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Dictation as a language learning tool

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Abstract

Dictation has been used in the field of language learning for several years. However, most of the language instructors and methodologists regard this method as useless and out-of-date. Indeed it is a teaching technique which enables teachers to focus on language proficiency of their students. It may both be used as a device for teaching a specific language phrase or clause and to list syntactic mistakes. This paper reports pervasive decoding/listening problems of word recognition and segmentation in connected speech at normal and high speed among Turkish high school students at the intermediate level through the use of dictation. The findings of the study indicates that there is a difference between the teacher-lead dictation and tape-recorded dictation during the dictation process.

Keywords: Dictation, foreign language, listening, word recognition, decoding problems

Introduction

In the Longman dictionary of Applied Linguistics (2002: 157) 'dictation' is defined as a technique used in both language teaching and language testing in which a passage is read aloud to students or test takers, with pauses during which they must try to write down what they have heard as accurately as possible. Davis and Rinvolucri (2002) defines dictation as decoding the sounds of [English] and recoding them in writing.

In the nineteenth century dictation was used extensively in teaching foreign language in conjunction with the grammar-translation method (Stansfield, 1985). As the audio-lingual method became more popular in foreign language teaching during the 1960's, dictation as a teaching tool, considered "non-communicative" and therefore rejected. In the early years of the 20th century, however, dictation regained

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popularity, especially as it provided high correlations with language proficiency (Stansfield, 1985). In any average group of European teachers more than half use dictation either regularly or from time to time in their teaching (Davis and Rinvolucri, 2002: 21).

In addition to basic writing skills, dictation enlarges a student's vocabulary and fills his mind with good standarts of speech (Natalicio, 1965: 58).

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In the task of taking down a reading given orally, dictation incorporates the skills of listening comprehension, writing, and the understanding of grammar and structure, eliciting from the students all of the these (Fisher, 2001: 62).

In order to chose the suitable text for use as a dictation, it is essential that the text should be self-contained and cohesive. In addition the subject matter should be potentially interesting to the learner and the text relatively short (Morris,1983:126). The text should not consist of isolated sentences, but should be a pieces of discourse. (Oller, 1979:273).

Nation (2009) considers dictation a valuable language-focused teaching and learning technique. The most common advantages are: dictation can help students to diagnose and correct grammatical errors; it ensures attentive listening and trains students to distinguish sounds; it helps to learn punctuation and develop aural comprehension. Wilson (2003) claims that an excessive focus on meaning, either through extra vocabulary learning or additional listening practice, will not necessarily solve the listening comprehension of many students. A so called discovery listening is described as an approach to teaching listening that strikes a balance between attention to form and attention to meaning, and tries to achieve a focus on sound and word recognition by adapting the dictation approach.

Dictation also increases the memory-span which result in improvement in foreign language proficiency. Lado (1965: 128) concluded:

 'Memory span is shorter in a foreign language than in the native language and the memory span in a foreign language increases with the mastery of the language. The difference between the native and the foreign language memory span is greater when the material in the foreign language contains pronunciation and grammatical contrasts between the languages. The relation of memory span to foreign language learning is greater for contextual material than for numbers'. Oller (1971) defines dictation as a technique in which learners receive some spoken input for a short time, and then write what they heard. He also suggests that this process involve holding language material briefly in memory before producing it.

There is not a great amount of research on dictation in the field of foreign or second language learning. The studies have generally been directed to the types of dictation and some of them are about the influence of dictation in language learning. Rahimi (2008) investigated the effect of dictation on the learners' proficiency and the results of the study showed that dictation reinforces the language proficiency. Olagboyega (2008: 25) in his study refers that the majority of dyslexic learners have difficulties with auditory processing- they find it difficult to identify, segment and manipulate sounds in words and therefore making a correspondence between letters and sounds is difficult. Furthermore he claims that EFL learners also have difficulty in understanding spoken language as they are slower at perceiving the sounds within a syllable.

Types of Dictation

 Sawyer & Silver (1972) identifies types of dictation as follows 1) phonemic item dictation, involving presentation of individual sounds, 2) phonemic text dictation, whereby learners phonetically transcribe a short text, 3) orthographic item dictation, the dictating of individual words used for testing spelling, and 4) orthographic text dictation, using short texts rather than individual words.

Selection of Dictation Text

The text should be appropriate to the level of the learners. Once the text is selected the difficulty level can be decided. There are a number of ways of influencing the difficulty level of the task even after the difficulty level of the material has been set by the selection process. At the intermediate level, dictations should also come from material the students have already read, in longer, more developed paragraphs. At both of these levels, dictations help to reinforce basic sentence structures and vocabulary.

At the advanced level, the goal is to force students to learn what they hear and what they do not hear. Therefore, the teacher should dictate unfamiliar texts, thereby making the students' experience of listening the primary aspect of the dictation (Nation, 2009). There are some other factors which effects the difficulty of the text.

