Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

The benefits of dictation for university writing students and teachers

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This paper will address the benefits and challenges of dictation, as well as the connection between dictation and improving the writing of Japanese university students. The paper will also include a step-by-step description of how to use dictation effectively. Finally, sample dictations will be provided and explained.

　本論では、ディクテイションと日本人学生の英作文力向上の関わりと共に、ディクテイションの効用と取り組みについて明らかにするものである。また、効果的なディクテイションの導入方法に関して段階的に述べたい。最後に、ディクテイションの例についていくつか提示し、それに関して説明する。

Uses and varieties of dictations

Dictation is both a language teaching and testing device that dates back to at least the 16th century. Its popularity varies depending on teaching methodologies in vogue. For example, the direct method, reading method, and grammar translation method of teaching support the use of dictation; the natural method and the audio-lingual method do not (Stansfield, 1985). Norris (1993) describes dictation as a technique in which a passage is read or played aloud to students with pauses (usually at the end of sentences or long phrases), during which students must try to write down what they hear as accurately as possible.

There are a number of types of dictation used in foreign language teaching. At the basic level is phonemic item dictation, in which the instructor dictates individual sounds of the language. Phonemic text dictation is similar, except students phonetically transcribe a longer passage. This is a useful method to illustrate how sounds change in connected speech. A third type of dictation is the orthographic item dictation, in which the instructor dictates individual words in isolation. This is useful for reinforcing the correlation between spelling and the sound system of a language. Students in Japan are familiar with orthographic item dictation as used in cloze exercises (Takahashi, 2001). While listening to the dictation, students write individual words in blanks, usually every fifth to tenth word. Orthographic text dictation involves students transcribing a unified passage (Sawyer & Silver, 1961; Alkire, 2002). In dictogloss (sometimes termed grammar dictation), students reconstruct a parallel text created in a group, based on their own grammatical and linguistic resources (Wajnryb, 1990; Nation, 1991). Dicto-comp is similar to dictogloss, the difference being that students work individually (Nation, 2009).

This paper will focus on the use of dictation at the sentence level or longer, with the goal of increasing understanding, noticing, and accuracy. Longer dictation provides more opportunities for utilizing context clues. Nation (1991) has found that students writing dictation of a sentence or more focus on phrase and clause level construction, whereas learners doing cloze exercises focus entirely on single word structures. Likewise, Takahashi (2001) has shown that many students approach partial dictation by focusing only on a single word or phrase without thinking of the meaning of whole sentences or the passage.

The benefits of dictation

Oller (1979) believes that dictation is successful because it is a language processing task which reflects what people do when they use language for real, communicative purposes. He asserts that dictation taps learners' internalized grammar of expectancies at work during the listening process. Listeners then synthesize speech into chunks and formulate hypotheses about what is said in each chunk.

Research has shown positive results from the use of dictation. Stansfield (1985) reports that more than 50 studies of dictation were conducted in the 1970s, and these findings were "invariably favorable" (p. 26). Takeuchi (1997) conducted a dictation experiment which involved 207 first-year students majoring in English at a women's junior college in Japan. Students were given a series of sentence dictations from a movie dialogue over a period of 13 weeks. All students who participated in the study showed significant improvement in L2 listening comprehension. Takeuchi concluded that his experiment "proves that dictation is effective in foreign language teaching" (p. 62).

The use of dictation can provide some benefits for university EFL classroom management, as well. Dictation can be used successfully regardless of class size or range of skill. Successful completion of a challenging task is motivating for students. By working together, using grammatical and context clues to complete the dictation, students engage in learning by problem solving, which Krashen (2003) believes is more effective than "intentional learning."

Dictation also provides pedagogical benefits to learners. Chief among these is that dictation gives learners focused practice in correct forms of language while utilizing all four language skills in an integrative fashion (Alkire, 2002). Short-term memory is also enhanced as learners practice retaining meaningful phrases or whole sentences before writing them down (Nation, 1991). Morris (1983) notes that dictation trains students to develop more awareness with context clues. Even Robert Lado (1961), a vocal critic of dictation, recognized that dictation helps foster the utilization of context clues. Written as a criticism, he opines that dictation "hardly tests aural perception…because the words can in many cases be identified by context if the student does not hear the sounds correctly" (p. 34).

Both improved note-taking and listening are also important byproducts of dictation (Wajnryb, 1990). Davis and Rinvolucri (1988) explain that decoding the sounds of English and recording them in writing is a major learning task. This also fosters unconscious thinking in the target language.

