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Featured Inside—Classroom activities to improve dictionary skills

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The ABCs of Dictionary Use: How Using Dictionaries Can Help Improve Students' Language Skills

by Bonnie McKenna

The words “look it up” echo through classrooms across the nation. For years, educators have promoted the use of dictionaries to build students' vocabulary and improve their spelling. However, many assume that students already have the skills necessary to access information in a dictionary. This is not always the case. So, what dictionary skills should we teach students—both young students and English language learners (ELLs)—before we expect them to “look it up”? Furthermore, once students have basic dictionary skills, what can teachers do to exploit the full use of dictionaries as learning tools? This article will explore these questions.

Dictionaries—Basic Elements

Young students and ELLs of all ages can benefit from basic dictionary skills and knowledge, such as how to alphabetize words, how a dictionary is organized, how to use guide words, how to pronounce words, and how to understand the features of a word's entry. Many educators are surprised to learn that older ELLs with low English language proficiency have trouble alphabetizing even a simple series of words, such as *kitchen*, *kite*, and *kitten*. Learning how to alphabetize empowers students to use a dictionary and take control of their own learning.

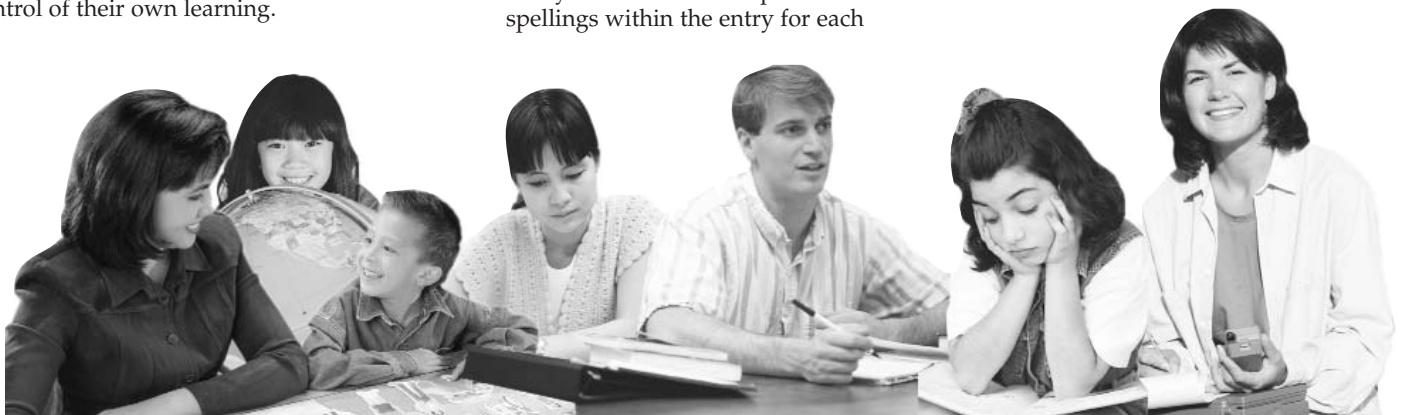
Before using any tool, it is important to understand how to use it. For example, understanding how to use a camera allows you to take better pictures. If photographers had to stop and read the directions on how to use the camera every time they wanted to use it, the opportunity to get the perfect shot would be lost. Similarly, if students know how a dictionary is organized and they understand its basic elements, they will find it much easier to use. Most dictionaries have a title, a table of contents, a pronunciation key, a pair of guide words on each page, and an entry for each word. In addition, some dictionaries include a guide or introduction that explains the various features found in the dictionary.

- The **title** and **table of contents** give students clues about what kind of information they will find in a particular dictionary and how the information is organized. It is important that students understand the organization of the dictionary. Most standard dictionaries are organized in alphabetical order. Some picture dictionaries are organized by themes or categories of words rather than alphabetically. Picture dictionaries that are organized by category often include an alphabetical index of topics, as well.
- A **pronunciation key** provides a list of the symbols used in the phonetic spellings within the entry for each

word. Keep in mind that the symbols used to represent sounds vary considerably among dictionaries. The pronunciation guide for the word *musician* may appear as **myoo-zish'ən**, **myoo-ZISH-un**, or **mju:zi'sen**. This is why knowing where to find the pronunciation key in a dictionary is essential.

