Teaching ESL Grammar through Dictation

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For a variety of theoretical and practical reasons, dictation is a promising general procedure for promoting both conscious learning and subconscious acquisition of L2 grammatical structures. Although traditional dictation tends to be rather boring, the method allows a number of interesting and motivating variant techniques. This article describes four such variants, useful and effective dictation activities specifically designed for the teaching of grammar, that ESL teachers might easily add to their instructional repertoires.

It is a fair guess that the majority of ESL teachers in this modern communicative era probably regard dictation as an old-fashioned and rather sterile method of language instruction. Our aversion to dictation may be rooted in personal memories of high school French "dictées" or other FL dictations. Those exercises, of course, tended to follow the traditional format: the teacher read a passage to the students phrase by phrase, the students copied the passage, and the passage somehow got corrected (Valette, 1977; Speer, 1980). This sort of procedure hardly seems effective in promoting communication, interaction, or creative language use, features that we value highly in today's enlightened world of ESL/EFL instruction. I should add that our disdain may stem also, at least in part, from the tacit belief that the main purpose of dictation is to provide practice in listening comprehension. Dictation lacks appeal under this assumption, since a number of far more interesting activities for improving listening skills are readily available (e.g., Ur, 1984; Schecter, 1984).

But dictation has been experiencing a kind of revival of late, as evidenced by the recent appearance of two excellent books on the topic. The first, Davis and Rinvolucri's (1988) *Dictation: New Methods, New Possibilities*, manages to dispel many of our doubts about the instructional appropriateness of dictation. A compendium of 69 different classroom activities utilizing dictation procedures of various types, it demonstrates quite nicely that dictation should be regarded as a general *method* that permits a wide variety of different *techniques*, many of which are potentially interesting and motivating because they are designed to promote meaningful communication between students as well as to provide opportunities for creative language use. The second book,

Wajnryb's (1990) *Grammar Dictation*, also succeeds in laying our doubts to rest, though in a different way. It focuses exclusively on a single dictation technique called "dictogloss" which is interesting, motivating, communicative, and—of major importance here—specifically designed for the teaching of ESL grammar. Dictogloss is a sophisticated and ingenious procedure, an excellent example of the flexibility of the dictation format.

There are other dictation procedures which, like dictogloss, have potential value for the teaching of English grammatical structures. My objective in this article is to investigate this particular application of dictation, namely its use for ESL grammar teaching, in some detail. Although descriptions of dictation variants useful for grammar teaching can be found in a number of sources, some of which are cited below, none of these offers a comprehensive account of the issue. I shall attempt to fill the gap, at least on the methodological level, by examining four different dictation techniques (including dictogloss) designed specifically to assist ESL students in acquiring or learning English grammatical structures. My ultimate goal is a practical one: I hope that teachers wishing to utilize dictation for this purpose may find this article to be a helpful resource.

WHY DICTATION IS USEFUL FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR

Before turning to the specific techniques I have selected, I would like to briefly consider the question of rationale: why might dictation, as a *general method*, be useful for teaching grammatical structures?

Oller's notion of a "grammar of expectancy" (e.g., Oller, 1975, 1978), which includes syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge, comes to mind immediately as one theoretical construct bearing directly on this question. A learner's expectancy grammar, according to Oller, is the nucleus of his or her predictive capacity, the ability to make sense of speech by "continually formulating, modifying, and reformulating hypotheses about the underlying structure and meaning of input signals" (Oller, 1978). Dictation obviously provides an excellent means of practising and improving this general capacity, as it encourages the learner to attend not only to the forms but also to the meanings—both semantic and pragmatic—of grammatical structures. Dictation thus promotes grammatical competence in a holistic fashion, not as an isolated component of the learner's overall proficiency. This approach accords with the modern view that the learning of grammatical

forms must always occur in association with semantic and/or pragmatic factors, the latter including both sociolinguistic and discourse-related meanings (Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Celce-Murcia, 1991).