Other benefits of orthographic dictation include the opportunity to revisit targeted vocabulary. Spelling and grammar errors can be noted and corrected, while the errors are still fresh (see Cartledge, 1968). In this manner, dictation can contribute to student consciousness-raising concerning their mistakes.

Furthermore, when evaluating learners, dictation can be a good indicator of overall language ability and as a testing mechanism (Oller, 1971, 1979). Oller examined EFL placement examination scores of nearly 800 students at the University of California at Los Angeles between 1969 and 1971. The examination consisted of five parts: (1) dictation, (2) an essay, (3) a vocabulary test matching synonyms, (4) a phonology test based on an understanding of minimal pairs, and (5) a grammar correction test. He found the correlation between dictation and total score was .91. The high correlation strongly suggests that dictation could be a good measure of overall language proficiency. The CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication) test, an English proficiency test begun in Japan in 2002, also features a dictation section. The CASEC consists of four parts: (1) vocabulary knowledge, (2) idioms and useful expressions, (3) listening for main idea, and (4) dictation. The dictation comprises 10 sentences with varying length phrase-level dictations (CASEC homepage, n.d.). Matsuoka (2006) notes that CASEC dictations have the highest correlation coefficient to overall score, r=.701, which offers further evidence that dictation performance could be a strong predictor of overall language proficiency.

While dictation can be beneficial for developing listening skills, it can also aid in developing student writing. Finocchiaro (1969) notes that dictation helps bring attention to concepts of punctuation and enables students to transfer English to written symbols. Stansfield (1985) believes that dictation helps students internalize the language, since learners employ more that one faculty. Valette (1964) believes that dictation practice can help students learn language and stimulate awareness in the written language. Morris (1983) notes that dictation develops accuracy in both listening and writing.

Challenges of dictation

For dictation to be a valid and effective teaching method, it is essential that several factors be kept in mind when preparing material for use in the classroom.

Word count is one critical factor. Oller and Streiff (1978) suggest dictations of about 150 words. The authors believe 50 to 100 words are sufficient to expose students to a full paragraph. Lengthy passages can result in students feeling overwhelmed and frustrated by the quantity of material. Morris (1983) uses passages of between 100 and 190 words. She believes that anything longer causes an overload, leaving students with too many things on which to concentrate while also taking up valuable class time.

Instructors need to take some time and effort in choosing an appropriate dictation. The material should be interesting and of suitable vocabulary range and sentence length. A passage from students' textbooks or a well-written student paragraph can meet this criterion. Ducroquet (1979) and Takahashi (2001) mention the necessity of choosing appropriate material and the dangers of not doing so. Teachers should choose a dictation that students can reasonably reproduce. A dictation can represent a review and practice with familiar vocabulary and grammatical structures. Working with EFL university students in the UK, Morris (1983) noted that many major points of misunderstanding occur in lexical and structural items which students already know. Dictation can provide one more review before students undertake more independent writing.

As preparation for later writing assignments, dictation should include vocabulary and model structures that will be used in homework assignments. For example, in the first sample dictation in Appendix 1, *May's Schedule* features the present tense, frequency adverbs, and the correct use of *always* and *almost*, which are frequently misused in student writing. *Africa and Japan*, the second sample dictation, uses compare and contrast vocabulary. Sample dictation three, *Spinach with Sesame*, is a process description which models the imperative form and utilizes signal markers.

How dictation can be implemented

Preview

Teachers should write key vocabulary (about five words) on the board and model the pronunciation with students repeating. Next, teachers should explain the words' meanings and solicit examples of usage. (Optional: teachers can erase the words and ask for the spelling or oral recall). Teachers can write the title on the board, or dictate it, then ask students to guess what the topic will be about. Predicting is a valuable part of the learning process and aids comprehension by helping students *get into* the topic. Timed conversation, making lists in groups, or assigning timed writing about the same topic are excellent ways of eliciting student-generated ideas and vocabulary related to the dictation.

Dictating the passage

This will vary depending on the proficiency level of the students and the difficulty of the passage, but a few principles should always be followed. Speed should be native speed, with pauses at key collocation and chunking points. Teachers should leave the preview vocabulary words on the board and add more words if students are finding

the task difficult. The number of times the teacher reads or pauses will vary depending on the students' language level and difficulty of the passage. Passages should be read at least twice, and difficult sentences and passages can be read as many times as needed.

