

Dictation as Teaching Technique

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Introduction

Davis and Rinvulcri (1988) relate the story of a teacher training workshop they did in which they asked how many of the participants ever used dictation in their classes. At first few said they did, but with some cajoling more and more hands went up, until in the end more than half the group admitted to using dictation regularly or from time to time. If so many teachers use dictation, then why are they so ashamed to admit it? For one thing, dictation appears on the surface to run counter to the commonly accepted notion of "communicative" language teaching. Dictation is, however, an age-old language teaching technique, which many language teachers have probably experienced themselves as students even if they have never used it as teachers. Of course the fact that dictation is so traditional and time-honored provides fodder for both apologists and detractors alike. And it is also quite likely that most teachers who do use dictation do not have a clear idea of exactly what dictation can do and what they hope to accomplish with it. Hubbard (1983: 277) contended that a major reason why dictation has always been so controversial is that it was so easy for a teacher to use it badly.

Research over the last thirty years, however, has indicated both empirically and theoretically that regular dictation practice is pedagogically valuable. A review of research and professional opinion on dictation will show a shift in the conception of dictation from that of a spelling or listening comprehension test to that of a global activity in which the student must draw on all of his knowledge of the language he is studying as well as his knowledge of the real world.

Before this investigation begins, a definition of terms is in order. The term dictation generally refers to a text which is read aloud by the teacher and written out by the students. This kind of dictation can be referred to as a full-text dictation. Another form of dictation uses a cloze-format. A cloze is a text in which every *n*th word has been deleted. Originally cloze was a reading exercise, and for clarity we can refer to this type of cloze as a reading cloze. The cloze text can also be dictated, with the students expected

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to listen for and fill in the missing words. This is known as an aural cloze or cloze dictation. Unfortunately, in the literature the term cloze is used indiscriminately for both the reading and aural versions.

Review of the Literature

Much of the criticism of dictation stems from a misunderstanding of its function. Anderson (1953) was typical of his contemporaries in criticizing dictation as “very indirect and inadequate” as a method of testing spelling. He also did not believe dictation could test listening comprehension: “[The student] may make quite a good score without having thoroughly understood what was said.” Lado in *Language Testing* (1961:34) asserted that “on critical inspection” dictation appeared “to measure very little of language. Since the order of words is given by the examiner as he reads the material, it does not test word order. Since the words are given by the examiner, it does not test vocabulary. It hardly tests aural perception of the examiner’s pronunciation because the words can in many cases be identified by context if the student does not hear the sounds correctly.” Lado did, however, seem to see value in dictation as a teaching device, giving suggestions for its use in his later *Language Teaching* (1964). Valette (1964), however, tested the effectiveness of dictation in beginning French classes and found that “proficiency in dictation” did not “automatically imply proficiency in other aspects of French language learning.”

But Oller and Conrad (1971) tested the usefulness of “aural” cloze tests “as measures of listening comprehension” and reported a high degree of correlation with standardized listening tests. They argued that the aural cloze procedure, as well as the traditional form of dictation, measured “integrative skills,” and they also asserted that it required the student to perform a task not unlike what native speakers do in listening, anticipating what the speaker will say next and frequently even supplying words or phrases. In a separate study Oller (1971) described dictation as “a dynamic process of analysis-synthesis,” whereby the student must process information in order to generate a meaningful text. He also argued that dictation was just as valid as standardized tests in measuring overall proficiency, as well as being easier to prepare and administer. Oller and Streiff (1975) argued that listening comprehension was “a highly creative process,” and that the listener was formulating “expectancies” about what he heard based on his internalized grammar of the language, which they termed “the grammar of expectancy.” Dictation, they claimed, activated “the learner’s internalized grammar of expectancy.”

They found this to be equally true of cloze.

Subsequent research on dictation by Savignon (1982) has corroborated the assertions of Oller and his associates as has research on cloze by Soudek and Soudek (1983). Hubbard (1983) believed both dictation and cloze were valuable as testing devices because of their "global" nature. Allen (1983) argued that dictation was a valid test of vocabulary knowledge, since usually "words cannot be written from dictation unless the writer has some familiarity with them." Ariew and Frommer (1987) described cloze as a "contextualized activity" which emphasized both language content and structure. Morrow (1979), however, remained more skeptical, noting that "neither [dictation nor cloze] gives any convincing proof of the candidate's ability to actually use the language...."

Many researchers have also asserted the value of dictation as a teaching device. Sawyer and Silver (1961) claimed that the most important function of dictation was providing drill in understanding connected speech. It also helped correlate spoken and written forms of the language. The textbook *Listening Dictation* by Morley (1976) is based on the idea that dictation developed "basic skill in discriminative listening." Haycraft (1978) described dictation as "a bridge between spoken and written" language. Davis and Rinvolutri (1988) listed "ten good reasons" to use dictation, many of which dealt with classroom management. This aspect has been mentioned by other researchers as well. Various adaptations of the dictation and cloze formats have been reported, such as in the teaching of poetry and song. (See Price, 1987, and Maley, 1987). Rinvolutri (1984) describes several original variations on cloze and dictation, as does Woodward (1991).

