

REFLECTIONS UPON DICTATION AS A TESTING DEVICE IN AN EFL CLASSROOM: THE PRO'S AND CON'S

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ABSTRACT

The present paper addresses the commonly acknowledged challenges of dictation as a testing device. Dictation is a valuable language learning device that has been used for centuries. However, for some teachers these days, the word dictation is all too often synonymous with old-fashioned, boring and teacher-centred teaching/testing technique. The paper incorporates a discussion of the value of dictation as a testing device bearing in mind that it has had its ups and downs among professional language test writers. Finally, the paper culminates with the proposal of a set of suggestions as to how this long-time underestimated technique can actually form an integral part of a language programme. In sum then, one may say that dictation can reveal much about the language proficiency of the learners in a most economical and effective way.

Keywords: Dictation, testing device, language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

By way of an introduction we want to argue in favour of a very much “underestimated” teaching technique and by putting forward some suggestions as to how dictation can form an integral part of a testing programme. 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.

Dictation is a valuable language learning device that has been used for centuries. In its simplest form, dictation refers to a person reading some text aloud so that the listener(s) can write down what is being said. When used in the language classroom, the aim has traditionally been for students to write down what is said by the teacher, word for word, later checking their own text against the original and correcting the errors made. While this certainly has its uses, there are countless variations that can make it more interesting and learner-centred. One of the 20th century's most influential linguists, Leonard Bloomfield (1942), strongly advocated the use of dictation as a learning device. Today, many applied linguists, teachers and test-designers are at least inclined to agree with Finocchiaro's 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.*" (1969, p. 176).

When dictation began to be used in foreign language teaching at the end of the Middle Ages, however, its purpose was to help students write and interpret the new language. Since then, it has been adopted, as we know, by the grammar-translation method for teaching the language system, phonology, grammar and vocabulary of the new language; and by the direct

method for teaching the sounds and spellings. Later, in the audio-lingual era of foreign language teaching, dictation fell into disfavour, as did other techniques related to the grammar-translation and direct methods.

Now that a more integrative approach to foreign language teaching and testing is favoured by most methodologists, dictation is regaining its former popularity. After many years of relative unpopularity, dictation is now being recognized as an effective diagnostic device for the classroom teacher and an excellent integrative test to include in a language proficiency test battery (Oller 1973). Indeed, research in the classroom shows it to be a valuable technique for language teaching and for testing students' competence in the language they are trying to learn.

Similarly, Heaton (1988, p. 17) posits, *'the integrated skills involved in tests of dictation include auditory discrimination, the auditory memory span, spelling, the recognition of sound segments, a familiarity with the grammatical and lexical patterning of the language, and overall textual comprehension,'* and claims that *'dictation tests can prove good predictors of global language ability'*. What is more, dictation has numerous uses in the ELT classroom, often involving very little preparation and a lot of creativity and interest. Used imaginatively, it can be an effective tool for working on accuracy and fluency in all four skills.

Why do it?

There are several reasons why dictation activities work well in the classroom. From the teacher's point of view, dictation can fulfill a three-fold purpose:

1. Can be done with any level, depending on the text used.
2. Can be graded for a multi-level class.
3. Usually require very little preparation and photocopying.

In fact, dictation can be used to decrease preparation time for other activities.

From the student's point of view, dictation can also fulfill a three-fold purpose:

1. Can focus on both accuracy (form) as well as meaning.
2. Can develop all four skills - speaking and pronunciation can be developed if the students do the dictating rather than the teacher.
3. Give students the opportunity to notice features of pronunciation such as weak/strong forms, linking and elision.

Pro's and Con's of Dictation

✓ *Advantages of Dictation*

Though it has been argued, principally by Lado (1961), that dictation in fact tests very little, there are several benefits that can be drawn from dictation, if properly varied. The following arguments, call somehow, into question Lado's view:

- Dictation can help develop all four language skills in an integrative way.
- As students develop their aural comprehension of meaning and also of the relationship among segments of language, they are learning grammar.
- Dictation helps develop short-term memory. Students practice retaining meaningful phrases or whole sentences before writing them down.
- Practice in careful listening to dictation will be useful later on in note-taking exercises.
- Dictation can serve as an excellent review exercise.
- Correcting dictation can lead to oral communication.
- 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 the students are active.
- Correction can be done by the students.
- Dictation can be prepared for mixed-ability classes.
- Dictation can be prepared for any level.
- The students, as well as the teacher, can get instant feedback (if the exercise is corrected immediately).
- Research has shown the learning to write down what you hear can encourage the development of literacy.
- Dictation can be a good indicator of overall language ability.
- During and after dictation all students are active.
- Dictation gives practice in correct forms of speech.

