

DICTIONATION IN THE ESP CLASSROOM: A TOOL TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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Introduction

Dictation has been used in language testing for a long time, but its benefit in language teaching / learning has been questioned by some language teachers. Currently dictation seems to be undergoing a revival as a useful teaching device. It is thought that dictation can help develop all language skills, that is, grammar, oral communication, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. However, there are no data on the usefulness of dictation at tertiary level. The present work aims at investigating benefits of dictation by examining learners' attitudes and drawing conclusions at its suitability at tertiary level.

The **aims of research** are to determine students' attitudes to dictation as a language learning tool.

The **research methods** include learners' feedback on prior-, during- and post-dictation activities.

The intended **outcome** of the research is to draw conclusions on the benefits of using dictation as a teaching / learning tool at tertiary level.

The **participants** in this study are students of two different specializations who study English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania.

Literature review

Dictation is a valuable language learning device that has been used for centuries. Its advantages are numerous. The most common are that dictation can help students to diagnose and correct

grammatical mistakes, it ensures attentive listening and trains students to distinguish sounds, helps learning punctuation and develops aural comprehension.

The dictation with the broadest learning possibilities is “orthographic text dictation, in which students transcribe a unified passage. This is a classic dictation exercise which, besides reinforcing the spelling and sound correlations of English, uncovers comprehension and grammatical weaknesses in learners for the teacher to analyze and address in future lessons” (Alkire, 2002).

Dictation has always been a rather controversial activity in the language classroom. In spite of its limitations, dictation is still in favor as a teaching device at some stages of language teaching. Some language practitioners view dictation negatively, believing that it hardly teaches anything, but it may have some value as a testing device, although there are other testing devices that are more effective. However, dictation gives badly needed practice in listening comprehension (Myint, 1998).

According to R. Montalvan (1990), there are “at least 20 advantages of dictation, and the most important are: 1) dictation can help develop all four language skills in an integrated way; 2) it can help learn grammar; 3) it helps to develop short-term memory; 4) practice in careful listening to a speaker will be useful to learners in the future in the note taking activities, for instance, listening to lectures; 5) dictation fosters unconscious thinking in the new language; 6) correction can be done by the students - peer correction of written dictation leads to oral communication”. Despite its benefits, currently dictation is not widely used in teaching English mainly because some language practitioners consider it teacher-centered and old-fashioned.

P. Davis and M. Rinvoluceri (2002) claim that “dictation contains a wealth of new techniques to extend the traditional language-learning activity of dictation. The activities range from the traditional focus on spelling and punctuation problems to exercises that emphasize personal attitudes and opinions of both teachers and students. Dictation provides activities suitable for a wide range of levels and ages, example texts for many activities, opportunities for students to create their own texts, and a variety of suggested correction techniques”. Moreover, it “normally turns out that in any average group of European teachers more than half *do* use dictation either regularly or from time to time in their teaching” (Davis & Rinvoluceri, 2002).

The potential problems that need to be addressed are an aversion to dictation, difficulty in producing a text and accuracy in writing (BBC teaching English online, 2005). Additionally, dictation activities where students compare their version of the text to the original can increase their ability to notice aspects of the language that are sometimes overlooked, as well as mistakes which they commonly make. These might include common spelling errors, incorrect use of either definite or indefinite articles or the third person singular ending ('s') in the Present Simple Tense. The comparison of written work in pairs or small groups also helps students to become better at identifying their errors.

There are very few references that analyze learners’ attitudes to the advantages or disadvantages of dictation activities. We have come across only one paper (Rahimi, 2008) which investigated the effect of dictation on the learners’ proficiency. The participants in M. Rahimi’s study into dictation involved 65 English majors: the experimental group consisted of 34 students, and the control group consisted of 31 students. The experimental group took a total of 50 dictations during the semester, while the control group did not take any dictations. The results of the study showed that the experimental group made some improvement in their language proficiency.

According to M. Rahimi (2008), the control group showed no improvement on the proficiency test.

This article is an attempt to put a useful but now undervalued technique back into the language teaching activities. With regard to the teacher's major function in language classrooms, i.e. feedback to students on their performance, by which students work through their individual errors, dictation offers great opportunities for increasing accurate and fluent command of the language through analyzing their work.

