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BOOK REVIEWS

The ESL Student's Secret Weapon

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The Cambridge Dictionary of American English. Sidney I. Landau (Ed.). Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 1088. 2000. \$23.00. ISBN: 0-521-77974-X paperback with CD-ROM.

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The *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* is an English as a Second Language (ESL) student's secret weapon. This English-English dictionary was developed particularly for beginning-level ESL students, and it is also a good resource for ESL teachers. In addition to clear definitions and helpful usage indications, the dictionary provides cultural information that is useful and effectively presented for ESL students, especially for beginning- to intermediate-level learners seeking to break the native speakers' code of unspoken rules—or intuitive knowledge—necessary for maintaining smooth communication. As an added bonus, this paperback dictionary comes with a CD-ROM that provides interactive features for pronunciation practice. Among the many strengths of this dictionary, three characteristics in particular stand out when it is compared to similar dictionaries—its distinctive features, its clarity of presentation for its target audience, and its accompanying CD-ROM.

A unique feature of this dictionary is its in-depth entries, called *language portraits*, which contain especially rich information about the intuitive knowledge of Americans. Language portraits provide brief explanations about aspects of the English language that are assumed to be unfamiliar to speakers of other languages. Each category—such as parts of speech, grammatical features, fractions and decimals, education systems, greetings, titles and forms of address, writing styles, addresses on envelopes, and telephone usage—is described separately from its headword definition. Although integrated into the alphabetical listing of words, language portraits are printed within boxes and are highlighted in a separate table of contents.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ESL instructors may appreciate specific language portraits that provide clear explanations of common areas of difficulty for their students. For example, words like *say*, *tell*, *talk*, and *speak*, or *see*, *look*, and *watch* can be confusing for Japanese students because a split occurs from their first language (L1), Japanese, to their second language (L2), English. *Split* is a term used in second language acquisition to denote when a single word or form in the L1 diverges into two or more words or forms in the L2. Therefore, in Japanese, there is only one word to express *say*, *tell*, *talk*, and *speak*, but in English it manifests as four different words, and thus Japanese learners may have a difficult time acquiring correct usage

of these four words. The examples in this type of language portrait may help instructors to explain concepts explicitly to learners.

Other valuable features are the Parts of Speech and Other Labels section and the Idioms Index. In the Parts of Speech and Other Labels section, brief explanations of the functions of parts of speech are introduced with examples. The Idioms Index is located at the end of the dictionary, separate from the actual dictionary. The Idioms Index helps users find an idiom even if they can remember only one of its component words. Because the meaning of each word may not provide any clue about the actual meaning of the idiom, and because a great deal of exposure and memorization is required for a learner to be able to understand and learn many idioms, this section is extremely useful for ESL learners.

The second major strength of this dictionary is its clarity. This clarity is achieved in several ways. First, the vocabulary used in definitions is carefully controlled. Every one of the dictionary's 40,000 entries is a frequently used word or phrase and is defined using a 2,000-word vocabulary. The definitions, however, are clear, substantive, and not overly simplified. Also, full-sentence examples clarify usage for each headword. Idioms and compound nouns derived from each headword are defined within its entry. **Second**, pronunciation is introduced in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), a system that is more often used in learners' bilingual dictionaries than in U.S. dictionaries. Students who are already familiar with the IPA will be able to use the phonetic symbols more efficiently and effectively. Third, helpful grammatical and usage information is included with definitions. Usage labels indicate whether a term is from a regional dialect, such as British English, Canadian English, or a regional dialect of the US. Usage labels also show whether a vocabulary item is suitable for particular people or situations by indicating its degree of formality, such as *formal*, *slightly formal*, *informal*, *not standard*, *slang*, *rude slang*, and *taboo slang*.

