

WHAT USERS DO WITH DICTIONARIES IN SITUATIONS OF COMPREHENSION DEFICIT: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY¹

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ABSTRACT

The present paper takes up the topic of receptive dictionary use from the perspective of highly advanced learners performing the complex comprehension task of decoding contextually modified idioms, viewed as a source of disruption to the fluent reading process. The path followed by students in an attempt to solve this conflict has been retraced with a view to pursuing the link between the quality of the consultation process and comprehension achievement. The results of the reported experiment with elements of an observational study reveal a mildly positive influence of the monolingual dictionary on comprehension performance. Among the factors that adversely affected the scores was misinterpretation of the entries as well as insufficient processing of the dictionary information in context.

1. Introduction

The number of experimental studies that offer valuable insights into the “very private matter” (Nesi and Hail 2002: 277) of dictionary consultation is still relatively small.² As McCreary and Dolezal (1999: 108) observe, “[t]he number of studies that look at how dictionary use can assist in comprehension of a word in context ... is smaller still.” However interesting the issue, the intuitively appealing image of the pedagogical dictionary as a tool for boosting comprehension of

¹ I have been fortunate to have comments on the present project from several scholars: Professor Arleta Adamska-Salaciak, Dr Ewelina Jagła and Dr Robert Lew. I am very grateful to them for the time and effort they have generously given me. I would like also to thank all members of the English Department of Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland who helped me in administering the test.

² For a comprehensive review, see, e.g., Atkins (1998), Hartmann (2001), Nesi (2000), Tono (2001).

a written text has not yet been confirmed beyond doubt, and it is debatable whether expectations of a clear-cut answer are feasible. After all, the obvious differences in design, comprehension measures,³ data collecting methods, and the ensuing, inevitably limited, comparability, criticism frequently levelled at such studies, seem only too natural if the painstakingly constructed experiments are to emulate the diversity of real-life situations of dictionary use, where total replicability of conditions is virtually impossible. The present paper, by no means aspiring to become a final word on the subject, is an attempt to contribute to the steadily increasing body of "more dynamic observations of what real users do with real dictionaries in real situations of communicative deficit" (Tono 2001: 83). The peculiar receptive situation of highly advanced students trying to comprehend contextually modified idioms has been selected as a relatively unexplored niche, and, at the same time, a convenient springboard for investigating the situation of dictionary use in its entirety. The fourth, empirical, part of the present paper is preceded by a brief overview of the literature, followed by a section spelling out the aims of the study and rationalisation for certain details of its design. The ensuing report on the results of the experiment carried out in October 2002 occupies the remaining part of the paper, to be completed with discussion and conclusions.

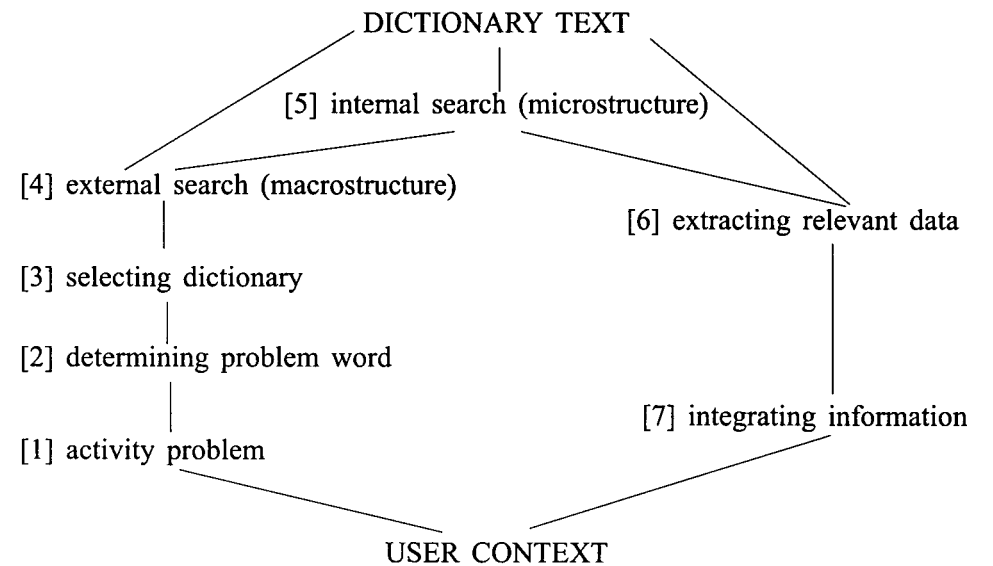
2. What might a student do with a dictionary in a reading situation?

Even though checking a word in a dictionary is usually performed in a routine, largely mechanical manner, to think of research into the steps of dictionary use as dwelling on the obvious is to give the lie to the complexity of the strategies involved. Recurrent trends in dictionary-using habits have been incorporated in models of the consultation process, such as Hartmann (2001) (Figure 1):⁴

³ As Tono observes, multiple choice tests that check general comprehension of the passage (e.g., Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss 1984), comprehension questions testing individual words (e.g., Summers 1988), or the immediate recall protocol (Knight 1994), are all likely to yield different scores (Tono 2001: 29-30).

⁴ See also Scholfield (1982, 1999).

Figure 1. Components of the consultation process (Hartmann 2001: 91)



Steps one, two and three involve the recognition of the problem and the decision as to the need for consultation, both of which, if absent, automatically cancel further stages. Points four and five concern the reference skills: the search for the appropriate entry and locating the desired information within the entry. Equally important, though frequently marginalised by students and teachers alike, is retrieval, comprehension, and integration of the relevant data back into context, a process undoubtedly requiring more than a cursory reading of the definition. The whole dictionary reference act is inextricably linked with inference, which not only, as it were, frames it, but, as Scholfield points out, "actually is relevant as a *part* of dictionary use itself" (Scholfield 1999: 28). Ideally, context and dictionary are used in a back-and-forth way to achieve the ultimate goal of the look-up process, that is, "to understand the meaning information given in the chosen subentry, and somehow to combine this with the meaning of the text where the unknown was met" (Scholfield 1999: 28). Preferably, the evaluation of the outcome of one's efforts crowns the consultation.

Unless allowance is made for the above steps, the picture of dictionary use cannot be comprehensive. Only when dictionary users' behaviour has been dissected, can problems be spotted, receptive errors analysed and prevented in future. What follows is a recapitulation of findings from previous research that account for three possible situations of handling a comprehension deficit with the dictionary at hand, namely those of the dictionary being ignored, misused, and properly exploited.

2.1. Ignoring the dictionary

It needs to be stressed that the mere availability of the dictionary in the experimental group rarely automatically leads to a multitude of reference acts. For a receptive situation of dictionary use to take place, the reader must experience a problem – a lexical gap that disrupts the reading process. Since “everyone has different degrees of word knowledge for different words, and, for many words, we simply do not need to have elaborated knowledge” (Stoller and Grabe 1993: 38), the lexical item may be either totally unfamiliar or, more likely in the case of advanced students, vaguely familiar. It is the latter “incomplete” meanings that are probably the most frequent targets of good readers (Scholfield 1997: 285). Obviously, a reference act will take place on condition that the lexical gap is irreparable by means other than the dictionary (e.g., a native speaker’s opinion, marginal glosses or highly informative context), and the item is truly important for comprehension. This relevance, as Scholfield (1999: 17-18) points out, might stem from the task type or from the unfamiliar item’s role in activating appropriate schemata.⁵ A replication of Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss’ (1984)⁶ well-known experiment revealed that reading comprehension tests may not be affected by the dictionary when: 1) the test checks comprehension of text and not of individual vocabulary items; 2) the dictionary does not provide the necessary information; 3) the user fails to identify keywords to be looked up (Nesi and Meara 1991: 639-643).

The more recent research by Hulstijn (1993) confirmed the positive relationship between word relevance and the reading goal on look-up. Furthermore, it showed that easily inferable words were looked up less frequently than words whose meaning could not be easily guessed from context, although inferring ability turned out to be a factor of minor significance compared to vocabulary knowledge. Students with limited vocabulary knowledge tended to look up more words than advanced students,⁷ but, surprisingly, greater inferring ability did not result in fewer consultations. Apparently, students were eager to check their inferences, which tallies with the results of Knight’s (1994) investigation into the effect of bilingual dictionary use on incidental learning and reading comprehen-

⁵ The term refers to knowledge of the world that readers store in memory and may activate when processing new information (Chodkiewicz 2000: 52).

⁶ Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984), whose study was motivated by the controversy between Israeli EFL teachers and administrators of examinations over the issue of dictionary use during examinations, report no positive influence of the dictionary on comprehension scores.

⁷ That higher proficiency students tend to search the dictionary less than lower proficiency learners is also stated in Atkins and Varantola (1998: 34) and Tono (2001: 112). On the other hand, Hatherall’s (1984) advanced subjects used the dictionary more often than the less advanced ones. This surprising fact is explained tentatively: “Perhaps less advanced students are less confident of retrieving the necessary information and thus more reluctant to try” (Hatherall 1984: 187).

sion in high- and low-ability students. Although fewer words per text-set were actually looked up by the low verbal ability group than the high-ability group, the correlation between the number of targets looked up and comprehension scores was high only in the former. Whereas there was a significant difference between the dictionary and no-dictionary condition for the low-ability group, the high-ability group seemed to be less dependent on vocabulary for comprehension. In the dictionary condition there was little difference between both ability groups (Knight 1994: 293). “[I]t appears that many high verbal ability students refer to the dictionary when they have already correctly guessed the meaning”, Knight (1994: 295) concludes, thereby partly corroborating the opinion of Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984: 271) that proficient students know enough to do without the dictionary.

Predictably, intermediate and advanced L2 learners are more likely to look up words when reading a shorter text rather than a text of more than one page (Hulstijn – Hollander – Greidanus 1996: 336). Finally, the accessibility of dictionary information influences the frequency of look-ups, with an electronic dictionary having an advantage over a paper one (Hulstijn and Hollander and Greidanus 1996: 336).

