

## The Utility of Dictation as a Technique for Learning Experience in Aural Comprehension in EFL Teaching/Learning Situations

Yoshihiro NAKAMURA

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Dictation offers much as a technique for motivating language learners to understand spoken language, specifically in a teaching/learning situation where the teacher feels that literary skills based on grammar learning are emphasized too much over aural-oral skills. To the question, "What would you expect from EFL learning at school?" EFL learners at schools always reply: "I would like to be a good communicator in the language." Learner-desired aural-oral skills have a valid claim to good attention in the language classroom: they are useful and necessary in communication; without these the learners are restricted only to the written symbolism of the language. The traditional tendency, however, in the profession is that graphic skills are primary with much less effort put into communicative use of the language. This situation indicates that the learners feel, in most cases, that they are not satisfactorily trained in the spoken language in the classroom; they find themselves almost always in a situation where there is much less attention given to verbal skills, with the awkward result that they may read or decipher the language they see, but have difficulty understanding it when they hear it spoken<sup>1)</sup>. Classroom activities should meet learners' expectations with more opportunities for them to expose themselves to the spoken forms of the language, especially with more focus on aural understanding of the language as a sound basis of human speech functions. Readily applicable to the traditional style of teaching, dictation is instrumental as a technique to alter the situation for the better, that is, to give more training in the spoken language in the classroom.

### Dictation

Educational literature suggests promising ways to use dictation in the language classroom, though no agreement seems to have been reached so far, as is seen below, on the specific nature

of its contributions to the profession: "dictation as a testing and a teaching device" (Gelman, 13:21); "dictation is not a teaching exercise but a testing exercise" (Cartledge, 8:227); "the dictation clearly seems to be the best single measure of the totality of English-language skills being tested" (Oller, 28:255); "dictation is primarily a test of spelling" (Somaratne, 40:48); "one purpose of this activity is to serve as a learning device. . . . A concurrent pedagogical purpose would be to serve as a testing device to check on student progress" (Sutherland, 42:24). Experimental studies tend to demonstrate that dictation has a highly reliable function as a device to assess a learner's general language ability, and its validity as a testing device seems to be in good favor with advocates of dictation. Oller (28:254-259), in his convincing attempt, reports that correlation of dictation with the total of the placement test was higher than that of any other subtests (vocabulary, grammar, composition and phonology) with the total, and that dictation also correlated more highly with each subtest than did any other subtest. He suggests in his conclusion that the learner's performance in dictation is the outcome of not separate, discrete skills but integrated skills in the aggregate. A cautious observation, however, comes from Valette (45:433-434). The comments she has on the results of her experimental data make us less optimistic about the efficacy of dictation for a testing purpose. The following are the findings she had from her analysis:

It is evident that the dictée, when administered as an examination, tests the student's proficiency in committing to paper the phrases read. Moreover, this proficiency improves with regular practice. However, if the dictée is to comprise the unique test to determine the student's overall knowledge of French, this can be done *only* in classes where little classroom time is devoted to dictation.

The author's view is that dictation, used as a learning experience, provides an effective channel for developing the ability to comprehend the spoken forms of the language; it provides a means through which separate skills are activated to be linked together for listening comprehension; it also serves as a vehicle through which the learners are enabled to join together the written and spoken functions of the language. The learners, as we will see in the next section, employ a variety of mental strategies to accurately write a dictation; dictation is not only useful as an exercise in the spelling skill but also as an exercise in cultivating integrative skills in processing auditory information through the ear. It is the internalized strategies for dictation that are most important to the learners in trying to understand the intended message in the language. We can hardly expect ability in aural comprehension to grow out of any teaching approach whose focus is mainly on the visual skills of reading and

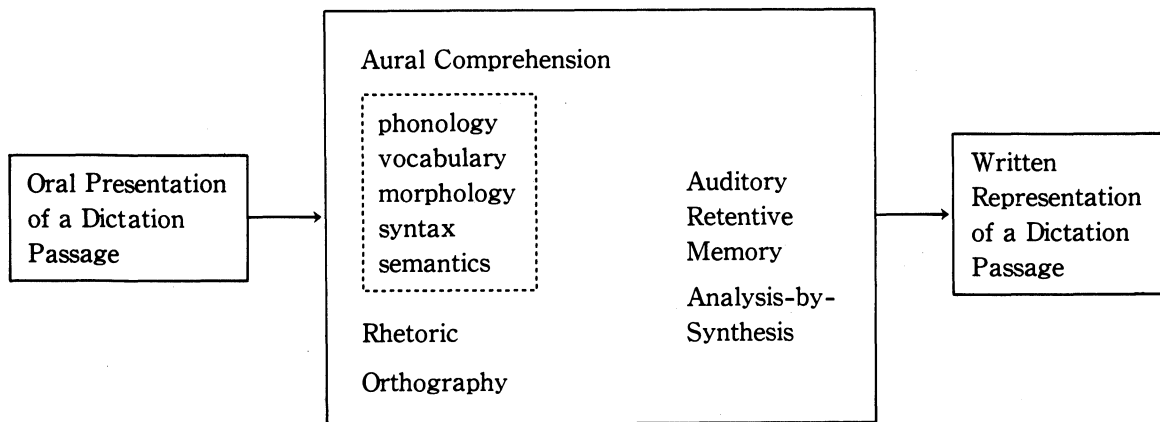
writing. Skills in the spoken language are realized simply through the learners being exposed to it in real use. Dictation deserves credit in EFL classrooms as a technique for facilitating integrated use of linguistic competence in the learners. Successful performance in dictation eventually brings about their spontaneous interest in their better ability to perceive the phonetic structure of a language differing completely from that of their native tongue. Solid ability in aural comprehension, vital for everyday communication, never fails to work out to their benefit, as it will pay good dividends for their practical use of the language.

