

Dictionary use strategies as an effective way to learn vocabulary of English as a Foreign Language

 Ahmed LOUNAS

Maître assistant

ENS- Bouzaréah

يتطلب تعلم اية لغة أجنبية أولا وقبل كل شيء تعلم مفرداتها لسبب بسيط و هو ان المفردات هي الادوات الاولى التي نستعملها لدراسة اللغة . لهذا يمكن القول ان تعلم مفردات اللغة يحتل مكانة جد هامة في مسار تعلم اية لغة خاصة اللغات الاجنبية. ولكي تكون عملية التعلم مشوقة ، ممتعة ومفيدة يجب على المتعلم استخدام الطرق والاستراتيجيات التي من شأنها تسهيل التعلم واجتناب الملل. من ضمن هذه الاستراتيجيات التي اثبتت نجاعتها استعمال القاموس . الكثير يعلم ان استعمال القاموس ليس بالامر السهل. الغاية من وراء هذا المقال هو استعراض اهم استراتيجيات استعمال القاموس لضمان تعلم مفيد وغير ممل لمفردات اللغة الانجليزية.

Abstract:

Vocabulary learning is a very important task to learn English as a foreign language. EFL Students can use a variety of strategies to learn and comprehend new vocabulary items. Among these strategies is the use of dictionary. To use a dictionary in an effective and easy way, students need to be familiarized with dictionary use strategies. Therefore, the aim of this article is to review the various dictionary strategies as suggested by field experts and specialist.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Dictionary use Strategies, Vocabulary comprehension, Lexicography and Lexicology.

Introduction

Vocabulary is a key component in learning English as a foreign language. Without rich and wide vocabulary knowledge, one cannot attain proficiency in English. For Michael Lewis (2000:p8):“The single most important task facing language learners is acquiring a sufficiently large vocabulary.” In fact, vocabulary knowledge helps students with language comprehension and we can even say it is the core element of language comprehension and use.

It is evident that “If you spend most of your time studying grammar, your English will not improve very much. You will see most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar, but you can say almost anything with words!” (Thornbury 2002: p. 13) Therefore, in order to comprehend a text successfully, students need to have sufficient word knowledge.

Both teachers and learners use various strategies and techniques to teach and learn vocabulary in order to achieve proficiency in English. Among the most reputable and widely used strategies of vocabulary learning is the use of dictionary, bilingual and monolingual. The choice of the type of dictionary depends on the learner and on the task at hand. However, using a dictionary is not an easy task. If the user is not skilled in dictionary use and if he is unfamiliar with its structure and its user's guide, the task will certainly become difficult if not boring.

Users should be armed with the necessary dictionary use skills. They should also be familiar with the different strategies of dictionary use. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to familiarize the students with the various dictionary use strategies in order to help them and guide them to enjoy and get the maximum of dictionary use.

Defining “Dictionary”

Before reviewing the various dictionary use strategies, it is worth attempting to define the word dictionary, or at least introducing some of the most important definitions given by prominent scholars and lexicographers.

If we ask the question “what’s a dictionary?” to any learner or teacher, he would certainly say that a dictionary is a book of words of a language or a book that lists words of a language in alphabetical order and provides the description of their meaning. A dictionary contains hundreds of thousands of words. Experts estimate that there are more than a million English words today. For instance the revised Oxford English Dictionary lists about 615,000 words. We can also say that a dictionary is a reference book containing words, usually arranged in alphabetical order, and it gives information about their meaning, pronunciation, etymology and uses.

Etymologically speaking, the term ‘dictionary’ originates from the Medieval Latin word “*dictionarium*” or ‘*dictionarius*’ which properly means “a book of sayings” (Hartmann 1992: p.5). The word *dictionarium* also meant a ‘collection of words’. John Garland, an English scholar, poet and grammarian was the first to use the word ‘dictionary’ as ‘*dictionarius*’ in 1225 A.D. as it is used in present day sense of ‘dictionary’ (Bejoint 2000: p 6). He used it as a title for a manuscript of Latin words to be learned by memory. For medieval scholars, a dictionary was a collection of diction or phrases put together for the use of pupils studying Latin. Moreover, dictionary in medieval times aimed at glossing texts and employing synonyms for them to help Latin learners.