Factors Influencing the Text Difficulty

The conceptual difficulty of the word sequences themselves

The overall speed of presentation

The length of sequences of material that are presented between pauses

The signal to noise ratio - i.e. the amount of noise added to the material

The number of times the text is presented

The dialect and the pronunciation of the speaker and the dialect the hearer is most familiar with (Oller, 1979).

Method

This study investigates the use of dictation with intermediate students and the dictation papers of the students are analyzed and word errors which can also be defined as semantic mistakes are listed. The dictation texts were taken from the 'New Bridge to Success for Intermediate Students' (Akman and others, 2009). In addition, the texts are chosen by the students according to their interest. The orthographic text dictation is implemented through two techniques one of which was the teacher lead dictation and the other was tape-recorded. At the beginning of the study the students are divided into two groups. The number and the grades of the students were the same. One group is chosen for the teacher-lead dictation and the other one for the tape-recorded dictation. They were given the same texts and the implementation is carried on at the same time. The dictation technique is based on an oral cloze, with selected words deleted from the dictated text and the students were asked to fill in the gaps with appropriate words while they listen to the text. Davis and Rinvolucri (1988) claim that this procedure forces students to think hard about what they hear, since the missing words cannot be accurately supplied unless the passage is understood.

In the pre-listening process brainstorming, discussion and guessing exercises are implemented for the both group. Before the while-listening process the students were given the original text and asked to fill in the gaps with appropriate words when the listening period starts. In the teacher lead-dictation the texts were read aloud through once at normal speaking speed. During the first reading the students were

informed just to listen and not to take down notes. The teacher read the dictation text through a second time, at a slightly slower speed and the students were allowed to transcribe the text. Then the teacher read the dictation through a third time. During this final reading students checked their texts and made the necessary changes. On the other hand, in the tape-recorded version of dictation the students listened to the texts three times. When the dictation process is over the teacher corrected each text of the students. Since the dictation was not used as a testing material in this study, the texts are not graded. Therefore in the after-listening period only the errors were underlined and shared with the students. At the final stage of the study the researcher have listed errors according to their frequency.

Limitations

In this study one major category of error which can be defined as 'wrong word' is determined and listed. The other types of errors including, punctuation, spelling, word omissions, article errors are not identified.

Participants of the Study

Participants were 76 eleventh grade intermediate students, studying at Anafartalar Anatolian Commercial High School in Ankara, Turkey. All had seven years of formal English education in secondary school. During the research they were taking English, nine class hours for each week. It is significant to point out that weekly dictation exercises were employed during one semester in order to develop listening comprehension, memory skills and knowledge of grammar.

Research Questions

1. Is dictation useful in detecting students word errors?
2. Is there any differences between teacher's lead dictation and tape-recorded dictation in word recognition?
3. Is the lenght of the text effects word recognition?

Instrument

Two texts were used as a research material which were taken from the students course book ''New Bridge to Success'' which was prepared by Turkish Ministry of National Education by Akman and others (2009) as an instructional material for the eleventh grade high school. The name of the texts are ''Rock&Roll'' the other text is called ''Cinema or Theatre''.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXTS

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TEXT 1

Rock and Roll

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In the 1950s, Rock and Roll **_hit_** the **_youth_** all over the world. **_Through_** this **_type_** of music, young people found a way of talking to express their philosophy of **_life_**. The most perfect example of course was Elvis Presley. The energy of his music made a **_real culture_**. For **_youngsters_** who didn't want to grow up **_like_** their parents. They created their **_own style_**. In those days, teenagers used to wear handmade sandals, black sweaters, black berets and tight black **_pants_**. On the other hand, hippies in the 60s favoured longer hair styles, beards along the jaw line and horn-rimmed glasses.

TABLE TO TEXT 1* (Rock and Roll)

Table 1: Word errors derived from defective word recognition through Tape-Recorded Dictation (n=155)

hit > head	17	real culture> real colour	11
youth > young	19	youngster > young star	23
through > true	36	like > liked	7
type > tide	5	own style > oven style	5
life > light	28	pants > hands	4

Table 2: Word errors derived from defective word recognition through Teacher-lead Dictation (n=81)

hit > head	10	real culture> royal culture	8
youth > young	6	youngster > young star	9
through > true	14	like > life	12
type > tight	2	own style > old style	3
life > lived	11	pants > hands caps	2 4

* In each box the first word or phrase is the original one and the second word or words are the errors. In addition, the number of times that the errors have appeared is also included.

The text includes 105 words and graded at the intermediate level so it is regarded as appropriate in terms of the level of the students participated in this study. The vocabulary of the text is not complex. However, the total number of word errors (n=155) in the tape-recorded dictation is quite a lot. It can be observed from the tables 1 and 2 that some students used 'head' for 'hit', 'young star' for 'youngster', royal culture 'for real culture', 'true' for 'through'.

When it comes to the teacher- lead dictation it is observed that (table 2) the number of word errors (n=81) are fewer. In other words, the number of word errors in tape-recorded dictation is (n=155) more than the number of teacher-lead dictation (n=81).