All things considered, the effort of consulting the dictionary must be seen as worthwhile before the learner decides to interrupt the reading, especially as “[t]he dictionary continues to be seen as an instrument designed to provide quick and superficial support in case of emergency” (Béjoint 1994: 152).

2.2. Misusing the dictionary

Of all potential sources of failure in comprehension tasks despite the presence of the dictionary, inadequate reference skills are regarded as the most acute problem. Although reference skills as a major determinant of the effect of the dictionary on performance constitute a popular area of research, “[v]ery little attention has been paid to how the learners’ particular use of dictionaries affects results” (Tono 2001: 56).⁸

Tight control over subjects’ reference skills being an exception rather than a rule, insights into reference problems can be gained from error analysis and observational studies, such as Neubach and Cohen (1988). The major difficulties

⁸ Tono’s (2001: 75-83) investigation into the effects of long-term dictionary use on reading comprehension proved a positive correlation between the overall results of the Dictionary Reference Skills Test Battery (DRSTB) and comprehension scores. Still, no straightforward relationship between DRSTB subscores and reading comprehension scores could be discovered. Apart from control over the reference skills, intensive training in dictionary skills that the subjects had received was pointed out by Tono (2001: 75) as responsible for the difference between his results and those of Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984).

with the macrostructure search experienced by the subjects during the consultation were: alphabetic ordering, inability to identify the right headword, abandoning the search, experiencing frustration during the search, and continuing the search when the target item had been found. Similarly, McCreary and Dolezal (1999) report their subjects' difficulties in following the guidewords in alphabetical order (put down to the Asian background of many of the subjects) and unwillingness to follow the cross-references, perceived by many students as "too much work, too time-consuming, and ... dependent on a fine and accurate knowledge of alphabetical order applied not just to the first letter of the word, but also to the second and third letters" (McCreary and Dolezal 1999: 132).⁹

After the entry has been found, the user might run into difficulties in locating the information, comprehending the definition and applying the information to the comprehension task. When searching the microstructure, students tend to opt for a *negative choice strategy*, i.e. they like to choose the first solution unless it is obviously wrong, and would rather not read the whole entry if only they spot something they take as the required information (Béjoint 1994: 162). Neubach and Cohen (1988) noted problems with defining vocabulary and terminology as well as with the definition format. Also, some subjects read only the first definition and were uncertain about the word meaning they managed to arrive at.

What sort of consultation problems are advanced students likely to grapple with? After analysing errors due to the misuse of bilingual dictionaries during a translation test, Nuccorini (1994: 595) concluded that it was the micro-structure that posed more difficulties to the subjects because "students tend to consult dictionaries rather carefully whenever they face supposed opaque items (thus mainly idiomatic expressions and most compounds)." Nesi and Haill's (2002) recent naturalistic and holistic research into receptive dictionary use offers particularly interesting findings. The data (77 reports on the way international undergraduate students at a British University looked up five selected words from a text of their choice in a dictionary they wished), collected over a period of three years, enabled the identification of five categories of look-up problems, of which the first one involves macrostructure skills:

- 1) The subject chose the wrong dictionary entry or sub-entry (34 cases).
- 2) The subject chose the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry but misinterpreted the information it contained (11 cases).

⁹ The fact that the subjects had an American college desk dictionary, and not a learner's monolingual dictionary, at their disposal, might have affected the accessibility of information.

- 3) The subject chose the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry, but did not realise that the word had a slightly different (often figurative) meaning in context (7 cases).
- 4) The subject found the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry, but rejected it as inappropriate in context (5 cases).
- 5) The word or appropriate word meaning was not in any of the dictionaries the subject consulted (8 cases) (Nesi and Haill 2002: 282-283).

Inadequate microstructure skills or lack of information induced the remaining error categories. Among the explanations for the misinterpretation of the entry provided by Nesi and Haill is the *kidrule strategy*¹⁰ (Miller – Gildea 1987), in which the familiar part of the dictionary definition is taken for the equivalent of the headword. To use an example, the child who looked up *erode* found a familiar-looking *eat out, eat away*, composed a sentence using this word and finally replaced *eat out* with the new word *erode*, to obtain the curious construct *Our family erodes a lot* (Miller and Gildea 1987: 97-98). Another reason for misinterpretation was the *sham use* of dictionaries (Müllich 1990), i.e. disregarding or distorting the dictionary information so as to be able to retain one's preconceived notions. Errors of the third type occurred because the subjects either had not recognised the discrepancy between definition and contextual meaning, or "no effort was made on the part of the subject to use the more generally applicable dictionary information to create context-specific 'value glosses'" (Nesi and Haill 2002: 289). Some of the subjects who committed errors of type four had problems with understanding the language of the definition, others did not recognise the possibility of a figurative interpretation or were influenced by preconceived notions (Nesi and Haill 2002: 289, 292). The dictionary evidently failed the students when the vocabulary item was absent, or the explanation was formulated in a misleading or difficult way.

Types three and four of receptive errors bring to the fore the recurrent issue of context processing, already highlighted in McCreary and Dolezal (1999), when the dictionary, alone no better than guessing the meaning from context, turned out to be beneficial when combined with the contextual information, thereby adding credibility to the practice of treating the use of contextual clues as an inseparable component of successful dictionary-aided reading rather than an alternative strategy. The context factor is germane to the discussion for yet another reason. The more difficult the text, the less successful the dictionary consultation is likely to be; in particular, the use of irony, colloquialism, slang,

¹⁰ Also observed with ESL students at an American university (McCreary and Dolezal 1999: 123-124).

and metaphor is “liable to impair the use of monolingual dictionaries by clouding the meaning of lexical units in context” (Müllich 1990: 486).

All in all, one would expect proficient learners to be already equipped with sufficient macrostructure strategies, indicative of basic metalinguistic skills (e.g., knowledge of the alphabetical order, parts of speech), and the knowledge of lexicographical conventions (e.g., phonetic alphabet, grammar codes, lemmatisation) that every skilful dictionary user must possess. On the other hand, overt optimism about the later stages of the look-up might be unfounded: retrieval of the relevant information from the entry and its integration with the context requires considerable mental effort, a substantial part of which has already been spent on prior stages of the reference act.

2.3. Using the dictionary to one’s advantage

Regrettably, few studies reporting a favourable influence of the presence of the dictionary on reading comprehension performance analyse the causes of success,¹¹ which, by default, must be attributed to the subjects’ excellent reference skills and the reliability of dictionary information. One of the exceptional investigations into the strategies of a good dictionary user is Tono (2001: 97-115). Data from the user profile questionnaire, observation of the use of dictionary conventions and of the look-up process during L2/L1 translation with a bilingual dictionary in three groups of advanced,¹² intermediate, and elementary subjects, helped to single out certain characteristics of a skilled dictionary user. Among other things, the advanced learners’ decisions to consult the dictionary were not rushed, but preceded by careful analysis of context. Although there were no major differences between successful and less successful users’ macrostructure skills, time spent by the former on pre-consultation deliberations was immediately offset by high retrieval speed of information under the given entry, attesting to successful users’ superior knowledge of the microstructure. Also, higher language proficiency gave advanced students an advantage over the intermediate and elementary group in understanding the entry. In the translation task the High group made better judgements as to the target words to be looked up, and generally spent more time on the actual translation than on processing dictionary information than the low-ability group. On the whole, it was microstructure skills that decisively distinguished successful and less successful users.

¹¹ The studies reporting a positive influence of dictionary use on comprehension performance are, e.g., Summers (1988), Laufer (1993), Knight (1994), McCreary and Dolezal (1999), Tono (2001: 75-83).

¹² The advanced subjects were MA holders – part-time teachers of English as a Foreign Language.

3. The present study: Aims, design, target situation

Although the following study is certainly not free from the fault of artificiality induced by the methods of data collecting, care has been taken, in the choice of the task, materials and the dictionary, to minimise the risk involved in any partly observational, partly quasi-experimental research, namely that it may “require users to look up words they would not necessarily wish to look up, in dictionaries that they would not normally consult, for purposes that they may not understand or subscribe to” (Nesi and Haill 2002: 277).

3.1. Aims

Since “further investigation is needed to see whether dictionary reference skills make a difference in reading comprehension ability” (Tono 2001: 75), the present empirical study has been designed with a view to exploring the effect of dictionary use on reading comprehension performance, through observing how a highly advanced EFL learner and an experienced dictionary user solves a complex lexical problem with the help of a dictionary, without losing control over certain factors crucial to re-establishing the link between quantitative and qualitative results. For that reason, searching procedures have been considered apart from the end-product of the consultation. Given that microstructure skills presuppose adequate mastery of macro-structure skills, and prior research proved finding an item rarely to be a problem for advanced students, in-depth investigation of macrostructure skills has been abandoned as redundant in this study. Instead, special emphasis has been laid upon the retrieval of information from the entry and integrating it with the context to understand the passage.

The following research questions have been formulated:

- 1) Is context alone a reliable predictor of meaning? (a. How accurate is the interpretation of the new semantic product – context-specific idiomatic meaning? b. How accurate are the inferences concerning the canonical meaning of idioms?)
- 2) What kind of look-up behaviour can be observed? (Have all target items been looked up and found? Have all target items recognised as unfamiliar been looked up? Have familiar target items been looked up for confirmation?)¹³

¹³ For the answer to research question 2, see sections 5.4, 5.5, 5.6. The remaining issues are dealt with in section 6.

- 3) What were the trouble spots in the case of failed consultation acts – the macrostructure (poor findability) or the microstructure (misinterpretation of the entry)?
- 4) Does a successful consultation act guarantee success in the comprehension task? (To what extent do learners apply the newly acquired information to verify their initial hypotheses about the meaning of the passage?)
- 5) What are the results of processing contextual and dictionary information during reading as reflected in the definitions of standard idiomatic meaning?
- 6) Is there a significant difference in reading comprehension performance between the “no dictionary” and “dictionary” condition in the case of advanced learners? If not, why?

