

ONLINE TOOL TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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This paper aims at examining students' attitudes to application of Information and Communication Technology for improving listening skills through online dictation. Dictation has been used in language testing for a long time, but its benefit in language teaching / learning has never been discussed by language teachers. This article is an attempt to put a useful but now undervalued technique back in the language teaching activities. However, there is no data on usefulness of dictation at university level. The research methods include students' responses to a specially designed questionnaire. The participants in this study are students of two different specializations who study English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania. Our study shows that class dictations of authentic materials are beneficial to students at tertiary level as they help improve listening and writing skills and raise awareness of problematic language areas. Statistical processing by means of the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) has proved that the findings are valid beyond the studied sample.

The advice for language teachers is to employ the online dictation technique in language classroom in a way that is beneficial to students.

Keywords: information and communication technology, English for specific purposes, online dictation, statistical processing of data.

doi:10.3846/cpe.2011.04

Introduction

Application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in language learning has been widespread and popular with students and teachers. It promotes learning and teaching all language skills. One of the interesting aspects of ICT application is for improving listening skills through dictation. Dictation has been used in language testing for a long time, but its benefit in language teaching / learning has never been discussed by language teachers. Currently dictation seems to undergo a revival stage as a useful teaching device. It is thought that dictation can help develop language skills: listening, speaking and writing as well as revise

grammar, lead to oral communication, improve pronunciation. However, there is no data on usefulness of dictation at university level. This work aims at investigating possible benefits of dictation by examining students' attitudes to online dictations and drawing conclusions at its applicability in English for Specific Purposes classes.

The object of our research has been the analysis of students' perceptions and attitudes to online dictation.

The aim of research is to find out if students support the activities of dictation as an appropriate language learning tool.

The research methods include students' responses to a specially designed questionnaire, statistical processing of the data by means of SPSS and students' feedback on prior-, while- and post-dictation activities.

The intended outcome of research is to draw conclusions on use of dictation as a teaching / learning tool at tertiary level.

The participants in this study are students of two different specializations who study English for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University, Lithuania.

Literature review of dictation practice

Dictation is a valuable language learning device that has been used for a long time in language testing. The most common advantages are: dictation can help students to diagnose and correct grammatical errors; it ensures attentive listening and trains students to distinguish sounds; it helps to learn punctuation and develop aural comprehension.

The dictation with the broadest learning possibilities is the orthographic text dictation, in which students transcribe a unified passage. This is the classic dictation exercise which, besides reinforcing the spelling and sound correlations of English, uncovers comprehension and grammatical weaknesses in learners for the teacher to analyze and address in future lessons (Alkire 2002). Dictation has always been a rather controversial activity in the language classroom. In spite of its limitations, dictation is still favored as a teaching device at some stages of language teaching. Some language practitioners view dictation negatively, believing that it hardly teaches anything, but it may have some value as a testing device, although there are a number of other testing devices that are more effective. However, dictation gives students badly needed practice in listening comprehension (Myint 1998). According to R. Montalvan (1990), there are at least 20 advantages of dictation, and the most important to mention are: 1) Dictation can help develop all four language

skills in an integrative way; 2) It can help learn grammar; 3) It helps to develop short-term memory; 4) Practice in careful listening to a speaker will be useful to learners in the future in the note taking activities, for instance, listening to lectures; 5) Dictation fosters unconscious thinking in the new language; 6) Correction can be done by the students-peer correction of written dictation leads to oral communication. Despite its benefits, currently dictation is not widely used in teaching English mainly because some language practitioners consider it teacher-centered and old-fashioned.

P. Davis and M. Rinvolucris (2002: 12) claim that dictation contains a wealth of new techniques to extend the traditional language-learning activity of dictation. The activities range from the traditional focus on spelling and punctuation problems to exercises that emphasize personal attitudes and opinions of both teachers and students. Dictation provides activities suitable for a wide range of levels and ages, example texts for many activities, opportunities for students to create their own texts, and a variety of suggested correction techniques. Moreover, it normally turns out that in any average group of European teachers more than half *do* use dictation either regularly or from time to time in their teaching" (Davis and Rinvolucris 2002: 21).

