



# ESL MiniConference

## Debating the Use of Dictionaries in ESL/EFL Report on a Recent TESL-L Discussion

An interesting discussion about the use of dictionaries in ESL/EFL classrooms took place on the TESL-L listserv during the second half of November and the first several weeks of December. This exchange appears to have developed as an offshoot of a debate over the relevance of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to ESL/EFL teaching and learning, and the extent to which words are translatable from one language to another.

Among the participants in this marathon were: Brett Reynolds, English Language Centre, Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, Toronto, CANADA; Nelson Bank, National Unity in Language, El Paso, TEXAS; Anthea Tillyer, City University of New York; Barry Bakin, Pacoima Skills Center, Division of Adult and Career Education, Los Angeles Unified School District; Felicity O'Dell, Cambridge, ENGLAND; Maria Spelleri, Manatee Community College, FLORIDA; Dick Tibbetts, University of Macau, CHINA; Mert Bland, Arlington, VIRGINIA; Geoffrey Vitale, QUEBEC; Glenys Hanson, Centre de linguistique appliquée, Université de Franche-Compté, FRANCE; Beatriz Chelle, Montevideo, URUGUAY; Steve Kaufmann, [www.thelinguist.com](http://www.thelinguist.com); Nevin Siders, Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Mexico City, MEXICO; Marc Anthony, Taipei, TAIWAN; Valerie Whiteson, [www.valeriewhiteson.com](http://www.valeriewhiteson.com); Keith Folse, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FLORIDA; Janet Kaback, Newark, NEW JERSEY; Betty Azar; Elka Todeva, Department of Language Teacher Education, SIT, Brattleboro, VERMONT; Adrian Jones, Sarasas Ektra School, Bangkok, THAILAND; Teguh Santoso, SMAK 7 BPK PENABUR Senior High, Jakarta, INDONESIA.

Certainly the most provocative position on which kind of dictionary to use was the one taken by Dr. M.L. (Mert) Bland, who said he "would probably find someone's bilingual dictionary and go into a tantrum, throwing it on the ground, stomping on it, screaming, and foaming at the mouth..."

"Direct translations rarely exist," said Bland in another post, "and using a bilingual dictionary is thus counterproductive, breaking down communication rather than helping it."

Winter 2006-  
2007

Achievement  
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Kessler

Achievement  
Profile:  
Naomi Ossar

Which  
Dictionary?

Students  
Making  
Comic Strips

TESOL /  
Applied  
Linguistics  
Grad  
Students to  
Meet!

Being Here  
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Anthea Tillyer suggested easing the transition for students, over the course of several weeks, from dependence on their bilingual dictionaries to mastery of skills for using a good ESL learner's dictionary. "It is not enough just to tell students that an English/English dictionary is a good idea and that over-dependence on a bilingual dictionary is not good," said Tillyer. "Dogmatic statements stress students out and are counter-productive."

Felicity O'Dell and Keith Folse made very strong counter-statements condemning the lack of sensitivity implicit in Bland's remarks. "In TESOL, we are supposed to encourage individual learner differences, not punish those whose learning strategies do not match our own teaching philosophies," wrote Folse. O'Dell recounted how her husband--a Russian immigrant--never returned to an ESL class after the teacher threw someone's bilingual dictionary out the window.

Perhaps the firmest rejection of Mert Bland's approach was given by Betty Azar, the well-known ESL/EFL author. "Stomping on a dictionary is akin, it seems to me," she said in her message to the list, "to stomping on anyone in a weaker power position (as students are) who holds views different from your own....This my-way-or-the-highway teaching approach, enforced through ridicule and superior position, is an utter embarrassment to our profession in the 21st century."

Yet the controversy over Bland's comments was not the most interesting aspect of the TESOL discussion about dictionaries. There were several important ideas which came out of these exchanges. First, "learners' dictionaries," especially those with accompanying exercises and workbooks, help to develop skills which, as expressed by Elka Todeva, "help students use dictionaries in a way that will truly empower them."

The other main point which emerged was that both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries can offer valid assistance to language learners in their efforts to grow more familiar with new vocabulary. Dichotomies like 'to use or not use dictionaries' or 'to teach or not to teach grammar' have always been counterproductive," said Todeva, a teacher educator at the School for International Training. "It is the 'how' question that offers interesting possibilities."

"Why are we even discussing forbidding any kind of tool that helps the students to learn?," asked Janet Kaback. "We all have multiple intelligences, diverse learning styles, and tools on which we rely to help our learning."

"Let's be real here," said Keith Folse. "Let's remember our students, the

reason we exist. Let's stop trying to foist ideologies on our students...there is nothing in the communicative method that forbids bilingual dictionaries."

"I think students should be advised not to use any kind of traditional dictionary," wrote Steve Kaufmann. "It is too time consuming to thumb through a dictionary only to then forget the word as soon as the dictionary is closed. Until I am quite fluent in the language I am learning I always look for texts which have vocabulary lists prepared ahead of time, or better still read on a computer where instant dictionary translations are available for each word at the click of my mouse." Kaufmann further recommended directing ESL/EFL students to "content that keeps new words to 5-10% of total words, and maximizes the recurrence of words that the learner is trying to acquire."

Among the learners' dictionaries suggested by participants:

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org> (Felicity O'Dell: "From that site you can choose from a range of dictionaries--a general advanced learner's dictionary, a dictionary of American English, a phrasal verbs dictionary, a dictionary of idioms and French or Spanish bilingual dictionaries. In addition, there are a range of dictionary based activities there.")

[www.oup.com/elt/oald/](http://www.oup.com/elt/oald/)

<http://nhd.heinle.com/home.aspx> (Barry Bakin: "I have had success with both the basic and more advanced Newbury House dictionaries with my classes. One feature that I have found particularly useful is the introductory pages [with] lessons in dictionary usage for students. As students work their way through the introductory lessons, they practice the skills necessary to understand the layout and structure of a dictionary, what to do with multiple definitions for a word, how the International Phonetic Alphabet can be utilized to help with pronunciation, etc. By the middle of the semester, students regularly use the English/English dictionaries in addition to, or even 'in place of' their bilingual dictionaries.")

<http://pewebdic2.cw.idm.fr/> (Anthea Tillyer: "Why do I like the Longman [Dictionary of American English, 3rd edition] best? Well, it has excellent exercises to promote efficient dictionary use. Also, its definitions are unfailingly clear and accurate, and the definitions are all written using the 2000 most common English words, so they are accessible to almost any learner....There is a thesaurus which I find really helps prevent students from repeating their favorite words--good, bad, important, nice, beautiful, terrible--over and over." Brett Reynolds: "I assume that the

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English is basically the same beast [as the Longman Dictionary of American English]. It has all the advantages that Anthea mentioned, but it targets an international audience.")

Report by Robb Scott

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