Nowadays, the word “dictionary” refers to a book containing lists of words with information about them. According to Crystal (1987: p108), “a dictionary is considered as a reference book that lists words in alphabetical order.” Crystal (ibid) also differentiates between the two meanings of the word “dictionary”: the first is the known reference book that we can buy or find in a library, and an inbuilt dictionary which every native speaker of a language carries with him as part of his mental equipment.

Different scholars have attempted to define ‘dictionary’ as a book containing words of a language with

their meaning in a stated order mostly in alphabetical. For instance, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary for Current English (1998), a dictionary is:

“a book that deals with the individual words of a language (or certain specified class of them) so as to set forth their orthography, pronunciation, signification and use, their synonyms, derivation and history, or at least some of these facts; for convenience of reference the words are arranged in some stated order, now in most languages alphabetical, and in larger dictionaries the information given is illustrated by quotations from literature.”

Zgusta (1971: p197) also defines the dictionary in his Manual of Lexicography as follows:

“A dictionary is a systematically arranged list of socialized linguistic forms compiled from the speech-habits of a given speech community and commented on by the author in such a way that the qualified reader understands the meaning of each separate form, and is informed of the relevant facts concerning the function of that form in its community “.

Moreover, the online *dictionary.reference.com* defines the dictionary as:

“a book, optical disc, mobile device, or online lexical resource (such as Dictionary.com) containing a selection of the words of a language, giving information about their meanings, pronunciations, etymologies, inflected forms, derived forms, etc., expressed in either the same or another language; lexicon; glossary. Print dictionaries of various sizes, ranging from small pocket dictionaries to multivolume books, usually sort entries alphabetically, as do typical CD or DVD dictionary applications, allowing one to browse through the terms in sequence...”

According to the online Encyclopedia Britannica, the word dictionary is a reference book that lists words in order—usually, for Western languages, alphabetical—and gives their meanings. In addition to its basic function of defining words, a dictionary may provide information about their pronunciation, grammatical forms and functions, etymologies, syntactic peculiarities, variant spellings, and antonyms. A dictionary may also provide quotations illustrating a word's use, and these may be dated to show the earliest known uses of the word in specified senses.

Further, dictionaries are reference works designed to provide lexically relevant information for the arranged lexical units of a language. It can include all or some of the information in its microstructure like spelling,

pronunciation, morphology, grammar, etymology, meaning, connotation, definition, domain etc. in one or more languages. Dictionaries can also refer to books giving information on particular subjects or on a particular class of words, sciences, names, or facts, usually arranged alphabetically such as: biographical dictionaries; dictionaries of medical sciences or of mathematics, etc.

Therefore, based on the above definitions, we can say that a dictionary is a book containing “all” the words of a language and providing various valuable details on them such as: etymology, pronunciation, meaning, synonyms, opposites, collocation, etc. Dictionaries are also characterized by their changing nature; they grow up through time as new words come to existence in language through borrowing, science, technology and so on.

Lexicography and Lexicology

In this context it is worth defining the word Lexicography as another important word in the world of dictionaries. In fact, Lexicography can be defined as the science and art of compiling dictionaries or as a set of principles and procedures involved in writing, editing, or compiling dictionaries. It is the professional process to codify vocabulary, by which dictionaries and other reference works are produced (Hartmann, 2001).

Moreover, lexicography is dif-

ferent from Lexicology which concerns the study of the formation, meaning, and use of words and of idiomatic combinations of words. It is a branch of linguistics dealing with the study of the overall structure and history of the vocabulary of a given language. Whereas lexicology is more theory oriented, lexicography is more concerned with concrete application of these theories.

The term Lexicology is composed of two Greek morphemes: *lexis* meaning ‘word, phrase’ and *logos* which denotes ‘learning’ or ‘science’. Thus, the literal meaning of the term Lexicology is ‘the science of the word’. Lexicology as a branch of linguistics with its own aims and methods of scientific research, it deals with the study and systematic description of vocabulary in terms of its origin, development and current use. Lexicology is concerned with words, variable word-groups, phraseological units, and with morphemes which make up words.