The potential problems that need to be addressed are an aversion to dictation, difficulty in producing a text and accuracy in writing (BBC teaching English online 2005). Additionally, dictation activities where students compare their version of the text to the original can increase their ability to notice aspects of the language which are sometimes overlooked, as well as mistakes which they commonly make. These might include common spelling errors, absence of either definite or indefinite articles or the third person's singular ending ('s') in the Present Simple Tense. The comparison of written work in pairs or small groups also helps students to become better at identifying their errors.

There are very few references that analyze learners' attitudes to advantages or disadvan-

tages of dictation activities. There is only one article by Rahimi (2008) who investigated the effect of dictation on the learners' proficiency. The participants of his research into dictation involved 65 English majors: the experimental group consisted of 34 students, and the control group consisted of 31 students. The experimental group took total of 50 dictations during the semester, while the control group did not take any dictations. The results of the study showed that the experimental group made some improvement in their language proficiency. According to M. Rahimi (2008), the control group showed no improvement on the proficiency test.

This article is an attempt to put a useful but now undervalued technique back in the language teaching activities. With the view of the teacher's major function in language classrooms – feedback to students on their performance – by which students work through their individual errors, dictation offers great opportunities for increasing accurate and fluent command of the language through analyzing their work.

Respondents and Research Methods

The participants in this study were the 1st and 2nd year full-time students of two different specializations, i.e. who study ESP either for psychology or social work.

Before dictations, the class activities included pair / small group discussions on the ESP theme. Discussions were usually followed by the vocabulary exercises which included either new terms or expressions. As a rule, prior-dictation exercises involved matching words and their definitions and predicting the contents of the recording. Post-dictation exercises involved checking comprehension, i.e. answering whether statements are True / False, and checking the answers. Problematic passage areas were analyzed in pair / small groups followed by individual examining of one's writing by comparing it with the transcript of the original text. In the final stage, students

gave feedback on their performance pointing out their specific difficulties. In other words, research methods included, firstly, experimental dictation activities throughout the semester, and secondly, students' instant feedback on their experience of learning relevant vocabulary, writing dictations, checking comprehension, and correcting errors.

At the end of the semester, the students were requested to answer the questions of specially designed questionnaires relevant to dictation activities (Appendix 1) and to improving language proficiency (Appendix 2). In this paper, only part of the latter survey is reproduced.

For dictations various online teaching materials, which are available at the language learning websites, were employed: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish>> and <www.breakingnewsenglish.com>.

The advantages of these websites are: 1) They have been designed for language learning / teaching; 2) There is a great diversity of themes to choose from. Moreover; 3) There are ready-made lesson plans and exercises for class activities, which is beneficial for busy teachers who might save time in preparation for language classes. It is important that the level and the aims are formulated, and there are a number of worksheets with comprehension questions, vocabulary matching exercises, grammar and language focus points. Many possible aspects of themes are described, so teachers may simply adjust the online activities for their particular classroom including the follow-up activities after students have listened to recordings, have written dictations and self-corrected their written work.

Lists of dictated themes

Here are the relevant themes that have been used for dictations from the website <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish>> for students who study ESP for psychology: 1) Drinking Loss; 2) Stress at Work; 3) Mobile Phones; 4) Social Business; 5) Cybercrime;

6) Obesity; 7) School Bullying in Japan; 8) Online Gambling; 9) Skinny Models; 10) Intermittent Explosive Disorder; 11) Women's Constant Body Worries; 12) Internet Companies Try to Stop Spam.