- The **guide words** on each page tell the first and last word on that page. The ability to quickly determine on which page a word should appear is an acquired skill. Students need practice defining the limits within which to find a word.
- Once students understand how a dictionary is organized and the basic elements it contains, they are ready to explore the features of a **dictionary entry**. Entries in dictionaries intended for older students or advanced English learners usually contain some or all of the following features: the word itself, the phonetic spelling(s), the part(s) of speech, the plural form (if a noun), the irregular past form(s) (if a verb), the definition(s), sample sentence(s), a list of synonyms, and a diagram or picture. Entries in beginning level dictionaries or

(Continued on next page.)



picture dictionaries intended for English learners or young students often include only the word itself, a picture, and a sample sentence or brief definition. The phonetic spelling (or pronunciation guide) within the entry, along with the pronunciation key, will give symbols for the various sounds and indicate stress patterns in English. The phonetic spelling will help students achieve proficiency in oral language skills, such as speaking, listening, and reading aloud. When introducing the features of a dictionary entry, it is important that educators emphasize that words can have multiple meanings and/or parts of speech. For example, the word *fly* could be either a noun or a verb. Depending on their age and language proficiency, it may be helpful to review several entries with students to make sure they understand the various features.

Benefits of Picture Dictionaries

For young children and ELLs with low English language proficiency, a picture dictionary is essential. These students do not have enough English vocabulary to decipher a definition that includes English words they do not yet know. While many picture dictionaries are organized by theme and categories of words, a picture dictionary that is organized alphabetically

Key Terms

Phonemic awareness: The ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds—phonemes—in spoken words.

Phonetic spelling: The systematic representation of sounds by a consistent set of symbols.

Phonics: The process of attaching sounds (known as phonemes) to the letter or letters (graphemes) that represent those sounds

Pronunciation: The way of speaking a word.

Pronunciation key: Something that enables a person to decipher a code indicating the way to say a word.

Pronunciation guide: Something that serves to direct or indicate the way to say a word.

is essential to help students develop alphabetization skills. A picture dictionary that has the same elements as a standard dictionary will enable students to develop dictionary skills and eventually transition to a standard English dictionary.

Classroom Activities

The following classroom activities reinforce alphabetization, dictionary organization, and pronunciation skills. These types of activities not only help students understand the various uses of the dictionary and become more comfortable using it, but also build their language abilities.

Alphabetization Skills

All students need to get out of their seats and stretch at some point during class, regardless of their age. In addition to the obvious benefits of increased blood flow to the brain, kinesthetic activities offer an alternative approach to learning for students who may not derive as much benefit from other learning modes. The following classroom activities, which reinforce alphabetization skills, give students an opportunity to move around without taking a formal break.

Alphabet Mixer

Have students write their names on cards and then line up in alphabetical order by first name and then by last name. They also can do this activity using the name of their favorite food, animal, or sport, or their country, state, or city of origin. There are endless categories you can use with this activity.

Where Do I Belong?

Use a picture dictionary organized in alphabetical order and matching picture cards for this activity. Choose four sets of picture cards. Each set of picture cards should contain words that are close together in the alphabet, such as *bean, bear, beaver, and bed*. Give each student a picture card with the corresponding word written on it. Tell students to first find the other students with words from their set of cards (e.g., all of the students with words beginning with “b” should get together). Then direct the students in each group to arrange themselves in alphabetical order and later verify the order by looking in the picture dictionary. You can make this activity a competition to see which group can alphabetize the words in their set of cards first.

Dictionary Organization Skills

The following activities also get students out of their seats and moving around. These games focus on learning how a dictionary is organized.