On the utility of Dictionary

It is an undeniable fact that dictionary is an important and essential language learning tool. Thornbury (2008) endorsed that dictionary is unequalled in that it is a source of words and of information about words. It can be used for different purposes such as meaning, phonetic aspects of words, orthography, grammar or usage. Dictionaries are regarded by many as the repository of

final linguistic authority. More than this, a dictionary is a valuable source of information about life and about different societies. For example, a learner can look up for the meaning of the word Halloween in a dictionary; he will find the meaning of the word, its history, celebration date and communities celebrating it.

Another benefit of dictionary use is incidental vocabulary learning. Research has shown that students learn many words accidentally while looking up other words on the dictionary. Hong (2010) claimed that incidental vocabulary learning was regarded as an integral part of L2 vocabulary learning because it includes three vocabulary learning strategies – glossing, guessing from context and using dictionary. This learning can happen while students review the different meanings of a word on one hand and when they go through the different sentences which, as we stated before, use examples from real life and native English-speaking society on the other hand.

Moreover, dictionary use plays a significant role in building the student's vocabulary knowledge in terms of formal and informal language and provides the student with an invaluable opportunity to learn refined vocabulary.

Dictionary plays a significant role in preserving the history, the culture as well as the traditions of society. According to Bejoint (2000: p.115),

it is regarded as “thesaurus of all the collective knowledge of the society”. Indeed it offers explanations of different events that different societies lived. For instance if a learner meets the word Enlightenment, he can easily find its meaning and what it refers to in time within the society where this concept appeared. It even gives its history and evolution in meaning.

Unlike the teacher, a unique and significant feature of the dictionary is that Foreign Language students can have it with them wherever they go and use it in any given situation. They can carry a pocket dictionary in the train, while waiting for the bus, while travelling abroad and access the meaning of any word at any time.

Based on the works of Nation (2006) and Harvey & Yuill (1997), we can sum-up the purposes of dictionary use in the following points:

1. confirm the meaning and see example sentences
2. check spelling, inflection, and derived form
3. find out about grammar of the word and check grammatical correctness
4. consider pronunciation
5. find collocation and expression
6. check etymology and word parts
7. confirm guessing from context
8. check the constraints or regis-

ter of the word.

9. look for related word.

10. look up frequency information.

Nation (2008) points out that dictionaries can help the learners in three major ways:

1) They can help learners understand words that they meet in reading and listening.

2) They can help learners find words that they need for speaking and writing.

3) They can help learners remember words.

In addition, he suggested that good dictionary should contain:

- plenty of words
- clear understandable definitions
- many example sentences
- information about grammar and collocations of the word
- the pronunciation of the word
- the spelling of inflected and derived forms
- information about constraints on the use of the word
- frequency information
- information about related words and word parts

From the above, we can gather that dictionary should be regarded as a valuable pedagogical tool that plays a significant role in learning a foreign language. Therefore, students should learn how to use and take ad-

vantage of this tool in order to gain proficiency in English as a Foreign Language.

Arguments against dictionary use

In spite of its utility and advantages, dictionary is not seen by all teachers and researchers as a perfect tool of learning language. In fact, many EFL teachers are against the use of dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, because they think that dictionary cannot help their students understand vocabulary in context. They consider dictionary use as detrimental to vocabulary learning process because of the fact that it makes the learner dependent on the dictionary. Furthermore, they think that students who rely on dictionary do not develop other strategies and techniques such as guessing from context to understand new words. For them, using dictionary also develops a lack of self-confidence and a lack of autonomy; the more students use dictionary, the more they become dictionary-addict and refer to it for any word without using any other comprehension strategy.