3.2. Design

The experiment has been designed with a view to recreating the natural situation of dictionary use when readers mark the vocabulary items they wish to look up, and access the dictionary information only after the completion of the comprehension task so as to verify their inferences. Accordingly, one of the groups used in the experiment (henceforth Group B) performed the reading comprehension task (paraphrasing the underlined fragment), availed themselves of the dictionary, and then entered corrections to paraphrases in the space provided. In this way, the impact of inference and the dictionary information could be separated and the possible disruptive influence of the search on the fluency of the reading process – prevented. In view of the fact that the mere availability of a reference work does not automatically lead to every student looking up every target item and every search ending in success, all instances of consultation were registered in students' written protocols,¹⁴ even though the true focus were only the target items. The latter, unlikely to be skipped because of the task's demands, were at the same time not so conspicuous to the readers as to reveal the purpose of the experiment or discourage close scrutiny of the surrounding text. Comprehension was measured via two tasks, that is, paraphrase mentioned above (a device more sensitive than multiple-choice questions or a summary) and, in the final stage of the experiment, definition, so as to highlight different aspects of comprehension: of the contextualised expression and its dictionary version, elicited by means of

¹⁴ Written self-reports, used, e.g., by Diab (1990) and Nuccorini (1992), though undoubtedly interfering with the natural process of looking up, are a rich source of information otherwise unobtainable in large groups.

cued recall.¹⁵ Whereas the evaluation of the difference between the “dictionary and “no dictionary” condition for the paraphrase task was feasible within one group (i.e. Group B before- and after consultation), the results of the post-consultation definition task had to be compared with those in the control group (hereafter Group A), which replicated the experiment except the opportunity to use the dictionary.¹⁶ Pre-knowledge of the lexical unit was controlled explicitly through self-reports: familiarity rating and a table of look-up behaviour relying on retrospection (in Group B), and familiarity rating, to be compared with the actual quality of idiomatic forms and definitions (in Group A).

3.3. Choice of subjects

The discussion of consultation pitfalls so far has often been limited to lower-level or intermediate subjects, with the problems of advanced students being largely neglected. The potential difficulties of senior students majoring in English as a foreign language have hardly been considered at all. Whereas reference skills and linguistic sophistication are undoubtedly concomitant, advanced students are only *relatively* better dictionary users. Inevitably, research results in which advanced students' achievement is compared with that of their lower-ability peers create a favourable image of a proficient learner as a dictionary user: easy tasks lead to few and far between searches, and those mainly for familiar items, which leaves little space for committing (and detecting) receptive errors. Implicit in the present study is the belief that, given a suitably challenging task, advanced students may need to resort to the dictionary as often as less proficient ones, and likewise experience consultation problems, though probably of a different nature.

3.4. Rationale behind target items

The decision to use idioms as lexical targets has been dictated by several factors. Firstly, notoriously difficult idioms are one of the primary reasons for consultation, which means that they are perceived by foreign learners as a source of major disruption to the reading process. In Béjoint's (1981: 217) questionnaire idioms top the list: 68% of the subjects look for idioms very often; in Tomaszczyk (1979: 111) the percentage is even higher: 72%. If the occurrence of a single un-

¹⁵ In the immediate recall protocol subjects normally write everything they remember after reading the text (e.g., Knight 1994). Here the term has been adapted to refer to recalling only the idiomatic form, not the contents of the paragraph.

¹⁶ In the absence of the dictionary, Group A did not correct their original paraphrases (in practice that would have meant poring over the same task just after completing it). Therefore, Group A functioned as the control group only for the definition task. Its additional role was to verify the pre-consultation results obtained in Group B.

known vocabulary item could make a sentence, or even an entire text, incomprehensible in certain contexts (Wittrock, Marks and Doctorow 1975), it is even more likely for an unknown idiom, let alone an unrecognised allusion to an unfamiliar idiom, to be comprehension-wrecking. Thus idioms, usually unfamiliar or only vaguely familiar to the majority of subjects, seem to make optimal targets in a situation when pre-testing the knowledge of lexical items would defeat the project.

Another thing is deficiency of lexicographic studies in the field. Despite evidence from needs questionnaires, research on idioms in the context of dictionary user-oriented studies is still underdeveloped. So far, it is the skills in finding idioms in the macrostructure that have received the most attention; the microstructure skills of utilising the dictionary explanations of idioms while reading have been explored to a lesser extent. The need for research directed specifically at dictionary use in interpreting unfamiliar idioms in texts has been voiced, e.g., by Bogaards, who observes that “nothing is known about the sensibility of foreign learners to the fixed or idiomatic status of word combinations they come across without knowing their meaning” (Bogaards 1996: 285). According to Tono (2001: 142), closer investigation of idiom look-up strategies at sentence and paragraph level might shed some light on the overall picture of cognitive strategies of dictionary use.

The rationale behind using occasionally modified, and not canonical, forms of idioms is two-fold. Although idiomaticity has been thoroughly explored, it is usually the fixedness aspect that has been emphasised. Regrettably, “[c]omparatively little attention has been paid to the dynamics of fixed expressions in real-time discourse, and the extent to which this is relevant to practical lexicography” (Moon 1992: 493). Systemic variation fares better; however, the more creative modifications are usually treated marginally. Another advantage of using one-off forms is that, being highly original, they resemble nonce-words in that they help to control the previous knowledge of target items. Furthermore, since occasional modifications are not simple applications of dictionary meaning, it is easier to separate the two factors of context and dictionary information than in the case of canonical forms, and thus possible to detect departures from what should be the standard procedure of matching the dictionary entry against the contextual information. In other words, occasionally transformed idioms, non-existent outside a given text, necessitate considering context as inextricably linked, and not alternative, to dictionary use.

3.5. Contexts

One of the criticisms levelled at linguistic experiments is that they are often, as Moon (1998: 32) put it, “suspect” from a corpus linguistic perspective. “[E]xplorations and discussions of variation and transformation are typically in-

tuition-based rather than data-driven: they depend on invented examples and so may not reflect real usage” (Moon 1998: 32). Apparently, only the use of authentic texts can test the hypotheses that claim to reflect the actual processes of interpretation (Moon 1998: 36). In order to address this recommendation, contexts from the British National Corpus have been used. The original body of 50 texts was reduced to five texts on the basis of the author’s subjective judgement of familiarity, transparency, and the degree of transformation of the target items (the idioms likely to be unfamiliar and rather opaque, with both the form and the meaning changed, were included). The contexts were eventually tailored to a manageable size of one paragraph, i.e. 7-9 lines (see Appendix 1). However, they have not been graded or controlled for difficulty, which on the one hand might be perceived as one of the flaws of the present study, but on the other contributes to the naturalness of this written language sample.

3.6. Reference work

The choice of one monolingual dictionary was imposed upon the subjects so as to control the contents of the entry. In the second stage of the experiment all subjects from Group B had Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 3rd edition (LDOCE3) at their disposal. This particular dictionary was selected for purely practical reasons: its popularity and availability. As there is a large number of copies of this edition in the Poznań School of English library, even those students who did not use LDOCE3 on a daily basis were likely to be familiar with its layout and conventions.

4. Experiment

4.1. Subjects

Group A comprised 75 fourth-year students at the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. All students were native speakers of Polish representing a high level of proficiency in English – as English teacher trainees they had passed a proficiency-level examination in English the previous term.

Group B was composed of 68 (53 fifth- and 15 fourth-year-) students at the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, from eight seminar groups (5-15 people each). All students were native speakers of Polish representing a high level of proficiency in English comparable with that of the subjects from Group A. More or less homogenous dictionary reference skills could be expected of the students who need to use a monolingual English dictionary efficiently for numerous assignments on a daily basis.

4.2. Materials

The task booklet was designed around five paragraphs with fragments containing a variant idiom underlined. One of the paragraphs, number four, had to be excluded from the body of the data; otherwise it would have been responsible for distorting the picture of dictionary use by inducing the floor effect.¹⁷

4.3. Procedure

Group A were informed that the purpose of the experiment was to measure reading comprehension of authentic texts. They worked during their regular lecture time in one 60-80-minute-session. Since the consecutive sections of the test had to be handed out successively, only after the previous task had been completed, the session had to be divided into three parts, lasting, roughly, 30-10-20 minutes each,¹⁸ so as to enable efficient and quick distribution and collection of the booklets in a group of 75 subjects. An instruction in Polish preceded each section. Task one was to read five paragraphs and provide English or Polish paraphrases of the underlined fragments. The subjects were advised to disregard the formal accuracy of their paraphrases. In the next section they were explicitly told to extract the idioms from the underlined fragments and to rate their familiarity on a scale of 1 (very well known) to 5 (completely unfamiliar).¹⁹ The last part instructed the subjects to build idioms using word-cues (those parts of the idioms that remained unaltered in context, i.e. the parts common to the canonical and the modified form),²⁰ and to write short definitions.

¹⁷ It turned out that, far from being merely a matter of greater user-friendliness, precise cross-references become indispensable in the case of transformed idiomatic expressions that have been truncated or have had one of their key components replaced. Even though many students were set on finding *put your commitment where your mouth is* that they turned to the unlikely headword *put* as a last resort, no one managed to locate it due to the idiom *put your money where your mouth is* lacking a cross-reference from *mouth* to *money*. As this prevented even the most persevering users from arriving at the desired entry and became a source of considerable frustration, the original numbers assigned to each idiom and the surrounding paragraphs have been retained, so we have Idiom1, Idiom2, Idiom3, and Idiom5. The absence of Idiom4 is telling in that it points up insufficient cross-referencing as one of the detrimental factors potentially reducing the usefulness of a dictionary in reading comprehension.

