

The Internet TESL Journal

Dictation as a Language Learning Device

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Introduction

Dictation has been used in language learning for several hundred years, and methodologists have often made pedagogical claims for its value. Davis and Rinvulcri write that "Decoding the sounds of [English] and recoding them in writing is a major learning task" (1988) and Frodesen writes that dictation can be "an effective way to address grammatical errors in writing that may be the result of erroneous aural perception of English.... Dictation can help students to diagnose and correct these kinds of errors as well as others." (1991) Montalvan writes that "as students develop their aural comprehension of meaning and also of the relationship among segments of language, they are learning grammar." (1990)

Despite claims such as these from respected methodologists, dictation is not widely used in ESL programs. Likewise, it has long been ignored in most teacher-training programs. The purpose of this paper is to re-introduce dictation as a valuable language learning device and to suggest ways for using it in an effective and interesting manner.

Types of Dictation

Sawyer and Silver (1961) define four types of dictation that can be used in language learning. I will give a short definition of each, and then expand on the one which has the widest application for ESL/EFL teaching.

The first, the *phonemic item dictation*, consists of the teacher presenting the individual sounds of a language (i.e., their IPA coordinates) to students for transcription. The phonemic item dictation is useful in that it increases the students' ability to recognize the sounds of a language and their contrasts, thereby facilitating their accurate production. This dictation is an excellent way to teach beginners to stop imposing the sound system of their native language upon the sound system of English.

The second, the *phonemic text dictation*, is an extension of the phonemic item dictation. It consists of the teacher reciting a passage which students phonetically transcribe. The phonemic item dictation is valuable as a way to understand how English sounds change in connected speech. Though it goes beyond the objectives set for students in most ESL programs in the U.S., it is commonly used in English departments in many foreign universities.

The *orthographic item dictation* is the dictating of individual words in isolation for transcription, similar to the traditional spelling test. It is useful for reinforcing the correlation between the spelling system and sound system of a language. In English this correlation is more complex than it is in other languages (e.g., Spanish and many Slavic languages), and so it is a worthwhile ESL/EFL exercise.

The dictation with the broadest learning possibilities is the *orthographic text dictation*, in which students transcribe a unified passage. This is the classic dictation exercise all foreign language teachers are familiar with. Besides reinforcing the spelling/sound correlations of English, the

orthographic text dictation uncovers comprehension and grammatical weaknesses in learners which the teacher can analyze and address in future lessons.

I will discuss the use and benefits of the *orthographic text dictation* in this paper.

Selecting a Dictation

The ideal dictation comes from a contemporary source of clear, standard English. The subject matter of the text is up to the teacher; however, a lively, engaging text livens up the exercise considerably. Because one of the goals of dictation is to provide practice in understanding semantically unified speech, paragraph dictations are best for most drills. At the high-beginning level, dictations should be elementary statements that students have already studied, in simple, unified paragraphs. 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.

In all cases, dictations must be selected according to the students' abilities, and the usage and style should be similar to what the students are expected to produce on their own in the course, both verbally and in writing. If one is teaching college students who must become familiar with a prose style common to modern essays, a passage from a writer such as William Zinsser, Malcolm Gladwell, or Phillip Lopate might be appropriate.

A useful source for dictations at all levels is the class textbook itself. By using the textbook, the teacher will avoid selecting material that is too different from the language norms the students have been learning. By the same token, the selected material will have (or should have) good examples of the language aspects the class is dealing with in terms of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation.

Delivering a Dictation

A good time to deliver a dictation is at the beginning of class. The reasons are to focus the students on English right away, calm them down, and ensure punctuality.

For their transcriptions, I request that students use pencils and uniform notebooks with lined paper. I also ask that they write their transcriptions on every other line, so corrections can be marked between the lines if necessary.

Before beginning the dictation, the teacher writes on the board any proper nouns, abbreviations (*etc.*, *e.g.*, *i.e.*, and so on), acronyms, or foreign or specialized words within the dictation that he or she has not previously explained. The teacher also writes on the board the chosen spelling for any word that is commonly spelled in more than one way (e.g., *rock and roll/rock'n'roll*).

To begin the exercise, the teacher reads the dictation through once, at normal speaking speed. As stated earlier, it is recommended that the teacher select a passage from the class textbook with which the students are already familiar (e.g., part of an essay, short story, or article). During this first reading, the students should only listen.