Another argument against dictionary use is that when a learner misuses dictionary, he will waste time and resources which is most of the time due to the fact that he ignores the conventions, strategies and the methods of using the dictionary. In many cases, it happened to teachers to see their students struggling with

dictionary. Some learners have difficulty even to choose the appropriate entry and thus make mistakes when looking up for the information in dictionary by mixing the parts of speech. In doing so, they cannot get the relevant information and end up with the wrong one. This problem is due most of the time to the fact that dictionary user probably paid attention to only certain parts of the definition (Nesi, 1994) instead of reading all the definitions to get the appropriate and required meaning based on the context of the word he is looking for. Therefore, plainly, the reason behind this misuse is the lack of dictionary skills and not dictionary itself.

Furthermore, for some EFL teachers, FL students should be discouraged from using dictionaries because they think that extensive dictionary consulting can lead to word for word reading and this of course can mislead the students in their understanding. Another argument used by dictionary opponents is that dictionary look up interrupts the reading process and thus results in wasting time and efforts to restart and recover the meaning.

Dictionary consultation strategies

Using a dictionary to learn vocabulary is a complex process that requires various mental efforts and an in-depth investigation from various perspectives. Users should be well trained in dictionary usage so that

the process of looking up words in dictionary wouldn't be a chore for them. To do so, learners need to be aware of the different necessary skills and strategies to use dictionary. In the late decades, specialists have been focusing their efforts on this major aspect of FL learning and teaching. This gave birth to a new area of knowledge which is coined as applied lexicography.

Applied lexicography comprises different topics including the study of dictionary and its use. As part of this field we have a variety of research topics such as aspects and ways or strategies of dictionary use, purposes of dictionary use and users' attitudes towards dictionary as well as the teaching of dictionary use. In recent decades, there has been an increasing interest of many scholars (Schofield 1982; Hartmann 2001; Nation 1990; Wingate, 2004) in investigating the different strategies used by dictionary users in the look-up process. Moreover, researchers investigated and conceptualized how students use dictionaries for the two functions of decoding and encoding.

One of the well-known models is the one developed by Schofield (1982). It is concerned with the strategies that users must follow while using dictionary for decoding purposes. In fact, Schofield (1982: p186) suggests that the practice of looking-up and understanding information needed for comprehension can be broken down into the fol-

lowing steps:

1- Locate words and phrases you do not understand.

2- If the unknown form is inflected, remove the inflection to recover the form to look up

3- Search for the unknown form in alphabetical list.

4- If you cannot find out at least one main entry for the unknown word, try the following procedures:

- If the unknown seems to be a set phrase, idiom or compound word, try looking up each main element.

- If the unknown seems to have a suffix, try the entry for the stem.

- If the unknown appears to be an irregular inflected form or a spelling variant, scan nearby entries:

- If there is an addendum, search there

5- If there are multiple senses, or homographic entries, reduce them by elimination.

6- Understand the definition and integrate it into the context where the unknown was encountered.

7- If none of the senses entered seems to fit, attempt to infer one that does from the senses you have. If more than one fits, seek further

contextual clues in the source text to disambiguate.

Each of the above listed steps requires different strategies. In the first step, for instance, the reader locates the new word(s) or phrase(s) which might involve several complex strategies. In the case where the reader has difficulty comprehending an idiomatic phrase even though he/she understands the meanings of the individual words that comprise the phrase, it might be necessary for him/her to search for the appropriate meaning under different headwords. The reader continues in his hunting for the meaning by using the next steps one after the other until he gets the meaning he/she is looking for. If we have a close look at the last step, it says: if none of the senses entered seems to fit, attempt to infer one that does from the senses you have. If more than one fits, seek further contextual clues in the source text to disambiguate. This means that even when using dictionary, the reader is invited to use contextual clues and other strategies such as attempting to infer the meaning of the word from the information gathered from the given definitions in dictionary in order to find meaning. The reader should use a blend of strategies during a dictionary consultation as no dictionary can provide enough information to capture all possible meanings that a word can convey.

We can gather from the above how complex it can be for a learner

to be able to conduct a successful dictionary look-up. However, Wingate (2004) speculated that those steps described by Schofield (1982) do not offer a comprehensive list of strategies required for a dictionary look-up, since these steps are the ones involved in reading. He maintained that the list of strategies would be much longer if the purpose of dictionary use is for writing.