¹⁸ The estimates of the time devoted to each section were possible after earlier observations of students from Group B, and proved largely correct as almost everyone managed to complete the task before the assigned time.

¹⁹ The familiarity rating scale, based on Nippold and Rudzinski (1993: 730) and Nippold and Taylor (1995: 428), appears slightly counterintuitive (the highest numerical value corresponds to the lowest familiarity value). Therefore, the students were instructed to pay special attention to its meaning.

²⁰ As it was impossible for Group A to recall the canonical forms of idioms unless they had known them before, responses to cued recall, apart from eliciting definitions that would show the influence of processing the paragraph content on the generic idiomatic meaning extracted from the context, helped to verify the validity of familiarity rating.

Group B were informed that the purpose of the experiment was to measure dictionary-aided reading comprehension of authentic texts. They worked at their own speed in 1-1.5-hour sessions at the times of their regular seminar classes. The experiment consisted of four sections, each beginning with an instruction in Polish. The first two parts had to be handed in together before section three could begin, which in turn had to be completed before the subjects went on to section four. After the first task (identical with section one in Group A), the subjects were allowed to use the dictionary if they wished. They were asked to record every step of their consultation acts in the table provided, and to utilise the space underneath for any corrections to the answers from section one. Having finished, they reported on whether they used the same dictionary at home, and if not, whether they found searching LDOCE3 troublesome. After sections one and two had been handed in, the students were explicitly told to extract the idioms from the underlined fragments and to reflect upon the motivation for their look-up behaviour in a table. In section four the subjects were instructed to build idioms using word-cues, rate idiom familiarity on a scale of 1 to 5, and to write short definitions.

4.4. Scoring procedures

4.4.1. Paraphrases

To score the paraphrases of the sentences containing modified idioms and the corrections to paraphrases (in Group B), Nippold and Martin's classification system (1989: 61) for the conventional idiom explanation task was adapted (see Table 1). Two raters scored the answers independently, checking them against the established interpretation (provided beforehand by three native speakers) and the classification system. Correct responses scored 1, partly correct ones were credited with a half point, incorrect ones – 0. Interscorer agreement was 0.93 (Group A), 0.91 (Group B), and 0.92 (Group B – corrections to paraphrases). The contentious cases were later discussed and agreed upon.

Table 1. Classification system used for the paraphrase task

Example sentence: "Tarring the whole of the Austrian public with the Haider brush is unfair."	
Correct (1)	The response captures the idiomatic/ambiguous meaning of the fragment, e.g., "To think of the Austrian public as having the same faults as Haider is unfair."
Partly correct (0.5): related	The response is vague or reflects only a partial understanding of the idiomatic/ambiguous meaning of the fragment, e.g., "Treating the Austrian public like Haider is unfair."
Incorrect (0)	
Literal	The response reflects the concrete meaning of the fragment, e.g., "Covering the Austrian public with tar using the brush of the Haider type is unfair."
Unrelated	The response has nothing to do with the accurate idiomatic/ambiguous meaning of the fragment, e.g., "Urging the Austrian public to do sth is unfair."
Restatement	Part of the expression or paragraph was repeated or reworded without adding any new information, e.g., "The fact that we tar the whole Austria with the Haider brush is not fair."
No Response	The answer space was left blank or the student answered: "I don't know".

4.4.2. Definitions

The standard of correctness was the conventional ("dictionary") meaning of idioms. The scoring system for definitions again draws on the criteria in Table 1:

- i) Correct (score: 1): the definition captures the conventional meaning of the idiom (as explained in reference works), e.g., "be considered to have the same faults as sb else"

- ii) Partly correct (score: 0.5): related, i.e. the response is vague or reflects only a partial understanding of the conventional meaning of the idiom, e.g., "treat sb like sb else"
- iii) Incorrect (score: 0):
- Unrelated: the definition has nothing to do with the accurate conventional meaning of the idiom, e.g., "urge sb to do sth"
 - No response: the answer space is left blank or the student answered: "I don't know"

Advanced students of English are unlikely to produce literal answers or restatements when explicitly asked to explain idioms and thus the categories "literal" and "restatement" from Table 1 were dropped as redundant.

4.4.3. Statistical measurement

T-tests for correlated samples were run so as to check the difference between the "no dictionary" condition (Group B before dictionary consultation; henceforth B/1) and the "dictionary" condition (Group B after consultation, hereafter B/2) for the paraphrase task. Additionally, t-tests for paired samples were carried out to check the difference between the two conditions for each of the four paragraphs.

5. Results

5.1. Paraphrases

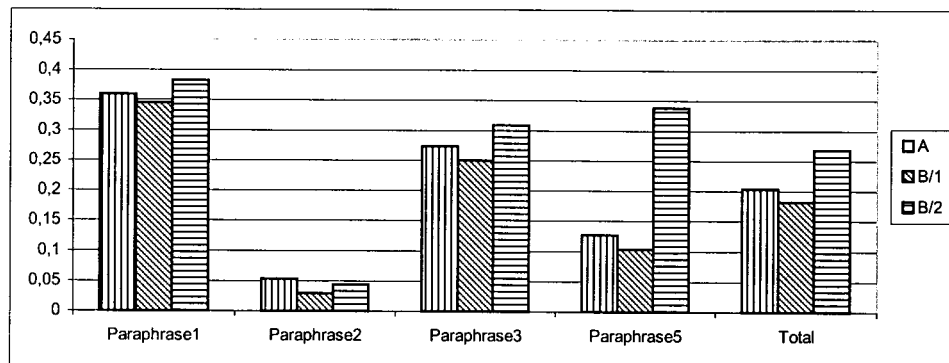
The results of the paraphrase task are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2. Mean score and standard deviation in the paraphrase task

	A		B/1		B/2		Difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	B/1-B/2
Paraphrase 1	0,36	0,44	0,35	0,44	0,38	0,43	0,03
Paraphrase 1	0,05	0,18	0,03	0,12	0,04	0,17	0,01
Paraphrase 1	0,27	0,38	0,25	0,33	0,31	0,33	0,06
Paraphrase 1	0,13	0,29	0,10	0,25	0,34	0,42	0,24
Average	0,20	0,18	0,18	0,17	0,27	0,22	0,09

Sample size A = 75; Sample size B/1=B/2 = 68

Figure 2. Mean paraphrase quality



The mean quality of paraphrases in Group A and Group B before look-up turned out to be similar: 0.20 and 0.18 respectively. For both groups Paraphrase 1 was the easiest; the next best in quality were Paraphrases 3 and 5; Paraphrase 2 fared badly. The greatest difference between the means was 0.03 (Paraphrase 5). The remaining differences are even more negligible: 0.01 (Paraphrase 1) and 0.02 (Paraphrase 2 and 3). Considering the fact that the groups were not randomised, they show a remarkable uniformity of performance, with Group A scoring somewhat higher. After look-up, performance in Group B picked up, though not as much as one might have expected: the difference between mean paraphrase quality before and after look-up is quite humble (0.09).²¹ The greatest improvement can be observed in the case of Idiom5. The dictionary brought about minimal changes in the remaining paraphrases.

5.2. T-test results

Table 3 presents the results of the t-tests for paired samples, which checked the differences between mean scores in Group B before and after dictionary consultation a. for the whole paraphrase task; b. for each of the four paraphrases.

²¹ Cf. Summers (1988: 120) – 20% and 16% rate of comprehension improvement; Knight (1994: 292) – a 17.36 difference between the mean comprehension scores of the control and experimental group. The low improvement rate in this study substantiates Tono's finding: the correlation between the reference subskill of finding idioms and comprehension scores was low and even slightly negative (Tono 2001: 80).

Table 3. Paired samples t-test results (B/1 vs. B/2)

	Df	t-score	p-level
Paraphrase 1	134	0.81	42.06%
Paraphrase 2	134	0.71	47.71%
Paraphrase 3	134	2.06	4.16%
Paraphrase 5	134	4.36	0.003%
All paraphrases	134	3.82	0.02%

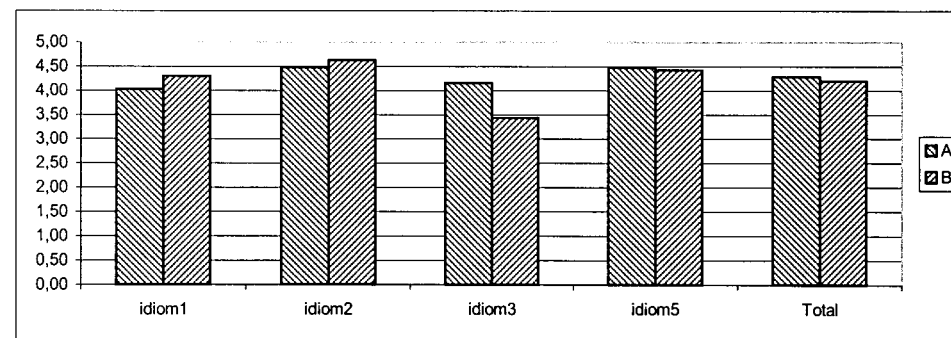
The difference of scores in the “no dictionary” and “dictionary” condition is significant at the 0.02% level. The difference between the scores for individual paraphrases in both conditions turned out to be statistically significant in the case of Paraphrase5 at the 0.003% level, and only just significant for Paraphrase3 (at the 4.16% level).

5.3. Familiarity rating

Mean values of familiarity rating²² are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Familiarity rating

Ranges of familiarity:



1-1.66 high familiarity
 1.67-3.32 moderate familiarity
 3.33-5.0 low familiarity

²² Considering the scale adopted, a more adequate, albeit awkward, term seems the “(un)familiarity rating”.

Whatever the individual differences, all idioms were rated as belonging to the "low familiarity" range, with Idiom3 (3.44) only approaching "moderate familiarity" in Group B, thus confirming the adequacy of the selected target items. The total means are similar, with Group A's familiarity (4.29) somewhat lower than that of Group B (4.20).

