

How Dictation Works in Listening Classes

Akiko Kawasaki

In my listening classes I noticed that students like dictation, or at least they take a somewhat active interest when they do dictations. Yet, while dictation is fun to do for some students, for others it presents a very difficult challenge. The difficulty of dictation seems to depend on the amount of the material to be dictated, the way that original material is presented to students, as well as the students' level and the content difficulty. Indeed, students who enjoy dictation seem to have a repertoire of listening strategies to draw on, while those who find dictation difficult are hampered by their lack of strategic control. To understand this difference better, in this paper, I describe and summarize a variety of dictation exercises and purposes, before I look more closely at the process of how students take dictation. From re-considering such classroom data, I then discuss effective ways of using dictation in English classes.

TYPES OF DICTATION

The type of dictation that most teachers will be familiar with is where the teacher lets the students hear a sentence and asks them to write down the complete sentence. The sound source can be either an audio-tape or the teacher's own voice. The sentence can be said once or repeated. The speed of dictation can be at a natural rate, somewhat slow, or with particular intervals in order to give students time to write the words down. Some teachers cut the sentences into meaningful clauses or phrases (sense groups), and read these slowly so that students can catch up as they write. There are also different options for checking the results with a dictated text. Some teachers may be strict about spelling and grammar; others may assess the written text more freely for sound to written word correspondences. These are the basic options, but other possibilities abound.

In their teacher resource book *Dictation*, Davis and Rinvoluceri (1988) describe many variations in dictation format and present an array of classroom activities. These range, for example, from simple dictation exercises such as vocabulary dictation and finding out silent letters to more complex ones such as question sentence dictation combined with language games. They use the term dictation to describe any activity in which students have the chance to write down what teachers say. For the purposes of this paper, I do not include dictating activities such as language games, but rather limit my scope to dictation as an activity focusing on listening to what is said and writing what is heard. Such writing includes not only precise realization of what is heard, but also

note-taking type memos.

Purposes of dictation: checking or improving?

From a teacher's point of view, there are basically two purposes to dictation: (a) to check what students can hear or comprehend, and (b) to develop students' listening ability. At first sight, the second purpose would seem to be automatically achieved through practice in dictation, but this is not always true. In order to develop particular listening skills, dictation exercises need to be created for very specific goals. If a dictation exercise is carefully planned, students can improve their listening ability effectively.

Focus of dictation: correct knowledge or listening comprehension?

As a listening activity, dictation has two focus points for students: (a) demonstrating sufficient correct knowledge about what they hear, and/or (b) practicing listening comprehension. The process of dictation always consists of two parts: listening and writing. Teachers generally tend to check first and foremost the spelling and grammar of what students write down. If the focus is on displaying correct linguistic knowledge, this is quite appropriate. However, if the focus switches to listening comprehension, different criteria should be introduced, whereby misspelling and minor grammar mistakes can be ignored.

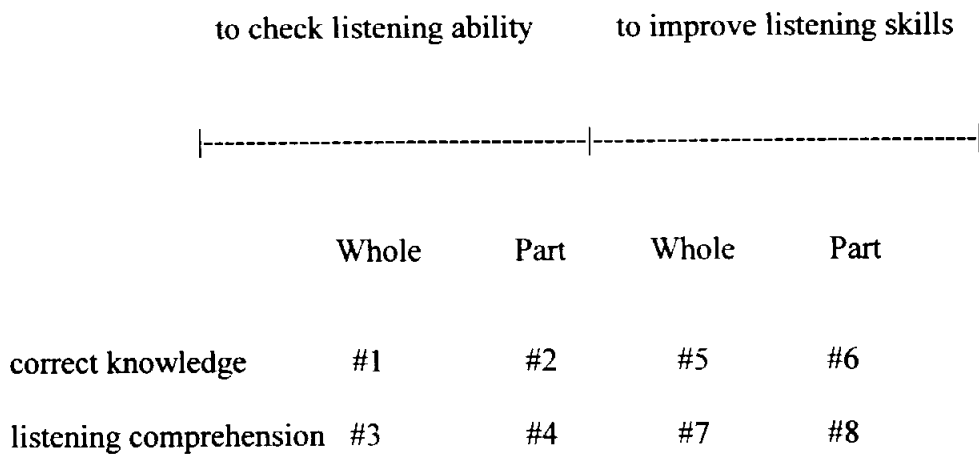
Size of dictation: whole or part?