### **Process of Dictation**

Dictation in a foreign language is a more highly skilled task than is generally realized. It makes simultaneous demands of the learners to deal with an ongoing stream of auditory input. It presupposes the learners having a good command of the orthography of the language and calls for an ability to comprehend an auditory message without any help of visual stimuli. Instantaneous transposition of speech into its orthographic representation reflects well-organized collaborations of abilities or skills at various facets of the language. The process depends much on logical guesswork of extrapolation based on the learners' knowledge about what makes the language tick. It is apparent that a succession of perceptual operations are synchronously involved in the process, serving as a link for the spoken and written system of the language. The learners keep intent on phonemic sounds, lexis, grammar, context and spelling, while incessantly analyzing each grammatical and semantic relation of a recoded chunk to an ensuing one to build up their own dictation passage. That is, they are attentive to locate semantic boundaries in the incoming flow of speech, so that they may divide it into meaningful segments. They retain an identified preceding segment long enough to match it with the following one. Correlated segments in logical sequence get synthesized into a larger constituent (Rivers, 34: 200). Such matching or correlating goes on at different levels with different segment-sizes to make up a passage. It is only too natural that the rapid matching should be tentative and sometimes require corrections to previous trials.

Also strategic in the process is contextualization, which helps the learners predict and coordinate sensible segments in synthesizing an entire passage. The learners are expected to be astute at the inter/intra-sentence level for contextualization. A rhetorical knowledge of two linguistic attributes, coherence and cohesion in the language, accelerates contextualization of a passage in their favor. Dictation requires the learners to make the most of those linguistic properties that function as connectives to bind sentences as well as words together in a stream

**Diagram I-1**  
The Mental Process of Dictation



of dictation discourse. The whole process keeps on to the very end of the session. Exerting their linguistic and semantic expectancy, the learners carry on their efforts to logically reconstruct a thread of an oral passage to generate a complete congruency in their rendition (see Diagram I-1).

Dictation, as we have seen, is not merely a device for estimating the learners' ability to spell words properly. There is much more than just spelling involved. Covert analysis-by-synthesis and some other cognitive activities are at work as intermediaries in the process. This implies that dictation has a number of advantages for both teachers and learners. It serves, first of all, as a device for the learners to nurture skills in careful listening which tends to be less effectively treated in EFL classrooms. Slow but steady transfer is expected to accrue from listening to other skills. The prospective transfer can reinforce a spiral coordination of the functioning of integrated skills gradually, bridging over the gap between skill-getting and skill-using in the acquisition of the language. Dictation is used by the teacher as a judgment for estimating the efficacy of both teaching and learning in the classroom, and also for diagnosing tendencies in errors made by each learner and a class group as well; an orthographical transcript by the learners of a dictated passage is a sort of 'mirror' held up to their present level of aural comprehension in the language, illustrating the progress the learners have been making in language acquisition. Oral production seems least related with dictation among the four basic skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking), but regular administration of dictation has latent effects on the learners' pronunciation and intonation. The learners learn to recognize and assimilate the phonic patterning typical of the target language. This problem will be discussed in the last section.

## Types of Dictation

In a classroom dictation given as a learning exercise device, the learners write down on paper what they think they hear from a live or taped dictation. The teacher administers either a partial or a passage dictation, depending on the level of the learners and the goals of dictation set by the teacher. The learners are required to mobilize all aspects of their knowledge about many facets of the language to achieve the task.

*Item or Partial Dictation.* An item or a partial dictation is mostly for learners at the beginning stage. They are given incomplete printed material with blanks which they are asked to fill in with words or phrases while attentive to the stretches of speech. Selection of words omitted for the dictation is made by the teacher from the textbooks the learners have previously worked with. In preparing material for the dictation, the teacher gives much consideration to items such as words with discrepancies between sounds and spellings; sounds so peculiar to the target language that the learners naturally tend to substitute with the nearest sounds to their native language; words grammatically important but usually unstressed and hard to discern, like prepositions, articles, pronouns, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs, etc. Set phrases and basic sentence patterns are also good candidates for blanks in this kind of dictation (see Example I below).