Although familiarity influenced the quality of responses to a certain degree (e.g., the first two most familiar idioms scored the highest in Group A and the two least familiar idioms scored the lowest in Group B), the role of this intervening variable was limited. For one thing, the difference in average familiarity between both groups was not reflected in the difference in average paraphrase quality: Group A, for whom the idioms were less familiar, were able to outstrip Group B in the paraphrase task. As to individual cases, Idiom3, rated as the best known by Group B, scored worse than the less familiar Idiom1, and worse still than Idiom3 in Group A, whose reported knowledge was considerably lower. Moreover, the same rating values did not coincide with equal quality of the respective paraphrases (cf. Idioms 2 and 5 in Group A) and vice versa (Idiom1 scored almost identically in both groups despite a 0.26 difference in familiarity). The meagre impact of familiarity on the scores might be explained in two ways. Firstly, differences within the low familiarity range do not visibly affect comprehension scores. Secondly, contextual information, as a true levelling factor, overrides the effect of "(un)familiarity" discrepancies.

5.4. Idioms searched and found

Table 4 provides the proportion of searches and successful searches per idiom (out of 68) and the total proportion of searches and successful searches (out of 272, i.e. the number of all possible searches).

Table 4. Proportion of idioms searched and found

	Idioms searched	Idioms found	Success rate
Idiom1	72%	72%	100%
Idiom2	93%	90%	97%
Idiom3	62%	62%	100%
Idiom5	84%	78%	93%
Total	78%	75%	97%

In view of the fact that numerous other words were searched, a 78%-look-up confirms high relevance of the idioms to the task²³ and corroborates the earlier voiced expectation that the advanced students will need to use the dictionary as much as the lower-proficiency learners provided that the text is suitably difficult. Almost all initiated searches ended in finding the idiom. Idiom2 was not found twice, and Idiom5 – four times, which accounts for a three-percent failure. Apparently, the subjective impression of (un)familiarity influenced the decisions to look up the expressions, as shown in Table 5. Paradoxically, the more an item was searched, the lesser improvement in scores can be observed, with the notable exception of Idiom5.

Table 5. Familiarity / Look-up / Improvement

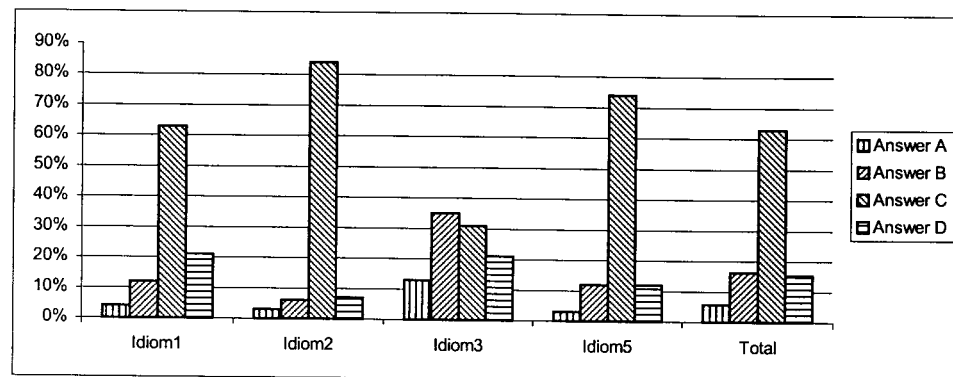
Idiom	↓ Familiarity	↑ Look-up	B1/B2 difference
Idiom3 (throw the book at sb)	3.44	62%	0.06
Idiom1 (a feather in one's cap)	4.29	72%	0.03
Idiom5 (have an axe to grind)	4.43	84%	0.24
Idiom2 (be tarred with the same brush)	4.63	93%	0.01

5.5. Reported look-up behaviour

Figure 4 accounts for the students' decisions to look up or to ignore the target items. Self-reports reveal a similar pattern for Idioms1, 2 and 5, looked up primarily because they were recognised as unfamiliar. Surprisingly, the second most common practice was to ignore unfamiliar target expressions (21% with Idiom1, 7% with Idiom2), or to search for familiar ones (12% with Idiom1, 6% with Idiom2 and 12% with Idiom5). The least often reported behaviour was that of not bothering to find familiar idioms. Idiom3, as the most familiar one, was approached in a different manner: 35% of searches were initiated in order to confirm the students' knowledge, and only 31% – because the item was unfamiliar. On 21% of occasions the decision was not to track down Idiom3 even though the learners admitted that they did not know it.

²³ Cf. 85% look-up of relevant words in Hulstijn (1993: 144). It is worth noting that the students often chose to search for other words which they had found unfamiliar or interesting.

Figure 4. Reported look-up behaviour



(per cent relative to the number of answers per idiom (68) and to the total number of answers (272))

Answer A – “I knew the idiom so I didn’t look it up”

Answer B – “I knew the idiom but I looked it up”

Answer C – “I didn’t know the idiom so I looked it up”

Answer D – “I didn’t know the idiom but I didn’t look it up”

In general, it was the furtherance of knowledge rather than its corroboration that motivated the overwhelming majority of the reference acts: 63% of reports referred to having looked up unfamiliar idioms, whereas only 16% mentioned checking the meaning of familiar items.²⁴ Not all expressions recognised as unfamiliar were looked up: in 15% of self-reports the subjects admitted to having ignored unfamiliar expressions. Finally, 6% of decisions was not to look up idioms because one already knew them.

5.6. “Paths”

In their search for meaning, the subjects who decided to look up the target words followed one of the “routes” or “paths” below:

A: “Improvement” incorrect paraphrase – look-up – correct paraphrase
partly correct paraphrase – look-up – correct paraphrase

²⁴ In the light of the actual proportion of the “confirmation paths” (section 5.6.), 16% looks like an inflated figure.

B: “No improvement”²⁵ incorrect paraphrase – look-up – incorrect paraphrase
partly correct paraphrase – look-up – partly correct paraphrase

C: “Confirmation”²⁶ correct paraphrase – look-up – correct paraphrase

D: “Deterioration” partly correct paraphrase – look-up – incorrect paraphrase
correct paraphrase – look-up – incorrect paraphrase

Although neither path B nor C lead to any real positive change in the answers, lack of the “dictionary effect” in path C is only natural as there is no space for improvement, unlike in path B. Table 6 represents the total number and proportion of paths undertaken.

Table 6. Path types: total number and percentage

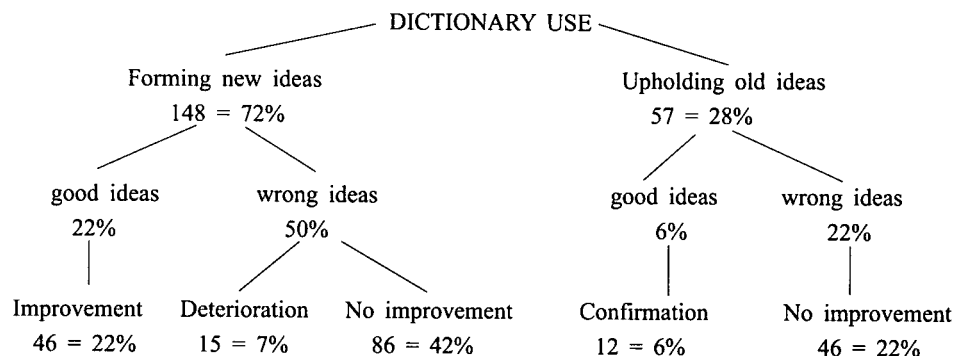
Paths	Proportion of path type out of all			
	Total number	Successful searches (205)	Initiated searches (211)	Possible searches (272)
Improvement	46	22%	22%	17%
No improvement	132	64%	63%	49%
Confirmation	12	6%	6%	4%
Deterioration	15	7%	7%	6%

Closer analysis of paraphrases shows that 35% (46) of “no improvement paths” involved no change, repetition or restatement. The remaining 65% (86 out of 132) corresponds to incorrectly altered answers. By combining this information with the data in the “successful searches” column, we obtain a more precise picture of the effect of dictionary use (rather than merely the presence of the dictionary) on performance in the situation under discussion:

²⁵ “No improvement” path covers both the prevailing instances of failed attempts to correct the initial answers and the cases of the paraphrases being left unchanged despite dictionary consultation.

²⁶ The term does not refer to the students’ subjective impression of having upheld their intuitions, but to confirmation resulting from the scoring procedure. It needs to be noted that accurate paraphrases following look-up were rarely verbatim repetitions of the initial correct versions.

Figure 5. The effectiveness of dictionary use

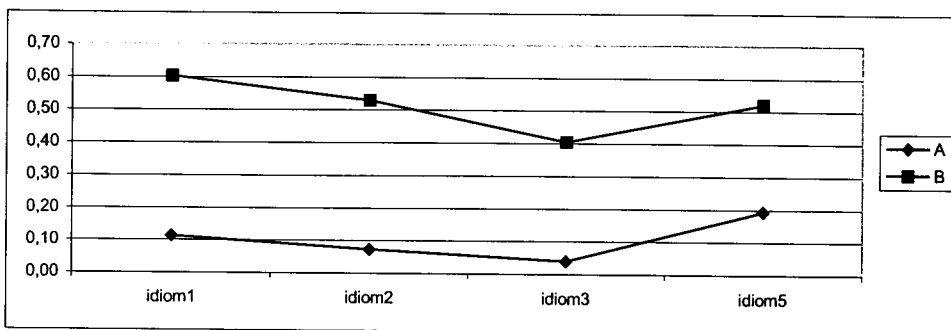


Disappointingly, dictionary use yielded negative results in 72% of cases (50% + 22%) by fostering or upholding erroneous ideas, and positive ones – in merely 28% (22% + 6%). Out of 46 “improvement” paths only 19 involved a full-point increase, and 15 “deterioration” paths reduced the scores by one or by half a point. Consequently, the actual rate of paraphrase improvement turned out to be as low as 0.09.

