

Turning an Old Methodology to a Communicative Language Teaching Device: A New Method of Giving Dictation

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Abstract

Dictation has been a feature of language classrooms for hundreds of years. It is considered by many teachers as somewhat old-fashioned and obsolete, a relic of the Grammar-translation method that dominated language teaching until the end of the 20th century. Thus, it refers to the dull, uncommunicative and often difficult lessons, where the focus was mainly on accuracy and correctness rather than fluency.

However, it contends that effective use of dictation activities will help improve students' proficiency in the four aspects of English language. In this article we attempt to explore how dictation can be used as a device to improve students' performance. We will highlight the many benefits of dictation and at the same time provide some practical ideas on how to use it. Finally, we will consider some implications using this valuable method in our class sessions.

Key words : dictation passages, language learning proficiency, listening skills, grammar knowledge.

تحويل الطريقة القديمة في تدريس كفاءة التواصل اللغوي إلى طريقة حديثة باستخدام الإملاء.

ملخص

قد أعتبر نشاط الإملاء إحدى خصائص تدريس اللغات لمئات السنين. ويعتبره العديد من المعلمين من الطرائق القديمة والعتيقة نوعاً ما، وهو من بقايا طريقة الترجمة التحريرية التي هيمنت على تعليم اللغات حتى نهاية القرن العشرين. ويشير نشاط الاملاء إلى الدروس الباهتة وغير المعهودة والصعبة في الكثير من الأحيان، حيث ينصب التركيز هنا وبشكل رئيسي على الدقة والصواب بدلاً من الطلاقة اللغوية.

ومع ذلك، فإنه من المؤكد أن استخدام الجيد لنشاط الاملاء يؤدي إلى تحسين الكفاءة اللغوية في الجوانب الأربعة للغة الإنجليزية. وسنحاول من خلال هذا المقال الكشف عن كيفية استخدام الإملاء كأداة لتحسين الأداء اللغوي لدى الطلاب في الصف، وفي نفس الوقت نسلط الضوء على الفوائد العديدة لهذه الطريقة في التعليم وسننظر في بعض التأثيرات الإيجابية لاستخدامها في تدريس اللغة الانجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإملاء، التحكم في اللغة، مهارات الاستماع، معرفة قواعد ونحو اللغة.

INTRODUCTION

Dictation has always been a rather controversial activity in the language classroom. At the same time, it has been a surprisingly popular one. Many language teachers may view dictation negatively, believing that it hardly teaches anything, most probably regarded as somewhat old-fashioned. Dictation, actually has many benefits to both students and teachers.

This paper is the report of an action research I conducted in one of my classes in grammar session. This research is to find out how dictation practices can help students' writing skills in teaching and learning sessions in the classroom, and to examine how teachers' creativity can promote students' interest and play the important role in instilling it within the students.

Research Objective

During the teaching and learning process, I noticed that the students of my research were struggling with English language. They have freshly come from secondary school and note-taking was rather a frightful activity. Besides, they were reluctant to use the language when conversing neither with me nor with their classmates in my session. I would always encourage them to express themselves and occasionally permitted errors coming from them as I prefer the 'silent way' proposed by Caleb Gattegno which privileged the autonomy of the learner in which the role of the teacher consists of monitoring and guiding the learners; in other words, the latter take their learning in

charge and have an active role during the learning process.

Dictation clearly offers an excellent platform for practicing and improving the capacities of the learners as it encourages them to attend not only to the forms but also to the meanings which include both semantic and pragmatic of the grammatical structures. This approach therefore upholds grammatical competence in a learner's overall proficiency.

In classroom language learning situations, the teaching of grammar may provide a short cut to learning the forms and structures which the limited language input itself may not cover. Dictation will provide learners with a passage and enhance the learning process since learners try to discover the rules from the language data by themselves. In other words, the teaching of grammar through dictation passages can support the learner's natural rule-discovery procedure. In fact, knowing a language means knowing the grammar of that language. Therefore, mastering the grammatical rules of a language equals mastering the art of writing. According to Rutheford (1987):

“Grammar is a necessary component of any language teaching program and thus plays an important role in language teaching. Good writing skill comes with good mastery of English grammar.”