Respondents and Research Methods

The participants in this study were 1st and 2nd year full-time students who study ESP for psychology or law.

Before dictation, the class activities included pair or small group discussions on the ESP theme. Discussions were usually followed by vocabulary exercises which included either new terms or expressions. As a rule, pre-dictation exercises involved matching words and their definitions and predicting the contents of the recording used for dictation. Post-dictation exercises involved checking comprehension, i.e. deciding whether statements are True or False, and checking the answers. Problematic passage areas were analyzed in pairs or small groups followed by individual examination of one's own writing by comparing it with the transcript of the original text. In the final stage, students gave feedback on their performance pointing out their specific difficulties.

In other words, research methods included experimental dictation activities throughout the semester students' instant feedback on their experience of learning relevant vocabulary, writing dictations, checking comprehension and correcting errors.

At the end of the semester, the students were requested to answer specially designed surveys relevant to dictation activities (Appendix 1) and improving language proficiency (Appendix 2). In this paper only part of the latter survey is reproduced.

For class dictations various online teaching materials were employed available at the language learning websites

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/> and www.breakingnewsenglish.com.

The advantages of these websites are 1) they have been designed for language learning and teaching, 2) there is a great diversity of themes to choose from, and moreover, 3) there are ready-made lesson plans and exercises for class activities, which is beneficial for busy teachers who might save time in preparation for language classes. It is important that the level and aims are formulated and there is a range of worksheets with comprehension questions, vocabulary matching exercises and grammar and language focus points. Many possible aspects of the themes are described, so teachers may simply adjust the online activities for their particular classroom including follow-up activities after students have listened to the recordings, have written dictations from these and self-corrected their written work.

Lists of dictated themes

The themes that were used for dictations from the

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish> website for students who study ESP for psychology were: 1) Drinking Laws, 2) Stress at Work, 3) Mobile Phones, 4) Social Business, 5) Cybercrime, 6) Obesity, 7) School Bullying in Japan, 8) Online Gambling, 9) Skinny Models, 10) Intermittent Explosive Disorder, 11) Women's Constant Body Worries, 12) Internet Companies Try to Stop Spam.

The following themes from the www.breakingnewsenglish.com website were used for students who study law:

- 1) Cloned Dogs in Training to Sniff for Drugs, 2) New Body Scanners See Through Clothes, 3) Top Spam E-mail Sender Stays in Prison, 4) Computers to Match Man by 2029, 5) Binge Drinking Deaths Double in 15 Years, 6) UN Calls for Death penalty Abolition, 7) Top fashion Model Says Vogue is Racist, 8) Underage Drinking Increasing in Britain, 9) Cyber-Bullying Spreads in the US, 10) Nations Pledge to End Use of Child Soldiers, 11) Global Body Part Trade Increases.

Results and discussion

The students' responses to the first questionnaire (Appendix 1) are presented in Table 1. The first column contains the statements on which the students are required to comment. The 2nd and the 3rd columns show the Likert Scale Means for responses of the students who study psychology (PS) and law (L), respectively. The 4th and the 5th columns display the frequencies of responses "not sure" and "agree" and "strongly agree", respectively. The first numbers in each row refer to the responses of psychology learners, and the second numbers to the responses of law learners. Interestingly, there were no "strongly disagree" or "disagree" responses.

Table 1. Likert Scale Means, Standard Deviations and Frequencies of Responses on Likert Scale.

Survey statements	Likert Mean		Likert Standard Deviation		Frequency of "not sure" responses		Frequency of "Agree + Strongly Agree" responses	
	PS	L	PS	L	PS	L	PS	L
1) Dictation helps improve short-term memory in the L2	3.91	3.92	0.59	0.41	25%	34%	75%	66%
2) Dictation helps improve listening skills	4.71	4.42	0.19	0.24	-	-	100%	100%
3) Pre-dictation synonym matching exercises help better performance in	3.76	3.58	0.39	0.58	34%	58%	66%	42%

dictations							
4) Post-dictation true-false exercises help check comprehension	4.49 4.50	0.32 0.42	4% 8%	96% 92%			
5) Self-checking of written dictations raises awareness of problem areas such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation.	4.85 4.58	0.19 0.24	- -	100% 100%			

As it can be seen, students of both specializations are unanimous (100%) in agreeing to Statement 2) that class dictations help improve listening skills and to Statement 5) that self-checking of written work raises awareness of problem areas. Post-dictation exercises are supported by the majority of learners - 96% and 92%, respectively (Statement 4).