5.7. Definitions

The dictionary favourably affected the comprehension of idioms in their canonical forms (see Figure 6): the mean score in the definition task increased from 0.11 in Group A to 0.51 in Group B. The most spectacular growth occurred with definitions of Idiom1 (0.49 improvement rate). The remaining means rose almost as remarkably (Idiom2 – a 0.46 increase, Idiom3 – 0.36, Idiom4 – 0.33). Unfortunately, it was impossible to establish whether correct explanations reflected genuine comprehension in the case of direct quotations from the dictionary.

Figure 6. Quality of idiom definitions



5.8. The dictionary variable

34 subjects (50%) used LDOCE3 at home. 35% of the remaining 34 students (18% of the total number of 68) experienced some problems while using the dictionary other than their own: 2 people found it “quite difficult”, and 10 – “a bit difficult”. On the other hand, 22 students (65% of those who were not accustomed to using LDOCE3; 32% of the total) found it easy to consult. Altogether, 82% of subjects (with those who used it on a daily basis accounting for 50%) experienced no serious consultation problems, with 18% complaining about the inconvenience of having to search the unfamiliar-looking macrostructure.

6. Discussion and conclusions

6.1. Research question 1a

The scores for paraphrases in the “no dictionary” condition demonstrate the limitations of contextual clues as comprehension facilitators. While the difficulty of the paragraphs has not been graded or controlled, they do not all represent the same level of difficulty, which seemed to play a more significant role in boosting or hampering comprehension than idiom familiarity itself. One could even know the target item, but be bewildered by the intricacies of the contextually transformed meaning. One student’s words succinctly summarise this paradox: “Kieruję się tu znajomością idiomu *throw books at sb* (sic), jednak nie wiem, co zrobić z resztą” [“I am guided by the knowledge of the idiom *throw books at sb* (sic) but I don’t know what to do with the rest”]. Let us look at each of the four contexts in turn, starting with the paraphrases that presented the greatest difficulties for the subjects.

Paraphrase2 (of the fragment containing the idiom *be/get tarred with the same brush*) involves encyclopaedic knowledge on the Anglo-American policy towards Iran after WWII and refers to American history as a British colony. In addition, the context is not very informative as far as the meaning of the target item is concerned. The scarcity of useful contextual clues, coupled with low familiarity of the idiom and its considerably changed form (substitution, according to Veisbergs 2001: 259), resulted in nearly total failure in the comprehension of the underlined fragment, with some subjects attempting random guesses, such as: *The United States should not be bothered by the colonial battles; The United States should stay away from the colonies.*²⁷

The next poorly scoring paraphrase involves Idiom5, modified by means of insertion/addition (Veisbergs 2001: 259) to become *have a technological axe to*

²⁷ All linguistic examples are presented in their original version (as they appeared in the students’ booklets).

grind. In this case, context provides more clues to the meaning of the idiom and does not require any sophisticated world knowledge of the readers. However, interference from the Polish saying *twardy/ciężki orzech do zgryzienia* 'a hard/tough nut to crack' influenced many interpretations, which refer to it either directly or implicitly, e.g., *Each vendor has to struggle with technological problems himself*; *Każdy kontrahent ma własny orzech do zgryzienia* 'Each contracting party has his/her own nut to crack'. Another frequent misinterpretation stresses the particular method, way, approach, etc. that each vendor has, for instance: *Each vendor has its own way of doing things (technologically)*.

The third context is also informative (without being overinformative), but tricky in that it supports the literal as well as the idiomatic reading (the so-called dual actualisation, coupled with insertion, according to Veisbergs 2001: 259-260). Not surprisingly, the fragment containing the idiom *throw the book at sb* invited the largest number of literal or partly literal interpretations (10 out of 13 in Group A and 12 out of 15 in Group B), e.g., *Mr Simpson would throw every accessible book in his huge library at him*; *Pan Simpson byłby nawet w stanie poświęcić książki swojej imponującej biblioteczki by rzucić nimi w niego* 'Mr Simpson would even be capable of sacrificing the books from his impressive bookcase so as to throw them at him'. Other common interpretations stressed Mr Simpson's anger, obviously as a result of clinging to the preceding comprehensible *would go purple in the face* as the likely synonym of the idiom, for instance, *Mr Simpson would react violently*; *Mr Simpson would be extremely angry with him*.

Surprisingly, despite the rich and even redundant context surrounding Idiom1 (*a feather in one's cap*), the scores, though the highest, were not soaring. The students, on seeing the familiar word *success*, which indeed captured the sense of the idiom, apparently read the rest of the text only perfunctorily. The deceptive simplicity of this particular fragment, as it were, lulled their attentiveness and induced the "looking (or, rather, reading) but not seeing" effect. Consequently, inadequate paraphrases emerged despite the subjects' grasping (or even, confirming their knowledge of) the idiomatic sense. One of the frequently occurring errors was the attribution of the "increasingly crowded cap" not to the Virgin company, but to Sting, e.g., *It meant that Sting could still achieve something more as he had great potential for achieving greater success*; *The success that Sting achieved at the beginning of his career was only a drop in the sea of his future achievements*.

To sum up, what were the causes of such disappointing results of reading in the "context only" condition? It seems that non-canonical forms of low-familiarity idioms had thrown the students into confusion. Whatever vague idea of the dictionary versions they might have had, the elaborate context effectively blurred this already feeble awareness, so much so that linking the original and

the modified meaning bordered on the impossible. In one case, the complexity of the idiomatic expression was aggravated by the absence of usable contextual clues and the students' failure to evoke the appropriate schemata of their world knowledge. Moreover, the contextual clues in the remaining fragments allowed only imprecise guesses at the meaning of the idiom alluded to, and without it the sense of the underlined fragment was hardly retrievable. Simultaneous actualisation of the idiomatic and the literal reading was a further complicating factor – those who did not recognise idiomaticity took the sentence to be literal. Finally, the students' inclination to find the Polish equivalent of the idiom regardless of the context resulted in negative transfer. On the whole, context did not prove to be a sufficient means of repairing the comprehension breakdown in the situation under discussion.

6.2. Research question 1b

In view of unsatisfactory achievement in the comprehension of contextualised idioms, it would have been unrealistic to expect Group A to infer more than rough approximations of their canonical meaning without any external guidance whatsoever. The awareness of what constituted the idiom was heavily influenced by the neighbouring text, which invariably fused with the target expressions and evoked definitions of various sorts, depending on which context element appeared to the subjects as the most prominent.

By way of illustration, let us consider a selection of the more interesting cases. Emphasis on *merely* and *one* that modified *a feather in one's cap* resulted in explanations that might be dubbed "one element out of many", as evidenced by *jeden z wielu kamyczków w bogatym dorobku* 'one of the numerous pebbles in one's considerable output'. The implied "commonness" notion, when combined with the positive aspect of the experience, automatically diminished it, e.g., *one unimportant thing among many others*; *to be merely an element in a larger group*; *to be but one good thing among other possible felicitous events, to be unimportant*. At times "oneness" was over-extended to imply insufficiency, expressed, among others, by means of the idiom *kropla w morzu potrzeb* 'a drop in the ocean of needs'. At the other pole we have the isolated definitions where *one* amounts to *unique*, e.g., *Kiedy mówimy, że ktoś wyróżnia się z tłumu* 'When we say that someone stands out in a crowd'; *to be exceptional*, or even *igła w stogu siana* 'a needle in a haystack', completely out of place here. Those students who concentrated on *an increasingly crowded cap*, took the idiom to mean "the beginning of something", e.g., *Być zapowiedzią, początkiem czegoś ważnego, dużego* 'be a prelude to something important, big'; *początek sukcesu* 'the beginning of success'. Among the more fanciful explanations were: *być wierzchołkiem góry lodowej* 'be the tip of the iceberg', *as w rękawie* 'an ace up your sleeve', and *zmieniać zdanie* 'change one's mind', the last one probably re-

sulting from a distant association of a feather with a small flag from the Polish *być jak chorągiewka na wietrze/dachu* (literally, 'be like a small flag in the wind /on the roof/weathercock'), meaning 'be a changeable person'.

In the case of the idiom *be tarred with the same brush*, where *same* had been replaced by the contextually specific *colonial*, numerous interpretations drew directly on the contents of the text by highlighting "involvement" and (lack of) "interference" as major semantic components of the idiom in question, e.g., *to be involved in colonial arguments; one should not meddle in the inappropriate matters*. Somewhat more detached from the context seem the explanations that mention a sort of "influence", occasionally alternating with the more specific "dependence", e.g., *to be influenced by something on a great scale, to be dependant and compliant to sb*. Due to the subjects' impression of "subordination" underlying the sense of the idiom, a few definitions mention the treatment that the inferior receive, e.g., *to be treated in a harsh and rude way; to ignore sb, być traktowanym protekcyjnalnie* 'be patronized'; *insult or offend sb*. Other explanations concentrated on the effect that such a treatment has on reputation, e.g., *to blacken sb; to adulterate sth or sb's good conduct with a taint of sth rather inglorious*. Several definitions represented the highest level of abstraction and thus were closest to the canonical meaning, e.g., *treated the same way; traktować coś/kogoś w jakiś sposób* 'treat something/somebody somehow'; *mierzyć kogoś tą samą miarą*,²⁸ literally 'measure sb with the same measure'.

