

Dictation, Dicto-comp, and Related Techniques

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Using dictation as a starting point, this article shows that a good teaching technique is capable of variation and that, although some techniques may seem to be different and use a different medium, they are in fact putting the same principles of language learning into practice.

Dictation

We can describe dictation as a technique where the learners receive some spoken input, hold this in their memory for a short time, and then write what they heard. This writing is affected by their skill at listening, their command of the language, and their ability to hold what they have heard in their memory.

Dictation has been thoroughly examined as a language proficiency test (Oller and Streiff 1975). As a teaching technique, it helps language learning by making learners focus on phrase- and clause-level constructions. This focusing is accuracy based.

Dictation will be most effective when it involves known vocabulary that is presented in unfamiliar collocations and constructions, and when there is opportunity for repetition of the material. The unfamiliar collocations and constructions are the learning goal of dictation. Focusing, holding them in short-term memory, and repetition are the means of learning. Sawyer and Silver's (1961) procedure involving repetition of a dictation text over several days until it can be done perfectly is one way of putting these means into practice.

Dictation is usually a guided technique

(Nation 1990). In a guided technique, parts of the task are carried by the teacher or course designer, allowing the learners to focus on parts that help them reach wanted learning goals. In dictation, the listening part of the task is supported by the use of repetition and phrasing with pauses, while the writing part of the task is strongly supported by the provision of content and spoken form.

Related techniques

Figure 1 shows how dictation is related to several other techniques. The main difference between the four techniques is the medium of input and output. Dictation has listening input and written output. Delayed repetition has listening input and spoken output. Read-and-look-up has reading input and spoken output, and delayed copying has reading input and written output. They all involve holding language material briefly in memory before producing it. Let us now look at the three techniques other than dictation.

Read-and-look-up. Michael West (1941) devised this technique as a way of helping learners to learn from written dialogues and to help them put expression into the dialogues. West regarded the physical aspects of read-and-look-up as being very important for using the technique properly. The learners work in pairs facing each other. One is the reader, the other is the listener. The reader holds the piece of paper or the book containing the dialogue at about chest level and slightly to the left. This enables the reader to look at the piece of paper and then to

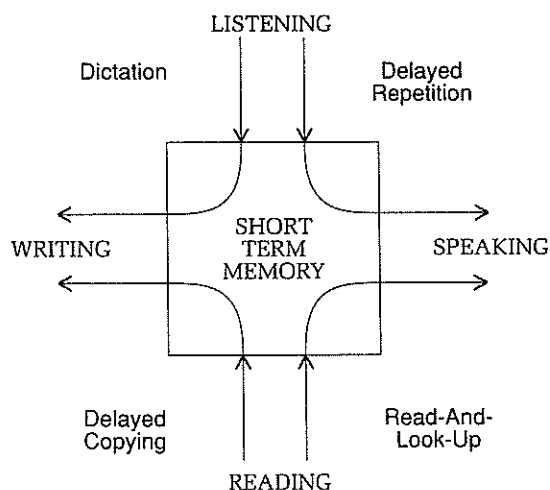


Figure 1: Dictation and Related Techniques

look at the listener, moving only her eyes and not having to move her head at all. The reader looks at the piece of paper and tries to remember as long a phrase as possible. The reader can look at the paper for as long as is necessary. Then, when ready, she looks at the listener and says the phrase. While she looks at the paper, she does not speak. While she speaks, she does not look at the paper. These rules force the reader to rely on memory. At first the technique is a little difficult to use, because the reader has to discover what length of phrase is most comfortable and has to master the rules of the technique.

This technique can also be practised at home in front of a mirror. West sees value in it because the learner "has to carry the words of a whole phrase, or perhaps a whole sentence, in his mind. The connection is not from book to mouth, but from book to brain, and then from brain to mouth. That interval of memory constitutes half the learning process. . . . Of all methods of learning a language, read-and-look-up is, in our opinion, the most valuable" (West 1941:12).

Delayed copying. This technique involves copying from a reading text (Hill 1969). An essential feature of the technique is that the learners try to hold as large a phrase as possible in their memory before writing it. So, instead of copying word for word, the learners read a phrase, look away from the text, and then write it. Unlike dictation, this technique is ideally suited for individual practice.

Delayed repetition. This technique has sometimes been used as a language proficiency test. This is because the length of the phrase that a learner can hold in memory has been regarded as an indicator of language proficiency (Lado 1965; Harris 1970). Instead of being an individual test, it can be used as an exercise either with the whole class or in pairs. When it is used as a whole-class activity, the teacher says a phrase, counts to three, and then gets the class to repeat it. The length of the phrase is gradually increased, and the pause between listening and speaking can also be increased.

These three techniques can usefully be regarded as variations of dictation, each making use of the same aspect of memory but using different media. There are further variations that can be

applied to them. One that can be easily applied to all of them is to provide some written support in the form of the main content words so that a much longer phrase can be held in memory. For example, the words *waves green up where die* are always available for the learner to look at while remembering and producing *Sea waves are green and wet, / but up from where they die / rise other waves, larger yet, / and they are brown and dry* (from "Sand Dunes," by Robert Frost). With dictation and delayed copying, the clue words can be on the sheets with spaces between them for the learners to fill in.

The few experiments with short-term memory in foreign-language learning have used memory span as a means of measuring second-language proficiency. Lado (1965:128-29) concluded:

1. Memory span is shorter in a foreign language than in the native language.

2. Memory span in a foreign language increases with mastery of the language.

3. The difference between the native and the foreign-language memory span is greater when the material in the foreign language contains the pronunciation and grammatical contrasts between the languages.

