

Teacher's Corner

> When in doubt, look it up!

The time is 9.45am. The students walk into the exam room apprehensively holding their dictionaries tightly in their hands. They sit on their chairs and the exam is about to start. It is just then that one of the candidates whispers to her friend sitting next to her: "Oh, no! I have left my dictionary at home! What am I going to do now?" Forgetting the dictionary on the day of the City & Guilds exam does not necessarily result in failure but a candidate that is well-prepared and capable of using the dictionary intelligently obviously has an advantage.

On the other hand, candidates will naturally be stressed in an exam situation and, unless the students are well trained in the use of the dictionary, it can turn into a mixed blessing: some students tend to rely on it excessively and can waste time looking everything up while they should be concentrating on the examination questions.

So, it is very important that you instruct your students how to use the dictionary. Some of the points that you need to bear in mind are the following:

Teach your students how to be selective so that they don't waste time looking up every word they see. For example, when doing a reading comprehension exercise, ask them to work in pairs to select a maximum of 5 words they need to know.

Train them in looking up words quickly and efficiently. For example, make sure they know that the first and last word defined on each dictionary page appear in the header of that page.

Show them where the different types of information in a dictionary entry are located, including information on the grammar of words (e.g. whether a noun is countable), their collocations, their level of formality, etc, so that they can use the dictionary to improve their written production and not just to help them understand texts.

Check your students' dictionaries a couple of weeks before the exam to make sure they are up-to-date and easy to use. Most publishers bring out learners' dictionaries at various levels, so make sure the ones your students use are appropriate for their level.

Spend time in class showing the students the steps that they need to follow when looking up a word. For low levels this can even be done in a form of a game!

Occasionally ask your students to bring their dictionary to class so that they practise under your supervision (they could complete some exercises found in the coursebook you use or during mock exams).

Play games that involve the use of the dictionary. Here are some ideas:

> **The dictionary game:** one student thinks of a word; the rest of the class have to guess which word it is by asking questions like "Is it before or after X [where X is any word the students can think of] in the dictionary?". This game can help your students practise alphabet skills.

> **Call my bluff:** Students work in groups. Each group chooses 3-5 unfamiliar words from a text they have read and prepare 3 different definitions for each word with the help of their dictionary. Only one definition is correct, though. The other groups have to guess which are the correct definitions.

> **Taboo:** An adaptation of the popular word game, whereby students work in groups to prepare taboo cards for vocabulary items that they have recently learnt; while preparing the cards, the learners use key words from the definition as well as synonyms and antonyms as taboo words. They then play the game with other groups.

> **Make up your own definition:** Give your students a list of familiar words. Ask them to make up their own definitions for these words. Then, using their dictionaries, students check if their own definitions correlate to the ones their dictionary provides.

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