(Adapted from various sources)

In sum, then, we can say that dictation, as a teaching activity in general and a testing device in particular, has here revealed much about the language proficiency of the learners, and in a most economical way, as the dictation usually takes a short time to administer and mark. All these facts indicate the value of dictation as a testing tool through which students are encouraged to develop accuracy in both listening and writing.

✓ **Disadvantages of Dictation**

One of the most overlooked disadvantages of dictation is that it can be cumbersome and time-consuming. Dictation is accurate and prescriptive. Also, you can often organize your thoughts better when writing or typing. Verbal communication is linear, where writing allows you to skip around. Another drawback to dictation is that most people think visually, rather than completely verbally.

Administering Dictation

Dictation passages may be presented in a number of ways. Of those ways, we have opted for Valette's (1967) way for its simplicity of use and pedagogical effectiveness. She recommends one effective technique for administering dictation:

First, the whole passage is read at normal speed. The students are told not to write, just to listen carefully. Then the passage is read a phrase at a time, with pauses during which the students write down what they have heard. At this time the teacher may read each phrase either once or twice, as long as he is consistent. Finally, the entire passage is read again at normal speed, and the students are given a few minutes for final revision. It is imperative that the teacher never repeat a particular phrase at a student's request (1967, p. 140).

In the same line of thought, it is worth remembering in this very specific context that the student is not supposed to know the spelling of proper names and proper adjectives. For example, the spelling of names like *Edinburgh* and *Leicester* and adjectives like *Scottish* and *Briton* is to be provided by the teacher. The words are either written on the board or individually spelt out. One can extend this to words in which the sound-spelling correspondence is seriously noticed, for example, *lieutenant* and *colonel*. In a formal test, the instructions should be made clear to all teachers concerning this point. Yet, which texts are most suitable for use of dictations purposes?

Text Selection for Dictation

The major emphasis in dictation is on listening comprehension skills and on the active re-interpretation by the learner of a text presented aurally. As the key to success in using dictation as a testing technique depends largely on a sensitive choice of the material, it is

essential that the texts be self-contained and cohesive. We would also suggest that the topic should be potentially interesting to the learner, and the text relatively short (around 100 words for a BEM EFL test and around 190 words for a BAC EFL test).

We should note here that pedagogically speaking and from a testing perspective the shorter texts are sufficiently long to demonstrate the learner's ability to reprocess the text, and to elicit a number of errors that will form the basis of testing points. On the other hand, the longer the text, the more time is spent on reading by the teacher.

Scoring Procedures

The scoring of the dictation test may be done in various ways. In the old school days, the scoring of the dictation was quite severe and simple in the sense that five mistakes renders the dictation test nil. Another advantageous method would be to fix the score to 20 and take off half a point for each spelling error and one point for each other error. A third method would be to give a certain number of points for each word/phrase transcribed correctly.

Alternatively, two other scoring methods can be made use of: error-counting method and correct words-in-sequence method. The former, as its name suggests, proceeds as follows: the number of errors are counted and the sum is subtracted from the total number of words in the text. The latter is based on the number of correct words and are assigned one mark each. The total is given out of the total number of words in the original text.

Dictation Revisited

It is a truism to assert that dictation does not work for everything or for everyone. It is a test of integrative skills and a very convenient and useful tool in listening training. As a technique for teaching and a device for testing languages, dictation has witnessed some ups and downs. At times it has been the target of severe criticisms while, at other times it has been considered positively effective and reactions to it have ranged from strong opposition and relegation to enthusiastic support and application. Anderson (1953) seems to dismiss dictation as a teaching-testing tool in the sense that it is a very indirect and inadequate test of auditory comprehension. Additionally, Lado (1961) plays down the role of dictation in language proficiency development. Heaton (1975) backs up Anderson and Lado's views; he notes that dictation is not an effective means of assessing any one skill because it measures too many features. Finally, Davies (1977) clearly and overtly posits dictation is too imprecise in diagnostic information.

Conversely, Bloomfield, one of the most influential linguists of the twentieth century, strongly endorsed the use of dictation as a learning device. Oller (1979), on the other hand, does not seem to dismiss entirely dictation and recognizes the limitations of dictation; he considers it to be a reliable device to test language proficiency, if it is administered properly and scored fairly¹. According to him, dictation meets both the criteria of pragmatic tests², if

¹ The scoring of a dictation test can be done differently depending on the nature of test's goals. Initially, in the 1960s and 1970s in the 6ème Exam (entrance exam to middle school), the scoring of dictation was simple yet very harsh; five mistakes rendered the dictation test's score nil. A more generous scoring method would be to fix the mark to 20 and take off half a point for each spelling mistake and a point for other mistake types. Alternatively, it would be to give a number of points for each word/phrase that is written correctly.

