

Remedial English Lessons: Using a Monolingual English Dictionary

英英辞典を利用し、英語嫌いを改善する授業の工夫

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Abstract

A significant number of students do not really like learning English. That is because doing so has meant nothing but meaningless toil in which they have experienced little joy. Their English teachers are partly to blame for this problem. We therefore need to devise some remedial English lessons for those students so that they will rediscover the joy in learning. In this paper, I will demonstrate, using a children's monolingual English dictionary as an example, how we can help these students.

Keywords: Remedial English lessons; a monolingual English dictionary

1. Introduction

Unfortunately it is still commonly observed that many first-year university students, who are required to take English as an obligatory subject, are not really keen on learning English. In fact, a significant number of them actually hate it! There may be several reasons for this, the main one being that learning English for them has been nothing but meaningless toil with nobody ever having shown them how enjoyable it can be. So it makes sense to say that if we can somehow manage to show them and let them experience that learning English can be lots of fun, we may be able to save at least some of them from the awful torture in which they have to learn what they do NOT want to learn. What they need is some sort of remedial English lessons in which they can hopefully rediscover for themselves that learning English is not that bad! In this highly globalized world many people think that a good working knowledge of English is a must, and that this is why it is very often designated as an obligatory subject for university students in Japan. But because we English teachers often fail to show students the real joy of learning English, many of them continue to see English as nothing short of torture. As the English proverb says, 'You may lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.' In order to make students drink the water called English, we have to devise some measures so that they will want to learn it.

Many different kinds of remedial lessons are possible. Using a monolingual English dictionary may provide such a remedy for those first-year students who are unhappy about learning English and who see little point in doing so. I propose this because for the last sixteen years or so I have

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been utilizing various monolingual English dictionaries in regular English teaching, and have witnessed on many occasions the very happy faces of students who did not really like English. A dictionary written entirely in English might sound a little too difficult to use with unmotivated students, but it may just offer them a change from their usual English lessons, or at least give them a little more *exposure* to English itself.

Over the years there have been many useful monolingual English dictionaries published for learners at an advanced level. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* and *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* are two good examples. There are also other monolingual English dictionaries at an intermediate level and at an elementary/beginner's level. I have used all these in my English classes and they are usually of excellent quality. However, some of them can be too academic or too difficult and off-putting for those students who are really weak in English. We should therefore exercise extra care when we choose a monolingual English dictionary for these students. It would be ideal if we could find something simple, enjoyable, and yet stimulating so that when they use it, they feel as if they were doing some games that would help them to see how the language works while they are using it. In short, they need something they can enjoy because students 'are usually quite willing to spend a great deal of time thinking and learning while pursuing activities they *enjoy*.'¹ In order to find a monolingual dictionary along this line, we can perhaps choose a beginner's dictionary or even a children's or picture dictionary. *Merriam-Webster's Primary Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster Inc. 2005), is an interesting dictionary because it is a combination of all these: it is at the same time a 'young person's first dictionary' (Preface) and, in a way, a beautiful picture dictionary, simply because it is full of colourful pictures. There are many interesting features in the dictionary which will attract students' attention, and they will always find something they can enjoy. I have used it to let students have lots of fun while learning English, and hopefully to provide them with the remedy to their negative experiences. In the following sections I will demonstrate, using this dictionary, how we can provide remedial lessons for students who are weak in English.

2. Explanation of words

Word definitions are given in the form of a narrative passage. Let us take the example of 'lion'. The headword and its related words are highlighted in the explanation. There is a coloured picture of a lion family in the right-hand margin next to the main explanation; a picture of this kind always helps the learner's comprehension.

lion *noun*

A **lion** is a big animal of the grasslands of Africa. **Lions** belong to the cat family, just like tigers and leopards do.

The **lion** is known as the king of beasts. In stories about animals, a **lion** is often the king.

A male **lion** has a large mane around its head. A female **lion** is a **lioness**. Baby **lions** are **cubs**.

A **mountain lion** is a different wild animal, but it's also a member of the cat family. **Mountain lions** are also called **cougars**.

