

Active vs Passive Dictation

Mozhgan Alsadat Ghaffarzadeh Hassankiadeh

Islamic Azad University- Tonekabon Branch, Iran

Article Info

Article history:

Received Feb 18, 2013

Revised May 8, 2013

Accepted Jun 10, 2013

Keyword:

Active dictation

Passive dictation

Real language

Everyday English

Traditional dictation

ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on dictation as a beneficial tool in both teaching and testing. The goal is to discuss the points that were ignored during the years in foreign language classes. In fact this paper aims at investigating helpful techniques in reviving active dictation. Here some discussion is presented theoretically about the strategies that can be used to assist learners in developing the other skills during dictation sessions. An effective tool that can help teachers and learners during language teaching/learning processes to promote learning is dictation, if it is utilized in a proper procedure while considering all four skills in learning a foreign/second language. So the significance of the topic prompts the researcher to study it. The aim is to identify the most appropriate strategies in using dictation in the classroom that may assist learners in learning a language communicatively. Therefore the current study came to existence to gain this target and to present some techniques to help in promoting such skills in language classes.

Copyright © 2013 Institute of Advanced Engineering and Science.
All rights reserved.

Corresponding Author:

Mozhgan Alsadat Ghaffarzadeh Hassankiadeh,
Islamic Azad University- Tonekabon Branch, Iran.
Email: Ghaffarzadeh.mail@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Dictation has been used in language learning for several hundred years and methodologies have often made pedagogical claims for its value [1]. Davis and Rinvoldri write that decoding and recoding the sounds in writing is a major learning task [2]. Bloomfield [3] strongly endorsed the use of dictation as learning device (see Alkire, 2002). Oller [4] considers dictation to be a type of integrative test, which requires a learner to use several language skills at the same time. There are many researchers who work on dictation as a useful tool in learning/teaching a language. For example, Norris' [5] studied dictation as a beneficial tool for managing and motivating learners in language classrooms. He distinguished between traditional and modern model of dictation procedures. His definition of traditional dictation is:

"In dictation's traditional form as a teaching technique, a text is either read by the teacher or played on a cassette tape once straight through while the students just listen and try to understand. The text is then broken into a number of short sections with a pause between each section. During that pause the students have to write down what they have heard. This is the only form of dictation many teachers and students have known, and is sometimes perceived as a boring exercise." (Norris, 1993, p.72)

And he defined the activated dictation in this manner:

"Dictation is one of those exercises which, if it is well done, the teacher's planned activity prompts reactions, simultaneously and immediately subsequently, by all the students in the group." (Norris, 1993, p.72)

Norris mentioned some strategies to use dictation as a tool in controlling the class and motivating the learners in his study. Farhady and Malekpour [6] studied dictation as a testing tool and discussed different

scoring techniques for spelling tests. Although there are some studies which concentrate on dictation as a learning tool not just as a testing procedure, there is little attention to techniques, methods and strategies which can be used in language classes. Especially there is no concentration on beginners in utilizing dictation to convert its solely role of rote memorization and repetition to motivated language learning tool. The tool which assists learners in improving skills that are helpful in making relationship and achieving the goal of learning a language i.e. using it as an instrument for negotiating and connecting to the entire world. This paper aims at filling the gap and stating deficiencies of traditional procedures in using dictation as a learning tool and discussing new strategies in promoting its applicability in learning a language.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE AND OBJECTIVES

Alkire (2002) mentioned the following benefits in utilizing dictation as a learning instrument:

- Dictation makes the students and the teacher aware of the students comprehension errors (phonological, grammatical or both).
- It shows learners the kinds of spelling errors they are prone to make.
- It assists learners to practice in comprehending and transcribing clear English prose.
- It gives learners valuable practice in note-taking.
- It gives practice in correct form of speech.
- It can help develop all four skills.
- It helps to develop short-term memory.
- It can be a good indicator of overall language.
- It involves the whole class.
- It is psychologically powerful and challenging.

Discussing the benefits of dictation, it was stated in Reading Rock [7] that:

- Teachers can model listening to a sound and writing authentic materials such as a letter by dictation.
- Students can watch as an adult writes using many conventions of writing such as letter formation, punctuation, spacing, and more.

According to the mentioned benefits of this tool in language learning/teaching, the goal of the study is to compare different techniques in using dictation and discuss the most proper ways which may promote learning intakes.

