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Dictation : A Rethink for the Millennium

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Introduction

Approaching the millennium has excited people around the world. In the field of language teaching/learning, there is no exception. Teachers are enthusiastic to explore “cutting-edge” themes or “hot” topics in the field in the hope of enriching their profession. As we are looking forward to the new advent of information technology and new methodology, it is also time to reevaluate the resources we have now. A rethink helps us rediscover and enhance our professional strength and growth.

Language teaching in the past few decades has shifted the emphasis from the teaching of language usage to the teaching of language use. Language, then, has been used to some communicative purposes in classroom practice. Unfortunately, although communication has long been a stated goal of language teaching profession, teachers still face the challenge of withstanding the shifting winds of new innovative educational approaches to reinforce communication. By and large, many teachers in this field have tried to develop new strategies to encourage comprehension and communication. Consequently, they are likely to avoid traditional methods of the past like dictation which has often been viewed as a traditional age-old language-learning activity.

Definition

Dictation, to many people, is nothing else but copying down actual words without comprehension. If so, dictation must lie only in the hands of the teacher. That is, the teacher reads the text, dictates it and then reads it again so that students can check through. In fact, by adapting this old-fashion method to a communicative emphasis, dictation can become attractive and encouraging activities even in a progressive, communicative classroom. It is the aim of this paper to propose new ways for dictation to make it exciting for both teachers and students within the current approach of language teaching and learning.

Theoretical Supports for Using Dictation

The recent emphasis on a more learner-centered approach to second/foreign language learning/teaching also influences dictation. Accordingly, students can become active before, during, and after the activity by being the ones who select the text for dictation, dictate to other students, and correct the dictation. Davis and Rinvulcri (1988) confirm that “dictation is one of those exercises in which, if it is well done, the teacher’s planned activity prompts reactions, simultaneously and immediately subsequently, by all the students in the group” (p.4).

In terms of communication, dictation activities can be employed as a lead-in to thoughtful communication and foster interaction among students. For example, after the dictation, the teacher may ask a problem-solving question like the one in "Picture Dictation" (see the section on Activities and Tasks for Classroom Implications). Students then work in small groups discussing their answers.

Dictation is also feasible for large classes which are commonly the norm in Thailand. The teacher is able to divide students into small groups or pairs, and have them dictate to each other. In addition, it is not uncommon to see the teacher dictate a text to the whole class of 60-80 students.

Within mixed-ability groups, dictation can cope with the range of abilities in one class. Through "Cloze Exercises" (see the section on Activities and Tasks for Classroom Implications), the teacher gives advanced students a blank sheet or a text with many words missing. For weaker students, they are given a text with only a few words left out. Consequently, while the more advanced students take down the whole text or fill in many more words, the weaker ones fill in fewer missing words.

To follow the trend of communicative approach and whole language which emphasize the need of using an authentic text (Freeman & Freeman, 1992; Richard-Amato, 1988; Skierso, 1984), the teacher can use newspaper articles and magazines for dictation purposes. Authentic texts usually attract students and are potentially used for discussion or debate after the dictation phase.

Research concerning the influence of interaction in language classrooms has long been recognized (Ellis, 1980; Long, 1983; Swain, 1985). Interaction is viewed as significant since it gives students the

opportunity to incorporate the target language and derive meaning. Like other "innovative" method of teaching and learning, dictation no longer conceptualizes classroom instruction as "the conveyance of information from the knowledgeable teacher to the 'empty' and passive learner" (Chaudron, 1988, p.10). Instead, by using dictation activities, such as Dictogloss and Mutual Dictation, students are encouraged to interact with the teacher and their peers, in small groups or on convergent tasks.

In the past decade, we have seen a movement away from narrow methods to broader integrated approaches in language teaching, approaches that encourage the teaching of all four skills within the general framework of using language for learning as well as for communication. In classroom practice; therefore, language teachers need to address the four areas to the teaching of the target language. Interestingly enough, dictation promotes all four language skills as well as language development in grammar and vocabulary. For example, imagine a dictation classroom where the teacher dictates a text to students. During the dictation phase, students must listen and take down words, phrases, or sentences. To begin with, this involves listening and writing. Further, students may be asked to read their texts and revise. They can even work in groups attempting to reconstruct the text, based on what each student is able to note down. During this reconstruction phase, students have an opportunity to communicate and negotiate with their peers while trying to complete their tasks. In fact, what is addressed here is nothing other than an integrated method to language teaching.