### Example I

A) Once there was (an) adventurous young man who lived (in) America. (His) name was Ranald MacDonald. He was born (in) Oregon (in) 1824. He wanted (to) go to Japan for (a) long time, because his mother was (an) American Indian, (and) (he) believed (that) Japan was the land (of) (his) ancestors. However, Japan was then closed (to) (the) rest (of) the world. Any foreigners who came to Japan (were) badly punished (by) the Japanese government.

B) (In) (the) summer of 1848, this young man sailed (to) Japan (and) landed (on) (a) small island near Hokkaido. Soon he was caught by (the) Japanese and sent (to) Nagasaki in Kyushu. There were (at) that time few Japanese (with) any knowledge of English. When Japanese officials asked him (to) teach English (to) their students, he was happy (with) the offer. So he became (the) first American teacher (of) English in Japan. Many books that he (had) brought (from) America were useful (in) his classes.

The dictation, which is, more or less, an exercise in sound discrimination and spelling, is so arranged that the learners naturally become aware of the fact that the language they are working on has its own sound system entirely different in phonic quality from that of their

mother tongue.

**Passage Dictation.** Dictation generally means a passage dictation in which an entire passage is read to the learners. All the clues in the dictation are acoustic. The teacher is recommended to use recorded tapes for the dictation, if available, so that the learners may have good opportunities to get accustomed to a variety of voices of native speakers of the language. The learners are expected to write down a whole passage as they hear it read. The material for the dictation should be at the right level for the learners; that is, the passage is appropriate to the proficiency of the learners, using lexis and grammar already covered, so that the dictation yields rich rewards to their study in previous lessons. Rivers (35: 291) comments:

... students taking dictation are notoriously inattentive to the meaning of what they are writing and particularly to the relevance of the segments as they write them to the import of the whole passage; in other words, their attention becomes concentrated on segments, despite the exhortation of teachers. Further, the student may understand perfectly what he has heard but be unable to retain it long enough to write it down in full, for auditory memory is also involved.

In addition to full use of the conversational forms of the language, the teacher is recommended to avail him/herself of a potpourri of styles for the material, including narratives in prose, lyrics of popular songs, letters, diaries, dramas and speeches to help the learners to find differences in the type of language, according to the situations where language use really takes place. The notion of 'register' is likely to be instilled in the learners through dictation into which various functions of the language are aptly incorporated.

Also important for the dictation is the length of a passage. It should be approximately a hundred words in number; a contextual idea may not be well expressed in a passage too short, while a lengthy dictation causes the learners to be excessively strained and attentive. Forced attentiveness does not keep up long enough for them to cover the session, unless good care is taken of the dictation in terms of its length and content. Overloaded concentration means the learners will be overwhelmed with more than they can handle, quenching their interest in dictation. As the learners become more proficient in the language, the number of words used in dictation can be increased.

### Dictation Procedures

Our discussion is limited here to dictation as a device primarily for a learning experience in aural comprehension. The administrative routine is rather simple, although it should be

well-planned and not haphazard. The teacher should be sensitive to the learners' learning stage in aural comprehension when selecting a passage for dictation; s/he should avoid dictations tedious with dull ideas unrelated to their daily experiences, let alone lexis and grammar unfamiliar to them. The same text hard for the learners to understand in print gets much harder for them to understand when heard. Any errors committed by the teacher in the preparation will soon create negative attitudes toward dictation among the learners. They may have a feeling that dictation is a hard nut to crack and that their wading efforts go to waste, leading them nowhere. The teacher will recognize how soon repeated experiences of unwarranted failures end up with unpopularity against dictation among the learners. The immediate deprivation of their willingness to invest themselves in the spoken language can be detrimental to the acquisition of the skill in aural comprehension which is essential to oral communication in social settings. Dictation is usually given three times in slightly different ways, may it be as a testing device or even as a teaching device. The teacher has prepared a dictation material which s/he feels sure is within the learners' comprehension. The material should be read through by a native speaker of the language who is not knowledgeable about the learners' mother tongue. A reader's knowledge of their language might be counter-productive in keeping the speech natural and spontaneous in rhythm and melody. His or her efforts, conscious or otherwise, to be comfortable to the learners' ear often cause distorting effects on the reading of the material in the target language. The first time, as a passage is read aloud to the learners at normal speed without any distortions in enunciation, they just listen to it for the general sense of the passage. Proper nouns new to the learners that occur in the dictation have been spelled on the blackboard to avoid the learners being distracted by these words. After the first reading, the passage is re-read, this time with pauses between sentences or sense groups of words to allow the learners opportunities to write down what they have apprehended aurally. The phrasing of a passage follows semantic divisions suitable for the learners' capacity in short-term memory. The teacher is careful about timing when to proceed with each new portion of the passage. The teacher does not need to wait for the slowest learner to finish; the unsecure length of pauses may cause the others to feel suspended. After the reading, the learners are allowed a short while to write out their scribbling version of the dictation.

The teacher repeats the process of the second reading, if necessary, before going on to the last reading of the whole passage. The passage is read for the last time the way it was for the first time but at a slightly more leisurely speed. The slower reading does not at all mean distorting acoustic features in pronunciation and phrasing. This is the final opportunity for the