3. THE USED STRATEGIES AND THE PROBLEMS

Imitation and repetition were historically the classic methods of using dictation in learning a language [8]. These instruments have a history stretching back to ancient times. Some scholars believe that dictation is as old as language teaching itself [9]. Until late 1960s, dictation has been regarded and used as a technique to reinforce students' ability in correct spelling [4, 6]

It is known that dictation is the process of writing down what someone else has said [7]. What I remembered from my own school is the teacher who was reading out the text or list of words piece by piece, pausing for us to write what we had heard. Then our scripts were marked. It was out of 20 and we would miss out one point for each error. In some schools, if students had over 20 mistakes, they would get a minus score-which meant a student who wrote nothing could score higher than one with a lot of mistakes [10].

What does it mean? Does traditional dictation develop writing and listening? If the students had the chance to learn it by heart, they would reproduce it in class without the teacher, but they couldn't use it. In fact, isolated random paragraphs from the textbook or individual words may have been remembered for the test but were unlikely to be retained for productive personalized use [10]. This sort of dictation is based on mechanical repetition. In other words a traditional method will contain the following steps [10]:

Read the whole text once. Students just listen.

Read the text phrase by phrase slightly slower than normal speed, giving enough time to learners to write.

Read the whole text at normal speed again.

Give students time to check their work.

In this kind of dictation, the teacher should read or recite words, sentences or a text in some set patterns. The perceived benefit to the students is the development of decoding (listening) and recoding (spelling and grammar) skills [11], but the learners couldn't use what they've memorized productively.

Farhady and Malekpour (1997, p. 3) enumerate some of the shortcomings of dictation as:

-*"The selection of words or sentences to be dictated is often biased, i.e., teachers often select difficult words and sentences with complex linguistic elements."*

-“*The focus of these activities is more on the spelling ability of language learners which has no direct relationship to students’ language ability.*”

Lado [12] argued that dictation cannot tap the most important component of language, i.e., meaning.

4. NEW STRATEGIES AND DICTATION

To reduce the deficiencies of traditional dictation, some new strategies were given in the following. The aim of all of them is to assist learners using the language productively.

4.1. Consulting and Dictation

An alternative method is firstly reading a text (which is in a story form, for example) and asking the learners to listen to it. After listening they can write as many key words as they can. They should not be worry about writing a complete text. ELT teachers’ corner (2009) explained the procedure as:

1. Read the whole text once through at normal speed while learners listen.
2. Read it again at normal speed while learners noting the key words.
3. Have students in pairs compare their notes and attempt to reconstruct as much of the text as they can.
4. Repeat step 3. Pairs should be building up the text further.
5. Let one pair come up to the board and write what they have got.
6. Suggestions for any gap can be given by the rest of class.

In this procedure, the learners in different groups will discuss about every grammatical or lexical error and correct them. In this way, the text is not cut up unnaturally. It is in a story form and will not be used in unnatural speed. Besides learners listen for the whole text to gain the overall meaning and they can improve note-taking skills. In addition, they learn to collaborate with each other to complete the task. In other words, the groups are involved in constructing the text instead of reminding it. Both accuracy and meaning are important in this method. This procedure may be accompanied with some pictures, or real objects to convey the meaning more easily.

4.2. Brain Storming and Dictation

Brain storming is a really effective tool in learning a language. In dictation, it can be used to reinforce or introduce particular structures or topics or to provide general language practice [10]. For example, the teacher can dictate the first paragraph of a story or an interesting text from a newspaper and ask learners to continue it. They can construct the story based on their ideas, emotions and creativity. Constructing a story will motivate learners to learn. Each sentence that was given by a pair or an individual will be written by all of the learners. After writing every sentence, the grammatical points and lexical selections will be discussed by the students. In this strategy the sentences of different learners can be compared with each other and the students can vote and select the better one for constructing an interesting story. Although it may take up to 30 minutes, it can assists learners to promote listening & constructing sentences meanwhile writing. Besides telling a story will attract their attention to learning.

4.3. Listen and Answer

The learners shouldn’t write what the teacher dictates to them. In spite they should write their own answers to what the teacher says. For example, when teacher says “I forgot the marker”, the learner may write “I will bring it”. This circle can be continued and sometimes one of the learners can do teachers’ duty and dictate the other learners. It should be noted that learners in this activity are in intermediate level.

4.4. Trans-Dictation

Farhady and Khany (1997) introduced trans-dictation (a combination of translation and dictation) to reduce the deficiencies of traditional dictation. In this procedure the teacher reads the text at normal speed while the learners are listening to it. Then the teacher read it again at normal speed and the students try to translate it (if they want, they can write their translations). Afterwards the learners should read their translations and try to write the dictation. Farhady and Khany believe that psycholinguistically, the trans-dictation is an improvement over both translation and dictation type tests and psychometrically, it proved to be a highly valid and reliable measure of language proficiency. They have stated that the procedure can have a positive backwash effect on classroom practices, because it taps those constructs that are fostered in students in communicative language teaching classrooms.

