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Teaching and Learning Lexicography: Theory and Practice

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Abstract

In this action research, the teaching and learning of lexicography engages with theory and practice. Obviously, the size, shape, and wordlists with compressed information for every lemma have driven people away from the dictionary. People have an impression about the tediousness and time-consuming act of producing a dictionary. This research attempts to motivate students to appreciate the art of compiling a dictionary by introducing lexicography (practice) and lexicology (theory), blending them together in order for students to have a better comprehension of this discipline. Starting with an impressionistic meaning of a word, students are then gradually exposed to theory and practice. Initially, after few practices, students are able to grasp and construct a complete lemma. It appears that through diagnosis, action planning and intervention, students are starting to change their mindset and becoming capable of relating the meticulous activity of compiling a dictionary with useful knowledge that they gain.

Keywords: Lexicography, lexicology, systematic, impressionistic

Abstrak

Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Leksikografi: Teori dan Praktis.

Dalam penyelidikan strategik ini, pengajaran dan pembelajaran leksikografi telah berasaskan kepada teori dan praktis. Jelasnya, saiz, bentuk dan senarai kata dengan maklumat yang mampat bagi setiap lemma telah menjauhkan masyarakat daripada kamus. Masyarakat mempunyai pandangan bahawa betapa cerewetnya dan banyaknya masa diperuntukkan dalam menghasilkan sebuah kamus. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk memotivasikan pelajar untuk menghargai seni menyusun kamus dengan memperkenalkan leksikografi (praktis) dan leksikologi (teori), kemudian dikacukkan kedua-duanya bagi membantu pelajar memahami disiplin ini dengan baik. Bermula dengan makna perkataan secara impresionistik, pelajar secara beransur-ansur diperkenalkan dengan teori dan praktis. Setelah beberapa sesi latihan, pelajar mampu untuk memahami dan membina lemma yang lengkap. Jelasnya melalui diagostik, perancangan strategik dan intervensi, pelajar telah mula menukar cara berfikir mereka dan mampu mengaitkan aktiviti penyusunan kamus yang rumit ini dengan ilmu yang telah mereka perolehi.

Kata kunci: Leksikografi, leksikologi, sistematik, impresionistik

1. Introduction

A dictionary is always seen as a thick book with compressed wordlists, meanings and their equivalences. Dictionaries generally have the same structure in terms of the arrangement of entries and bold headwords followed by word definitions. Yet, not many users know how tedious and time consuming the process is to produce one dictionary. The term related to dictionary is lexicography. Lexicography is an elective course offered at the Linguistics Program, School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia at postgraduate level. Even though it is an elective, it is a popular course with many followers every semester. The reason for this popularity is that this course involves theory and practice as well as hands-on experience. Fourteen weeks of lectures and tutorials cover topics encompassing lexicography and lexicology. In the first part of the course the basic task of a lexicographer is introduced, followed by presenting the compulsory elements of lexicology and its linguistic inputs, concluding with the corpus data toward enhancement for forming the best definitions for entries. At the end of the course, students are able to make a simple but complete description of a word in one lemma. This description starts with a list of headwords together with its definition. Words are spelled phonetically and further flourished with grammar categories, examples for word usages in particular contexts, social labels and other details such as metaphorical expressions (if any) and a list of polysemy. Students are paired from the beginning of the course and are assigned a task every week. Each and every task is followed by presentations followed by class discussions and comments in order to make corrections to the given task. The aim of the course is to encourage students to understand the art of preparing a dictionary through integrating theory and practice.

Prior to the commencement of class, students are asked to choose a noun, a verb and an adjective, and to provide a definition of their chosen words. Students are only able to give the equivalent meaning of their chosen words accompanied by a sentence string. Obviously, the definition given is based on their impressions. As a result, the meaning formed is more likely a synonym of these words. The best they can give is a simple description of a word that is far from satisfying. These simple descriptions suggest that students have no idea and pay little attention to these matters.

2. Literature Review

Malay lexicography started as early as the 15th century. All the dictionaries that were produced during this century were bilingual dictionaries. These dictionaries were for the perusal of merchants and colonialists (Asmah 2007). It was only in the middle of 20th century that the formal Malay monolingual dictionary compiled by the Language and Literacy Agency was first launched. Since that launch, many research projects have been conducted on Malay lexicography. Most research projects have thus far focused on problems in building up a good definition of an entry wherein meaning has become a major focus. Asmah (1986) noted the existence of circulation of meaning in Malay dictionaries. Some definitions consist of difficult words that hamper a user's understanding. Similarly, meaning equivalences in bilingual dictionaries also require some attention (Intan and Zakiah 2007). While Norizah (2007) pointed out that the incompleteness of meaning given in bilingual dictionaries could affect translation work, few discussions look at how to solve this incompleteness. The lexicology element is lacking. Hartmann (2001) stresses that the art of making a dictionary does not exist in a vacuum but is produced and used in contexts that can vary considerably across space and over time. Hence, both practice (dictionary-making) and theory (dictionary research) are necessary particularly in an academic setting. This implies that linguistic theories are indispensable in dictionary-making.