Consolidation

This stage involves students working together to complete the dictation. This is an important stage for clarifying meaning and correcting mistakes. Naturally, the value of a dictation is increased if learners know what mistakes they make (Nation, 2009). Students should be given time to discuss answers or share answers by orally reading to each other or comparing texts. Asking students to use different colored pens is useful to show the next stage of correction. This correction stage is immediate and interactive, allowing students the opportunity to notice their mistakes and correct them before they become internalized.

Final corrections

Chances are, even the most diligent students probably do not have the dictation perfectly notated. Also, at this stage students have invested a lot of time and effort, making them motivated to complete the task. Teachers could provide an answer sheet. However, the authors prefer a whole-class correction. One option is for students to write the correct dictation on the board in groups, with two or three people assigned to write one sentence. One drawback is that this activity is time-consuming. A faster technique of correction is for teachers and students to alternate reading sentences,

phrases, or words. In a choral response, teachers can hear omitted or mispronounced words and correct the mistakes. Dictation passages can also be explained individually, with one student at a time reading one word, phrase, or sentence so that most or all students can contribute to the collective effort.

Follow-up

Once students have completed the dictation, they can discuss some of its ideas and concepts of the dictation. If the final dictation is written on the board, teachers can erase words or sentences (either gradually or totally) and ask students to say the missing words or sentences without looking at their papers. Teachers can give a quiz on the content by reading a question, while students must write complete sentence answers. This activity works well as a review exercise in the following lesson. Teachers can duplicate a dictation in a later class, as an exercise, or even as a test, a technique promoted by Sawyer and Silver (1961). If students keep dictation notebooks, teachers can periodically check them and review common mistakes with a grammar review or spelling quiz. With a full understanding of the dictation meaning and a review of vocabulary and grammar structures used, students will have been exposed to the grammar and structures required for a later writing assignment.

Conclusion

While dictation can aid in all areas of language acquisition, it is particularly suited for introducing models, grammar, and the organizational styles of various essay types. At

minimum, because of their active role in writing a sample paragraph, students will have a better recall of the model than if they had merely read it.

Dictation may not specifically develop independent writing skills, since students do not have to express their own ideas in written form. However, dictation activities encourage rereading, enforce listening-writing transfer skills, and encourage noticing in punctuation and spelling. Used in conjunction with timed writings and followed up with more personal expressive writing assignments, dictation can be a valuable part of a university writing course.

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Appendix 1

Sample dictations

Dictations are prefaced by questions which can be discussed either before or after the dictation. Words in bold should be included in the preview section.

1.   May's schedule

Do you have a busy schedule? What is your favorite part of your routine? What is the least favorite part of your schedule?

May has a busy weekday schedule. She always gets up early, **generally** at **half past six**. She gets dressed and eats breakfast quickly. Usually, she has toast, a piece of fruit, and coffee. She leaves home at 7:30, and takes the train and subway to university. At **quarter to nine**, she arrives at university. After taking classes all day and having lunch with her friends, May goes to her part-time job from 5 until 10 almost every weekday. Because she works at a restaurant, she can eat dinner for free. The only problem is that she doesn't like the food at her restaurant. (103 words)

2.   Africa and Japan

What images do you have of Africa? How many countries are there in Africa? How many can you name? Can you explain any strengths and weaknesses of the **continent**?

Africa is about 80 times larger than Japan, and is **made up of** 53 countries. The average African **lifespan** is 49.6 years

while Japan's is 82.3 years. Only 25% of African children attend junior high school, while over 95% of all Japanese children do.

On the other hand, Africa has many natural resources. It produces 65% of the world's supply of diamonds, 89% of the platinum, and 12% of the petroleum.

Participation of women in **politics** is increasing. In Japan 11% of government officials are women. Some African countries such as Rwanda (45%), Mozambique (35%), Burundi (32%), and Tanzania (30%) have more participation by women than Japan. (105 words)

3.   Spinach with sesame
What is your favorite food? Do you like to cook? How do you prepare your favorite food?

Making a **spinach** salad is easy and healthy. First, wash and boil the spinach. Then, cut it into bite-sized pieces. Next, in a separate bowl, add 2 tablespoons of **grated sesame**, 2 teaspoons of soy sauce, and 2 teaspoons of honey. After that, mix them together. Finally, eat it. It's delicious and **nutritious**. (53 words)