4.5. Correcting the Mistakes

In this method, the teacher will give the learners a written text accompanying some spelling or grammatical mistakes. Afterwards the teacher will read the text at normal speed and the students will follow

it, looking at their texts. Then the teacher will read it at normal speed again while the learners are identifying the mistakes. At the end, time will be given to students to correct and check their papers. The more advanced the students, the more mistakes will be included in the text. After correcting the errors individually, the teacher can ask the learners to consult their papers in pairs. Totally, the groups will compare their papers and discuss about probable errors by other learners.

4.6. Cheating and Dictation

Teachers are successful, if they will be able to use even the negative activities like cheating in learning. Cheating is one of them which insults teachers all over the world. But if the teachers aim to, they can use its strength in learning. Learners tend to learn more for exam than for tests during teaching sessions i.e., in exam they need to learn to get mark, and they will try more, so the items of the test will be remembered more easily. In this procedure, the teacher reads an interesting story-like text, while learners are listening to it. Then he reads it and students write. Afterwards the teacher reads and they check. When all the learners checked their papers, the teacher asks the learners to open their books, consult with other learners and use every instrument or strategy to correct their mistakes. After consulting, the learners correct their papers by themselves. If there are some mistakes, they will be discussed and corrected. Up to the end of the dictation session, the teacher and learners discuss the problems which they had in the process of writing the dictation. In the next session, a similar dictation can be given to learners to check their progress.

4.7. Learner- centered Dictation

Instead of the teacher dictating the text, there are some ways of taking the focus onto the learners. Using the students as the “dictators” has the benefit of focusing on learners’ pronunciation [2]. One of the procedures is to distribute different parts of a text among the learners. Every student should dictate his own part and the other ones will write it. Afterwards the whole text will be given to the groups to be compared to their own texts. At the end, the discussion will be held to correct the mistakes and solve the problems.

4.8. Art and Dictation

This method involves and motivates the learners while learning. Firstly, the teacher dictates the text and the learners listen to it. The text is constructed in such a manner that the learners can draw some pictures about it. For example: “the teacher may say “there is a bird on the tree. The bird is yellow, ...”. Secondly, the teacher reads the text slower and the learners will draw it. Then they work on their drawings while the teacher is monitoring them. Having completed the task, they will be distributed in groups to compare their pictures. Afterwards, one of the learners draws the picture on the board and the probable mistakes will be corrected. Then the students try to write what they see. Dictation will be corrected in groups. At the end a discussion session is held and the mistakes will be identified.

4.9. Cleaning – rewriting Procedure

In this procedure, the teacher reads a text at normal speed and all of the students listen. Then he reads it sentence by sentence, while one representative from each group writes it on the board (One sentence for each representative). After completing the text, the other members of each group should guide their leaders to correct the errors. The leader should clean the mistakes and write the correct forms. They should speak in English. Time limitation may be held to do the task by the teacher. At the end of the task, the mistakes will be identified and corrected by the teacher and the other learners. The fewer mistakes will determine the winner. Afterwards, all of the learners will sit down and write the text, when the teacher is dictating it again. The groups are responsible for correcting the papers.

4.10. Gaps and Dictation

In this method the teacher can rub out the words on a text and ask the students to work in pairs and fill the gaps [13]. Or the class can be divided into two groups. A line will be drawn. Each group will stand on one side of the line. Then those whom they face will be their shouting dictation partners [13]. One partner should shout the text and the other one should write. Then the text will compare with the original one in pairs.

5. ACTIVE V.S PASSIVE PROCEDURES

Dictation improves listening and comprehension skills and punctuation is realized by pauses in breathing, if presented in normal speed. If it is prepared as the language presented in real world, it will surely promote learners’ other skills such as writing , vocabulary, grammar, listening or even reading and speaking(for example when they are checking their texts in groups). If the teacher reads the text in normal

speed, the learners will pay attention to the relationships between spelling and pronunciation. In these conditions, dictation can lead into oral communication activities. It will foster automaticity and unconscious thinking [13]. And if it is done properly, it will maintain learners' interest and motivation. If discussion sessions are held, learners can compare their outputs with an original text and with each other. By self-correction, it provides an immediate feedback. If it is done in groups, it can teach the learners how to work cooperatively and also they will learn in groups better than individually. If it is done in a competition form, learning will be facilitated. In fact if dictation is done actively in the normal language, it will help learners to better understand people in everyday life. But, when it is in a slower speed and in an artificial manner, the only benefit may be learning how to spell the words. When it isn't occurred as it is in real or quasi-real situations, it will not lead to promoting proficiency skills. When it is presented passively (just the teacher reads and the learners write) sometimes no promotion will occur even in spelling.

