



Nuala: Hi, I'm Nuala O'Sullivan and you're listening to 'Exam Skills'. This programme will focus on the importance of using a learner dictionary. Here's examiner Mark Shea.

Mark Shea

To pass most English language exams you will be required to build your vocabulary quite a bit to reach the correct level for the exam.

Nuala: Easy to say, more difficult to do. But having the skills for learning vocabulary is one of the keys to success in exams. Teacher Margaret John has no doubts about that.

Margaret John

You know what really makes the difference between a fair and an excellent performance in exams? It's knowing how to learn your vocabulary.

Nuala: Margaret John has taught advanced students of English for many years now. I asked her – what's the best way to start improving your vocabulary?

Margaret John

You have to start by buying the right dictionary. And not an English dictionary – a Learner English dictionary, which is quite a different thing.

Nuala: So get hold of an up-to-date Learner Dictionary. Whatever your level of English, there'll be an appropriate Learner Dictionary for you. These days

most English Learner Dictionaries have CD Rom and online versions as well. So make the most of what's available – a good Learner Dictionary will be your friend for life. Margaret John explains why.

Margaret John

Because with that you'll find that you'll have a tremendous number of entries, you'll have far more explanation about how the language works in context, and you'll also have a full description of the etymology of the word – that is, the source of the word and its real meanings, and also of course, its pronunciation. All of these things are essential.

Nuala: So a Learning English dictionary gives you much more than a simple definition of a word. It puts the word in context and shows you how to use it. And here's a reminder of how learner dictionaries work. Let's take a word like 'heart'. First, look up the definition – no problem. But don't stop there. Keep looking down that entry and you'll find all sorts of useful expressions and phrases based on that word 'heart'. Medical phrases like 'heart condition' and 'heart transplant'; idioms like 'it breaks my heart', and lots more. It's a huge list!

Margaret John

You need to be able to write down not just the word 'heart', and to know what the actual physical heart is in the body, but you have to recognise the heart has then got a series of expressions related to it, and also it has emotional expressions related to it. And that's the way to start looking at your vocabulary.

Nuala: That's the approach Japanese student Noriko is taking.

Student

Well the thing is to remember as much collocations and phrases as I can. I think that's the most important thing to do. Collocations, phrases and words.

Nuala: That's what learning vocabulary is all about. Not just learning lists of words, but building up useful phrases as well. And collocations – groups of words that usually go together. (For example, we say 'happy birthday', not 'merry birthday'.) All these things are what a learner dictionary provides. However...

Margaret John

Don't expect to remember them all, you won't. But you will recognise them when you read them, you'll hear them, you'll observe them. And that way you can develop a really good passive understanding of vocabulary, as well as knowing, right from the beginning, what a heart really is, in English.

Nuala: So, bit by bit, you'll come to recognise those new words and phrases (that's your passive understanding). And then soon it'll become part of your day-to-day language (that's your active vocabulary).
Here's Margaret John again.

Margaret John

The really important thing to remember is that you have to look down the entries in a dictionary; that you don't just stop with the plain definition. And most importantly, you have to buy the right dictionary: a good English Learner dictionary.

Nuala: Good luck and good revising!