Turning next to the language acquisition model proposed by Krashen (e.g., 1982), a second plausible reason for the effectiveness of dictation as a grammar teaching method is that dictation passages may qualify as good comprehensible input, and therefore promote the subconscious *acquisition* of structures. Well-chosen texts that challenge ESL students are bound to contain a few structures at the "i+1" level. Dictation also demands active involvement and attention to meaning. According to Krashen, comprehensible input becomes "intake" under such conditions, and acquisition occurs automatically.

On the other hand, dictation activities also promote the conscious *learning* of structures. Students performing dictation exercises are generally required to transcribe the text as accurately as possible, and follow-up work usually involves various kinds of correction activities which focus directly on form. One obvious benefit of such attention to formal features is that it encourages what Sharwood Smith (1981) and others have called the "consciousness-raising" of grammatical structures. Although Krashen insists that learning cannot become acquisition, many have argued that structures which are analyzed and understood on a conscious level can ultimately, through practice and experience, become implicit ("acquired") as well. This process of "rule internalization," as it is sometimes called, may in fact be nothing more than the development of "automaticity" (McLaughlin, Rossman, & McLeod, 1983) or "control" (Bialystok & Sharwood Smith, 1985) of grammatical knowledge. If so, dictation may provide useful practice, both receptive (listening) and productive (writing), for acquiring such control.

These various arguments, as well as others that must be passed over here, strongly support the claim that dictation has potential value for grammar teaching. Perhaps we should pay brief attention as well to some of the more general advantages of the method. It is usually suitable for groups of any size and at any proficiency level. Teachers may appreciate the calming effect that dictation exercises induce (students need to be quiet and attentive to perform the required tasks). Most importantly, dictation activities are generally easy for teachers to construct and administer. Other practical advantages could easily be added to this list, but it is time to turn our attention to the four specific techniques promised earlier.

1. CLICKER-GAP PASSAGES

The first is my adaptation of a procedure suggested by Davis and Rinvolucri (1988, p. 61) called *whistle gaps*. Their technique is basically an oral cloze, with selected words deleted from the dictated text and replaced by a whistle (or a clap, or a tap on the desk). The students must copy the entire text as it is read to them, filling in the gaps with appropriate words of their choice. Davis and Rinvolucri observe that this procedure forces students to "think hard about the *meaning* of what they hear," since the missing words cannot be accurately supplied unless the passage is understood. Their main objective, then, is to improve the skill of listening comprehension.

This procedure can be modified quite easily to provide excellent practice in the use of certain grammatical categories, especially articles, prepositions, and pronouns. I propose that the "gaps" in any dictated passage consist of items from one category only. The result would be an oral "modified cloze," to use a term suggested by Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988, p. 56). I recommend further that teachers fill the gaps with the sounds made by children's toys called *clickers*, little metal devices available at most novelty toy stores. The clicks made by these toys are ideal because they are distinctive, loud, brief, and easily produced manually.

An effective procedure, I suggest, would be something along the following lines. The teacher (henceforth "T") selects a short passage containing a number of instances of the target structure. T begins the exercise by pre-teaching any essential vocabulary items that the students are not likely to know or be able to guess. T then reads the passage once at a normal speed, asking students to listen carefully and focus on the meaning; following this, the students are encouraged to ask questions for clarification. The students are then told that they will now hear the passage read again, slowly this time, with all words in a particular category (e.g., articles) replaced by clicks. Their task is to copy the passage as a dictation, filling in each click with a word that they think is appropriate. Various kinds of correction activities, including text comparison in pair work, could follow.

As an example, the following passage might be useful for teaching article usage at the intermediate level. The focus here is on choosing between *a/an* and *the*; further exercises could include the zero article or *some* as additional options. The words to be replaced by clicks during the dictation phase are enclosed in angle brackets. Recommended pause points are indicated by slashes, with sentences separated by double slashes.