One of the most comprehensive and well known sets of dictionary-use strategies was presented in Nesi's (1999) taxonomy of reference skills. It consisted of 40 strategies divided into six stages:

The first two stages involve techniques that are used before dictionary consultation such as knowing the types of dictionaries in order to determine which one to buy and deciding on the necessity of dictionary consultation.

Stage three relates to finding the entry information for the unknown word and it includes two skills 1) knowing dictionary structures, and 2) understanding how information is presented.

Stage four provides the description of fourteen strategies for interpreting entry information. Some of these strategies involve identifying relevant information and interpreting phonetic symbols.

Stage five deals with recording information from the entry. In this stage, strategies such as choosing a recording method and creating a vocabulary notebook can be used.

The sixth stage deals with issues of understanding relating to dictionary consultation and involves strategies such as knowing the purpose of using dictionaries and their various styles. Nesi (1999) based his strategies on a survey conducted with language teaching professionals.

Based on Nesi's (1999) taxonomy, Bishop (2000) compiled a set of guidelines for using bilingual dictionaries as a study aid for language learning. The aim is to use the guidelines as the basis for a dictionary-use skills course to be used by learners to improve their dictionary usage during written exams and personal language learning. The guidelines consisted of 10 steps:

1) *familiarize yourself with a dictionary you buy and become aware that various types of information are contained in a dictionary;*

2) *know the part of speech (e.g., verb, noun) of the word you are looking for in the entry and the symbols that are used to refer to verbs, nouns etc.;*

3) *use the dictionary to search for synonyms in order to enrich your vocabulary;*

4) *use the dictionary to accumu-*

late specialized vocabulary prior to writing on a given subject;

5) *make sure you understand how to use the grammatical information included in the dictionary;*

6) *learn how to read phonetic symbols listed in the dictionary;*

7) *make sure you know how to check the preferred register of a word in the dictionary (e.g., formal vs. casual, written vs. spoken);*

8) *cross-check the meaning in the other half of the bilingual dictionary to make sure it is the one you are looking for. For example, when you check an English word in the English-to-Spanish section of a bilingual dictionary to see what it means in your first language, look up the meaning you chose again in the Spanish-to-English section to see if it is the correct meaning.;*

9) *make sure to proofread your written work after you write; and*

10) *remember that a dictionary cannot be a substitute for a solid grasp of vocabulary.*

It is clear that these guidelines are different from the strategies suggested by Scholfield (1982) for two reasons. First, they are mainly concerned with dictionary-use skills that could help learners in their writing. Second, these guidelines were

developed to help with bilingual dictionary usage; thus, they might not function with monolingual dictionaries. Learners might use monolingual, bilingual, or bilingualized dictionaries, or a combination and a dictionary might be used for receptive activities such as reading or listening, or for productive activities such as writing or speaking; hence, the difficulty of the task to design dictionary-use strategies covering all the possible purposes of dictionary use and dictionary types.

Further, Caduner (2003) designed a dictionary-use skills course that covered certain objectives. The course was intended to third-year college-level Spanish grammar and composition course at an American university and had six objectives:

1) *make students aware that translating verbatim does not always work;*

2) *show students how reference skills are related to writing, revising, and editing;*

3) *show students how to look up linguistic information using grammar labels;*

4) *familiarize students with the advantages and disadvantages of the way information is organized in language reference books;*

5) *provide students with strategies such as skimming and scanning dictionary entries;*

6) *show students that a dictionary also contains grammatical information*

In Carduner's (2003) study, participants were asked to rate their own bilingual dictionary skills before and after taking the course in order to evaluate the overall efficacy of the dictionary-use skills instruction. They were also asked to assess each lesson using a feedback form. A general questionnaire on dictionary usage was administered to the participants and the result showed that more than 80% of the students reported that they had learned a lot about the dictionary from the instruction. The results of another more specific questionnaire indicated that 70% of the participants reported they had learned a lot. Based on these results, Carduner concluded that dictionary-use training is beneficial for foreign language students.

