

Redefining Dictionaries for Mobile Learning: A Study of the Learner-Friendly Features

of an Online Dictionary

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Abstract

Amidst a plethora of materials available for learning English as a second or foreign language, the place of dictionary has not been defined adequately. The potential of dictionaries as source of information about language pertaining to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and spellings is generally underestimated. While the use of primary teaching materials like textbooks may be maximized or minimized depending on the context, the scant use of a dictionary is common to most of the language classrooms around the world. The ‘taken-for-granted’ approach towards dictionaries has made its use recede to the background in the language curriculum. Reasons like time constraints, the teacher’s lack of training or expertise, non-affordability or lack of resources etc. could also be cited in favour of the usual neglect of this teaching-learning aid. However, with the recent splurge in the use of mobile devices for language learning, the place of dictionaries is being redefined in the language learning process due to factors like portability, freedom of time and place, flexibility of usage, and social connectivity. The present article is an attempt to explore and uncover a range of features offered by mobile dictionaries that could potentially foster language learning. The focus of study and observations will be the online version of Oxford Learner’s Dictionary since it incorporates the printed version and provides additional learner-centred resources. The use of this dictionary is looked at as an opportunity to be utilized in order to strengthen linguistic and communicative competence of the learners.

Keywords: Mobile assisted language learning (MALL), m-learning, Dictionaries as language learning aids, e-dictionaries.

Introduction

Mobile technology has come a long way in terms of making a significant contribution in the pedagogical practices around the globe. Mobile devices are no longer just ‘assistants’ in the traditional classroom practices, but they have redefined language learning as a mobile enterprise. Since formal classroom education has its own limitations in terms of structure, content, time and place, it becomes necessary for the learner to engage in informal and more authentic language learning activities. The mobile devices, especially smartphones, provide such an addition by making the learner’s experience more personal and flexible in terms of time and place. The hand-held devices provide various platforms which offer an opportunity for the learner to engage in online and offline modes of language learning. The former includes many English Language Teaching and learning websites in the form of blogs, articles, English language courses, et cetera, where one can interact with writers, instructors and also learners from different backgrounds, and the latter includes mobile application software (apps) that often come in handy when it comes to a quick look at any aspect of language - anytime, anywhere. Of the many resources available for learning language in these modes, dictionaries have evolved to be instrumental not only as a reference, but as a language learning resource in its own right by offering significant additions in terms of content and the range of language areas covered in the traditional printed dictionaries. The versions of dictionaries as websites or mobile applications, in addition to having the given advantages of a mobile technology, have also expanded the range of information provided for each entry.

Oxford Learner's Dictionary: The Website

In an introductory description of the tenth edition of Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the official ELT webpage of Oxford University Press states that "OALD is more than a Dictionary" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, 2020) since it includes access to additional resources, i.e. the online and the mobile app version of the dictionary. We, therefore, turn our attention to one of these versions and observe the characteristics and components that could be useful in facilitating the language learning process. In addition to this, we shall attempt to unfold the features that make these resources "more than a dictionary", where 'dictionary' is primarily understood in the sense of printed dictionaries.

Layout and design

The overall experience of any online dictionary is a result of a number of features, beginning with how the page is designed and structured to what and how much content has been covered. The webpage of the Oxford Learner's dictionary is simple and easily accessible in terms of its structure. It maintains user-friendliness by including various learning resources within the four major sections, i.e. Dictionaries, Grammar, Word Lists and Resources. Each of these sections consists of multiple sub-sections which can be accessed by the learner based on their individual needs. The range covered by the platform is evident from the sub-sections into which each of these sections is divided, the dictionaries section, for example, consists of three different kinds of dictionaries - American English, Academic and Collocations dictionary. In addition to this, features like the word of the day, the word of the month, Children's word of the year, the text checker, and the newly added entries in the

dictionary form the major part of the homepage. The following table shows the division of the four major sections into their sub-sections:

Dictionary	Grammar	Word Lists	Resources
English	Practical English Usage	My word lists	Text checker
American English	Learn and Practice grammar	Topics	(Additional)
Academic			
Collocations			
German English			

The Dictionary entry

Besides the plenty of resources that the online version provides in a compact form, the core elements of each lexeme in the dictionary have been upheld with some additional features. Since any dictionary is used by language learners for encoding and decoding, i.e. for comprehension and production, respectively, it becomes crucial for the learner to be aware of all the components of a headword, for a dictionary entry is not simply about the definition of a word and its examples of use. The online Oxford learner's dictionary provides the following information about a word:

- The multiple definitions and their varying usage
- Grammatical categories like noun(n), verb(v), adjective(adj) etc.
- Verb forms and types
- Pronunciation
- Plural or singular form of the word
- Different examples corresponding to the varied meanings
- Collocations
- Phrases and idioms related to the word
- Synonyms, antonyms and related words
- Register, i.e. the formal or informal use of the word
- Word origin/etymology
- Related topics

Since the online version can afford to provide detailed information about a word as there are no constraints of space, categories like extra examples, grammar points and ‘nearby words’ (words related to the target entry) also supplement the understanding, in addition to the core elements mentioned above. Each entry in the dictionary and its constituent parts are arranged according to the priority of the learners at different stages of learning. The oxford learner’s online dictionary marks each entry under a headword with the levels A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 established by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). These labels are useful for the teacher while teaching and assessing the learner’s vocabulary in the classroom. The dictionary also provides two major ‘word lists’

consisting of 3000 most important or core words for the beginner's level to the Intermediate and an additional 2000 words for the upper-intermediate and advanced levels. The words which form a part of these lists are marked by a 'key' symbol along with the suitable CEFR level. From these major word lists, the learners can create their own individual word lists based on the stage they have reached in the language learning process, by selecting the words of their choice from different entries. These words are stored under a category called 'My word list' which offers flexibility in terms of its learner-centered approach towards vocabulary building. These individual word lists created by the learners, is supplemented by more specific word lists like the essential vocabulary for academic writing and speaking and a list of the most important phrases to learn in English.

Additional Resources

The features mentioned above, taken together, pay more attention to the central aspect of all dictionaries, i.e. vocabulary building. The dictionary under discussion, however, offers the following in addition to the information about individual words in a typical dictionary format:

- Practical English Usage
- Learn and Practice Grammar
- Topic Dictionary
- Text Checker
- i-speaker and i-writer

The separate grammar section in the dictionary provides access to the Practical English usage by giving detailed information about the frequently asked questions regarding the use of lexical and grammatical choices in different linguistic contexts. The difference between the grammar of speech and formal writing, and the British and American variants of a word and its use has also been covered. The section also addresses the common mistakes made by learners by providing a list of over 250 word problems. The Practical English Usage section is an online replica of Michael Swan's book by the same title, and provides detailed answers to questions like "Can they and them have a singular meaning?", "when do we use get as a passive auxiliary?", "when do we use bring and when do we use take?", "how can we use a question to sound more polite?" et cetera (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2020). Such questions address multiple language needs of the learner by covering the lexical, grammatical as well as the pragmatic components, thus focusing on providing information pertaining to the communicative competence as a whole. In addition to this, there is a sub-section called 'learn and practice' where the content on different grammatical categories like tenses, determiners, possessives etc. are supplemented by practice examples.

Apart from this 'mini-grammar', the online version offers a 'mini-dictionary', or an alternative format of the dictionary, where the words are divided based on their similarity in terms of the overall topic of which they are identified as parts. For example, on choosing one of the topics from the categories like "Animals", "Culture", "Communication" etc., a list of words is displayed which belong to that topic. The user can

select the word he wants to look up for, after which he will be redirected to the dictionary entry of that word where he can find the required information. The purpose of this feature is to act as a filter which facilitates the search, given the learner is taught how to make use of such features optimally. Among the list of words covered in a topic, the learner can filter the words according to their learning stage. The teacher can make use of such topic- based dictionary in the classroom by introducing the learners to the categories one by one and covering the required vocabulary based on the level of the learners. Such a neat categorisation of words into topics which the users can access according to their individual needs is made possible by the flexibility that the mobile version of this language learning aid provides.

Another equally useful resource for both students and teachers is the 'Text Checker' which helps gauge the learning level of the students based on their vocabulary. The text written by the learner is measured against the word lists given in the dictionary, based on which the corresponding CEFR level is assigned. The result page is divided into three categories, i.e. Text, Results and Activities. In the text category, each and every word written in the text is labelled in terms of the word class and the learning stage at which that word is learned. The next category shows the results in terms of the percentage of words covered from each level, and the last section allows the teachers to create their own exercises for the students according to their specific needs.

