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A Dictionary for a New Age

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The past decade has seen considerable changes in our life-styles. One of these is the communication explosion, including the exposure to English outside of school, jet travel, and computers.

As a result, the distinction between EFL (English as a Foreign Language - learnt almost only in the classroom) and ESL (English as a Second Language - learnt at school and absorbed also through the environment) is rapidly becoming blurred. People worldwide are exposed more and more, and at a younger age, to the sound of spoken English and to the appearance of English texts in daily life. This has created the need for a dictionary for lower-level learners of EIL - English as the International Language.

These developments motivated us to create PASSPORT, an English database dedicated as the core for learner's dictionaries for people studying or using English at the beginner-to-intermediate levels. This article deals primarily with the level that PASSPORT is geared to, and tries to determine the need for such a dictionary.

Ironically, the first learner's dictionary ever to appear had less than 10,000 entries. It was Michael West's New Method English Dictionary, first published in 1935 by Longman. But when Hornby's Advanced Learner's Dictionary appeared in the '40s, it was vastly preferred over West's smaller dictionary. And even though Longman, Oxford, Chambers, and others published Elementary, Junior, or First learner's dictionaries, none of these became widely used, as none significantly caught the fancy of English teachers, the attention of English learners, or the interest of English curriculum writers. Teachers and students appeared to be satisfied with the intermediate and advanced level dictionaries - whether monolingual, bilingual, or bilingualised - and few seemed bothered by the absence of an appropriate dictionary for these levels.

When pupils heard and read English mainly in the classroom, the best dictionary at the elementary and middle school levels was the teacher. But now, that so much exposure takes place out-of-class, mainly at home, a teacher-substitute is required. Extra-classroom support via TV, video, computer, printed material, and other self-study aids, is already widespread. What is needed is a dictionary to supplement the classroom teacher, at home as well as at school.

PASSPORT English Learner's Dictionary attempts to fulfill this need. It has been made as user-friendly as possible, so that it can be used independently, without teacher assistance or guidance. Its user-friendliness means having a handy and visually appealing format, enabling quick and simple finding of entries, containing a minimal number of abbreviations, facilitating comprehension of text, and providing mother-tongue equivalents.

It is convenient in size, with large, clear and uncrowded print, so that both the words and the lines are generously spaced. There are innovative charts that enable the user to find out at a glance precisely on which double page a headword is located, in addition to the running heads, and to an alphabet key at the outer edge of each page.

There are no definitions of the headwords. In the case of upper-level learners, the translation supplements the explanation, guaranteeing and reinforcing comprehension, and guarding against misunderstanding. But at this lower level, the translation replaces the explanation, which now becomes superfluous. Thus, accurate comprehension is achieved by means of the translations, and is enhanced by the examples of usage and by the notes.

PASSPORT contains hundreds of helpful notes on use, with tips about spelling, grammar, synonyms and antonyms, British and American differences, etc. It also presents a wealth of supplementary material, featuring a grammar section, in addition to the grammatical information that is richly dispersed throughout the entries. There are exercises to develop dictionary-using skills. There are appendices on time, numbers, measures, irregular verbs, geographical names, etc. There are also illustrations on almost every double page, and fully illustrated pages by topic.

The first two editions to appear are for speakers of Hebrew and Arabic*, each including its own L1-English dictionary section, to help users find out its English equivalent. Both versions exclude phonetic transcriptions, as our ten-year experience with Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking pupils shows that they are no worse off without phonetics. Since native speakers of non-Latin languages are already required to master one foreign alphabet when learning in English, having to learn also a phonetic sign system is an additional burden. All the more so for learners at this lower level. Others publishers may decide whether or not to include phonetics in their own localized version, and which sort of phonetic system to use.

Each language edition demands a certain degree of localization to render it fully compatible with the specific requirements of that particular language, culture, or education system. This implies, in certain cases, the presentation of some notes in L1 instead of in English, and in other cases, introducing special notes relevant to that particular language or society.

It should be noted that PASSPORT is probably the first English learner's dictionary created specifically to serve as a basis for adding other languages.

All the same, the question arises: If there is really such a need for a learner's dictionary at the middle-school level, why can't the larger dictionaries serve this purpose? Why should pupils be required to purchase two dictionaries - one for the pre-high-school and another for the high-school level? Why should they not buy the high-school dictionary when in a lower grade, and use it right through their remaining school years?

It must be remembered that the upper-level learner's dictionaries employ a defining vocabulary of as many as 3,500 "basic" words in dealing with their 20,000-50,000 headword list. Many of these words may be unfamiliar to pupils at a lower level. However, PASSPORT uses a basic word-list that is hardly half that size. Moreover, the grammar and syntax used in the upper-level dictionaries is much too complicated for pre-secondary school pupils. They will not yet have learnt a great many of the grammatical forms, especially verb tenses.

PASSPORT contains all the words likely to be required in the 3rd to 7th years of English studies. At the same time, it does not contain most words that learners do not need at this stage. The beauty of using such a dictionary is that its users do not have to wade through a lot of unnecessary text in order to find what they want, thus saving time, and avoiding confusion and frustration. The results of its use are more readily rewarding. Not only are unnecessary headwords, difficult vocabulary, and unfamiliar grammar and syntax avoided, but the examples of use utilise specially written, didactically appropriate, phrases and sentences that are easy to grasp and retain.

Subjecting lower-level learners to sentences that contain unfamiliar words, expressions, tenses and syntactic forms, is likely to discourage young learners from using the dictionary. A negative initial encounter with an unfriendly foreign language dictionary can deter students from using dictionaries at a later stage, even when they do have the necessary basis.

Actually it was the assigning of high-school dictionaries by teachers to learners who are near-beginners, that triggered off our awareness of the need of a dictionary that is specifically designed to be used by pupils in primary and junior-high schools. We saw that rather than derive benefit from it, pupils confronted with a dictionary that is beyond their level are discouraged from using a dictionary later on, because an image is created of it being difficult or complicated to use, incomprehensible and intimidating. Thus, by prescribing a higher-level dictionary than their pupils' actual ability, teachers with good intentions are liable to defeat their own purpose.

In conclusion, out-of-school exposure to English is a matter that has to be reckoned with. A major contribution to this out-of-school situation, where the teacher is not at hand to assist with the meanings of unfamiliar words, is having one's own dictionary suited to one's own level. Besides which, acquiring the dictionary-using habit, which leads to the development of dictionary-using skills, should start before the secondary school stage, and as close to the

beginning of the foreign language learning process as possible. Having a dictionary tuned to one's own level promotes learner independence, and frees the teacher from a lot of unnecessary word-explaining.