

○ **M. EAST, *DICTIONARY USE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITING EXAMS (IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS)***

(AMSTERDAM; PHILADELPHIA: JOHN BENJAMINS, 2008, PP. XII, 228)

Dictionary use by language learners has been a vexed subject, as much for reasons surrounding the ‘fairness’ of allowing such use as it is over the usefulness of bilingual dictionaries. East also notes that he has witnessed occasions, during his extensive experience of teaching senior secondary school and tertiary level German, where the dictionary in exam situations for writing tasks seems to be more a foe than a friend, as it rapidly consumed time available to complete the exam task. And a further aspect of his study is the actual proficiency in using a bilingual dictionary, a proficiency that relies on some level of linguistic proficiency, but which should ideally boost linguistic proficiency in the L2. The big questions are whether such dictionary use aids or inhibits acquisition of proficiency; or how such use may require changed views on overall curriculum; and whether students view dictionary use as helpful. Everyone knows of or has experienced dictionary howlers, and these often colour the debate over allowing dictionary use by language learners under assessment conditions, but this, as East notes, in turn points to wider arguments over the purpose of assessment itself, as being either for “‘professional and learning purposes” or for “managerial and accountability” purposes’ (p. 9). East’s study then works through discussions and analyses of his research data probing matters like how test takers use dictionaries, what test takers think of having a dictionary at hand during exams or tests, whether it is fair to have dictionaries in writing exams, and whether student ability level alters the picture.

It is worth stressing that generally evidence strongly supports the use of dictionaries in the L2 classroom and this is usually seen as being in accord with communicative approaches to language teaching. It complements authenticity and, as East notes, is in accord with arguments that communicative language tests ought to work towards giving language learners the best possible opportunities to demonstrate their optimum performance. Of course, such dictionary use also calls for suitable tests, and such test design as part of the overall curriculum also needs to be linked to the best methods to allow students to be effective dictionary users. However, East’s own ‘tests’ of students of varying ability levels seem to show that dictionary use in exams/tests makes no significant difference to

test scores. But test scores are not the only parameter that needs analysis and East's probing of test takers' use of dictionaries with reference to previous studies of Lexical Frequency Profiles (LFP), (a measure which he sees as flawed in that it, while it measures lexical range, it cannot measure correct lexical use), nonetheless finds that dictionary use in tests produced a slight improvement in lexical sophistication. However, while this part of East's study signals some benefits in dictionary use under test conditions, he also picks up some of the limitations, e.g. errors in the dictionaries, as well as what he terms 'look-up errors' that led students astray.

Focusing on students themselves, East finds that there was a range of opinions over dictionary use with some comments relating positive experiences right through to others who expressed fears that such use was close to cheating. However, once he shifts the study to how useful and how fair is dictionary use in test situations, East is necessarily back into issues like writing proficiency, and test validity, authenticity, impact, reliability, practicality, etc. All this discussion is laced with his general findings that the bilingual dictionary makes no statistically significant difference to test scores across the two basic conditions - tests taken with or without dictionaries. As well, subject to the test design, dictionary use does not of itself produce evidence of any unfair advantage.

In terms of authenticity, East (p. 173) makes the revealing comment that while students themselves appear almost ambivalent over dictionaries in test situations, teachers are generally positive about such use. Turning to interactiveness and topical knowledge, Lexical Frequency Profiles suggest that there is some improvement in the quality of writing, particularly for the lower ability cohorts, and that once you combine interactiveness and topicality, dictionary use can boost an L2 writer's information and accompanying lexical repertoire and, in such cases, dictionary use was a clear plus for test takers. Nonetheless, much also depended on prior exposure to dictionary use and this factor emphasizes how important it is for L2 students to be introduced to effective dictionary use. However, East also found that higher ability test takers make far more effective use of dictionaries under test conditions than their lower ability counterparts; the more able L2 users were less likely to make wrong lexical choices, but interestingly, less able L2 students self-reported a higher level of confidence in their dictionary use than the more able groups. Could this be a case of a false sense of security vis-à-vis the more competent L2 students' wiser more finely tuned linguistic sensitivity?

And turning once more to whether dictionary use in tests is fair or not, East is left with an equivocal outcome, but he argues that given the fact that dictionaries do not significantly interfere with test scores for intermediate tests of L2 writing, the decision on use of dictionaries in writing tests depends greatly on the priorities that test setters

wish to work with. For example, if the concern is with having test takers at ease with the overall situation, then dictionaries can be justified; if the concern is with the time constraints in more strictly timed test conditions, then dictionaries may not be justified.

Overall, East's study is centred on hardcopy dictionaries. Electronic dictionaries are not a prime focus – although East does outline some of the interesting facets of the latter near the end of his study and signals this as another area for more research. East stresses that dictionary use in tests by L2 learners has important social consequences for test takers. As well, East's findings for timed writing tests by L2 learners suggest that dictionary use is neither a challenge to test validity nor disadvantageous for the test takers. However, this does mean that care has to be taken in order to introduce useful dictionary 'habits' by L2 learners such that they are transferrable to the test situation. And in all this, there is the issue of what constitutes a good bilingual dictionary that is optimally suited to complement and enhance the ability of the L2 learner. East's study raises many tough questions and does not have easy answers; it also touches on a range of areas of great importance for the professional teacher of L2, including the prime focus of curriculum and assessment.

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