Another feature that enhances the clarity of the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* is its unique system for classifying and presenting headwords based on meaning. Each entry represents one meaning. Therefore, there is more than one headword for each lexical

item that has more than one meaning. For example, the word *close* is represented as eight different headwords in the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* because there are eight different meanings for the word *close*. On the other hand, in the Webster's dictionary there is only one headword for the word *close*, with 13 definitions for adjective uses, 6 for verb uses, and 1 for the noun use (*Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary*, 1984, p. 134). Learners who are using the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* for the first time may think all headwords are independent words rather than the same word with different meanings. However, it should not be too difficult to become accustomed to using this unique formatting and to choose the correct meaning. This is because the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* provides a clearer definition of each word and illustrates its usage with an example sentence. In this way, each meaning is explained in more detail than in a standard dictionary. See examples below.

close **IFECI** /Mous/ *adj* [not gradable] very warm, with no movement of air • *It was uncomfortably close in the gym.*

dose **MAKE NOW OPEN!** /ki013Z/ *v* [VT] to change from being open to not being open, or to cause this to happen • *Come in and close the door* [T] • *Because of an accident, police closed (blocked) two lanes of the expressway.* [T] 0 *Grace closed her eyes to think.* [T]

closed /'cloozd/ *adj* [not gradable] • If a society or economy is closed, it does not allow free exchanges or trade with other societies or countries. • **Closed circuit** television is a system that sends television signals from various places within or around a store or building to a limited number of screens, as a way to prevent stealing or other illegal activities. • A closed shop is a place of work where you have to belong to a particular labor union (= organization of workers).

close **[END 1 STOP]** /klouz/ *v* [VT] to end or stop operating, or to cause this to happen • *Authorities closed the aging nuclear plant.* [T] 0 *After a run of three months, the show closes on Saturday.* [I] • (esp. of a business) To close is also to temporarily stop being available to customers: *The store closes at 9 tonight.* [I]

close /klouz/ *n* (C usually sing) • *The ski season has come to a close.*

The final outstanding strength of the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* is its CD-ROM, which includes all the information found in the paperback. Although it is possible to purchase the paperback dictionary alone, I strongly recommend buying the one with the CD-ROM. ESL students may in fact find using the CD-ROM more useful than using other English-English dictionaries, for its convenience and its pronunciation feature.

Because the CD-ROM can be installed on a computer, the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* can be used whenever students are at a computer—surfing the internet, reading or writing e-mail messages, or composing an essay. They can easily click the small icon in the task bar next to the time clock to pull the dictionary back up on the screen to search for a word, an operation that can be completed in less time and with less effort than using a paper dictionary. For this reason, the program could be installed on the computers in language labs at schools so that students can save time looking up words in the dictionary.'

The best feature of the CD-ROM is that the students can hear the actual pronunciation of each headword by clicking on its adjacent speaker icon. The pronunciation of each individual word on the CD-ROM may differ somewhat from the way it would be pronounced in a native speaker's string of speech. Nevertheless, being able to hear the sounds is a welcome complement to seeing phonetic symbols in print and helps learners to practice the correct pronunciation of words in American English. As a nonnative speaker of English and a graduate student who is under training to become an ESL/EFL teacher, I find this function very useful because it is important for me to know the correct pronunciation of words and to pronounce each word accurately and clearly for my future students.

Cambridge University Press offers a networkable CD for language labs, which is priced at \$150 for up to 30 users and \$3 for each additional user over 30. The license agreement that comes with the CD-ROM packaged with the book is for a single user only. Contact eslhelpacup.org for information about the networkable CD.

ESL students who are pursuing a degree in higher education may not find this dictionary the most useful or effective because it focuses more on cultural issues and pragmatic aspects of the language and less on higher level vocabulary for academic purposes or for a particular field of study. But for beginning- and intermediate-level ESL/EFL learners and instructors, I heartily recommend the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* even though its homonymic headwords may confuse some users at first. Each component of this dictionary was carefully selected and developed by specialists to illustrate English language use in the US in both written and spoken form. The *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* serves as a quick reference to English grammar, writing conventions, American culture, and word meaning. This dictionary is an ESL student's secret weapon, an extremely useful resource for ESL and EFL students and instructors alike.

REFERENCE

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Seeing the Big Picture: Exploring American Cultures on Film

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