What follows is a summary of the empirical and theoretical evidence in support of the pedagogical value of dictation. Then a hypothesis is made suggesting that the factors which make dictation a valid testing device also make it a valid teaching device. Two experiments will be proposed to test this hypothesis.

Empirical evidence

Empirical evidence given by various researchers for the effectiveness of dictation in the classroom can be divided into two broad categories: classroom management, and learning opportunities.

Dictation is one of the few classroom activities that deals just as effectively with large groups as with small. If used at the beginning of class it discourages tardiness, as

well as calming the class and getting it fully under the control of the teacher. It is also easy to prepare and to grade, and since the activity is fully controlled, it is safe for the non-native teacher. Since the level of difficulty is completely flexible, from single word to academic text, dictation can be used effectively with any level of class. And in mixed-ability groups, the higher level students can be expected to do a full dictation, while the lower levels are given a cloze of the same passage. (Sawyer and Silver, 1961, 40-1; Radice, 1978, 201-2; Davis and Rinvulcri, 1988, 4-7) Dictation is low-tech, so it is easy for the teacher to learn how to do, and it is also cost-effective, with full-text dictations being cost-free and cloze-dictations requiring only the cost of making copies.

Savignon (1982:45) noted that students typically respond well to dictation, which suggested to her that "dictation appears related to the skills learners are seeking to acquire." Sawyer and Silver (1961:40-1) believed that dictation was useful in making the student more aware of his errors. Morley (1976:ix) believed dictation developed "basic skill in discriminative listening," while in a similar vein Sawyer and Silver (1961:37) claimed that the "most important function" of dictation was "providing drill in understanding connected speech."

But perhaps the greatest benefit of dictation is that students can correct their own work, thus obtaining instant feedback and an opportunity for "overlearning." (Davis and Rinvulcri, 1988:4) A number of methods have been suggested for this. Students can compare answers in pairs or groups after the exercise, or the teacher can show them the original on OHP or handout. Lado (1964:197) suggested having one of the students do his dictation on a blackboard mounted on an easel and facing away from the class. After the exercise this dictation is shown to the class, errors corrected on it, with the other students correcting their own work from this.

But all of this still begs the question: What exactly does dictation teach, if anything? Let us go back to Oller's theory of the grammar of expectancy, which he used to explain the validity of dictation as a global test of language competence, and see whether we can apply it to dictation as a teaching device.

Theoretical evidence

According to Oller, listening is "a highly creative process" for both native speakers and learners. The "perceiver" is "given a sequence of sounds from which an intended set of words in sequence must be extracted" (1971:257). A dynamic process of analysis-by-synthesis takes place in the mind of the perceiver. He first forms a "synthetic" or

wholistic, though still crude, understanding of the sound stream. Then he attempts to analyze this sound stream by formulating "expectancies" or hypotheses about its detailed meaning, bringing to bear his internalized grammar of the language. This ability to make predictions he called the grammar of expectancy. Oller believed dictation activated the learner's grammar of expectancy, which was why dictation was valid as a global test of language competence.

If all this is true, then might not we also be able to expect that when dictation is used regularly as a classroom activity it helps the student to expand or to "hone" his own grammar of expectancy, his ability to make predictions? Savignon (1982:35) believed dictation could be useful in language teaching, and remarked that "there are many experimental and practical uses which remain to be explored." On the other hand Vallete (1964:434) was more skeptical, and she believed evidence from her experiment indicated that repeated dictation practice simply made the student better at taking dictation, without any improvement in other language skills. Oller and Streiff's (1975:87) experiments at UCLA, however, indicated no such practice effect. Savignon (1982:46) believed the issue of practice effect was not yet settled and needed additional inquiry.

Morris (1983) did an error analysis of student dictations and came to some interesting conclusions. She found that "a number of the major points of misunderstanding occurred in lexical and structural items that were already 'known'," and remarked that "[t]he failure to use context clues to help in the recognition of words not clearly heard was a serious handicap," and that "many students need training in this skill." Through the use of dictation, she believed, "[s]tudents can be trained to be alert to any inconsistencies in the written text they produce as a result of 'hearing' (what the teacher has 'said')." She concluded that "dictation is... a most useful tool in listening training and training in self-reliance."

Conclusion

Dictation has many practical advantages: it requires little work on the part of the teacher in either preparation or administration (while demanding the full concentration of the student for the duration of the exercise); it is also highly adaptable to class size and level. Professional opinion and scholarly research tends to favor its use in the classroom. Oller's grammar of expectancy explains in theoretical terms the mechanics of dictation and what benefits accrue to the student from regular practice in it, while the experiments performed so far tend to lend evidence to its pedagogical value. It is high

time dictation find a respectable place in the language classroom. And as for those teachers who are already using dictation in their classes—there is no longer any reason to be ashamed!

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