There are two ways to measure the size of a dictation task. First of all, how much input should be given? Secondly, what type of and how many dictation slots should be created? If students are required to write down everything that they hear, the smallest possible unit is a word. Teachers read a word and students write it down. This may be increased to the phrase, sentence or text level. When teachers ask students to write down part of the input only, there is space for more variation and flexibility in the demands made on the students. The combination of sentence as input and word as a slot is possible: teachers read a sentence, and one part of the sentence (e.g. a verb) is left blank for the students to complete. In this kind of exercise, students can use the written co-text as a clue to guess what the missing part is. At the same time, teachers can tacitly draw students' attention to what the focus is by making slots in target places. Further features can be mentioned to exemplify variations in dictation format. For example, variables of natural speed or controlled speed, and of degree of repetition, can be added as important planning factors.

Since most of these additional variables are automatically included according to the fundamental choice of dictation type, I would like to summarize the preceding typology at this point before looking at more concrete examples of student output. The numbers in the figure below thus refer to

the short examples presented below and on the next page.

Figure 1.
Types of dictation



A dictation test consisting of words such as 'pin' and 'pen' belongs to the first category. A fill-in-the-slot type test of phrases such as 'I cannot () this noise' [stand] belongs to the second type. A dictation exercise asking students to write down a sentence such as 'Mary's in her fifties.' where student responses such as 'May is in her 50s.', and 'Mary in her 50s.' (both grammatically incorrect in formal terms, but acceptable as a display of listening comprehension) belong to the third category. A fill-in-the-missing-information test such as 'Jack's telephone number is ()' after listening to 'You can reach Jack at 345-6789' belongs to the fourth, whereas dictation exercises such as fill-in-the-slots with past verbs ending with /t/, /d/ and /id/ and present verbs belong to the sixth type. In contrast, questions asking students to write down the subjects and verbs of the sentence belong to category eight.

HOW STUDENTS TAKE DICTATION

Students try hard to be successful at dictation. Dictation seems to be familiar to them, and they know what they are supposed to do. From my observations, the results of dictation accurately reflect students' listening ability. Moreover, intermediate-level students have a somewhat different way of doing dictations from advanced students. As such, an analysis of how students perform on dictation tasks can help us understand the dictation processes that they engage in, as well as eventually create more effective listening materials and tasks. In this section, then, I would like to analyze the results from a particular dictation exercise, before examining in the next section students' self-reports about how they do dictation.

What students hear and write down

In order to see what students hear and write down, I asked the students in a *Kogaku-shisutemu* B-level English class to do a three-step dictation: They listened to the following conversational excerpt three times with a given interval for writing down what they heard each time after the tape had been played: *Oh, look at this. Typical early sixties. That's when guys started to wear their hair long. And girls wore their skirts really short. Remember the miniskirts and boots?* I then collected in their responses and analyzed the results by categorizing them according to the degree of accuracy. In the following table, each column is sequentially headed by the first letter of each word in the conversation excerpt. In each row, each student's results are coded as explained in the key to the table; students are listed from highest scoring to lowest scoring, in descending sequence in the table (Student 1= the highest scoring, Student 37= the lowest scoring).

Table
Dictation results key (n=37)

- word correctly/almost correctly written in the first dictation interval
- word correctly/almost correctly written in the second dictation interval
- word partly correct in the first dictation interval
- word partly correct in the second dictation interval
- x word was incorrectly noted in the first dictation interval
- w word was incorrectly written in the second dictation interval

	O	l	a	t	T	e	s	T	w	g	s	t	w	t	h	l	A	g	w	t	s	r	s	R	t	m	a	b
1	○	○	○	○	●	●	●			○					○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	●
2	○	○	○	○		○	○	●		○					○	●	○	○			○	○	○	●		□	○	○
3	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	●	●		●				●	●	●	●	■							□	○	○
4	○	○	○	○		●	●	●		●					○	●	●	○				●	●	w		□	●	●
5		○	○	○		●	○	●		●					○	○		●			●	■	●	●		○	●	○
6	●	●	●	●		○	○			●					●	●	●	●			●	■	○			□	○	○
7	○	○	○	○		○	○			○					●	○		○			○	□	○	○				●
8	○	○	○	○		○	○								●	●		○	○			○	○	x		□	○	○
9	○	○	○	○		○	●			●					○	○		●	●							○	○	○
10	●	○	○	○			○	○		●					x	○	●						●	○		○	○	○
11	○	○	○	○		●	●								○	●					○			●	●	●	●	○
12	●	○	○	○	●	○	○	●		□					○	○						○	○					
13	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	●							○	○	●	w										
14	○	○	○	○		●	○			●					○	○						■	●			○	○	○
15	●	○	○	○	●	●	○	●							●	●						○	○					○
16	○	○	○	○		○	○	●		●					●	●		○				■	●			□		□
17	○	○	○	○		○	○										○	○						○	○	□	○	○
18	○	○	○	○			○								○	○	x	●				□	○	○		■	●	●
19	○	○	○	○		●	○								○	○		○			●		●			■	●	●
20	○	○	○	○			○								○	○								○		○	○	○
21	○	○	○	○						●					○	○		●			○	○	x					○