The utilization of the text checker resource can be further accelerated by the i-writer. The Oxford i-writer is a premium feature which assists the students with different kinds of writing tasks, i.e. reports, notices, e-mails, essays, CVs etc., by providing model examples for each and guiding the students through the different stages of writing. The development of writing skills goes hand in hand with the additional skill of 'viewing' via a

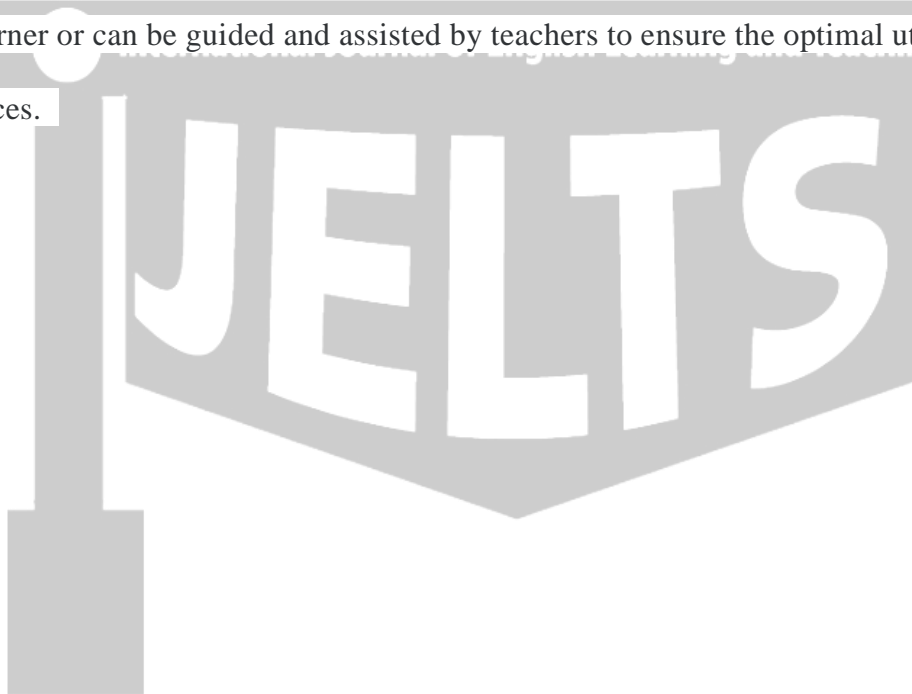
discussion of the selected pictures. There is some useful advice on the appropriate use of language based on the context, how to sound more formal, how to avoid repetition etc. The i-writer is therefore no less than a package that not only provides notes and sample examples, but also helps the students hone their writing skills through practice.

Another similar yet related premium feature is the i-speaker which includes videos on both British and American pronunciation of English. The students also get a chance to record themselves and compare their recordings with the model pronunciation. The pragmatic aspect of language is also taken into consideration by making the students a part of the conversations that happen in everyday situation, for example, asking for help, inquiring about something, apologising to someone etc. Thus the learners can listen, practice and self-assess their performances through this platform.

Additionally, there is a reading exercise for the students in which they are asked to read one sentence at a time based on one vocabulary item. If they happen to read and understand all the sentences, they are given an extract to read from a novel or short story. Towards the end of the exercise they are asked if the exercise was way too easy or too difficult or just about right for them, and based on their understanding, further suggestions are given. These suggestions can be utilised by teachers for assessing the student's performance and recognising their problem areas or the areas where they have made progress.

The features discussed above make us revise our idea of dictionaries in the first place. While we are aware that dictionaries provide information related to grammar, pronunciation and usage, they are able to do so in a limited way. With the introduction of mobile dictionaries, an opportunity to bring much more to the table has been rightly seized

by educators and software designers alike. The resulting websites and educational apps are a result of the collaborative effort of the software designers, web designers, language experts, teachers and lexicographers. These platforms can be seen as one-of-a-kind ‘mini-language classrooms’ which, though primarily a repository of words and their different meanings, can be extended to offer much more in terms of enhancing the overall linguistic competence of the learner. This extension comes not only in the content but also presentation. The website, as a whole, can be used for self-improvement by the learner or can be guided and assisted by teachers to ensure the optimal utilization of the resources.



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