

# Dictionaries

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An English/English dictionary is perhaps the most **under**-used resource in contemporary language teaching. The tendency is to see the dictionary as useful only for looking up the meaning of unknown words. A good dictionary – and for the present that for me means one from the Cobuild range – helps with meaning, stress, collocational range, and archetypical examples. In addition, it conveniently and helpfully blurs the distinction between dictionary and grammar book. All entries contain useful grammatical information about words; because of the alphabetic organisation of dictionaries, this information is easily accessible. Inevitably, it has to be written using some grammatical terminology and codes. But within a lexical approach it is natural, even essential to look at the grammar of individual words – does a new noun have both countable and uncountable uses? Can an adjective be used gradably? Attributively? Good dictionaries also list polywords, and many of the expressions broadly covered by the term ‘idiom’. Collocations are increasingly finding their way into dictionaries (again particularly the Cobuild range), and with increased understanding of lexical phrases we may expect them to be given increased prominence.

The Cobuild dictionary range has changed the nature of dictionary making, making them much more user-friendly and providing much more information in accessible form which would previously have been hidden in corners of the grammar book. As an adjunct to the dictionary range, Fox and Kirby have produced a Workbook,<sup>1</sup> which helps teachers and students access new kinds of information, and makes better use of dictionaries in class as a genuine teaching resource than has ever been done before.

I should perhaps, justify the recommendation today of the Cobuild dictionaries at the expense of all others. The theoretical justification is the nature of their corpus work; in recommending them for classroom use, key points are:

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\*An excerpt from: **Lewis, M.** *The Lexical Approach. The State of ELT and a Way Forward*, LTP, Hove 1993

<sup>1</sup>**Fox, G. and Kirkby, D.** *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary Workbook*, Collins Cobuild 1987

- a. Their defining style is to **exemplify** uses of a word in full, natural sentences. This style ensures students see more of the collocational features of a word and means that the dictionary definition is itself useful comprehensible input. It is in sharp contrast to other dictionaries which 'define' in abbreviated form, through supposed synonyms. This synonym approach is unhelpful, encouraging impossible or unlikely collocations. suggesting a rather algebraic view of language. Compare, for example, the following:

<p><b>empty</b><sup>1</sup> <i>adj</i> containing nothing</p> <p><b>empty</b><sup>2</sup> <i>v</i> to make EMPTY</p>
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<p><b>empty</b></p> <p>1. A place, vehicle or container that is <b>empty</b> has no people or things in it.</p> <p>2. If you <b>empty</b> a container, you remove its contents.</p>
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The first pair of definitions involve cross-referencing, difficult use of a delexicalised verb (make) and are from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. The second two are from *Cobuild*. The advantages, particularly for students in class, are readily apparent.

- b. The grammatical information about words is extensive, and the printing conventions adopted, in which this information is put in an 'extra column' means that the whole entry is much less intimidating than most dictionaries.
- c. Every use is illustrated with one or more archetypical examples from the corpus. These examples offer further useful, and often fully contextualised, comprehensible input.

The innovative nature of the Cobuild project is shown by the fact that their dictionary of collocation will be the first serious attempt to make information on this topic available.

Within a lexical approach every well-balanced course should provide the learners with real training of how to exploit an English-English dictionary to best advantage. Taking lexis seriously means ensuring that learners, too, see its value, and are trained to investigate it both for their immediate short-term needs, and as an important learning strategy for use after any formal course.