The following themes from the <<http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/website>> were used for students who study social work: 1) Cloned Dogs in Training to Sniff for Drugs; 2) New Body Scanners See Through Clothes; 3) Top Spam E-mail Sender Stays in Prison; 4) Computers to Match Man by 2029; 5) Binge Drinking Deaths Double in 15 Years; 6) UN Calls for Death penalty Abolition; 7) Top fashion Model Says Vogue is Racist; 8) Underage Drinking Increasing in Britain; 9) Cyber-Bullying Spreads in the US; 10) Nations Pledge to End Use of Child Soldiers; 11) Global Body Part Trade Increases.

Results and discussion of online activities

The students' responses to the questionnaire are presented in Table 1. The first column contains

the survey statements. The 2nd and the 3rd columns show the Likert scale Means for responses of the students who study psychology (PS) or social work (SW). The 4th and the 5th columns display the frequencies of responses "not sure" and "agree and strongly agree", respectively. The first numbers in rows refer to the responses of psychology learners, and the second numbers – to the responses of social work learners.

As it can be seen, students of both specializations are unanimous (100%) in agreeing to the statements 2) class dictations help improve listening skills and 5) self-checking of written work raises awareness of problem areas. Other areas of dictation activities reveal a different perception. An improvement of short-term memory (ability to remember for a short period of time) what has been said is supported by 75% of psychology learners and 66% of social work students.

Prior-dictation exercises are not popular among social work students – only 42% find them useful, but more popular among psychology students – 66%. However, post-dictation exercises are supported by majority learners – 96% and 92%, respectively.

Table 1. The Means, Standard Deviations and Frequencies of Students' Responses on Likert Scale (Appendix 1)

Survey statements	Likert Mean		Likert Standard Deviation		Frequency of "not sure" responses		Frequency of "Agree + Strongly Agree" responses	
	PS	SW	PS	SW	PS	SW	PS	SW
1) dictations help to improve a short-term memory in the L2	3.91	3.92	0.59	0.41	25%	34%	75%	66%
2) dictations help to improve listening skills	4.71	4.42	0.19	0.24	–	–	100%	100%
3) prior-dictation exercises help to perform better in dictations	3.76	3.58	0.39	0.58	34%	58%	66%	42%
4) post-dictation exercises help to check comprehension	4.49	4.50	0.32	0.42	4%	8%	96%	92%
5) self-check of written dictations raises awareness of problem areas	4.85	4.58	0.19	0.24	–	–	100%	100%

Table 2. Students' responses about improving language proficiency (Appendix 2)

Statements	Means and Standard Deviations PS specialization	Means and Standard Deviations SW specialization	Computed and critical <i>t</i> values, Two-tailed Significance Levels <i>p</i>
Class dictations help to notice my own mistakes in writing	4.11 0.549	4.00 0.816	$t = 3.690$ $t > t_{crit} = 2.638$ $p < 0.001$
Prior-dictation and post-dictation exercises are beneficial for improving writing and listening skills	4.17 0.598	4.11 0.567	$t = 1.676$ $t < t_{crit} = 1.665$ $p < 0.05$

Noticing one's own mistakes and the awareness of benefits of certain learning activities are very important steps towards improving language proficiency. Students reflected on these two aspects of learning (Appendix 2) and the findings are shown in Table 2.

The 1st column of Table 2 includes two statements relevant to language proficiency. The 2nd and the 3rd columns show the Means and Standard Deviations computed for both specializations, respectively. The last column displays *t*-test data and two-tailed significance levels for each statement.

The *t*-test is the most frequently used measure in second language research when comparing mean scores for two groups. The adjustment for group size is made by using degrees of freedom *df*, which are determined by subtracting one from the number of participants in each group and then adding the two resulting numbers together. In this study, *df* = 90. Computed *t*-values for each statement are 3.690 and 1.676, respectively (Table 2). For the 1st statement, computed value significantly exceeds the critical value 2.638 at the significance level $p < 0.001$, and for the 2nd statement computed value is very close to the critical value 1.665 at $p < 0.05$. The interpretation of these findings is as follows: the difference between both groups is significant for the 1st statement, i.e. the students, who study ESP for psychology, tend to notice their errors better than the students, who study ESP for social work. There is a very slight difference between both groups: students' perceptions of benefits for improving writing and listening skills are very similar.

Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn.

1. Class dictations of authentic materials are beneficial to students at university level as they help improve listening and writing skills and raise awareness of problematic language areas.

2. Class dictations are intended for setting friendly learning environment which provides opportunities for each learner to assess his /her achievements individually by comparing written work with original transcripts of dictated materials.

3. Post-dictation comprehension exercises proved to have been beneficial.

4. Pre-teaching vocabulary might be optional depending on general students' proficiency.

The advice for language teachers is to employ the online dictation technique in language classroom in a way that is beneficial to students.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire on Online Dictation Activities

1) Dictations help to improve a short-term memory in ESP:

a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

2) Dictations help to improve listening skills:

a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

3) Prior-dictation synonym match exercises help to perform better in writing dictations:

a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

4) Post-dictation true-false exercises help to check comprehension:

a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

5) Self-checking of written dictations raises awareness of problem areas such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.:

a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

Appendix 2. Questionnaire on Improving Language Proficiency

1) Class dictations help to notice my own mistakes in writing:

a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

2) Prior-dictation and post-dictation exercises are beneficial for improving writing and listening skills:

a) strongly disagree, b) disagree, c) not sure, d) agree, e) strongly agree.

INTERNETINIS METODAS ANGLŲ KALBOS ĮGŪDŽIAMS TOBULINTI

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Šio darbo tikslas – ištirti studentų požiūrį į šiuolaikinių informacinių-komunikacinių technologijų (ICT) panaudojimo aspektą, kad diktantas padeda tobulinti klausymo įgūdžius.

Nors diktantas senai naudojamas kalbos testuose, bet jo nauda mokant(-is) kalbos niekada nebuvo aptarta. Šiuo metu diktantas, kaip reikšminga mokymo priemonė, išgyvena atgimimo etapą. Manoma, kad diktantas padeda tobulinti kalbos įgūdžius: klausymą, kalbėjimą, rašymą, gramatiką ir tarimą. Tačiau nėra jokių duomenų apie diktanto svarbą aukštojoje mokykloje.

Šiuo straipsniu bandoma atkreipti dėmesį į primirštą kalbos mokymo(-si) formą – diktantą ir ištirti galimą diktanto naudą, nagrinėjant studentų požiūrį į internetinį diktantą ir jų išvadas apie diktanto taikymą per anglų kalbos pratybas universitetinėse studijose.

Tyrimo metodui naudotos specialiai parengtos apklausos anketos, skirtos išnagrinėti studentų požiūrius į diktanto svarbą specialybės anglų kalbos klausymo ir rašymo mokymo tobulinimui. Tyrimui pasirinktos Mykolo Romerio universiteto Socialinės politikos fakulteto įvairių mokymo programų (psichologijos, socialinio darbo) studentų grupės.

Nustatyta, kad studentai teigiamai vertina internetinį specialybės kalbos klausymą ir mano, kad tokia veikla padeda tobulinti užsienio kalbos klausymo ir rašymo įgūdžius bei skatina problematinių kalbos sričių supratimą. Statistinis rezultatų apdorojimas naudojant SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) paketą patvirtina, kad rezultatai galioja už ištirtos imties ribų.

Atliktų tyrimų reikšmingumas yra tai, kad kreipiamas pedagogų dėmesys į diktanto taikymą per anglų kalbos pratybas universitetinėse studijose mokymo(-si) kokybei gerinti.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: informacijos ir komunikacijos technologijos, specialybės anglų kalba, internetinis diktantas, statistinis rezultatų apdorojimas.

Įteikta 2011-01-12; priimta 2011-03-28