Other areas of dictation activities reveal the different perceptions of learners. Statement 1) improvement of short-term memory (ability to remember for a short period of time what has been said) is supported by 75% of psychology learners and 66% of law students. Pre-dictation exercises are not popular among law students – only 42% find them useful, but they are more popular among psychology students (66%).

Noticing ones own mistakes and the awareness of the benefits of certain learning activities are very important steps towards improving language proficiency. Students reflected on these two aspects of learning, which are included in Appendix 2. The findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Statistical treatment of the students’ responses to the two statements on language proficiency.

Statement	Means / Standard Deviations (psychology)	Means / Standard Deviations (law)	Computed and critical <i>t</i> values, Two-tailed Significance Levels <i>p</i>
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Class dictations help notice my own mistakes in writing	4.11/0.549	4.00/0.816	$t = 3.690$ $t > t_{crit} = 2.638$ $p < 0.001$
Pre-dictation and post-dictation exercises are beneficial for perfecting writing and listening skills	4.17/0.598	4.11/0.567	$t = 1.676$ $t > t_{crit} = 1.665$ $p < 0.05$

The 1st column of Table 2 shows two statements relevant to language proficiency. The 2nd and the 3rd columns show the Means and Standard Deviations computed for each of the specializations. The last column displays *t*-test data and two-tailed significance levels for each statement.

It is well known that the *t*-test is the most frequently used measure in second language research when comparing mean scores for two groups. The adjustment for a group size is made by using degrees of freedom *df* that are determined by subtracting one from the number of participants in each group (46 students) and then adding the two resulting numbers together. In this study, *df* = 90. Computed *t*-values for each statement are 3.690 and 1.676, respectively (Table 2). For the 1st statement, the computed value substantially exceeds the critical value 2.638 at the significance level $p < 0.001$, and for the 2nd statement the computed value is very close to the critical value 1.665 at $p < 0.05$. The interpretation of these findings is as follows. For the 1st statement the difference between responses of both groups is significant, i.e. the students who study psychology are more likely to notice their errors than the students who study law. For the 2nd statement there is a very slight difference between the responses of the two groups. Psychology and law students' perceptions of benefits for perfecting writing and listening skills are very similar.

Conclusions

Learners' attitudes to dictations in ESP classes have been investigated. The following conclusions have been drawn. First, class dictations of authentic materials are beneficial to students at tertiary level, as they help perfect listening and writing skills and raise awareness of problematic language areas. Second, class dictations are designed to create a friendly learning environment in which students collaborate in pairs or small groups. Third, dictation activities provide opportunities for each learner to compare her/his written work with a peer's work. Fourth, post-dictation comprehension exercises proved beneficial, but pre-teaching vocabulary might be optional depending on the students' general proficiency in language. Finally, self-checking of ones written work by comparing it with original transcripts of the dictated material allows students to assess their achievements individually.

The major implication of this research for language practitioners is that employment of the dictation techniques in the language classroom is a creative diversification which might serve a number of aims such as writing practice and listening comprehension.

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Appendix 1. Survey on Dictation Activities.

- 1) Dictations helps improve short-term memory in ESP.
a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
- 2) Dictation helps improve listening skills.
a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
- 3) Pre-dictation synonym match exercises help better performance in dictations.
a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
- 4) Post-dictation true-false exercises help check comprehension.
a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
- 5) Self-checking of written dictations raises awareness of problem areas such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

Appendix 2. Two Statements from Survey on Improving Language Proficiency.

- 1) Class dictations help to notice my own mistakes in writing.
a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.
- 2) Pre-dictation and post-dictation exercises are beneficial for perfecting writing and listening skills.
a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.