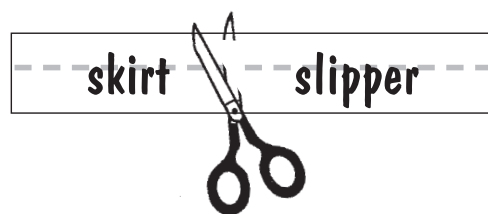
Guide Word Partners

Write the beginning and ending guide words from several pages of a picture dictionary on separate cards and give one card to each student. Direct students to find their partner (i.e., the person who has the other guide word from the same page). Have them check their answers by looking in the dictionary. Keep in mind that by choosing pairs of guide words from different first letters in the alphabet you will create an easier activity than if you choose guide words that are within the same first letter in the alphabet. For example, it will be easier for students to find their partners by using the guide word pairs *belt/birthday, dolphin/dress, and triangle/Tuesday* than by using the guide word pairs *shovel/six, skirt/slipper, and soda/space capsule*.

Living Dictionary

Try this activity with a group of 13 or more students.

Step 1: Write the beginning and ending guide words from six consecutive pages in a picture dictionary on sentence strips. Cut the sentence strips into 12 individual words. (You also can use 12 cards if you don’t have sentence strips.)



Step 2: Choose random words from those six pages in the dictionary. Write those words on additional sentence strips of a different color. Cut the sentence strips into individual words. (Again, you can use cards instead of sentence strips and write these words in a different color.)

NOTE: You should complete these steps before students begin the activity.

Step 3: Give the 12 individual guide words to students. Have the students arrange themselves in alphabetical order, representing the six pages in the dictionary.

Step 4: Give the random words to other students. Direct them to find the page they belong on and stand between the students representing that page.

Step 5: Rotate the words among students so that each student has a chance to “place” a word.

Phonics and Pronunciation Skills

Phonemic awareness is the first step in developing phonics skills and understanding pronunciation guides. Once students learn to recognize that sound similarities exist and that letters represent sounds, they can put these two concepts together. Again, this stage of literacy development is widely recognized as valuable for young children, but often overlooked for older ELLs with low English language proficiency. Manipulatives, such as letter tiles or word and picture cards, can help students develop phonics skills. Try the following activities with young children or ELLs:

Memory Match—Words and Pictures

This activity will help students learn to associate a written and spoken word with its picture. For this activity, you will need two to six students and several pairs of word and picture cards such as the ones below. The reverse side of each card should be blank.



Place each set of cards face down in rows on a table. The first student picks up one word card and one picture card. He or she shows the cards to the other students and reads aloud the word written on the word card. If the cards match, the student can keep the pair and continue. If the cards don't match, the student must return the cards to their original facedown position so that the next player can take a turn. Continue until all of the pairs of cards have been collected from the table. The student with the most pairs wins the game.

Memory Match—Words and Sounds

Play this game the same way as the game described above, but substitute the picture cards with a set of cards showing the phonetic spellings of words. Again, have the students read the words aloud when showing them to the other students. This game will help students recognize

the spelling of words and connect the phonetic sounds to the printed word. It also will help them develop their pronunciation skills.

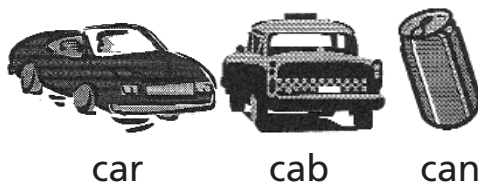


NOTE: Both of the “matching” games described above can be played in small groups or by dividing the class into two teams and using large cards (8" x 10") taped facedown on the board. Make sure that each member of the team gets a chance to choose a card.

Word Morph

Children enjoy the concept of morphing (i.e., when an object transitions into a different object). Tell students you are going to play *word morph*. Students use letter tiles to spell out a word and progressively change the word by substituting one or more letter tiles. This type of activity is great for practicing phonics skills, such as recognizing beginning and ending sounds, understanding consonant and vowel substitution, identifying rhyming words, recognizing consonant blends, and so forth. It also helps with pronunciation if students are encouraged to read the words aloud. This kind of activity is even more effective when used in combination with picture cards. Below are some activities that use increasingly more difficult phonics skills.