Dictation exercises that shift responsibility for interaction and correction to the students provide teachers with an effective means for teaching [5]. Norris also believed that "if the students themselves are doing the dictating, the entire class is activated and the teacher is freed to walk around the classroom". By having students write or draw something they can compare with an original text, Ur (1981, p. 13) believes that:

1. It focuses and defines what the group has to do.
2. It provides a clear signal to the group that it has finished.
3. It provides a basis for feedback (either by the teacher or the students themselves through self-correction).

Davis and Rinvoluceri (1988, p. 50) elaborate:

"In normal use, language behavior is generally accompanied by other activity involving the eye, the hand, the brain, etc. There is a lot to be said for reproducing the complexity in the learning situation. Dictation of any kind provides a nice blend of listening, writing, and checking through reading. This appeals to students whether they learn primarily in an auditory or visual or kinesthetic way. [Dictation] exercises...motivate students by keeping them busy on several planes at once."

So active dictation refers to use learners' energy in learning and asked them to dictate, control their own tasks, play, draw, etc. It can assist learners/teachers in promoting learning skills and proficiency level while learning a language. It will improve spelling ability meanwhile.

6. IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Dictation is a valuable language learning device that has been used for centuries. Its advantages are numerous. The most common is diagnosing grammatical errors [14]. But in a way that it is used in foreign language classes, it cannot be so much helpful. It changed into a tool which just tests spelling ability. The teachers slow down the speed norm to assist learners to write or even they read the text word by word with unusual pauses. In fact it is presented in an artificial situation. Today at least in many foreign language classes, it is used just as spelling test, not as a beneficial instrument for teaching other skills. So this paper set out to discuss useful techniques which can revive the real aims at utilizing dictation as a tool in both testing and teaching. The study may guide teachers in conducting appropriate ways in using dictation in foreign/second language classrooms and can assist both teachers and learners in promoting language skills through proper use of dictation as a learning tool. It may be beneficial for language researchers, too and may direct them in conducting helpful studies about the effectiveness of different methods in using dictation as a significant instrument in learning/teaching a language.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alkire, Scott. 2002. Dictation as a language learning device. Internet TESL Journal, Vol. VIII. No. 3. Retrieved from: <http://iteslj.org/techniques/Alkire-Dictation.html>
- [2] Davis, P., and Rinvoluceri, M. 1988. Dictation: New methods, new possibilities. P.7. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- [3] Bloomfield, L. 1942. Outline guide for the practical study of languages. Baltimore: Linguistic society of America.
- [4] Oller, J. W. 1979. Language tests at school. London: Longman.
- [5] Norris, W., R. 1993. Using creative dictation to manage, motivate and activate large groups of false beginners. Fukuoka Women's Junior College Studies. Vol. 45: 71-82.
- [6] Farhady, H., and Malekpour, M. 1997. Different methods of scoring dictation tests.
- [7] Reading Rockets, Fresh Top Ten Kids' Books. 2011. WETA Washington. D.C. Retrieved from: <http://www.readingRockets.org/strategies/dictation>
- [8] Fisher, C., M. 2001. Dictation: what and how students learn from it. Hesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the art in teaching degree at Bartleboro, Vermont. Retrieved from: http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/view_content
- [9] Farhady, H., and Khany, R. 1997. Transdictation as a measure of language proficiency. In translation conference, Tabriz, Iran.

- [10] ELT teachers corner. 2009. Retrieved from : [http:// www. Teachers-corner.co.uk/dictation](http://www.Teachers-corner.co.uk/dictation)
- [11] Pattimore, R. 1999. An old dog does new tricks. TESOL publication studies, 27. Retrieved from: <http://www.tuj.ac.jp/tesol/publication/studies/vol-27/pattimore.html>
- [12] Lado , R. 1961. Language testing. New York: MCGRAW Hill.
- [13] Miguelbengoa elt. 2008. English language teaching: Dictation. Retrieved from : <http://miguelbengoa.com/elt/>
- [14] Kavaliauskiene , G., and Darginaviciene , I. 2009. Dictation: a tool to improve language. English for specific purposes world. Vol . 8 , issue 23. Available on: <http://www.esp-world.info/>

BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR



Mozghan Alsadat Ghaffarzadeh Hassankiadeh graduated with MA degree in Teaching language in September 2012. She has done some researches which are under publication or under review. Her research interests lie in teaching & testing a foreign language to promote teaching/learning processes. She is a teacher in university as well as high school & enjoys teaching. In her idea, teaching is firstly an art then a job.