	O	l	a	t	T	e	s	T	w	g	s	t	w	t	h	l	A	g	w	t	s	r	s	R	t	m	a	b	
22	○	○	○	○		●	●														○	○	○		□	○	○		
23	●	●	●	●	○	○	○								○	○									■	○	○		
24	○	○	x	○		○	○	●							○	○									□	○	○		
25	○	○	○	○	○	○									●	●	○							●					
26	○	○	●	○				●		○												○	○		■	●	○		
27	○	○	○	○		●	●										●				○	□	○	●					
28	○	○	○	○	○	●	●																	●	■	●	●		
29	○	○	●	●			●			●					●	●					○	■	○						
30		○		○		●	○			●					●	○	●				●						●		
31	●			●	●	○									●	○								○		●	●	○	
32	○	○	x	○		○	○	●							○		x				○						○		
33	●	●				○									○	○								■	●		○	○	○
34		●	●	●		●									○	○								■	○		□	●	●
35	○	○	○	○											w	●									■	●	●		
36		○	○	○		○	○															●		●					
37						○																							

As can be seen from the key to the table, degrees of dictation accuracy are divided into (a) word correct/almost correct in the first dictation interval; (b) word correctly/almost correctly in the second dictation interval; (c) word partly correct in the first dictation interval; (d) word correct in the second dictation interval; (e) word incorrectly written in the first dictation interval; (f) word incorrectly written in the second dictation interval. The first question is then which words are more likely to be heard and written down accurately? The results in Table 1 can be totaled in order to understand this. This is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.
Number of students who accurately recorded words in over the first two dictation intervals (n=37)

Oh,	look	at	this.	Typical	early	sixties.		
32	35	30	35	9	26	33		
That's	when	guys	started	to	wear	their	hair	long.
12	1	13	1	0	0	0	28	29
And	girls	wore	their	skirts	really	short.		
7	18	3	0	14	8	22		
Remember	the	miniskirts	and	boots?				
12		3	9		25	30		

From totaling the results and making my own observations, the following tendencies can be noted:

1. Strongly stressed words (those with **prominent syllables**, to use Brazil's term (Brazil: 1995) are more likely to be accurately recorded than weakly stressed words.
2. Content words are more likely to be accurately recorded than function words.
3. Nouns are more likely to be accurately recorded than verbs.
4. Familiar phrases ('chunks') are likely to be recorded as a phrase in themselves rather than as separate words (e.g. *Look at this*).
5. Some words are likely to be accurately recorded when they form a closely associated meaningful cluster. (e.g. *hair long*).
6. Students with higher level listening skills tend to process what they hear as phrases.
7. Students with lower level listening skills tend to process what they hear as single random words.

STUDENTS' SELF-REPORTS ABOUT DICTATION

The second source of data for understanding the processes of dictation consists of the students' own self-reports about dictation. In another of my classes, after the dictation of eight sentences which were read twice, students were asked to explain in their own words how they went about dictating. This class group featured an Igaku B English class, which is generally considered to be at a mid-intermediate level according to the Foreign Language Center's standardized English placement and proficiency tests. These first-year medical students were asked to listen to and write down whole sentences such as:

Are you doing anything tomorrow night? Would you like to see a movie?

I'd make hotel reservations before I left if I were you.

Sesame Street is one of the best known children's programs on television.

The program has been running for more than 20 years.

Students' retrospective reports on their own processes are listed in Table 2 on the next page. The first two digits indicate the student (n=32), whereas the next two digits represent their total score for the dictation. Simply put, the higher the second pair of digits is, the higher their listening skill. Each student wrote two comments: the first line for the first dictation interval, and the second line for the second dictation interval. If any student wrote a comment about the dictation as a whole, this has

been placed in parentheses.