Specifically to listening, which plays a major role in dictation, Morley (1991) argues that teachers in the language teaching

field should not regard listening as a “passive” skill and simply take listening for granted. Teaching listening in today’s language curriculum must go far beyond a 20-minute tape a day, followed by a series of test questions about the factual content. Morley calls this framework as a “Listen-and Do-format” (p.93). That is, after listening, learners are required to produce an ‘outcome’ such as performing actions, transferring information, solving problems, negotiating meaning, and the like. For Picture Dictation, a picture description is dictated to listeners who are asked to draw a picture and locate persons and/or things in the picture. Ur (1994) suggests that a picture dictation can contain simple linguistic structures or even more complicated ones. Other dictation exercises like Note Taking and Using Recorded Messages involves learners transferring information from spoken to written form; that is, hearing information and writing it down.

Activities and Tasks for Classroom Implications

Picture Dictation

This activity involves having students draw pictures rather than write down the words. This helps students focus on meaning and communication. Ask students to take a blank sheet of paper and lay it lengthways. Dictate sentence by sentence and the students draw what they hear. The teacher should select a text that is not too complicated in terms of vocabulary and structure so that students can understand all the spatial terms in the dictation. Students can also work in pairs; one student reads the text and the other draws pictures. Example:

Draw a line across the middle of the page from left to right.

Above the line there are waves.

In the top left-hand corner there is a swimmer in the water.

In the top right-hand corner there is a sailing boat and a man on the boat.

There is a woman sitting in a deck-chair in the bottom right-hand corner.

Draw a man lying on the sand in the bottom left-hand corner.

The man is listening to the radio which is next to him.

The swimmer is shouting, “Help! Help!”

Question: Who is the nearest to reach the swimmer and help him?

Adapted from: Davis, Paul & Rinvulcri, Mario. (1988). Dictation: New methods, new possibilities. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Note Taking

This exercise is especially good for ESL students who need work on taking notes in class. A given text should be related to school/college subjects familiar to students. The teacher can prepare guided notes and ask students to listen to a complete lecture and fill in the missing information. It is important to tell them to write only what they feel is the most important, such as key words and phrases. Students then learn to edit their dictations as they are writing them by omitting unnecessary information and useless words. They also learn to shorten words (abbreviations) and use symbols like ↑ for “increase” or “go up”. Encourage students to compare their notes with their peers and discuss the differences. The teacher can extend the activity by asking the students to study their notes and prepare for a quiz over the material to be given the next day.

Dictogloss

Dictogloss was very popular in the late seventies, especially in Australia. The aim of Dictogloss is to develop learners' grammatical competence in using the language. It makes a good activity to grammatical analysis and discussion in class.

Choose a fairly long sentence or a text appropriate for the level of the students. Prepare students for the dictation by discussing the topic of the text. Tell students that the teacher will read the sentence/text twice at a normal speed. During the first reading, they just listen. During the second, they can write as much of the text as possible. Have students form small groups and try to reconstruct the sentence/text in writing as accurately as they can, based on what each student in the group is able to copy down or recall from the reading. Each group needs to assign a "secretary" to write down the group's sentence/text. As students work at their rebuilding of the sentence/text, suggest that they check the text for grammar, textual cohesion, and logical sense. Have the "secretary" of each group write up a final version on the board for everyone to see and discuss. If it is a large class, the teacher can distribute a photocopied version of the text to each group for correction and discussion.

Tips: 1). The role of the teacher is to be a monitor. The monitor should not stop

students from making errors while reconstructing the text. Corrections can be pointed out during the final stage when students are comparing their corporate version with others and the teacher's original.

2). The teacher should use only one long sentence for beginning or intermediate levels while using a complete text with more advanced students. An alternative is to use a fairly long sentence for the first couple of dictations and a whole text for later dictations.

