

The Value of Dictogloss for Japanese Senior High School Students

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Introduction

Over the past decade, dictogloss, which Wajnryb (1990) developed from dictation, has become well known in second language (L2) learning classrooms. Dictogloss is considered to be a way of integrating linguistic form and communication (Nassaji, 2000), encouraging monitoring of and reflecting on language form (Nunan, 1999) or getting learners to talk about linguistic forms as well as target forms (Ellis, 2003). Jacobs (2003) sets out a reason for advocating the use of dictogloss: it is because it involves not only students' attention to form but also to all four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing). He also notes (*ibid*) that dictogloss encourages learner autonomy, cooperation among learners, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment techniques and involves teachers as co-learners.

Although there are several formats for dictogloss, the basic procedure is as follows:

1. The teacher reads a text aloud to a group of students at normal speed.
2. Students just listen but do not write anything.
3. The teacher then reads the text again at normal speed and the students take notes while they listen.
4. Students work in small groups to reconstruct the text as closely as possible to the original text.
5. The students compare and analyse their version and the original.

As can be seen, this procedure involves all four language skills: students listen when the teacher reads or they work in small groups; they speak in the process of reconstructing in groups; they read their notes, the reconstructed text and the original; and they jot down and write the reconstruction from their notes. In addition, during the reconstruction session, what Jacobs has pointed out can also be observed, such as

learner autonomy, cooperation among learners, focus on form and meaning and thinking skills.

The effectiveness of dictogloss has been empirically examined in L2 learning research. A number of empirical studies show that dictogloss is effective in promoting L2 learning. Kowal and Swain (1994) and LaPierre (1994) showed that metatalk or a metalinguistic (reflective) function of output proposed by Swain (1998, 2005) might be useful in L2 learning. Swain and Lapkin (2001) found that the dictogloss task increased accuracy in the production of pronominal verbs and prompted students to notice and reproduce complex linguistic structures while the jigsaw task led students to use a wide range of vocabulary and language-related episodes, defined by Swain and Lapkin (1998: 326) as ‘any part of a dialogue where the students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others.’ Kim (2008) found that although those who carried out the dictogloss task collaboratively had a similar number of language-related episodes as those who did the task individually, the former performed better in building their vocabulary.

These empirical studies indicate that dictogloss has promoted several aspects of L2 learning. However, they do not show how L2 learners feel when they experience the task nor how closely they can reconstruct or write a text to the original. From the viewpoint of teaching, it is important to know what impressions L2 learners have about a given task and how accurately they can produce their target language. The latter problem relates to Skehan’s (1996) proposed three goals of L2 learning: accuracy, complexity and fluency.

In sum, the purpose of the present study is to analyse how senior high school students learning English as a foreign language feel when they perform the dictogloss task and how closely they can reconstruct their texts to the original. The study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do senior high school students learning English as a foreign language feel when they carry out the dictogloss task?
- 2) To what extent can they reconstruct their texts in comparison with the original?

Method

Subjects

The subjects were eighteen first-year students (thirteen girls and five boys) learning English as a foreign language at a Japanese public senior high school.

Text

The dictogloss text was chosen from a short description of 'Christmas' in the *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1992), because the study was conducted during the season of Christmas and it was a good opportunity for students to learn cultural information of the event (see Appendix A). At the same time, in terms of complexity, the passage was composed of two sentences (compound and complex sentences), so it was not easy for students to memorise the whole fifty-five words of the text.

Data Collection

In order to answer the research questions in the present study, a questionnaire and reconstructed texts were employed for the data collection (see Appendices B and C). The questionnaire consisted of five questions: three multiple-choice questions on a scale of 'easy' to 'difficult' on listening, note-taking and reconstructing a text; one multiple-choice question on a scale of 'interesting' to 'boring' on reconstructing a text; and one open-ended question on what they thought about the dictogloss task. Eighteen questionnaires and seven reconstructed texts were collected from the students.