Table 2
Student retrospective self-reports about the dictation process

- 01 28 wrote down at least half of the sentence, got the rough meaning for the rest
wrote down the missing part
- 02 28 vaguely understood the meaning, wrote down first some words only
got the meaning without translating, was able to write down
- 03 28 wrote immediately whatever heard
filled the missing part
- 04 27 (the pause between 1st dictation and 2nd dictation was too short to write down)
- 05 27 (I needed more time to write down, I was still writing when the next sentence was read)
- 06 27 I could distinguish only some word. I guessed the sentence based on them
was able to recognize the sentence, but not so precisely of the content
- 07 25 listed up all the words which came up to me
grasped the vision of the whole sentence
(when I can not comprehend, then give up. If I do not give up, I can not concentrate on the next one)
- 08 25 roughly understood what the sentence meant, wrote down words quickly
listened to fill the missing parts
- 09 25 listened and thought the meaning
listened to the precise words and expressions
(so, if I can not understand the meaning, I can not dictate well)
- 10 25 (listened the first part and the last part of the sentence, and wrote down)
(I didn't have enough time to grasp the meaning, because I was still thinking the previous sentence)
- 11 24 listened vaguely and comprehended roughly about the content
wrote down the sentence checking the meaning
(sometimes I was late in writing down, and the next sentence was read)
- 12 24 listened whatever I could and grasped the rough meaning
filled the missing parts
- 13 24 understood the meaning of sentence
I wrote it down the contents
(I needed more time to write in a clean way)
- 14 24 (I hear it, but forget it while writing it down. While I get confused, a new sentence is read.)
- 15 24 (I listen to it carefully, but it is hard to get the meaning. I can not do listening and comprehending
together at the same time.)
- 16 23 (When I try to get the meaning, I can write down the sentence. When I try to write down the words, I
can not make them into sentence.)

(Table 2 continued)

- 17 23 (I started to write down one by one from the first word of the sentence. I needed more time)
- 18 23 wrote down whatever I heard
guessed the whole meaning, and filled the space
(When I dictate myself, I listened to the tape about 4 times. 2 times is not enough.)
- 19 23 got the meaning of the sentence
wrote down
(didn't have enough time to dictate)
- 20 22 wrote down as I heard it
do the same for the second time
(needed more time)
- 21 22 (I don't think anything special. I write as I hear)
- 22 22 couldn't concentrate because of the previous questions
grasp the idea and wrote down
- 23 21 time passed while I was not careful
tried hard for the second time
- 24 21 wrote down the starting part and some words which I heard
filled the missing parts
(for the easy ones, I remember whole sentence from the beginning)
- 25 21 took memo while listening
filled the missing parts
(listening twice is not enough, I want to listen to more)
- 26 21 got the meaning and wrote roughly
filled the missing parts
- 27 20 wrote down words one by one
filled the missing part
(I was not good at dictating)
- 28 20 (I tried hard to listen to it because it would be read only twice. But actually I could not listen well.)
- 29 19 (wrote down whatever I heard. No translation. When I wrote just what I heard, sometimes I was able to get the meaning.)
- 30 19 (I was just busy listening first. I could write down only the last part of the sentence. It is not enough to listen to it only twice.)
- 31 16 (It was really difficult. Too fast, too long.)
(I could not listen to the detailed part such as articles.)
- 32 14 took memo, after listening roughly
tried to write down after listening carefully
(only a limited words came up to my mind)

From looking at these self-reports, it becomes clear that in some students' minds, listening is

somewhat different from comprehending. When they listen to some sentences, they sometimes listen only to the words in the sentences without getting the idea of what the whole sentence means, as student #06 says. That may happen too when we do not pay attention in our mother tongue. So, here, if the word *listening* is used in opposition to *comprehending*, it refers to word-only type listening.

At the time of dictation, the three skills of listening, comprehending and writing need to be employed in closely connected with each other. This can enable the listener to perceive the words, separate them out of a continuous stream of sounds and then write them down. The process of "wrote down whatever I heard", as student #18 says, belongs to this composite skill. For this skill, a basic lexical knowledge of words and expressions is necessary. From the self-reports, it is also clear that some students can get the rough meaning while listening to the sentences. That is, they have a developed comprehending skill. When they can get the rough meaning, it becomes easy to listen to the words and to remember them, as student #16 says, for example. Listening and comprehending need therefore to be undertaken at the same time for the listener to be successful at such a task; this then avoids placing too much demand on short-term memory. If the students cannot combine these two skills, as student #15 reports, their self-reports tend to indicate an increased difficulty in comprehension. They become literally lost for words. A final point here is that the last part of the dictation process, writing, acts as another cause of difficulty for the listener. The listener has to write words down while listening and comprehending, but some students are clearly not accustomed to writing quickly in such a fashion, as student #13 says.