Through Krashen's (1982) language acquisition model, a second plausible reason for the effectiveness of dictation as a grammar teaching tool is that dictation passages may qualify as good comprehensible input and therefore promote the subconscious acquisition of structures.

If done systematically and regularly, the dictation method is a great tool to be used in the language classroom by teachers to teach and encourage learners in the learning process. From these evidences, I choose to use this method as a treatment forenhancing students' writing skill and reducing grammatical errors. Moreover, dictation exercises improve students' ability to distinguish sounds in continuous speech as well as improving their recognition of gramatically correct sentences. Davis and Rinvoluceri write that

“Decoding the sounds of English and recoding them in writing is a major learning task.” (1988).

Frodesen writes that dictation can be:

“ an effective way to address grammatical errors in writing that may be the result of erroneous aural perception of English... Dictation can help students to diagnose and correct these kinds of errors as well as others.” (1991).

Error analysis is very important for learners and teachers. In fact, errors are advantageous for both learners and teachers. It provides information to the teachers on students' errors. This helps the teachers in three ways, firstly to correct their errors, secondly to improve their teaching and thirdly to focus on those areas that need reinforcement. Corder (1967) described that analysis of learners' errors provide insight into the innate nature of learners' learning system and process of language teaching.

Our students' inability to produce grammatically correct sentences is familiar to every teacher, and since our students hear or see little English outside the classroom, either between themselves, and very likely at home,

giving students dictation exercises could be looked upon as one way of redressing this.

THE BENEFITS OF DICTATION

Giving the dictation right at the beginning of the class forces the students to focuss on English right away, calm them down, and ensure punctuality. By doing this, some sort of uniformity or standardization is achieved, this is clearly the most important function of English at university level.

Dictation gives students valuable practice in note-taking. Thus first-year students at ENS may already be in courses in which they must take notes of lectures delivered in English at normal speed. Learning to write spoken language quickly is an essential university skill. Note-taking is a core competency and a valuable addition to a student's repertoire of sub-skills, and while we may teach techniques and strategies to recognize the signposting of information, students still have to comprehend what is said in situations in which both the language used and the message conveyed are unfamiliar. Regular dictation exercises do justice and help students' recognition of super and supra-segmentals in the lectures they attend.

Any attempt to improve our students' grasp of vocabulary can be helpful. The comprehension of pronunciation of words in a foreign language, particularly in the English language, is problematic and difficult; the apparent lack of any regular correspondence between spelling and pronunciation of English words in isolation is compounded in connected speech. Students need to hear and understand authentic speech patterns in a systematized way that ensures full comprehension.

Dictation helps develop the four language skills in an integrative way. Besides, it helps to develop short-term memory. Students practice retaining meaningful phrases or whole sentences before writing them down. I have also noticed that as students are introduced to more and more dictation exercises, their ability to both forecast what is coming and to retain what has already been said increases rapidly and noticeably. Both abilities point to evidence of an increased familiarity with the language.

Dictation can serve as an excellent review exercise. Once a passage has been dictated, much valuable work can be done in getting students to 'notice' their own errors on the page they have just written; what happens is that many students come to recognize their errors by virtue of the positioning of items in sentences, parts of speech, for example, as well as equally obvious things like verb tenses.

Moreover; dictation is psychologically powerful and challenging. The concentration required to 'keep up' with the dictation exercises in class, together with the compulsion and pressure to keep up with everyone else listening to the same passage ensures that exercises are totally enveloping, meaning that once begun, they 'take over' the class, and thus at once become a challenge that all face together. It is my experience that students, listening and writing become absolutely absorbed in the activity.

Dictation also fosters unconscious thinking in the target language. Students do not have time to go through native language equivalence to assist themselves. This is actually what they regularly do in other classes as mother tongue is intrinsically present and predominant and also seductive in the foreign language class.

In order not to make dictation stressful and too demanding, there should not be too much unknown vocabulary. Therefore, it is important to tailor the passages according to the students' level, which means grading passages for complexity and for the ratio of new, unknown words to known ones.

If we reflect for a moment on what dictation actually does, then we will see that it can be an extremely versatile activity. As stated above it practises first and foremost listening and writing skills and within the latter a range of sub-skills from letter writing to spelling.

