DICTATION TECHNIQUE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Dana Carmen Zechia
Lecturer, PhD, „Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy of Constanța

Abstract: Dictation has a long history in literacy education, particularly in second language education. In the standard dictation procedure, the teachers read a short, dense text at normal speed and students have to fill-in blanks where words have been gapped out. To practice writing from dictation is a perfect way to improve learning English. By listening to the spoken version of the text, you will hear both the natural pronunciation and word-order. By hearing, reading, and pronouncing what you see, you will also improve your grasp of English.

Keywords: dictation, learning process, classroom teaching, context, linguistic competence

Dictation refers to the process of transcribing spoken text. One person, for example the teacher, will read out (dictate) a passage of text while another person, for example the pupil, will write down what is being said as accurately as possible. The present study is aimed at using the dictation technique, a 'bottom-up' strategy and linear learning process, as a means to figure out EFL learners' listening comprehension difficulties, specifically focusing on three aspects: cognitive processing, linguistic competence, and dictation task itself. It is expected that the outcomes can contribute another dimension for this frequently used technique and clarify problems for understanding listening learners' obstacles.

Dictation has a long history in literacy education, particularly in second language education. In the standard dictation procedure, the teachers read a short, dense text at normal speed and students have to fill-in blanks where words have been gapped out. This been discussed by a number of studies and commentaries and therefore dictation is regarded as a supportive learning technique (Llewyn 1989; Cheong, 1993; Nabei 1996). The reasons for advocating the use of dictation are its encouragement to focus learners' attention on form and involve listening (to the teachers read the text), reading (the original text), and writing (e.g., spelling).

First of all, consider who dictates the message. Traditionally it has always been the teacher but why not get the students to do it? There are a number of ways of doing this. First of all, you can ask a student or students to dictate the text to the rest of the class. Or you can get students to work in small groups with each person in the group dictating a section of the text to the rest of the group. This encourages the learners to listen to each other, highlights the importance of clear pronunciation and, in an ideal world, and helps to promote the use of English in a monolingual class.

Generally speaking, dictation offers a context-rich method of displaying learners' linguistic competence and involves the knowledge about the content of the text. Davis and Rinvolucri (2002), for example, indicate the advantages for using dictation in a language class, including activating students' involvement during and after the exercise, leading to oral communicative activities, fostering unconscious thinking, coping with smaller or larger groups. Yet, dictation in this traditional form has been criticized as a rote learning method in which students merely make a copy of the text the teacher reads without doing any thinking, thus producing a mechanical form of literacy. Specifically, in the 1960s structural linguistics favoring testing the more discrete elements of language skills considered dictation as misguiding.

In terms of its represented form, there are many variations on dictation, for example, pause and paraphrase, listening cloze, error identification, jigsaw dictation, dictation negotiation, scrambled sentence dictation, picture dictation, dictation summaries, standard dictation, partial dictation, dictation with competing noise, dictation/composition, elicited imitation, to mention only some variations.

Listening comprehension is not only looking at the final outcome by selecting a correct item in multiple-choice questions; instead, 'processes' should be the concern to investigate what difficulties are encountered while they are listening to a text. It appears that until we have some diagnostic procedures, the teacher can only continue to *test* comprehension, not to teach it. We need to move to a position where the teacher is able to recognize particular patterns of behavior manifested by an unsuccessful listener and to provide exercises for the student which will promote superior patterns of behavior. With this significant motivation, it seems worth investigating roots of problems for future learning and teaching.

To investigate EFL learners' listening difficulties, two main directions lead this study, including student factors and dictation task factors. In terms of the former, student factors, three parts can be mentioned: cognitive process factors, linguistic proficiency factors, and other factors which cannot be grouped under the previous two categories (e.g., note-taking ability). Regarding to the latter, dictation task factors, two elements are further analyzed: text factors and dictation presentation mode factors. Related studies regarding to the above factors are further discussed as follows.

In relation to the dictation task itself, two dimensions are included: *text factors* and *dictation presentation mode factors*.

Text factors include organization of the text, text length, interest to the message, difficulty of content and concepts especially if the material is abstract, ambiguous, highly specialized or technical, esoteric, lengthy, or poorly organized, and learners' familiarity with topic/subject matters.

