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Electronic Bilingual Dictionaries in the Language Lab

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Various stages of language learning and various language tasks suggest different learning tools. This paper does not address tools for the beginning student (i.e. first year). Rather, it describes a tool for the intermediate or advanced student who has mastered a core vocabulary and basic grammar and who wants to improve in second language writing.

There are at least two schools of thought on second language writing. One school claims that the student should stay entirely within active vocabulary. This nearly eliminates the need for a bilingual dictionary, since any word which is not already known in the second language will not be used. Vocabulary building tasks place in structured vocabulary exercises, not in writing. Another school suggests that the intermediate or advanced student should stretch while writing. This means that if an expression is not known in the second language, the student should find it using a native language expression and bilingual dictionary. It seems obvious that in this approach, the time in the native language should be minimized. This suggests that the less time spent looking up an expression the better.

WHAT IS AVAILABLE NOW

For the second approach, especially if the student is already using a word processor while writing, an electronic dictionary seems a natural alternative to a paper dictionary. An electronic dictionary product called Collins On-line(tm) will be described and demonstrated. It will be available in May 1989 in the U.S.A. This product solves the problem of expanding a demonstration dictionary into a full-scale dictionary, by incorporating an electronic version of a Collins(tm) bilingual dictionary. One advantage of the Collins dictionaries over those of other publishers is the careful Collins "signposting" which helps the student select the appropriate translation equivalent.

ENHANCEMENTS NEEDED

Future versions of electronic dictionary software should permit easier search of expressions, especially when the headword of the expression is not known. Approximate spelling, base form reduction, and grammar helps would also be useful. Although the current version uses a simple character-based interface on an IBM-PC type machine (to conserve resources and be available on the largest possible installed hardware base) it would be clearly desirable to develop a graphics-based interface as well.