Another significant contribution to the field of dictionary strategies is the study conducted by Wingate (2004). The latter wanted to provide empirical evidence of the extent to which language learners actually utilize the strategies described by Scholfield (1982). She conducted an introspective study on dictionary use for reading comprehension where

she investigated the strategies used by intermediate learners of German using bilingual and monolingual dictionaries for unknown words. In this study, Wingate wanted to see if the type of dictionary determined the type of strategies required.

The study was conducted on 17 Chinese intermediate learners of German at a Hong Kong university. The participants were given two articles from German magazines and asked to think aloud while identifying the difficult words and looking up the meaning in the dictionary. Wingate found that the partial reading of dictionary entries was the most frequent behavior and this led the participants to an unsuccessful use of dictionaries. The participants were not even able to find the appropriate entry for the unknown word because they did not know how to search in a consistent way for the entry. The study also indicated that participants did not use many of the strategies described by Scholfield; hence, the unsuccessful dictionary consultations.

Therefore, based on the results of her study, and incorporating Scholfield's steps, Wingate (2004) suggested the following dictionary-use strategies:

1) *dictionary-specific strategies, which relate to the knowledge of dictionary conventions;*

2) *language-specific strategies, which morphologically and syntac-*

tically analyzes the unknown word; and

3) *meaning-specific strategies, which involves skills such as identifying the most appropriate meaning of a polysemous word.*

The study of Wingate was only concerned with dictionary look-ups involved in reading; thus, they cannot be generalized on other skills such as writing. Therefore, Wingate emphasized the need for further studies with more focus on other language activities such as writing.

Dealing with dictionary consultation for writing purposes, (Garcia, 2005: p255) devised a modified version based on Schofield's work. This modified version includes the following

1- *Recovering the canonical from the inflected target words.*

2- *Selecting an appropriate reference work (be it a monolingual or bilingual dictionary)*

3- *Searching for target words in the alphabetical list. This step can even work in the case of the user experiencing a tip-of-the-pen state, since often the beginning of the word is retrieved*

4- *Scanning all of the definitions or translations in the entry for the one closest to the meaning of the wri-*

ter to be expressed before taking any decision.

5- *Reading the examples, grammar code, collocation information and style labels and finding the ones that best fit the context in which the target word is to be used.*

6- *Cross-referencing, if the word was sought in a bilingual (L1 to L2) double-check the translation of the candidates in the L2 to L1 section or in the cases of a monolingual search, use a thesaurus for double-checking the candidate words.*

7- *Adding any inflections that were eliminated during original search to fit the linguistic context in which they will be used.*

To better illustrate the steps employed by students when using a dictionary for writing, Garcia (2005:p251) suggested the following schematic figure:

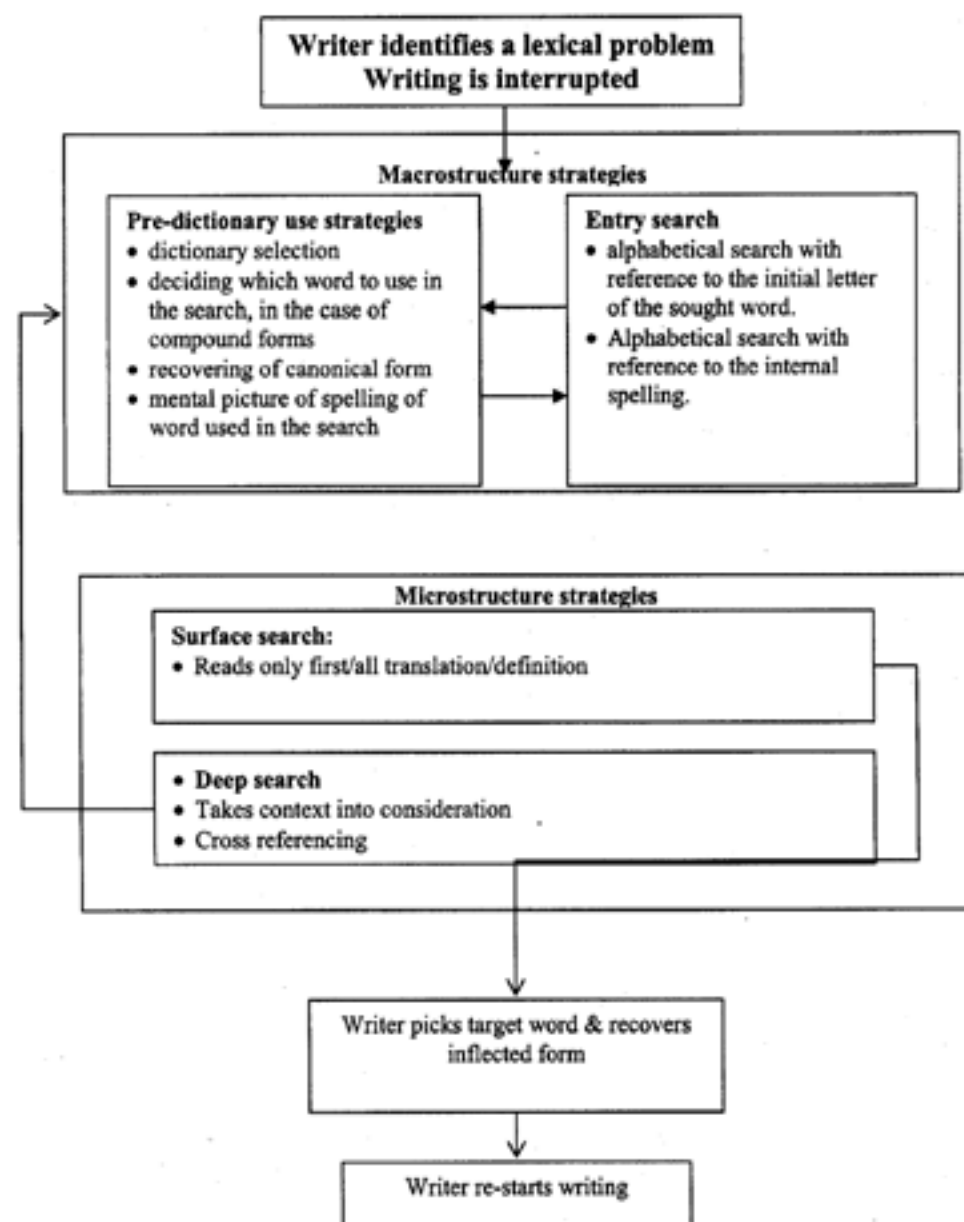


Figure. Strategies Employed During Dictionary Search

.Source: Garcia (2005), University of Essex

Conclusion

From the different dictionary use strategies cited above, we can conclude that generating general strategies that can fit for all types of dictionary usage and all types of dictionaries is a complex and nearly impossible task. Moreover, a strategy that works well for some learners does not work automatically and effectively for others. Learners employ various strategies depending on the words they need to look up and the purpose of the dictionary consultation. In addition, the levels of the learners' proficiency in language as well as dictionary skills play a great role in the success of the dictionary consultation process.

Moreover, the nature of the text as well as the language used in the text have an influence on the choice of the dictionary strategy. Teachers can always suggest strategies but the role of the context as well as the learners' preferences play a key role in the consultation as Christianson (1997) states clearly: *"While teachers might be able to suggest a number of strategies that students may find helpful, the students themselves ultimately must choose based on the writing context and the given word or phrase being looked up"* (p. 38).

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Another key point having a great impact on dictionary consultation success is the skills instruction. It is necessary for teachers to instruct

effective strategies of using dictionary. In fact learners need to learn the different strategies and how to use them in reading and in writing. Wingate (2004: p. 11) states that *"...learners do not just know the necessary strategies by themselves but need instruction and repeated practice to acquire them..."*

Language learners should also familiarize themselves with the most effective skills and strategies of dictionary-use through instruction and practice. They should attach a great importance to dictionary strategies and understand that good dictionary skills can enhance their dictionary consultation and; consequently, improve their vocabulary learning in a significant way.



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