The integrity of the idiom *throw the book at* being impaired by adjectival or adverbial modifiers and a prepositional phrase, most of its definitions included varying amount of context information, e.g., *to throw every legal book from one's library, to throw every book in a library at sb, to throw one's every possible book in one's rich library at sb*. The clue *he would go purple in the face* directly preceding the idiom allowed the subjects to surmise that the sense of the idiom was 'being angry' or 'any behaviour accompanying the state of being angry'. Hence we have: *to go mad at somebody about something; get furious and throw abuses*, and the far-fetched: *zdenierwować się do tego stopnia, że nie panować nad sobą i zrobić wszystko, by się odegrać – tonący brzytwy się chwyta* 'become so angry as to lose one's temper and do everything to get even – clutch at straws'. Another foothold for the interpretations were "the legal books", to most respondents a metonymy of the law, legal action, rules or knowledge in general, used against someone. This understanding has been captured in the largest number of explanations such as: *wykorzystywać kruczki prawne znane sobie* 'exploit the legal loopholes that one knows'; *to use rules, regulations to fight sb*. There were also students who interpreted "throwing books" as quoting

²⁸ Unlike the English idiom, this Polish phraseologism is not restricted to the context of ascribing negative features to someone on the basis of the behaviour of their associates.

fragments from books, pelting sb with definitions, very bookish knowledge. The definitions most abstracted from the context referred to criticism or accusations, for instance: *to criticise sb, rzucać oskarżenia pod czyimś adresem* 'make accusations against someone'.

The students fared reasonably well in the case of the idiom *have an axe to grind*, whose form was least entangled in context. Despite the intervening modifier *technological*, the integrity of this idiom was for most students easy to perceive. Two frequently recurring interpretations were: "a problem to overcome" and "an individual approach (to problems)". Examples of the former are: *to tackle some difficult problems, cope with sth*. Just as with paraphrases, some negative transfer occurred when the idiom was translated as *mieć twardy/trudny orzech do zgryzienia* 'have a hard nut to crack'. The "approach" explanation is present in, for instance: *to have one's own methods/ways to achieve the goal; to deal with the problem individually, in one's specific way*. Finally, there are the nearly correct explanations such as: *to have one's own profits in mind, not being willing to compromise; take care of one's own business*. The last group consists of idiosyncratic guesses, e.g., *be in need of a financial or technological jump forwards, wtrącać swoje pięć groszy* 'put/shove one's oar in'.

To conclude, a chance that ESL students will infer the canonical meaning of idiomatic expressions from their modified versions is slim, and to a large extent depends on the degree of contextual transformation. The ubiquity of context elements in the idiomatic forms recalled and in the ensuing definitions not only substantiates *the mental effort hypothesis*,²⁹ but it also conveys an impression that advanced learners, aware of the multitude of English idiomatic expressions and sensitised to their inflexibility by years of instruction, would rather quote too much than accidentally tamper with the structure of a possibly existing idiom.

6.3. Research question 3

97% success rate in locating the target items and only modest improvement in paraphrase quality after look-up indicates that the students failed at the microstructure level. Barring the interfering context factor discussed above, the peculiar formulation of two entries was one of the chief culprits responsible for underachievement. Let us compare the definitions of *be/get tarred with the same brush (as sb)* as presented in four learner's dictionaries.

CIDE *Because they were so close John was tarred with the same brush as (= thought to have similar faults to) Tim.*

²⁹ According to this hypothesis, the deeper new words are processed, the better they will be remembered (the idea originated from "depth of processing" proposed by Craik and Lockhart 1972).

- OALDCE5 having or considered to have the same faults as sb
 LDOCE3 to be blamed for sb else's faults or crimes
 COBUILD2 If some people in a group behave badly and if people falsely think that all of the group is equally bad, you can say that the whole group is tarred with the same brush.

Of the four, COBUILD2 is perhaps most successful in conveying the sense of the idiom in that it spells out the connection one forms between the negative features of a group or an individual and a person associated with them. CIDE captures this point by stating the close relationship between John and Tim, the faults of the latter being transferred to the former in people's minds. OALDCE5 is less explicit about the cause of "tarring", and LDOCE3's definition leaves the reader at a loss as to the reasons for "blaming someone for somebody else's faults or crimes". Consequently, some subjects took the definition at its face value and understood the situation as that of a person getting away with a crime and someone else being charged with it. This gross misinterpretation is evidenced by the disappointingly large number of inadequate corrections of Paraphrase2, e.g., *The US should not be blamed for the crimes and faults committed by GB as a colonial power; US shouldn't be blamed for the colonial times; US should not be blamed for crimes of colonialism.*

Another example of the unfortunate wording is the definition of *have an axe to grind* in LDOCE3: "to do or say something again and again because you want to persuade people to accept your ideas or beliefs: *I have no political axe to grind.*" By emphasising the repetitiveness of someone's actions or words (only a means of bringing others around), it diverts the reader's attention from the essential semantic component of the target expression, that is, the reason for being so persevering, which, however, is explicitly stated in the corresponding definitions in other learner's dictionaries, e.g.,

- OALDCE5 to have private reasons for being involved in sth: *She had no particular axe to grind and was only acting out of concern for their safety.*
 COBUILD2 If you say that someone **has an axe to grind**, you mean their reason for doing something in a particular situation is motivated by selfishness; an informal expression. *Mr Rollins, who according to Mr Perot was fired, may be suspected of having an axe to grind.*

The peculiarity of phrasing in LDOCE3 led several subjects to believe that *have an axe to grind* means 'be persuasive' or 'repeat oneself', such an interpretation being reflected, e.g., in the following pseudo-corrections: *Each vendor has to be as persuasive as possible as far as the technological values are concerned; Każdy sprzedawca ma tendencje do powtarzania się, gdyż zależy im do*

przekonania innych do swoich pomysłów 'Every vendor has a tendency to repeat himself/herself because they care deeply about bringing others round to their ideas'; *Każdy sprzedawca musi powtarzać w kółko to samo* 'Every vendor has to repeat things again and again'. The procedure of clutching at familiar parts of the explanation to construct the meaning, evident in the above sentences, resembles the aforementioned kidrule strategy (section 2.2.).

Remarkably, it was not the incomprehensible metalanguage or complex definition format, but tricky formulation that confused whatever accurate notions the students may have had before consultation. Lack of meaningful examples only aggravated the problem. It seems that idioms, being semantically complex and culturally specific, as well as infrequent, require particularly careful lexicographic treatment. Sacrificing precision to user-friendliness or economising on space in the case of idiom entries turns out to have a detrimental effect on comprehension: the more inquiring users would need to continue the search in other dictionaries so as to grasp the meaning.

6.4. Research question 4

The disproportion between the number of successful searches and mean improvement in the paraphrase task clearly demonstrates that finding the required information does not guarantee success in the comprehension task. 22% of "paths" ending in previous inadequate guesses being sustained corroborates Müllich's (1990) observation of the sham use of dictionaries. Some attempted to save their inference by attaching a fragment of the definition to it, which represents a more sophisticated version of the sham use of the dictionary, e.g., *The fact that Sting's songs were top hits was only one factor to bring him fame, and next were to come. ⇒ Sting's songs were only one of many things he could be proud of; Sting's success was too small to be taken seriously in the music business ⇒ Sting's success was too small to be proud of.* Instead of matching the retrieved information against the contextual form and the surrounding sentences, the subjects preferred to quote whole or fragmented definitions, with little or no effort at adjustments.³⁰ Examples of the sense thus distorted can be found in the following paraphrases: *Wilson should be proud of his cooperation with Sting; the USA shouldn't be blamed for crimes or faults of others; Mr Simpson would charge him with as many offences as possible; Each vendor was saying sth again and again because they wanted to persuade others to accept their ideas.*

The motivation behind such behaviour is unclear: was it genuine inability to incorporate the dictionary meaning into context, inability to paraphrase the meaning, or simply a desire to compromise between one's reluctance to perform

³⁰ Cf. category-three errors in Nesi and Haill (2002: 299).

the task and a sense of duty? More importantly, do the subjects tend to dismiss the context after dictionary consultation while reading at their leisure?

6.5. Research question 5

The use of the dictionary did not wipe out the effects of intense context processing, of which more or less distinct traces, in the form of the incorporation of the subject matter of the paragraphs into the definitions, were registered in 14% of the total number of answers (in 25 definitions of Idiom1, 9 definitions of Idiom3 and 5 definitions of Idiom5), e.g., *one thing among many others, to be one of the many, to be just one part of sth bigger, more important* (Idiom1); *react angrily, violently, to act offensively, use arguments from a book, to use legal expertise to stop somebody* (Idiom3). Usually fragments of the dictionary definition and context were combined, e.g., *one of numerous successes; one more thing to be proud of* (Idiom1); *to find every possible argument (a legal one) to punish sb* (Idiom3). Ideally, the subjects should have reconsidered the text after consultation not only to generate the context-specific meaning, but also to keep potential misinterpretations of the entry in check. Unfortunately, this was rarely the case, as translations and paraphrases (but not direct quotations) of dictionary definitions reveal, e.g., *być obarczonym za winy innych* 'be burdened with responsibility for others' faults'; *to punish sb severely for sb else's crime or offence* (Idiom2); *mieć dar przekonywania* 'to have great powers of persuasion'; *mówić o czymś "w koło Macieju"* *żeby przekonać innych do swojego punktu widzenia* 'to talk about something over and over again in order to bring others round to your point of view' (Idiom5).

All in all, despite the fact that the dictionary meaning did not totally override the correctly or incorrectly inferred contextual meaning, and the contextual information did not always rectify the effects of misreading the entry, exposure to dictionary information significantly enhanced the subjects' awareness of the difference between the canonical form and meaning of idioms and their contextual applications, as the results of the definition task in Group A and B demonstrate.

6.6. Research question 6

Essential as the dictionary was to the successful completion of the paraphrase task as a source of the hardly inferable canonical meaning of idioms, statistical analysis reveals a mildly positive picture of the usefulness of the monolingual dictionary in the reading situation under discussion. Despite a significant difference between reading comprehension performance in the "no dictionary" and "dictionary" condition, the increase in mean scores after look-up fell short of expectations. As far as individual idioms are concerned, in only two cases – of the idiom least detached from its canonical version (*have an axe to grind*) and the most familiar one (*throw the book at*) was the difference statistically significant.