Procedure

As mentioned earlier, in the basic procedure of dictogloss, the teacher reads the text twice. However, the passage was read three times in the current study, because students had difficulty in reconstructing their text after they listened only twice. The teacher explained to students what the dictogloss task was like in both English and Japanese before the task was carried out. The procedure in the study was as follows:

1. The teacher handed out blank sheets and read the text to the class at normal speed.
2. The students just listened to the teacher without taking notes.
3. The teacher read the text twice at normal speed and the students jotted down notes while listening.
4. The students worked in groups of two to four to reconstruct the passage for approximately ten minutes.
5. The teacher told several groups to read their texts aloud.
6. The teacher handed out the original text and the students compared it with their own.

7. The teacher handed out a questionnaire to the students and asked them to complete it.
8. The teacher collected all the questionnaires and the sheets on which the reconstructed texts were written.

Results and Discussion

The first research question addresses the issue of how students felt in the dictogloss task. The four multiple-choice questions on the questionnaire are concerned with this issue. With regard to listening comprehension, out of eighteen students, six felt that the task was difficult; eleven felt it was a little difficult and one felt it was so-so. This might be because of students' lack of familiarity with the task. As for note-taking, four students out of eighteen felt that the task was difficult; twelve felt it was a little difficult and two felt it was so-so. This may also show that students were unfamiliar with the dictogloss technique. Interestingly, concerning reconstructing the text, five students out of eighteen felt the task was difficult; nine felt it was a little difficult and four felt it was so-so. The number of students who thought the task was so-so increased from the first question to the third. This might be attributed to the fact that while students worked individually in listening and note-taking, they worked collaboratively to reconstruct their texts and felt more comfortable during the reconstruction. While a large number of students thought the dictogloss was difficult, most of them found it interesting. Three students found it very interesting; fourteen found it interesting and one student did not answer the question.

The open-ended question in the questionnaire also concerns the issue of how students felt about the dictogloss task. Students wrote what they felt freely in Japanese. Their comments seem to be categorised into four types. First of all, numerous students thought that the task was difficult. For example, one student noted, 'I found it hard to follow the passage. Today's text was short, but I found it difficult.' Another commented that 'I found it difficult to reconstruct a text as closely as possible to the original because I have been used to answering questions after listening and have not experienced the reconstruction of a text.' A third mentioned that 'It was difficult because I could not take notes at all.' A fourth remarked, 'I found it very difficult to listen and jot down at the same time.' It is apparent that these comments show why a large number of students felt the dictogloss task was difficult.

Secondly, students realised that their English language skills, especially listening skills were inadequate for the task. One student wrote, 'I realised my English ability is not so high.' Another noted, 'I realised that I lacked listening ability. Since the way

people speak is different, I thought my listening ability should be built up by listening to various pronunciations.'

A third type of students' comments shows that students realised the advantage of collaborative work. One student commented that 'There were plenty of unknown words, but due to pair work, I was able to understand the content of the text a little better.' Another mentioned that 'It was interesting, because I found it better to reconstruct a text collaboratively than to do it alone. Dictogloss was a little difficult but it was more fun and worthwhile than usual.'

Finally, students found that the dictogloss exercise may cultivate a positive attitude toward learning English. Here are three comments: 'Dictogloss is a very good exercise for listening. I have to study harder'; 'I will receive training in my listening and note-taking skills using dictogloss'; and 'It is like killing two birds with one stone since dictogloss practises listening ability and enables me to learn the content of a story. This way of studying is also fun.'

In sum, numerous students found the dictogloss task difficult but interesting. Students also realised the necessity of improving their English ability, especially listening ability and the importance of cooperation through dictogloss.

The second research question examines to what extent students were able to reconstruct the original text. The collection of seven reconstructed texts by four pairs and three groups shows what they really wrote (see Appendix C). On average, they wrote their texts with 29.14 words, a maximum of 40 words and a minimum of 13 words. The original text consisted of fifty-five words. Table 1 indicates the number of sentences and words employed.