The dictation gives badly needed practice in listening comprehension. It gives students practice in comprehending and transcribing clear English prose. Students seeing their own written responses next to the correct ones in exercises should provide invaluable guidance in the ways that spelling can be improved. The dictation forces students to write at least 45 or 40 words in English every day and thus improves their general writing skill and increases their vocabulary.

Finocchiaro (1969) states:

“ 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. ”

Likewise Montalvan (1990) writes :

“ as students develop their aural comprehension among segments of language, they are learning grammar. ”

ACTION RESEARCH

I do not wish to argue for or against the use of dictation as a teaching device. Instead, I would like to recount my own method for turning what might be an unpleasant or a difficult chore for both teachers and students into an enjoyable learning activity.

First let us look at the way we are expected to make use of the dictation. The following steps are to be considered while dealing with this teaching device:

a. All selected passages for dictation must be relatively short and enticing for the students. At least 5 or 6 words must be explained to the students.

b. Each dictation should be read only three times. The first and last reading should be done at normal speed. The second reading should be slow and clear. The teacher does not need to give any explanation during the process of dictation.

c. The dictation should be given at the beginning of each class and should be corrected by the teacher or students.

In a nutshell, dictation could be both a teaching device and a testing device. It can be an excellent way of assessing a student's grasp of a current speech. (Cartledge 1968).

In attempting to use dictation in my classroom, I had to ask myself the following questions :

1. How can I make my students enjoy what is essentially a boring and somewhat incomprehensible exercise ?

2. Since I am expected to give the dictation in every class, how can I inject a note of continuity into the exercise ?

3. How can I make my students learn something from the exercise ?

My solution to the problem as I saw it was a new way of giving dictation which I have termed “story telling.” Basically, I turned my dictation into a continuous short story so that instead of being bombarded with unconnected dictation passages in every English class, my students found themselves listening to short paragraphs which together made up a short story. In this way, I was able to get them interested in the dictation passages and also inject a vital note of continuity in the process. The students started asking me questions about the story and showed a genuine interest in the plot. All of a sudden, the dictation became something more than a mechanical exercise which had to be tolerated because of the marks they were given for it. In fact, a number of students told me that they looked forward to the dictation every day.

As the students became more interested in the exercise, their skills at it also improved. This was due to the following reasons:

1. They were paying more attention, so they heard and understood more.

2. They were thinking ahead trying to guess what would happen in the story. This enabled them to make educated guesses.

3. They were not merely doing a mechanical exercise, but instead were involved in a real communicative situation.

4. Last but not least, it was made certain that a number of words they were learning and certain structures or patterns that they were being taught were incorporated into the “story telling.”

5. Students were quite aware of their grammar, since I teach them grammar, so they looked at this subject with more excitement. They were able to identify the new structures to be taught at the same time they were deeply involved in the story and curious about the coming passage of the following sessions. That was great indeed and very satisfactory as grammar has always been a challenging and rather dull task.

Although the “story telling” meant more work for the teacher, it was certainly work worth doing. It changed a mechanical and often a misunderstood exercise into a fun-filled activity from which both the teacher and the student benefited.

Implications for Practice

Through this research, it is interesting to note that this method of teaching has been very appealing and that it enabled students to judge the usefulness of dictation using story-telling. Students loved to learn language using this methodology. Besides being enjoyable, stories turn a dull grammar activity into a lively communicative one. This method can benefit both parties as this teaching strategy is easy to be carried out and to be obtained. If learners continue to be taught in this way, I believe they will be better in English as time goes by. It is important to keep them motivated and freshened up with new and fun activities.

With this, it can be suggested that teachers should conduct more dictation activities in classroom sessions. Many sessions can be carried out with this method and this can be used for any language skills. Teachers should be able to be creative enough to design good and effective lesson plans that can promote students' interest in learning the language and to increase students' proficiency level. Dictation should be practiced more in schools as it is a good tool to learn language and to encourage fluency among the students too.

Conclusion

Dictation has always been a rather controversial activity in the classroom especially in the language classrooms. Like any other activity, dictation has a number of advantages but at the same time is not free from limitations. However, in spite of its limitations, dictation is now favored as a teaching device in language teaching. Some language practitioners view dictation as a method of inculcating the language proficiency in students especially the badly needed practice in listening comprehension.

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 grammar or 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.

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