From looking at these results, I suggested to the students in later lessons that they try to focus on the meaning and to make as many memo-notes as possible. Why? It was evident that some students write down the words they know, while others write down the words that are important. The latter is an example of a good combination of listening and comprehending skills. Both high-scoring students and low-scoring students wrote about "getting the meaning of the sentence (comprehending)". Both sets of listeners seem to be disposed to focusing on meaning, but the high-scoring students' skill and content recognition proved to be more precise than that of low-scoring

students. At the same time, students with such higher level listening ability also proved to be good at writing quickly: students with a less developed listening skill seem to have difficulty in writing and listening at the same time because they presumably face some kind of cognitive overload.

DEVELOPING DICATION IN MY ENGLISH CLASSES

In my intermediate listening classes, I use dictation as one part of the review exam. In my classes, students complete the lesson tasks with tapes before transcripts are handed out at the end of the class. I expect students to review well so that they can reproduce on paper what they hear. In the review exam, I copy the conversations or passages from textbook and add blanks. These consist of short whole sentences, sense groups or single words. Blanks usually target language such as social phrases of greeting, phrasal verbs of daily activities, adjectives describing people, and so on. When I grade this kind of dictation test, I ignore misspelling or grammar mistakes, since it is not a writing class. What I check for is whether the students can get the meaning accurately or not. In terms of Figure 1 (Types of dictation), the types of dictation exercise involved here are #3 or #4.

For more advanced classes, I introduce new materials and let them take dictation. Here also I ignore misspelling. The students do not have to reproduce everything they hear—just the topic, the main idea, important figures, etc., according to the instructions on the worksheet. I call this dictation exercise *memo-taking*. Students gradually get to know how to take memos while listening; they learn that to stop and get stuck with unknown words does not help them grasp the main idea. Here I am using type #7 type to help the students improve their top-down listening skills. This takes them far beyond word-by-word listening and helps them become proficient at ‘chunking’ what they hear.

Overall, what is important here is that students get the sense of daily listening, even in the foreign language. We do not listen word by word in our mother tongue. It would be simply too exhausting. We ignore unknown words when they are not so important. We also guess in order to get what the speaker wants to say. Thus, when native speakers of whatever language are asked to take memos, they select key points and often use their own expression to summarize.

At both levels, I should stress that I explain the grading system or purpose of doing dictation. I believe this is important. Students should know how dictation can help them develop their listening skills, as well as understand what they should do to prepare for the test or how they should practise dictation to become better listeners.

CONCLUSION

From the results of the analysis of the students' dictation skill and process, we can notice that high-scoring students tend to write down set phrases, phrasal verbs, meaning clusters, rather than single separate words. They can do this because they get the (top-down) meaning of the sentence. At the same time, we can also claim that if students know, for example, a lot of set phrases, they may have less difficulty in dictation, because clustered meanings come more easily to mind. From this, I advise students, especially before the dictation review test, to look again at all the set phrases by themselves. Reviewing and remembering set phrases may sound too basic a learning task, but it greatly helps students to improve their listening comprehension. In other words, conscious vocabulary-building and review at the phrase and collocation level are essential parts of developing better listening skills.

Dictation can be clearly employed as one way of improving listening comprehension. When we want to train students to focus on specific grammatical categories and forms, such as verbs and verb forms, we can create materials with appropriate slots for dictation practice. In that way, we can guide students to listen for verbs carefully. This will improve their listening comprehension. I call this type of dictation guided dictation. This is also important as we noted that students are more likely to hear noun phrases than verb phrases.

To summarize, this classroom research study involved looking afresh at what I routinely do in some of my classes. It required restructuring dictation into different types; examining closely sample student dictations samples; collecting and analysing retrospective self-reports from students. Through doing this, I discovered new possibilities for using dictation in the classroom. I also came to a better understanding of how my students learn to listen. Although the data is still limited and

more careful analysis should be carried out in a later cycle of classroom research, this process of looking closely at what I and my students do has, I believe, changed my teaching for the better. That is why this type of classroom research constitutes an important part of curriculum development.

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