- Have students form simple words like *cat* with letter tiles. Then direct the students to substitute the beginning sound with other letters to form words like *bat*, *rat*, *mat*, and so forth. As students substitute the beginning sound with other letters, have them read each new word aloud.
- Next, students can substitute the ending sound with other letters to form words like *car*, *cab*, *can*, and so forth. As students substitute the ending sound with other letters, have them read each new word aloud.



NOTE: To increase the possibilities for the two activity variations described above, show students picture cards that correspond with the substitutions.

- Now students can try vowel substitutions by using letter tiles to form words, such as *pet*, *pat*, *pit*, and so forth. As students substitute the vowel sounds with other letters, have them read each new word aloud.
- Finally, students can progress to the more challenging task of combining vowel and consonant substitution. This activity will help students discover how many morphs they can make. Give them a few examples, such as *pet*, *pat*, *cat* or *hot*, *hat*, *bat*, to show them how to first substitute the vowel and then the consonant. Next, use examples, such as *hike*, *bike*, *bake* or *tank*, *bank*, *bunk*, to demonstrate consonant and then vowel substitution. As with the previous word morph activities, have students read each new word aloud as they substitute the vowels and consonants.

Conclusion

Knowing how to alphabetize and understanding how a dictionary is organized allows students to get the information they need quickly and continue the process of learning. Picture dictionaries are a good introduction to dictionary use for young children and for older ELLs at the beginning stages of language acquisition. Using a picture dictionary that has the same elements as a standard dictionary will enable students to transition more easily to a standard English dictionary designed for older students or more advanced English learners.

After students have started using a more advanced dictionary, understanding the various features of a dictionary entry gives them a valuable tool for developing their language skills. They can improve their grammatical knowledge by learning about parts of speech and word forms; their vocabulary skills by reading definitions and sample sentences; their reading skills by using words in phonics activities; and their pronunciation skills by understanding the phonetic spelling for a word and by knowing how to use the pronunciation key.

Educators need to remember that dictionaries are learning tools. Learning how to use a dictionary empowers students to take control of their own

learning. However, dictionaries are not a resource which students automatically know how to use. Educators cannot expect a student to “look it up” easily without first teaching them dictionary skills. Moreover, once students have acquired some basic dictionary skills, educators should use dictionary-related activities on a regular basis to develop and enhance their students’ language skills. When used consistently and effectively, dictionaries can become classroom treasures. ■

Bonnie McKenna, M.A., TESL Certificate, CLAD credential, teacher and curriculum developer for the Community Based English Tutoring (CBET) program in the Capistrano Unified School District in California, has been an educator for more than 30 years. She has taught in elementary schools, at the college level, and in adult ESL programs. She was among the teachers who pioneered the CBET program in 1999.

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- Brown, H. Douglas. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1994.
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Speaking Out...

How do you use dictionaries with your ELLs?

Michelle Hewlett-Gomez

*Associate Professor
Sam Houston State University, TX*

To help build students’ schema, I ask my students to use graphic organizers to create a conceptual framework for a new word. Students refer to a dictionary and include many of the following elements: the word’s spelling, the phonetic spelling, the definition, a sample sentence, a visual, a description of a physical experience related to the new word, and a description of feelings related to the new word. Providing a visual organizer for the concepts related to the new word helps students retain the information.

Lisa Kelly

*5th-Grade Teacher
Bucknell Elementary
Fairfax County, VA*

My students gravitate toward picture dictionaries not only to spell words but also to get ideas for writing. I have two types

of picture dictionaries: one organized alphabetically and one organized by subjects. Both allow me to teach students a variety of skills, such as sorting, ABC order, and letter/sound associations.