As you can see, this is a rather unconventional dictionary explanation of a word. It is like a story, and the headword and the related words are used as integral parts. But this is how we often teach children the meaning of a word whether it be English, Japanese, or any other language. The explanation in this example should not be too difficult for university students to understand. Words like ‘leopards’ and ‘mane’ may be new to some students, but they may not cause much trouble for them to understand because they can get help from the context and the picture, and, of course, from the teacher, who can provide them with further explanation. What is really important to notice here is that although the headword is very easy, it is used in a meaningful context, and that by reading the entire explanation, students will get a certain amount of exposure to English.

Here is another example of how a word is explained, and the word this time is ‘help’, an abstract idea:

help *noun and verb*

Sometimes you can’t do something all by yourself. You need **help**.

My sister **helped** me with my reading.

I got some **help** from Dad too.

The story “Little Red Hen” is about helping:

One day Little Red Hen found a grain of wheat. “Who will **help** me plant it?” she asked. “Not I!” said Cat. “Not I!” said Goose. “Not I!” said Cow. So Little Red Hen planted the wheat herself. The wheat also needed to be harvested and ground into flour, and the flour made into bread. But each time Little Red Hen asked the others for **help**, they would say “Not I!” and she would do the work herself. When the bread was made, Little Red Hen asked “Who will **help** me eat the bread?” “We will!” said Cat, Cow, and Goose. But Little Red Hen said, “No, you would not **help** me, so you cannot now enjoy what I have made.” And she and her chicks ate the bread by themselves.

The two short example sentences and the story of “Little Red Hen” are given to illustrate the meaning of this abstract word, and they are printed in blue while the main part of the explanation is in black; this arrangement in different colours helps the learner to understand visually how the dictionary is organized with different elements. As for the story of “Little Red Hen”, there may be certain grammatical and lexical difficulties learners may encounter that may cause them problems. The teacher should then help them to understand by giving them extra explanations *in easy English* or using pictures and gestures. With such help, they will understand the story, or at least its main point, the selfish attitudes of the Little Red Hen’s friends, which is reflected in the contrast between the two utterances by them, “Not I!” and “We will!”. This example demonstrates how effective this kind of monolingual dictionary is in learning English because students not only learn the meaning of the headword, but they are also exposed to more English. They are certainly exposed to more English than they are when using, for instance, an English-Japanese bilingual dictionary.

3. Etymological information

This supposedly young children’s dictionary even gives the etymology of certain words in a story-like passage. This may give the learner new insight into the English language. Here is an example:

breakfast *noun*

Breakfast is the first meal of the day.

The word **breakfast** is about 500 years old. **Breakfast** is made up of the words break and fast, even though it doesn't sound like it. In this word, break means stop, like breaking a habit. And fast here doesn't mean speedy; fasting means to go without food for a while. People fast for religious reasons or for their health. But in a way, everyone fasts every night because people don't eat while they're asleep. In the morning, when you eat your breakfast, you are breaking your fast!

If you eat your first meal of the day very late, near lunchtime, that is often called **brunch**.

Brunch was made by putting parts of the words breakfast and lunch together, like this: breakfast + lunch = **brunch**. **Brunch** is like **breakfast** and lunch together.

The first half-line explanation of the headword prior to the etymological explanation is easy to understand. In fact, every Japanese person, I am sure, knows the word since it is often used in the Japanese language. But I suspect that not many students really know its original meaning. Whenever I show this word with its etymological explanation in class, I notice many surprised faces of students who have understood the meaning of the word fully for the first time. At such a moment, they are well involved in their new discovery, and learning is really taking place. This is a good example of how rich and how gripping this dictionary is, and that gripping richness will help students to learn English.

Here is another example, 'school', which also has etymological information:

school *noun*

The place you go to learn is your **school**. A **school** has classrooms, or **schoolrooms**. The area where you play outside the building is often called the **schoolyard**.

Would you be surprised to learn that **school** means recess? Well, it doesn't exactly, but the word **school** goes way back to an ancient Greek word that meant free time!

The ancient Greeks liked to use their free time to learn. Their word for free time was *scole* and they started using it to mean time spent in learning things and also the place where they learned. The Romans later adopted this word into Latin, and from there it was adopted into Old English as *scol*. Later, this word became **school**.