For dictation presentation mode factors, because the environment is usually in a language laboratory, good audio quality is provided; thus, some factors such as noise or inadequate volume are excluded. There are, anyway, some possible problems relating to the presentation mode: speed of delivery, repetition of the material, and clarity of speaker's production, including voice, clarity, etc.

After combining all the above possible factors involving learners' performance in dictation, the students could do a self-report to reflect individual problems.

The reason that dictation works well is that the whole family of auditory tasks comprising faithfully reflect crucial aspects of the very activities that processes discourse auditorily. More specifically, it is a direct measure to get a closer look at listeners' processing discourse from decoding the sounds in a linear fashion, noticing a form in the target language, solving linguistic problems, and finally, sorting out the final answers.

The most significant part is that learners take their own responsibility to find out their own problems instead of the teacher's work. Particularly, the cognitive process that undergoes in the learners' mind can be faithfully reflected by them. Therefore, the process of developing dictation exercises brings revealing effects both to the teacher and learners, figuring out the factors leading to comprehension break down since dictation precisely mirrors how listeners cope with discourse processing tasks.

The direction goes to the regard to the linguistic competence. From a macro perspective, while developing listening courses, materials and lessons, it is important, not only to teach bottom-up processing skills such as the ability to discriminate between minimal pairs, but also to help learners use what they have already known to understand the main idea in the receptive message. If teachers do not prepare learners to establish schematic knowledge, it is very possible that listeners only do a *decoding* work in a dictation work, but not involving any

further semantic or pragmatic comprehension. This is especially crucial in listening to a lecture or any subject referring to a specific field.

Discussing from a micro perspective, three aspects are involved, including vocabulary knowledge, failure to recognize verb tense, numbers and tone. First, it is obvious in the results that vocabulary knowledge is the most serious problem in linguistic competence, including both in lack of knowledge of a new word and incapacity to recall the meaning of the learnt words. Accordingly, how to expand learners' word knowledge and recycle learnt words are crucial targets in a listening course. Intensive listening practices may help.

Another concern under linguistic competence is referring to the reorganization of verb tense, numbers, and tone. It is suggested that in order to raise learners' awareness, the listening materials selected for learners should contain some particular features, for example, gapping out verbs, numbers, or content words for listeners to concentrate on these particular difficulties they confront. Furthermore, repeating playing the listening text and reading aloud alongside scripted texts may help learners to become familiar with the real cadences of the target language and they will have a better sense of the meaning that different tones imply.

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.

All in all, dictation is a useful and flexible activity. You can use it to introduce a new structure, to present the first paragraph of a text, to revise an area of vocabulary, to provide a summary of a reading or listening exercise and to provide practice in different areas of grammar. If dictation is carefully linked to the rest of the lesson and has a clear and unambiguous purpose, students will probably enjoy it. It is only when it is departmentalized and used as an end in itself that it will appear to be boring and a waste of time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Anderson, A., & Lynch, T. 1988. *Listening*. New York: Oxford University Press.

2 Bloomfield, L. 1942. *Outline guide for the practical study of languages*. Baltimore: Linguistic Society of America.

3. Boyle, J. P. 1984. *Factors affecting listening comprehension*. *ELT Journal* 38, 34-38.

Buck, G. 1992. *Listening comprehension: construct validity and trait characteristics. Language Learning* 42(3), 313-357.

4. Chaudron, C., Loschky, L., & Cook, J. 1994. *Second language listening comprehension and lecture note-taking*. In *Academic Listening—Research Perspective*, Flowerdew, J. (ed.), 75-92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5. Davis, P., & Rinvolucri, M. 2002. *Dictation: New methods, new possibilities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

6. Field, J. 1998. *Skills and strategies: towards a new methodology for listening. ELT Journal* 52 (2), 110-118.

7. Krashen, S. D. 1996. The case for narrow listening. *System* 24(1), 97-100.

8. Underwood, M. 1990. *Teaching Listening*. New York: Longman.

9. Wajnryb, R. 1990. *Grammar dictation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.