4. The relation of memory span to foreign-language learning is greater for contextual material than for numbers.

Harris (1970) developed a group-administered memory-span test. He found that "the difficulty of the test sentences appeared to be determined very largely by their length and syntactical complexity" (Harris 1970:203). Syntactical

complexity was determined by the presence of subordinate clauses. Performance on the memory-span test "correlated quite highly (from .73 to .79) with performance on standardized listening and grammar tests of English as a foreign language" (Harris 1970:203).

Although the experiments mentioned above have given valuable information on the relationship between memory span and foreign-language learning, three important questions remain to be answered: (1) Does memory-span practice (as in dictation and related activities) increase memory span? (2) Does this increase in memory span result in improvement in foreign-language proficiency as measured by a variety of tests? (3) What factors in the techniques involving memory span increase proficiency?

Dicto-comp

Dictation and its related activities work mainly at the phrase and clause level. There is a range of related techniques that work with much larger units of language. The dicto-comp (Ilson 1962; Riley 1972) is the best known example of these. In the dicto-comp, the learners listen as the teacher reads a text to them. The teacher may read it several times. Then, the learners write what they can remember without any further help. The main difference between dictation and the dicto-comp is that in dictation the learners have to remember a phrase of several words as accurately as possible. In the dicto-comp the learners have to remember the ideas in a text that is more than a hundred words long and express them

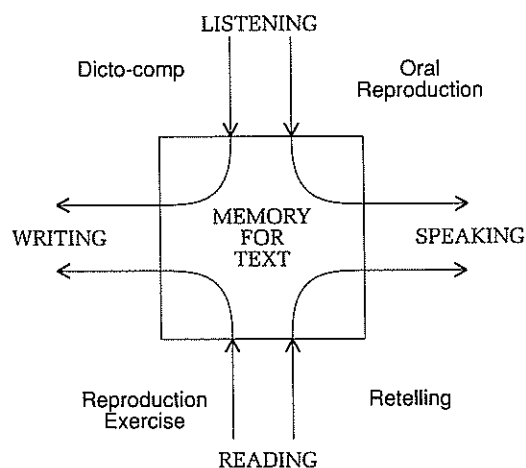


Figure 2: Dicto-comp and Related Techniques

in the words of the original or in their own words. The dicto-comp, whose name comes from *dictation* and *composition*, is an experience technique (Nation 1990). That is, it reduces the cognitive load of a task (in this case a writing task) by preparing the learners well before they do the task. In dicto-comp and its related techniques, the preparation provides the learners with ideas, language items, and text organization so that they can focus on the skill aspect, which is writing in the case of the dicto-comp.

Related techniques

Figure 2 shows how the dicto-comp is related to other techniques.

Oral reproduction. In this activity the learners listen to the teacher or a classmate tell a story, several times if necessary, and then they retell it to a partner. Often this activity is part of a chain of retelling, with new listeners, who did not hear the first telling and other retellings, coming into the classroom to listen and retell. It is also possible to do it as a group activity, with learners working together to make the retelling as detailed and accurate as possible.

Retelling. The input to this activity is reading. After the reader has reached a good understanding of the written text, it is put away and the reader retells the information to a listener. This can be usefully combined with the 4/3/2 technique (Maurice 1983), where the same information is told by the same person three times. Each time, however, it is told to someone who has not heard it before and with less time (four minutes, then three minutes, then two minutes) to retell it. This results in increasing fluency in the retellings (Nation 1989; Arevart and Nation forthcoming).

Reproduction exercise. This exercise involves reading input and written output. The learners read a text and then have to produce their own written version of it without looking back at the original. The learning benefits of this exercise can be increased if the learners are required to fill in an information-transfer diagram after reading the text. The diagram can be based on the information in the text, using a topic-type analysis (Franken 1987).

Thus, a diagram for a text of the characteristics topic type (Johns and

Davies 1983), such as a description of contact lenses or the baobab tree, would look like this:

Group	
Example	
Features	Tests or Evidence of Features

Elkins, Kalivoda, and Morain (1972), in an interesting article called "Fusion of the Four Skills," describe a chain procedure where information is read, then spoken, then written. This procedure is simply the activities of retelling and dicto-comp chained together and repeated. Elkins et al. intend that there should be a different person at each part of the chain, but as a variation there are advantages for the development of fluency if the chain is a circle of three people who have to process the same information several times in a different medium.

The four techniques—dicto-comp, oral reproduction, retelling, and the reproduction exercise—are all capable of being adapted to suit the proficiency level of the learners. The main factors, besides the content and language difficulty of the text, are (1) the number of repetitions, speed, or time that the learners have to comprehend and retain the input, (2) the length of the delay between the input and the production of the output, and (3) the degree of detail and resemblance of the input expected in the output. These factors can all be played one against the other. So, in the dicto-comp, the text may be spoken quite quickly but with several repetitions. Alternatively, the text may be spoken quite slowly and with several repetitions, but the learners are expected to write something that quite closely resembles the original.

The two sets of techniques described here have different learning goals. Dictation and its related techniques have a language-learning goal. Dicto-comp and its related techniques have a skill-learning goal. By manipulating the features that go to make up the techniques of dictation and dicto-comp, it is possible to see a range of techniques

that can be used to achieve the same goals.

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