Nor Hashimah (2001) agrees that linguistic knowledge is vital for arranging meanings in a dictionary and has proven that semantics and pragmatics can guide students toward composing a good definition of a

word. In one dictionary research, Zaiton and Nor Hashimah (2007) suggested ways to solve the ambiguous meaning of a phrase and metaphor for '*ibu ayam*' (lit: mother hen). '*Ibu ayam*' as a phrase refers to 'mother hen' while '*ibu ayam*' as a metaphor refers to pimp. Problems can occur when it comes to arranging these meanings. Should these be put under one lemma '*ibu*' (mother) or put separately under '*ibu ayam*' as a metaphor? There are many instances of compound words that have both literal and figurative meanings in Malay. Here comes the role of semantics and pragmatics in assisting dictionary compilers to decide whether to have one lemma or two separate lemmas for compound words. Zaiton and Nor Hashimah further suggest that a compound word with both literal and figurative meanings be arranged under different lemma. This kind of arrangement would become very useful for users to find meanings systematically. Therefore, it is imperative that this course establishes both practice and theory for students to have a clearer picture in setting up meanings in a dictionary.

3. Methodology

Susman and Evered (in Baskerville & Wood-Harper 1996) and O'Brien (1998) have identified five phases for action research. The five phases are: (1) diagnosing (2) action planning (3) action taking (4) evaluating and (5) specifying learning. Certain procedures are taken to ensure these five phases are materialized. These procedures are as follows:

- a) For diagnosing purposes, two words from each grammar category, i.e. a noun, verb and adjective are chosen. The tasks given are:
 - To define each word.
 - Discuss the possibilities of improving the definition of each word.
 At this level an impressionistic definition is expected.
- b) Action plans are taken. Students should be exposed to lexicology. Lexicology involves linguistic elements in defining words. Students are required to acquaint themselves with phonetics (for proper guidance in pronunciation), phonology (the sound systems that are vital for identifying loanwords), semantics (meaning of words), pragmatics (the appropriate contexts for meaning and help to capture polysemies), and forming sentences in context. In addition to theory, corpus as a source of data is integrated as well.
- c) For the first two weeks during the action-taking phase, students are introduced to basic requirements in making a dictionary. The compiler's job of collecting data along with getting feedback from reviewers, teachers, librarians or booksellers who are the major players in setting the dictionary (Hartmann 2001) are made known to students. The following eight weeks are comprised of linguistic elements. During these eight weeks more practical work is introduced. At the end of each theoretical class, students are directed to prepare assignments. At this point, digital corpus data play an important role in assisting the students to draft a sound definition of a word. As expected, students should have more knowledge in building up definitions based on the principle of lexicology.
- d) A presentation followed by discussion has become a tool for evaluation. Certainly, students are beginning to grasp the whole idea of making up a definition. Students have improved from an impressionistic to systematic type of definition.
- e) Action research attempts to link theory and practice, thinking and doing toward achieving practical and research objectives (Susman in Baskerville & Wood-Harper 1996). During the final phase, the specifying learning is ascertained. This phase is an ongoing process of learning reflecting knowledge gained in the action research. If there are shortcomings in achieving target goals, further and additional knowledge may provide foundations for diagnosing in preparation for further action research intervention.

The whole process of action research is to change the mindset of a student cum user into researcher and compiler of a dictionary, from a simple minded to more creativity and innovation in producing a good dictionary. This learning process and the ability acquired in setting up a complete lemma enlighten students, in comparison to their initial, simplistic perceptions about what a dictionary is.

4. Findings and Discussion

A series of lectures followed by presentations and discussions have indeed improved students' understanding in compiling a dictionary especially when it comes to arranging a complete lemma or a headword. Compare Table 1 with 2 other figures below in order to chart the students' progress throughout the course. Table 1 shows the basic level of understanding in making up a definition. Students offer a limited description of a word '*suram*' (dim) and a string of a sentence for an example. At this point they have no idea on how to generate a complete definition of a lemma. A lemma must consist of a grammar category of a word, phonetic symbols, definitions, examples of usage and other relevant information for that particular headword.

Table 1: A definition based on impression

Entry/Headword	Definition
Suram	Keadaan cahaya yang tidak terang. Cth ayat: Keadaan di bilik itu suram kerana kekurangan cahaya.

In addition to gaining more knowledge in constructing the definition, students are competent enough to detect the inappropriateness of meaning given in some dictionaries. They can notice the awkwardness of the given meaning and simultaneously propose a better description needed for the word. Data from corpus has become the students' primary source in building up the meaning. Students can classify the details of each description. A complete definition is shown in Figure below where students have marked the phonetic symbols, grammar category, polysemies, subentry substitution, abbreviation and syllables.