Although the number of times the text presentation were the same, it is clearly apparent that the number of word errors are considerably diverse. That is, in tape-recorded version of dictation the number of defective word recognition seems quite higher. It might be suggested that the dialect and the pronunciation of the speaker and the dialect the hearer is most familiar with effects students performance of comprehension. In addition, it can be inferred that the speed of the dictation also effects the performance of perceiving sounds and words. That is, when it is compared to the teacher-lead dictation, the tape-recorded dictation may be identifed as faster in speed. Therefore it is possible to put forward that students suffer from decoding words at high speed and they have difficulty in perceiving the speech of the native speakers. In this study it is apparently observed that the students are better in teacher-lead dictation which might suggest that speed in connection with the short-term memory is in concert with audial competence in language learning.

TEXT 2
CINEMA OR THEATRE

Cinema and theatre differ in ***some ways***. For instance while theatre has been present since the earliest days of the antiquity. Cinema is a never form. ***Here*** are some people who give their opinions and preferences to compare cinema and theatre.
Although cinema is more popular, I prefer going to the theatre because it is more social and it's nice to see people wearing smart clothes and make up while waiting in the foyer.
I hate it when people talk ***loudly*** in the cinema, eat their pop corn and drink coke as if they are at home. But the people in the theatre are more ***respectful***. I don't know why ***though***. I can't see much ***difference*** beetween them and I can't say I like both of them.
There is a big difference between cinema and theatre. Cinema is livelier, more active and colourful. The action is ***infinitely*** faster when compared to theatre. You don't just see actors and ***actresses*** on the stage but lots of locations on ***screen***. Cinema uses technology a great deal and as far as I'm concerned cinema is number one.

TABLE TO TEXT 2 (Cinema or Theatre)

Table 3: Word errors derived from defective word recognition through Tape-Recorded Dictation (n=89)

some ways > sum ways 7	though > thought 4
here > hear 12	differences > differents 6

although > allow 3 all the 4		infinitely > infinity 4	
loudly > lived 10		actressses > artists 14	
respectful > impactful 2		screen > scream 23	

Table 4: Word errors derived from defective word recognition through Teacher-Lead Dictation (n=44)

some ways > subways	2	though > down	1
here > here are	3	differences > differents	3
although > alldown	5 4	infinitely > definitely	4
loudly > lovely	13	actressses > at risk	5
respectful > is pactful	2	screen > scream	6

The second text is rather complex and long as it involves 187 words. Table 3 suggests that the length and complexity of the text has influenced the performance of the students. In other words, when the type of the dictation incorporated, the total number of errors that have been made in the second text (n=133) is much lower than the first text (n=236). In contrary to the the first text, the second text includes more comprehensible input. In other words, it gives more contextual clues to the students.

When the types of dictation is compared it is seen that students have difficuly in comprehending tape-recorded dictation. As the number of word errors through the the tape-recorded dictation (n=89) is more than the teacher-lead dictation (n=44). It might be suggested that the more the information is given, the better the students comprehend the whole text and use the textual clues to analyse the text.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

In this study it is observed that dictation is a way of detecting word errors. The findings suggest that total number of word errors through the tape-recorded dictation (n= 244) is more than the teacher-lead dictation (n=125). Besides, it is observed that the lenght of the text also effects dictation. In this study the students have shown great achievement in lengthier text whereas the word errors doubled in the shorter

one. It might be inferred that the amount of contextual information effects comprehension positively. It is essential to note that in both types of dictation students have made some common word errors but the frequency of these errors are outnumbered in tape-recorded dictation. In addition it might be suggested that the dialect and the pronunciation of the speaker and the dialect the hearer is most familiar with effects students performance of comprehension. That is, the findings of this study implies that the students have difficulty in perceiving the speech of native speakers.

According to Miller (2003), more than forty percent of our daily communication is spent on listening, thirty-five percent on speaking, about sixteen percent on reading, and only nine percent on writing. Yet listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning in spite of its critical role in communication and language acquisition. Dictation is considered as one of the technique used in mainly to develop listening skills. In this study the use of dictation technique has revealed listening deficiency of the students. Therefore, dictation can be regarded as an assesment in foreign language learning. In order to overcome this deficiency, students should exposure to more native or native like communication through listening devices such as tapescripts, videos, cds and other resources. On the other hand teachers should take account of memory limitations of the students and implement dictation exercises which their memories can handle.

Besides, dictation is a productive learning devise for revising language skills. The learners can have immediate feedback on the nature of their linguistic performance. They can compare their output with an original text. If dictation is carefully linked to the rest of the lesson students may probably enjoy it. In addition, the dictation studies might enable teachers of English to concentrate on students' defficiencies and to focus on those aspects. Dictation helps to develop four language skills in an integrative way and short term memory. Therefore dictation should be taken more seriously not just for its own sake, but as the basis for comprehending the whole language.

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