Several factors seem to have reduced the overall positive influence of the dictionary on reading comprehension performance of advanced learners. First and foremost, the peculiar formulation of two definitions led the students astray and induced curious paraphrases and definitions. The subjects themselves, though expert in picking out the idioms from the macrostructure, exhibited less satisfactory microstructure skills. Some, lacking in flexibility in processing the dictionary information, tended to take the contents of the entry for granted, which led to misinterpretations of the confusingly formulated definitions. Furthermore, insufficient processing of the successfully retrieved information and unwillingness or inability to integrate it back into the context could be observed. The subjects, as if complacent about finding the target item, were quite content to quote parts of the definitions with minimal or crude adjustments – hence a wide discrepancy between the scores in the paraphrase and definition task after dictionary consultation. Disregarding the context was not confined to the after-look-up stage. Whereas the more difficult contexts were, on the whole, read carefully, the overinformative context invited only perfunctory reading, which also spurred incorrect paraphrases. In the light of the above, active integration of the dictionary information with the context deserves particular attention as the weak link in the chain of advanced learners' procedures directed at the retrieval of the writer-intended meaning.

The ultimate obstacle to comprehension was the complexity of the context. On one occasion it turned out to be so obscure that it blocked the positive effect of dictionary consultation almost completely. The degree of contextual transformation was not without significance, either: the least changed Idiom5 had the highest rate of improvement. At times, the modification was so disconcerting to the students that even the recognition of the idiom as familiar could not help in capturing the instantiated sense. In other words, knowing the idiom did not guarantee the comprehension of its one-off version. The subjects, accustomed to treating idioms as fossilised chunks, were apparently taken aback upon encountering their innovative applications. One person volunteered a comment: "To mi nie wygląda na idiom." ["This doesn't look like an idiom to me"]. There were also isolated cases when the idiom had evidently been located, but the self-report said "not found", as if the contextual form had been expected in the dictionary. The present study points to the need for raising awareness of idiom flexibility, for example by means of exercises in which students manipulate idioms and comment on the meaning thus obtained.

Finally, the results might have been affected by the design of the task booklet. The need to register searches and other self-reports undoubtedly consumed the subjects' energy and distracted their attention, which otherwise might have been directed at reconsidering the context. Nonetheless, the accuracy and consistency of the data remained remarkably high, pointing to the students' alertness and capability of managing multiple linguistic and meta-linguistic tasks.

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APPENDIX 1

Texts used in the experiment:

1) ... Sting, as a songwriter, had been signed to Virgin by the head of the publishing division, Carol Wilson. It was Wilson who had "discovered" the singer as an unknown in his native Newcastle... Under her direction, and with Virgin money, Sting had recorded a series of demos which had led to his association with the Police, a recording contract with A&M and, ultimately, the hit parade. The arrangement Sting had signed with Virgin had been for a 50-50 split, rising to 60-40 in Sting's favour after two years. It was a standard contract for an unknown songwriter, but as the Police began to enjoy enormous success, so Sting's value in the market-place rose... Sting and Carol Wilson had remained friends throughout the negotiations. In fact it was she who had advised him to get a second opinion on the matter from a lawyer... For Wilson, *Sting's success*, and the prodigious royalties it had earned for Virgin, was merely one feather in an increasingly crowded cap.

British National Corpus World Edition. Source description: Text id FNX; Richard Branson: the inside story. Brown, M, Headline Book Publishing plc, London (1989), 157-303. Sample containing about 42225 words from a book (domain: applied science).

2) In their dispute with Iran the British set out to close off all outlets for Iranian oil. American oil companies (fearful of the knock-on effects to themselves in the Middle East if Iranian radicals were seen to succeed) proved more enthusiastic allies than the State Department. The British, however, remained suspicious of American motives, and resentful of their advice. Eden's private secretary, Shuckburgh, thought it "very offensive" when, following an unsatisfactory meeting on Anglo-American policy towards Iran, he was told by Acheson that the British had to learn to live in the world as it was. Yet Acheson's remarks were hardly surprising when his department was receiving so many reports of the strength of Arab feeling against the British. By 1952 he was becoming all the more determined that *the United States should not be tarred with the colonial brush*.

British National Corpus World Edition. Source description: Text id HY8; The special relationship. Bartlett, C J, Longman Group UK Ltd, Harlow (1992), 1-124. Sample containing about 46090 words from a book (domain: world affairs).

3) ... However, this remarkable literary work - even given an army of fans as keen as his niece - would not have brought in very much income, nor would the journalism, and it was to be assumed the trust provided the rest. What he was also wondering was whether Harriet had received any letters of the kind received by Tom Fearon

and if so, whether she had kept them? But he had little reason yet to ask for a search warrant and *Mr Simpson would go purple in the face and throw every legal book in his considerable library at him* if he so much as tried. But it would be worth making contact with Miss Frances Needham-Burrell when she arrived and asking her - when sorting out her cousin's effects - to keep an eye open for letters with a threatening or abusive content.

British National Corpus World Edition. Source description: Text id CEB; A season for murder. Granger, Ann, Headline Book Publishing plc, London (1991), 21-134. Sample containing about 37282 words from a book (domain: imaginative).

- 4) I can clearly remember that night, the hush that fell over the audience after the first song. They were amazed at this big, big voice coming out of this tiny girl. By this time, Sinéad had already linked up with Farelly in Dublin... Record company talent scouts in Dublin had already expressed an interest in her, but not the rest of the band. Today ex-manager Farrelly claims he is not bitter about the split but says he is annoyed about the things Sinéad has said about that period: "The only thing that rankles me is what she says about Ireland. She's rewritten her own biography, and is very touchy about her past". *He wants Sinéad to put her commitment where her mouth is*. She could be such a positive force for the organisations she purports to feel for, such as CARE, a charity for abused children.

British National Corpus World Edition. Source description: Text id CEK; Today, News Group Newspapers Ltd., London (1992-12). Sample containing about 124295 words from a periodical (domain: social science).

- 5) Lee Rothstein, director of Southport, Connecticut-based market research firm New Science Associates Inc's advanced network computing service, takes umbrage with a lot of current thinking on open systems. He says that much of his firm's research showed, at an early stage, that open systems concepts "weren't going to cut it"; moreover, that many "were a myth". In theory, guidelines for open systems are formulated when a committee of vendors come to some sort of agreement over architectural definitions and create a standard. "However, in reality, *each vendor has its own technological axe to grind* and the results miss the mark", says Rothstein. The committees "never get to the leading edge because large companies usually don't understand new technology, so they drag their feet on the committees until they are able to catch up."

British National Corpus World Edition. Source description: Text id CTM; Unigram x. APT Data Services Ltd. (1993-04/1993-05). Sample containing about 8042 words from a periodical (domain: applied science).

APPENDIX 2³¹

A1 No
Read carefully each text (they all come from different sources) and write English or Polish paraphrases of the underlined fragments in the space provided. You may disregard the formal accuracy of your paraphrases.

Text 1)
.....

Text 2)
.....

Text 3)
.....

Text 4)
.....

Text 5)
.....

A2 No
Write the idiomatic expressions that appear in the underlined fragments. State your familiarity of the idiom before this test by circling one of the numbers 1-5: 1 - very well known, 2 - well known, 3 - vaguely familiar, 4 - rather unfamiliar, 5 - completely unfamiliar.

Text 1)

Text 2)

Text 3)

Text 4)

Text 5)

1. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

2. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

3. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

4. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

5. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

A3 No
Use the cues to build idiomatic expressions; if necessary, add articles, prepositions or other missing words. Then define the idiom (in English or in Polish). You may disregard the formal accuracy of your definitions.

³¹ The original Polish instructions have not been provided here so as to economise on space.

1. feather, cap

idiom:.....

definition:.....

2. tar, brush

idiom:.....

definition:.....

3. book, throw

idiom:.....

definition:.....

4. put, mouth

idiom:.....

definition:.....

5. axe, grind

idiom:.....

definition:.....

B1

No.....

Read carefully each text (they all come from different sources) and circle any words/phrases that you would like to look up in the dictionary. Then write English or Polish paraphrases of the underlined fragments in the space provided. You may disregard the formal accuracy of your paraphrases.

Text 1)

Text 2)

Text 3)

Text 4)

Text 5)

B2

No

You may consult the dictionary now if you wish. Register every consultation in the table: what you are looking for, under which headword, whether you have found the desired information. If you think your first paraphrase is faulty, there is space for corrections under the table. (Please do not add anything to the first part of the test.)

	Word/phrase looked up	Headword looked up	Information		
			Present	Partly present	Absent
1.					
2.					
3.					

Possible changes in the paraphrases:

1.....

2.....

3.....

4.....

5.....

Please circle one option that is true in your case:

1. At home I use a) the same b) a different dictionary.

Point 2 concerns people who have circled 1b.

2. Using the dictionary other than my own made arriving at the desired information

a) extremely b) rather c) a little d) not at all difficult.

B3

No.....

Fill in the table with the idioms that appear in the underlined fragments. Tick (?) the appropriate column.

Text 1)

Text 2)

Text 3)

Text 4)

Text 5)

Idiom	I knew the idiom so I did not look it up.	I knew the idiom but I looked it up.	I didn't know the idiom so I looked it up.	I didn't know the idiom but I did not look it up.

B4

No.....

Use the cues to build idiomatic expressions; if necessary, add articles, prepositions, and other missing words. State your familiarity of the idioms before this test by circling one of the numbers 1-5: 1 – very well known, 2 – well known, 3 – vaguely familiar, 4 – rather unfamiliar, 5 – completely unfamiliar. Then define the idiom (in English or in Polish). You may disregard the formal accuracy of your definition.

1. feather, cap

idiom:1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

definition:

2. tar, brush

idiom:1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

definition:

3. book, throw

idiom:1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

definition:

4. put, mouth

idiom:1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

definition:

5. axe, grind

idiom:1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5

definition:

Thank you for your cooperation,
Renata Szczepaniak