The first main explanation of the headword is easy enough for any student to understand. That is followed by its etymological explanation. Although it is told in easy English since it IS after all for young children, the mentioning of its original meanings in Greek, Latin, and Old English could be suitable for first-year university students. The teacher might even tell them jokingly that studying at school and university, even if that entails their having to learn English, should not be hated since, according to the above explanation, schooling is something enjoyable which happens in their free time!

In the right-hand margin next these explanations of the headword 'school', there are two extra pieces of information. The first one reads:

Some children are **homeschooled**. That means that they have **school** at home. Their teachers are their parents.

This gives a few more related words. The second one is a riddle with the answer in italic:

Why are fish so smart?

They swim in schools.

Riddles are another very interesting feature of this dictionary, and they will be very useful in class.

4. Riddles

The above riddle is of a fairly advanced kind for students because to solve this riddle, they have to know a meaning of the headword 'school' besides the one already explained. They also need to know the meaning of 'smart'. I hate to spoil the reader's enjoyment by simply solving this particular riddle for you, so please try it yourself. What I really want to emphasize here is that in this riddle a *pun* is used; pun is a very important feature in English language, and is often employed in English literature. I suspect not many students have ever been taught about the use of pun at either school or even university. Here we see again that we cannot underestimate the potential of this children's dictionary, which can be very useful for university students. It reveals many important features of the English language in a malleable fashion so that even weaker students will gradually and naturally understand the tremendous richness of the English language while enjoying this kind of word game.

Since I have given just one example of the riddles found in this dictionary, I would like to introduce several more:

- (1) Why is noon like the letter A?
- (2) What 8 letters of the alphabet can be found in water?
- (3) Why did the actor flunk his spelling test?
- (4) What letter of the alphabet asks the most questions?
- (5) What is the smartest insect in the world?
- (6) What will you lose if you win a race?
- (7) What flowers will you find right under your nose?
- (8) Where did the fish keep its money?
- (9) What is the best way to remove varnish?
- (10) What do you get from a nervous cow?

For convenience sake I put numbers in front of the riddles. Riddles (1), (5), (6), and (8) are average, but (6) is particularly interesting since it is constructed around the contradiction of 'lose' and 'win', very characteristic of children's riddles in any language. Riddle (2) may rack your brain.

Riddles (3) and (9) test your vocabulary; (9) is especially clever! Mind you, the answer to the riddle (4) is NOT ‘Q’, which is the usual answer given by students because it is the first letter of the word ‘question’. A good guess, up to a point, I must say, but the answer is not that. This riddle is in fact more advanced than it seems, and really tests your (and any English teacher’s) *feel* for the language, especially your sense of English phonetics. Most students would not be able to solve this riddle by themselves, but when the answer is given, they would be really delighted with its unexpectedness! Like Riddle (4), Riddle (7) has to do with phonetics, and is beautiful. Riddle (10) is hilarious!

By solving, or rather *trying* to solve these kinds of riddles, students can easily get excited, and this is what is needed for those whose real problem is being bored with English learning. This kind of activity will give them an opportunity to experience something new and exciting, and something very different from being asked by the teacher to do nothing but translate English into Japanese and vice versa. It will be more effective if this activity is done in pairs or even in small groups so that students can interact with one another and exchange their ideas *in English*, however poor their communicative skills are. Such interaction is ‘the pivot on which language learning turns’.² After a while, the teacher may even encourage students to make riddles themselves such as ‘What is the lion which is not a lion?’³

Some observant readers of this article might be worried that these riddles can be too difficult for the students who are weak in English to solve. They are absolutely right, that is, if these riddles are given out of context. We must remember, though, that these riddles are always there in the dictionary as an *addition* to the main explanation of the headword and the other helpful information, and that they are always related to what they have just learned. Therefore, they should not be too difficult for them. For example, a brilliant but possibly difficult riddle, ‘Why was 6 afraid of 7?’, is added to the main explanation of the headword ‘eat’, and the riddle is designed to teach the learner the past tense of the headword, that is, ‘ate’, together with the fact that ‘ate’ and ‘8’ are pronounced in the same way! The anxious readers of this article, therefore, may rest assured that there are always many clues that can help the learner to solve the riddles. Besides, there the answers are always given with the riddles, and the teacher can always provide any extra explanation if necessary.