The teacher then reads the dictation through a second time, at a slightly slower speed. The students begin transcribing. The teacher stops after each phrase or meaningful unit and also

calls out punctuation, which the students must include in their transcriptions. Occasionally a student will ask for a word or phrase to be repeated; I will generally repeat any word or phrase once, if requested.

For any words the students cannot hope to transcribe, I tell them to leave a blank and to continue with transcribing the dictation.

The teacher then reads the dictation through a third time at normal speaking speed, again including punctuation. During this reading, the students check their work and make any last changes.

After finishing the dictation and allowing the students a minute or two for final corrections, the teacher instructs the students to stop. They then take out the source material for the dictation and self-correct their transcriptions. Alternatively, the teacher can have the students correct each other's dictations. Whatever the case, the corrections should be in ink, in order to distinguish them from the transcriptions.

Evaluating Student Transcriptions

Periodically throughout the term, the teacher should collect the notebooks to evaluate the kinds of errors being made. Evaluating transcriptions will require care in terms of distinguishing between comprehension errors and spelling errors. Comprehension errors include both phonological mistakes and grammatical mistakes. A phonological mistake would be the spelling of the word *physics* as *fyzics*; a grammatical mistake would be transcribing *Yesterday he worked* as *Yesterday he work*. We can define spelling errors as those that would likely be made by a native speaker (e.g., *receive/recieve*)

From this data the teacher can gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of each student. Lessons can be prepared to address errors made by a majority of the class.

Conclusion

Dictation is a valuable language learning device that has been used for centuries. Although linguists have not completely understood how it facilitates language acquisition--it would be extremely difficult to isolate the language competencies that are employed--many have attested to its pedagogical value. One of the 20th century's most influential linguists, Leonard Bloomfield (1942), strongly endorsed the use of dictation as a learning device. Today, many methodologists are at least inclined to agree with Finocchiaro's (1969) summary of its value: "[Dictation] ensures attentive listening; it trains pupils to distinguish sounds; it helps fix concepts of punctuation; it enables pupils to learn to transfer oral sounds to written symbols; it helps to develop aural comprehension; and it assists in self-evaluation."

Appendix

Benefits of Dictation

- Dictation makes the students and the teacher aware of the students' comprehension errors--phonological, grammatical, or both. In English, typical errors include the frequent omissions of bound morphemes such as:
 - The -s plural
 - The -'s possessive
 - The -s third person singular
 - The -ed ending for regular past participles.

- Dictation shows students the kinds of spelling errors they are prone to make.
- Dictation gives students practice in comprehending and transcribing clear English prose. Note: I find this important because we have all encountered awkward sentences in textbooks that are not good models of English writing, or raise grammatical, syntactic, or semantic questions that are not the point of the exercise to begin with. One example from a rather famous source: "When you receive a request like that, you cannot fail to obey it." This was in a textbook for a pre-intermediate class and came without a footnote to aid the student.
- Dictation gives students valuable practice in notetaking. ESL college students may already be in courses in which they must take notes of lectures delivered in English at normal speaking speed. While no one should take lecture notes that are exact transcriptions, learning to write spoken language quickly is an essential college skill.
- Dictation gives practice in correct forms of speech. **Note:** We have all read student compositions with grammatically correct sentences that are not correct *forms*, for example *She is a surgeon of hearts* or *He is a good cooker*.
- Dictation can help develop all four language skills in an integrative way.
- Dictation helps to develop short-term memory. Students practice retaining meaningful phrases or whole sentences before writing them down.
- Dictation can serve as an excellent review exercise.
- Dictation is psychologically powerful and challenging.
- Dictation fosters unconscious thinking in the new language.
- If the students do well, dictation is motivating.
- Dictation involves the whole class, no matter how large it is.
- During and after the dictation, all students are active.
- Correction can be done by the students
- Dictation can be prepared for any level.
- The students, as well as the teacher, can get instant feedback if desired.
- Dictation can be administered quite effectively by an inexperienced teacher.
- While dictating, the teacher can (in fact *should*) move about, giving individual attention.
- Dictation exercises can pull the class together during the valuable first minutes of class.
- Dictation can provide access to interesting texts.
- Knowing how to take dictation is a skill with "real world" applications. Many jobs demand accurate understanding of spoken orders (phone agents, dispatchers, administrative assistants, etc.). Also, the U.S. citizenship exam requires examinees to take a dictation.
- Dictation can be a good indicator of overall language ability. (For its use in testing, the research of John W. Oller, Jr. is particularly useful.)

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VIII, No. 3, March 2002
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