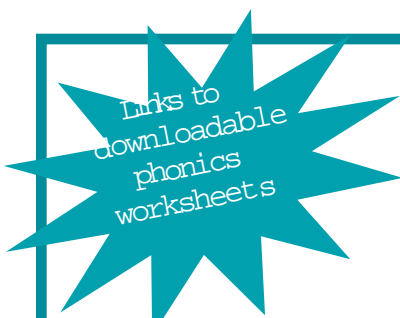


Sylvia Martinez



*2nd-Grade
Teacher
Horace Mann
Elementary
Glendale, CA*

When using a picture dictionary, it is easy to get my students to look up new words. They love to look through the dictionary to find pictures of the vocabulary words we are studying. My students also use their dictionaries during writing activities to locate words they are not sure how to spell. ■



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Congratulations

Congratulations to **Dr. Carlos Abeyta** on his return as bilingual director of the Bernalillo Public Schools in NM.

Kudos to **Mary Silva Apodaca**, who is the new principal of Isleta Elementary School in NM.

Hats off to **Jane Borland** of Lamar High School in Arlington, TX, and **Mary Melendez** of Socorro High School in Socorro, TX, on receiving the Milken Family Foundation Awards.

We celebrate with **Barbara Perea Casey**, who is the new associate superintendent of the West Las Vegas Schools in NM.

We commend **Linn Demeris** of Laguna Elementary School in NM on the success of her "teddy bear project." Demeris and her students had a teddy bear drive and donated the bears to the victims of the World Trade Center tragedy.

Best wishes to **Connie Guerra** of Edinburg, TX, on her new position as TABE president.

Liz Morrison of Parkway South High School in Manchester, MO, **Mary Ann Shields** of Oak Grove Middle School in Oak Grove, MO, and **Timothy J. Tuttle** of Santiago High School in Corona, CA, received the Outstanding Social Studies Teacher of the Year Awards. Way to go!

We applaud **Tim Harvey** on his new position as superintendent of the Brea-Olinda Unified School District in Brea, CA.

Martha Johnsen of the West Las Vegas Schools in Las Vegas, NM, was assigned to the Family Partnership Program. Well done!

Kudos to **Alexis Lopez** of University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, on receiving the Best Student Presentation Award at the MwALT 2002 Conference.

We salute **Clara Lopez** on being appointed as the new bilingual director for the Las Vegas City Schools in Las Vegas, NM.

Anita Lyons of Sharpstown Middle School in Houston, TX, was named Houston Independent School District's teacher of the year. She was also named the 2001 ESL Teacher of the Year by both HAABE and TABE. Well done!

Hats off to **Virginia Rivera** of Phoenix, AZ, on her new position as bilingual director of the Arizona Department of Education.

Congratulations to **Antonia Tapia** of the El Paso Independent School District on her new appointment as director of bilingual/ESL education.

We celebrate with **James Tighe** of Whittier, CA, on being named the 2001-2002 Teacher of the Year for the East Whittier School District.

Hats off to **Solana Winters** of Hollibrook Elementary in Houston, TX, on being named Hollibrook's Teacher of the Year 2001-2002. ■

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Teaching Tip

After my students have learned quite a few new vocabulary words, I create a word hunt activity. I have my students use the *IDEA Picture Dictionary* to search for grade-appropriate categories for words that they have just learned. First, I give them some categories of words such as numbers or colors. Next, they look in the picture dictionary to find words for each category. Finally, they make a list of words they find and indicate the page number



where they found the word. Indicating the page number lets me know they are learning about the dictionary's organization. Sometimes I have my students do the word hunt individually within a limited amount of time. Other times I put my students in teams to make it a group level competition. This word hunt activity is fun and helps my students extend their understanding of concepts and vocabulary by categorizing new vocabulary words.

Sylvia Galvez Grado
1st-Grade Teacher
Horace Mann Elementary
Glendale, CA

Do you have an innovative idea to share with other educators? Please submit your 'Teaching Tip' to the IDEAS for Excellence editor, Jill Kinkade. You can contact her at (800) 321-4332 or jkinkade@ballard-tighe.com. Remember, you will receive free teaching materials if we use your submission!!

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