Suggested Readings:

1). Wajuryb, Ruth. (1994). Grammar dictation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2). Morgan, John & Rinvoluceri, Mario. (1983). Once upon a time. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mutual Dictation

This information gap activity involves students working in pairs to combine a two-part text into one continuous piece. Have students face each other. Give one student in each pair gapped text A and the other student gapped text B. Tell the students that each has half of the text and instruct them not to look at each other's texts. Student A dictates to student B, then student B dictates to student A. When they have completed the dictation, have them compare texts. Example:

Version A

One day, a man _____, and took with him _____. He put _____ on the donkey's back, _____. After a while, _____ asked the horse to help him. _____, who was _____.

Further along the road, _____, and again asked the horse _____. And again the horse _____.

_____, the donkey _____ at the side of the _____. So the man took _____ and put it on the horse's back, _____, and they _____.

Version B

_____, _____ went on a journey, _____ his horse and his donkey. _____ a very heavy load _____, but nothing on the horse's back. _____, the poor donkey _____. But the horse, _____ very selfish, refused.

_____, the donkey started to feel very tired, _____ to take some of the load. _____ refused.

Finally, _____ fell exhausted _____ road and died. _____ the whole of the heavy load _____, together with the skin of the dead donkey, _____ continued on their journey.

Taking Messages

This activity encourages students to practice realistic message taking from telephone conversations. It involves writing down the time, the place, the address the other person has given the message taker. It, therefore, proposes real communicative tasks which are actually dictations and semi-dictations.

Prepare students for some of the vocabulary and useful phone language. Record messages on an answering machine. Make sure there is a variety of volume and speeds, topics, formal and informal speech, etc.. There should also be a pause between each message. Divide students into pairs. Have one student in each pair listen to the messages twice and take down the information. When the student finishes taking down the information, have the student dictate the messages to the partner. When students have completed the activity, play back the messages to the entire class.

Poetry Dictation

Poetry lends itself nicely to dictation because of its distinct rhythm and rhyme. A dictation of poetry can help students recognize different meters and forms of poetry. This makes a good warm-up activity to poetry analysis and discussion in literature classes.

Cloze Exercises

A text with words or phrases omitted is given to students. The teacher reads the text, one or two times. Instruct students to fill in the blanks as they listen to the text. After the students finish the activity, ask them to compare their texts with the original.

Suggested Reading:

Borodkin, Thelma. (1992). A "cloze" look at English. Heinle & Heinle.

Tips: 1). Students, rather than the teacher, can be the ones who dictate the text to the other students in pairs.

2). Use song lyrics for texts. Omit some of the words. Have students listen to the song once without writing. Play the song one more time while students fill in the blanks.

3). Turn dictations into games by dividing students into teams to fill in as many blanks as possible. The team which fills the most blanks wins.

Using Recorded Messages

Morley (1984) suggests that students practice with real telephone recorded messages. In the second language environment, the teacher can make use of authentic recorded messages from various sources, such as a movie theater. However, in a country like Thailand where English is used as a foreign language, it is more difficult to

locate authentic recorded messages. The teacher may need to search for them by calling international companies and financial institutes which usually provide recorded information in English.

Have students call different places to listen to recorded messages, write down all pertinent information, and report to class next day. Those who listen to the same message form a group discussion and compare their written messages.

Conclusion

The field of second/foreign language teaching has undergone many fluctuations and

dramatic shifts over the years. While there are abundance of methods, and techniques developed to support current movement in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, it is unwise to overlook all the old methods. The teacher needs to be in a position to derive useful techniques or principles by studying all the available approaches and methods and adapt, not adopt, them to his or her own classroom. This article has done its job in proposing ways to adapt the so-called traditional method, dictation, and introduce it in interesting and communicative ways to classroom language teaching.

The Author

Reongrudee Soonthornmanee received her Ph.D. in Reading Education from State University of New York at Buffalo. She is currently an Assistant Professor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) and the chairperson of CULI Writing Clinic. She has published articles in refereed journals and presented her research papers at both national and international conferences. Her research includes reading strategies, portfolio assessment and whole language.

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