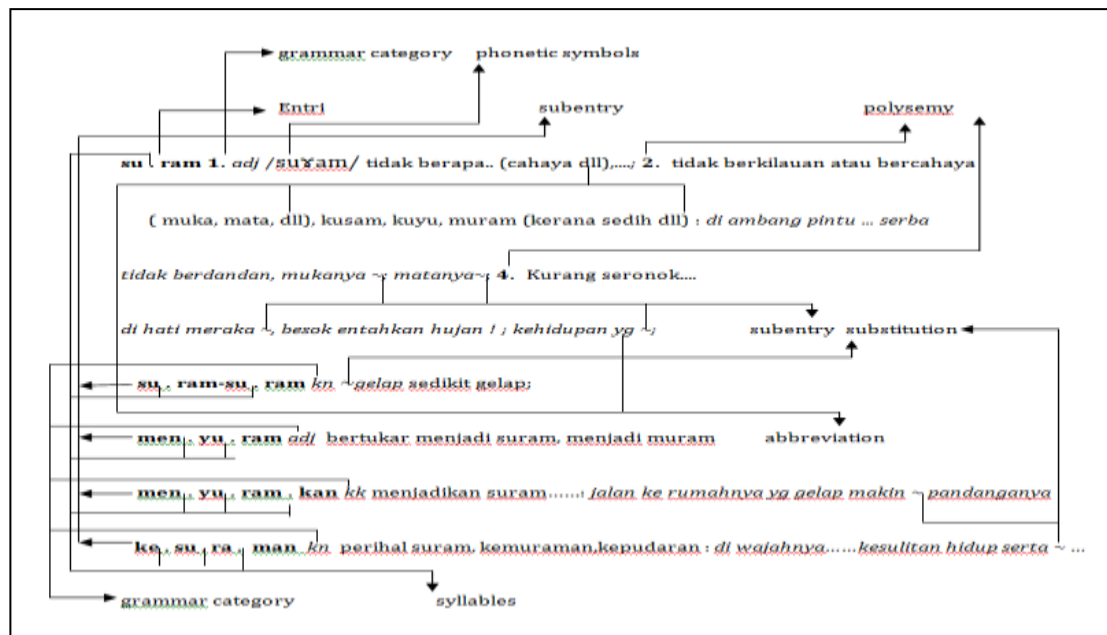


Figure 1: A complete definition with the lexicology description

Finally, they arrive at a complete definition for a headword 'suram' in one lemma as proposed in Figure 2 below.

su.ram 1. *adj* /suʃam/ tidak berapa terang (cahaya dll), agak gelap, kurang cahaya, redup (cuaca): *di dalam kamar tidurnya itu hanya lampu tidur sahaja yang hidup, lampu kecil yg~cahayanya:petang yg~*; **2.** tidak berkilauan atau bercahaya (barang ema, perak dll) tidak bening (batu permaya), buram : *kalau beberapa hari tidak dicucinya, kereta itu kelihatan ~*; **3.** tidak berseri-seri (muka, mata, dll), kusam, kuyu, muram (kerana sedih dll) : *di ambang pintu terdiri Jenab dgn pakaian serba hitam, rambutnya tidak berdandan, mukanya ~; matanya~*; **4.** kurang seronok (kehidupan dll), kurang berbahagia, susah (hati dll), sedih : *sesekali guruh menderam di sebelah barat, di hati meraka ~, besok entahkan hujan !; kehidupan yg ~*;
su.ram-su.ram n ; ~gelap sedikit gelap (sehingga tidak kelihatan nyata), samar-samar,sabur limbur;
men.yu.ram kk bertukar menjadi suram, menjadi muram (buram,pudar);
men.yu.ram.kan kk menjadikan suram (buram, pudar dll), memuramkan,memudarkan: *jalan ke rumahnya yg gelap makin ~ pandangnya*
ke.su.ra.man n perihal suram, kemuraman,kepudaran : *di wajahnya, terbayang kesulitan hidup serta ~ masa hadapan anak-anak itu*

Figure 2: A proposed definition

The entire process of making up a definition is accomplished. At this stage, the students are well taught in the making of a dictionary while simultaneously introduced to dictionary research. The mixed method of combining theory and practice has provided students an opportunity to learn and comprehend how a dictionary is compiled systematically. The notion of tedious and tiring work is turned into an interesting and challenging process.

Conclusion

For some people the dictionary is often considered a secondary text with a limited function in life. The dictionary collects more dust than fingerprints due to its underuse despite rich information in every lemma. The learning intervention via this action research has swiftly turned around students' perceptions about the dictionary. The exposure to dictionary making (lexicography) and dictionary research (lexicology) has developed student interest in this subject. As a linguistics student, each person possesses basic knowledge of theories and their applications in language through this course. In sum, the combination of theory and practice has expanded student mindsets in looking into best practices of learning. Theory with practice research has provided students an opportunity to eliminate pessimistic thinking about the dictionary so that students can instead delve into an ocean of knowledge.

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