

Arguments Against Using the Monolingual Dictionary

Learners of English should use the monolingual (English-English) dictionary before using the bilingual (Korean-English) dictionary. Here are some doubts that students have, and replies to those doubts.

1. "It's too difficult to understand the definition in the Monolingual dictionary."

In reply: Definitions in the monolingual learner's dictionaries in Korea use only the 2,000 most basic words of English. "Basic" means that they are essential to you, and if you don't know them, you had better learn them. If the definition is difficult for you to understand, you definitely need the practice which you will get from using the monolingual dictionary.

2. "It takes too much time to use the Monolingual dictionary."

In reply: You have to face the fact that learning a word accurately requires a lot of time. It's not just a matter of reading a definition once. It involves studying the grammar and features of the word; it involves studying the samples. This is a fact of life. If you ignore this fact, you won't learn the language.

More time involved in using the language (wrestling with the English definition) is actually a good thing. It is more time-efficient in the long run. In the process of getting accurate understanding of the meaning of one word, you get several other things that will help your language development. You will get the following benefits, whether you make a conscious attempt or you merely read the definition and examples:

- subconscious review of vocabulary that you know already but might have forgot or will forget.
- subconscious review of grammar.
- new ways to use vocabulary which you already know.
- learning required basic words, and
- learning useful conventions.

The reason you look up a word in a dictionary is to learn the word. And the reason you want to learn the word is to become comfortable in English. In the long run, the total time it takes you to become comfortable in English will be shorter if you use the monolingual dictionary.

3. "I want a concrete equivalent Korean word 1) for easier understanding or 2) so I can remember the English word more easily."

In reply: One of the biggest obstacles to becoming really fluent in English is translating from Korean into English every time you speak or write. Conversely, the best way to become fluent in English is to think in English. Learning and speaking new vocabulary through Korean equivalents is translation, which prevents thinking in English. If you depend on one-to-one equivalents, that means you are not thinking in English—you are translating from Korean.

Actually, there are not many real equivalents between English and Korean. For example, the word 'expectation.' The bilingual dictionary misleads you into thinking that the Korean equivalent for expectation is 기대. Look below at the bilingual dictionary definition, and then compare it with the monolingual dictionary's definition below that.

In the Essence dictionary:

expectation n 1. 기대. 예기; 가망, 가능성; wait in expectation 기대하다 2. 기대되는 것; (pl.) 상속할 가망성이 있는 재산; He has great expectations from his father. 그는 아버지로부터 많은 개산을 물려 받을 가능성이 있다.

Now, let's look at the entry for 'expectation' in the Longman Dictionary. In the Longman Dictionary:

expectation n 1. the condition of expecting: There is every expectation of a cold winter.

The entry for 'expect' in Longman's is:

...to think (that something will happen): I expect (that) he'll pass the examination. / He expects to fail the examination.

The strong desire for exact equivalents causes the student to accept the presence of many mistakes in the English-Korean dictionary. The sample sentence in the entry for the Essence dictionary's entry of 'expectation' in Essence (above), for example, is not good English. The sample sentence in the Essence dictionary uses the preposition 'from,' but native speakers don't say that. If we change the preposition to 'of' (the correct preposition in this case), the sentence would mean that he expects his father to do great things; it has no relation with inheritance (재산).

Another example (one of many examples) of the mistakes involved in the desire for equivalents: the Korean “equivalent” for embarrassed is correct only in certain contexts. Most of my students say embarrassed when they mean confused. That's because the bilingual dictionary gives 당황 as the main meaning of embarrassed.

Another common mistake: 상식 has three possible meanings in English. They are ‘general knowledge’ (such as the type of questions which comprise one section of employment exams), ‘common knowledge’ (something which is known by many people), and ‘common sense’ (practical wisdom held by many people). However, most students know only the meaning ‘common sense’ and use it incorrectly when talking about an employment exam. They got this mistake from the bilingual dictionary.

And there is one last problem related to requiring a one-to-one equivalent. There are so many features in a single word that, for most words, all the features can't be the same in both languages. An example of this is ‘expectation.’ The entry in Essence makes the student think that expectation means thinking that something positive may happen. The explanation in Longman's tells the student that expectation can mean thinking that either a positive (pass) or a negative (fail) thing may happen.

4. “Because of cultural differences, a Korean student cannot understand the exact meaning of many of the words used in the English definition. For example, there are many meanings of the word love, and when that word is used in the definition, how is the Korean student to know which meaning of that word is being used in the definition?”

In reply: English speaking Cultures have concepts which are different from Korean, and you must know these concepts if you want to work well in English. Using a Monolingual dictionary, which is written by natives of the culture, will introduce these concepts to you.

Don't try to use the easiest way. Don't be impatient. Involve your *whole* mind, not just one part of it, in learning whole English, not just isolated words. Learn *real* English, not artificial English. Use the monolingual dictionary first, so that you can get the true and accurate meaning and natural and accurate examples of the word, and get used to thinking in English. Carry the smaller monolingual dictionary with you to school and keep a bigger one at home or in your locker.

After you study the entry in the monolingual dictionary, look in your bilingual dictionary for the Korean “equivalent” if you want.