5. Thesaurus information

This dictionary also has thesaurus information. Under the headword ‘eat’, which I have mentioned briefly above, several words similar in meaning are given:

Here are some words for ways to **eat**:

gnaw chew gulp munch nibble

Because the precise meaning of these words is not given in the dictionary, the teacher may have to explain it in English, perhaps with some body language, or maybe pictures.

Another example of a headword which has related words listed together with the main explanation of its meaning is ‘sound’:

Most living things make **sounds**. Here are the words for some of them:

roar howl growl grunt chirp

tweet screech buzz twitter

And here are some words for **sounds** that machines make:

whir hum beep vroom chug

There are words for pleasant **sounds**:

ding tap chime jingle strum plink

And there are words for unpleasant **sounds**:

clang clank blare screech squeal

What a wide variety of words the dictionary gives for different sounds! I would admire any English teacher who knows the precise meaning of all these words.

Sometimes synonyms and related words are given skilfully in a story, which will effectively teach students how to use them. Let us look at the story under the headword 'gee'. It is presented after the main explanation of the meaning of the headword and two short example sentences:

Words like **gee** are called **interjections**. Here is a story with lots of **interjections**:

One day I was walking with my friend Ben. "**Wow!**" said Ben. "Look at the ants on the sidewalk!" "**Yuck!** They're eating that old cookie," I said. "**Hey!** Let's start an ant farm," Ben suggested, picking up an ant. "**Gee,**" I said, "Maybe we should ask first." "**Ouch!** It bit me," he said, dropping the ant. "**Yikes!** Let's just go." "OK," he agreed. "**Boy,** I didn't know ants were dangerous!"

As for this story, the teacher may not have to explain in words the different usages of these interjections since most of them are self-explanatory, provided they are acted out with the correct intonation. After this demonstration, students take a turn at acting it out, which will certainly give them extra speaking practice.

There are many other headwords in the dictionary which are presented with their synonyms and other related words. However, the teacher should be careful not to overburden students with too many words; he should use his good judgement about how much he will ask students to take in each time.

6. Cultural information

The headword 'sound', which we have already looked at, has additional information, which is about the culture of the USA and other countries. It says:

A trumpet has a big **sound**.

At the **sound** of the trumpet, we all stood up.

The association of the sound of the trumpet and people standing up on hearing it is something which some students may not understand first, and they may require some explanation from the teacher. The teacher can talk about how soldiers react on hearing the sound of the trumpet, for instance. That kind of extra explanation is in fact really good for the students because by listening to what the teacher says, they are getting more listening practice, and possibly more interaction with the teacher, and, of course, more exposure to English. The more exposed they are to English, the more

confident they will become in using it.

Another example of an introduction to culture is seen in the following, which is found under the headword 'piece' :

If you find something really easy, you might say that it is a **piece of cake**.

The spelling test was a **piece of cake**.

There are a few different Japanese expressions we use when we want to say that something is really easy. For example, we say, 'Ochanoko saisai'. 'Ochanoko' is a general term for any kind of light snack eaten with tea. It is not a heavy food so that it is eaten and digested *easily* and *quickly*. 'Saisai' is a kind of bantering or cheering noise. So altogether the phrase is used to mean 'a piece of cake'.⁴ Although we do not use the image of cake as such, the two images are really alike. Both refer to food, especially snack food. Students will be interested in the difference as well as the similarity between them.

7. Semantic information

This dictionary includes some interesting instances of semantic accidents. Here are some examples:

If **fast** means speedy and it also means stuck in one place, then fast is the opposite of **fast**!

When a house **burns** up, it **burns** down.

When you **fill out** a form, you have to **fill** it **in**! That is, you have to **fill in** the blanks.

A horse can **paw** the ground — even though it doesn't have **paws**!

These are interesting semantic contradictions. Here are other examples which are also interesting; they are interesting, mainly because they are semantically a little confusing:

I can be **alone** with my friend. Then we're **alone** together!

The **opposite** of **opposite** is **same**!

There are also slightly different kinds of examples which are of semantics:

There is a **teaberry** and a **sugarberry**, but no creamberry!

Are people who are not **outlaws** called **in-laws**?

You can **break** a cookie in half and give one half to your friend. But that's not damaging anything — that's sharing.