Table 1. The Number of Sentences and Words

	Pair 1	Pair 2	Pair 3	Pair 4	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Sentences	2	?	5	3	5	6	4
Words	19	13	34	27	40	32	39

It seems that those who worked in groups tended to employ more words than those who worked in pairs. This might suggest that because of the different number of groups, students in groups took more notes than those in pairs. Or possibly, the students in Pairs 1 and 2 were not very good at listening and note-taking, so they may have written their texts in less than twenty words.

If we look closely at the longest reconstructed text (40 words), which Group 1 created, it is evident that this group had problems with accuracy and with using articles and

prepositions and dealing with complex sentences.

Group 1

Christmas is main public holiday in Britain and US.

People spend time with family each special food and drink a lot.

Christmas is Christian festival and birth of Jesus.

People often regret and miss it as a time.

Merry making given present.

At the same time, it also indicates how difficult it is for the students to reconstruct their texts as closely as possible to the original. Other reconstructed texts also display similar difficulties.

It should be noted that one pair (Pair 3) tried to use different words from the original (see Appendix C): for instance, 'celebrate' and 'exchange gift' appeared in their text. This may suggest that they employed the 'thinking skills' which Jacobs (2003) considers to be a useful outcome of the dictogloss technique.

Conclusion

This study first introduced the basic procedure of dictogloss, mentioning its advantages, and then examined several empirical studies concerning its effectiveness. Next, the study posed two research questions and tried to answer them. It clarified how Japanese high school students felt when they were performing the dictogloss task and to what extent they were able to reconstruct the original text.

The study has a number of limitations: the small sample size and the students' unfamiliarity with the dictogloss task. The latter problem might have caused numerous students to feel the task was difficult. If they had been familiar with it, they might have had different feelings. Future research should overcome these limitations.

The history of research on dictogloss started about two decades ago but the use of the technique is not common in Japanese language classrooms. It is hoped that teachers and researchers will become more interested in using and conducting research into the technique in future.

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Appendix A

Dictogloss Text

Christmas is the main public holiday in Britain and the US when people spend time with their families, eat special food, and drink a lot. Christmas is a Christian festival to remember the birth of Jesus, and people often regret that it is now very 'commercial' and seen as a time of merry-making and present-giving.

(Source: *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, 1992: 215)

Appendix B

Questionnaire

今日の活動(dictogloss)をやってみてどう感じましたか？(アンケート)

該当する項目を○で囲んでみてください。

1. 英語の聞き取りについて

易しい 少し易しい ちょうどいい 少し難しい 難しい

その他 ()

2. 英語を聞いて、書き取ること（メモを取ること）について

易しい 少し易しい ちょうどいい 少し難しい 難しい

その他 ()

3. ペアで聞き取った内容を元の文章に近い形に作り上げることについて

①

易しい 少し易しい ちょうどいい 少し難しい 難しい

その他 ()

②

とても面白い 面白い 普通 あまり面白くない 面白くない

その他 ()

4. この活動(dictogloss)であなたは、どんなことを感じましたか。自由にコメントを書いてみてください。

Appendix C

Reconstructed Texts

Pair 1

Christmas is main public holiday in Briten in England.
Spend with family eat special food and drink a lot.

Pair 2

Xmas is main public holiday
spend family special food and drink.
Christian festival

Pair 3

Christmas is main public holiday in Britain and US. People spend a time with families, eat special foods and drink lot. Christmas is Christian's festival. They celebrate Jesus' birth. They also doing exchange gift.

Pair 4

Christmas is a main public holiday in Britain and US. When people spend with family and eat special food and drink a lot.
Christmas is Christian's birthday.

Group 1 (4 students)

Christmas is main public horry briten and US.
People spent time with family each special food and drink a lot.
Christmas is Christian festival and birth the Jesus.
People often regret and seen as a time.
Merry making given present.

Group 2 (3 students)

Christmas is main Public holiday in Britain and U.S. People spend time with family. They have special food and drink. Christmas is Jesus' birthday. Christmas is Christian festival. Many time present given.

Group 3 (3 students)

Christmas is main public holiday in Britten and US. People spend with family, and

eat special food and drink a lot. Christmas is a Christian festival for Jesus's birthday. People often reglet to him and merry making present giving.