² Oller (1979) proposed what came to known as the *Unitary Competence Hypothesis*, i.e. performance of a whole range of tests (which he termed pragmatic tests) depended on the same underlying capacity of the learner –the ability to integrate grammatical, lexical, contextual and pragmatic knowledge in test performance. ***“It is possible to be somewhat more precise in saying what a pragmatic test is: it is any procedure or task that causes the learner to process sequences of elements of language that conform to the normal contextual constraints of all language and which require the learner to relate sequences of linguistic elements via***

the sequences of words or phrases to be dictated are from normal prose, dialogue or some other natural form of discourse. In this very specific context, he notes that,

“A simple traditional dictation meets the naturalness requirements for pragmatic language tests. First, such a task requires the processing of temporally constrained sequences of material in the language and second, the task of dividing up the stream of speech and writing down what is heard requires understanding the meaning of the material, i.e. relating the linguistic context (which in a sense is given) to the extra-linguistic context (which must be informed)”. (Oller, 1979, p. 39)

To the question: Do you use dictation in your classroom? We obtained the following percentages in terms of frequency:

Never: 25.5%

Sometimes: 52.5%

Often: 22%

To the question: Do you think that dictation has a place in the modern English language classroom? The following viewpoints have been exposed

Dictation is regarded by many instructors as teacher centered, outdated, a legacy of the grammar-translation method. The focus was mainly put on language accuracy, i.e. spelling. It is reminiscent for many unhappy moments in which former learners particularly at the primary level feared the most. The dictation was used as an end in itself devoid of any type of motivation. The only severe instruction the former learners still remember is that threatening instruction stating the number of mistakes that lead to zero.

Dictation aims at spelling through listening and writing skills within a wide range of sub-skills from letter formation to spelling, punctuation, lay-out... it can check and reinforce, for instance, the use of the final –s in third person singular; ‘s possessive; -s of plural ...

If dictation is carefully prepared and aims at the academic and mental age of the learner (connected to the learning outcomes and objectives of the lesson), the learners will surely find it of great interest.

The assessment of dictation is a formal and formative that aims to measure students’ spelling and intensive listening skills. The students are required to listen to either a word; sentence or paragraph and write it down. Punctuation is also given prior importance. The main problem in dictation can be related to perception rather than that of production or a real problem of spelling. Assessment process should focus on spelling problems. The major problem we face is that teachers choose demotivated texts to dictate with bad pronunciation devoid of any evaluation grid.

The criteria and indicators of evaluation can mean different things to different people in different times. The students should know in advance the evaluation grid.

(H.M. ELT Inspector)

For cons upon cons, dictation has been used as an activity in both language teaching and language testing. It has been used as a means to transmit material from the teacher to the students in the first language classroom, and later, passed into the second and foreign language class. It proved to be useful when well integrated with other learning activities. Dictation seems to be an important resource of the direct

pragmatic mapping to extra-linguistic context ... Moreover, the constraints must be of the type that are found in normal use of the language not merely in some classroom setting ...”(Oller, 1979; pp. 38-39).

method. Some linguists added a refinement to it to teach one particular aspect of the language, for example, the English sounds.

“Phonetic dictation is very stimulating to pupils and serves as useful test of their acoustic powers ...” wrote Sweet in 1898. Spelling could be another aim of the dictation exercise. Some teachers introduced the marking of all long vowels so as to ease the activities that follow. Dictation, here, is considered as a conditioning process used a formal repertoire for sound discrimination. This will certainly lead to ability in both listening and writing.

Spot dictation, another type of dictation, focuses on the correct spelling of certain words (decided in advance by the teacher). It is generally used as a testing device to develop the mastery of the spelling system of the English language. It is very useful at elementary level.

As a conclusion, dictation of unfamiliar material as exercise in auditory recognition and accurate reproduction had been a regular classroom activity for centuries. It has always been recommended in the Algerian system of education. We believe that it offers more advantages than disadvantages.

- It helps the learner develop their auditory system
- It trains them in discriminating the sounds
- It gives them the ability to master the spelling of the words
- It aims at grammatical accuracy and textual cohesion, when learners are working in group in the dictogloss activity
- It trains them to relate what is heard to its graphophonemic form

The only major problem is perhaps the difficulty to administer a dictation to a crowded class: discipline problem, noise, cheating in the case of a test.

(B.A. former ELT Inspector)

Some uses of dictation in EFL formal and informal tests have been proposed. Ideas advanced through discussions, interviews and questionnaires with both teachers and learners prove dictation to be a useful learning/testing device suitable for a wide range of levels, interests and ages. Virtually all teachers put forward the idea that dictation can offer an interesting learning path for language learners and a helpful technique for teachers that extends beyond the oft-held view of the traditional outdated teaching-learning-testing activity. However, a related question worth raising here is: *What are the criteria for text selection in a dictation test?* The answer to this thought-provoking and sensitive question keeps the lines open to a better and optimal exploitation of dictation both as a teaching technique and as a testing device.

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