Here the teacher may again encourage students to create their own versions of semantically interesting sentences or phrases, first, though, showing one of his own as an example:

Teachers teach, drivers drive, and doctors doc!?'⁵

The exposure to a lot of these interesting semantic 'problems' will certainly contribute to the gradual development of a student's *feel* for the English language.

8. Vocabulary quizzes

Adapting the definitions of words in this dictionary, we can provide students with vocabulary quizzes. For example, the first part of the definition of the word 'dark' reads:

When there is no light or very little light, it is **dark**.

This can be turned into a vocabulary quiz, and the teacher can ask students: 'What do you call it when there is no light or very little light?' We can do similarly with the definition of the word 'hospital':

A **hospital** is a place where sick or injured people go to get care. Doctors, nurses, and other people work in **hospitals**.

This can be changed into: 'What do you call a place where sick or injured people go to get care? Doctors, nurses, and other people work there'. In this way, you can create numerous quizzes to make students think hard about the answers. Students, however weak they are in English, usually enjoy solving these problems, and there is the added bonus of having them actively involved in the activity even though they are probably unaware of it. This kind of unconscious involvement is vital in any kind of learning.

9. Poetry

There is poetry in the dictionary which may give students a new, exciting experience in their learning of English. The following poem by Laura E. Richards is found under the headword 'elephant'.

*Once there was an **elephant**
Who tried to use the telephant —
No! no! I mean an elephone
Who tried to use the telephone —
(Dear me, I am not certain quite
That even now I've got it right.)
Howe'er it was, he got his trunk
Entangled in the telephunk;
The more he tried to get it free,
The louder buzzed the telephee —*

*(I fear I'd better drop the song)
Of elephop and telephong!)*

Because there is a picture of elephants included in this section, understanding the meaning of the headword is easy enough. The purpose of the poem is not so much that of reinforcing students' understanding of its meaning as of letting them enjoy the combination of words and sounds. As a matter of fact, it is a nonsense poem, and is strewn with nonsensical words. This is to show the state of confusion in which the elephant who tried to use a telephone without knowing how to use it found itself. The point of this poem is that the elephant is in a confused state, physically and mentally, his gigantic body 'entangled' in the telephone wire, with no idea of how to get out of it. The language of the poem mimics this great confusion. To teach students this deeper level of meaning, and to ask them to understand it all, may be asking too much. At an earlier stage, we should simply allow them to enjoy the funny and rhythmical combination of the words, which is *pleasant to the ear* if they listen to it or read it aloud. This kind of enjoyment of the ear, of listening to beautiful combinations of English sounds, is very important for students to experience, and they should be encouraged to experience more of it.

10. Conclusion

I have demonstrated, using a children's monolingual English dictionary as an example, how we can provide remedial lessons to students who do not like English so that they may hopefully rediscover the joy of learning English. Learning English has always been nothing but meaningless toil for most of them, largely because nobody has ever shown them how enjoyable it can be. We have to remember here that their not liking English is not entirely their own fault. Since most of their learning of English has taken place in the classroom, we teachers share not a small part of the blame. It is a real possibility that because of our poor teaching, they have come to think that English is boring. By providing them with some effective remedial lessons, we can help them to *unlearn* what they have learned so far. And if we ask them to unlearn, we also have to *unlearn* our teaching, and *unteach* our practice.⁶

NOTES

1. Zoltán Dörnyei. *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge Language Teaching Library series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, 72.
2. Jill Burton and Chales Clennell, eds. *Interaction and Language Learning*. Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series. Alexandria, Virginia: TESOL 2003, 1.
3. I have invented this riddle.
4. 新村出編. 「広辞苑」. 第5版. 岩波書店.
5. I have invented this. Cf. Patsy M. Lightbown, Nina Spada. *How Languages are Learned*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006. 13.
6. Kenzaburo Ooe writes in a newspaper article about one of the characters in his novels, who is a retired Japanese professor and who used to teach in the United States. He reflects upon his own teaching in the past and realizes that it was full of flaws. He has therefore decided to 'unlearn' everything he has learned, including his teaching. In response, some of his former students appear to tell him that what he taught them was all wrong, and thus they 'unteach' him. (大江健三郎.

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