A ten-year-old boy in New Mexico / has discovered <a> box / full of old Spanish gold coins / with <a> value / of around one million dollars. // <The> boys found <the> box / in <a> hidden cave / while on <a> field trip / with his grade five class / in <a> remote, hilly part / of <the> state. // Archaeologists at <the> nearest university / say <the> box had been hidden / in <the> cave / for more than two hundred years. // <The> boy found <the> entrance to <the> cave / by accident, / when he climbed behind <a> cactus plant / to get some shade / from <the> sun. // He doesn't get to keep / <the> coins for himself, / but he will receive / <a> large reward.

Exercises of this sort, which are obviously very easy for teachers to prepare and administer, would be useful as ongoing practice or "refresher" activities. I doubt that they have much value for teaching complicated structures, but perhaps the greatest merit of the technique is that it lends itself to simple but effective practice in using certain one-word structures that ESL students generally take a long time to internalize. The categories suggested above, articles, prepositions, and pronouns, are obvious examples of such structures. Other possibilities are forms of the verb *to be*, quantifiers, and perhaps even modals. The simplicity of the clicker gap dictation procedure makes it easy for teachers to provide the necessary recurrent practice in using structures like these.

The reader may well wonder why this technique is any better than *written* modified cloze. One obvious advantage is that the teacher doesn't have to prepare printed handouts, since all that is needed to conduct an oral cloze is a clicker and a suitable text to dictate. But I think there are advantages on a more theoretical level as well. In doing written cloze, students have no opportunity to reproduce the "base" of the text, i.e., all the words that are not omitted. In contrast, oral clicker-gap cloze requires students to write both the target items *and* the surrounding text. This may result in a heightened awareness of the syntactic environments in which the target forms tend to occur.

2. SPLIT DICTATION

This is an original technique which I have devised to provide practice in analyzing elements of English clause and sentence structure that are too complex for clicker gap procedures. Split dictation is suited mainly to the language needs of upper-

intermediate and advanced level ESL classes, which would benefit from instruction focusing on patterns of clausal coordination and subordination.

In order to make the best use of this method, the teacher should choose a text containing a variety of compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. The passage might include such structures as relative clauses (restrictive and non-restrictive), adverbial clauses, noun clauses, non-finite clauses of various types (participial, infinitival), clauses in coordination, appositives, direct quotations, etc. As a preparatory step, T should carefully divide the passage into "dictation phrases" which are short enough so that each can be easily copied on one hearing (i.e., without repetition), but long enough so that students have no time to relax or dawdle.

Prior to dictation, the class is divided into two equal groups, group A seated on the left side of the room and group B on the right. T pre-teaches any difficult vocabulary items necessary, and then reads the passage to the students while they listen for meaning. A short discussion period should follow, during which the students are given a chance to ask for clarification about unfamiliar words, the meaning of the text, etc. Then T tells the students that they will hear the passage dictated once again, and that they should copy it as in a regular dictation, with one important variation. Group A will copy only the parts addressed directly to them, while group B does likewise. T stands between the two groups and reads the first dictation phrase to group A, at a normal conversational speed; he or she then turns around and dictates the second phrase to group B. This pattern continues in alternating fashion, with T turning 180 degrees many times until the passage is completed. Note that there should be no long pauses between phrases, as in normal dictation; each group should be able to write its phrase during roughly the time taken for dictation of the next phrase to the other group.

Following the dictation, the students are paired up so that the members of group A work with partners from group B. The task of each pair is to reconstruct the text co-operatively, combining the two "half-texts" they have written down to produce a complete version. This is somewhat like an exercise in sentence-combining. At first glance it may seem like an easy thing to do, but bear in mind that during the second reading, the teacher gives the students no overt information (beyond the division of the text) about sentence breaks, clausal breaks, etc. As the students collaborate to replicate the original passage, then, they must pay attention to grammatical signals and patterns of coordination and subordination in order to group the dictation phrases together into well-formed

sentences. The correction stage should focus specifically on the higher-level structural organization of the text, including important features of written English like punctuation and capitalization.

Texts suitable for split dictation are easy to find. Short items in newspapers, like the following story from the *Winnipeg Free Press* (March 11, 1991), slightly modified, are often ideal. Dictated phrases are separated by slashes, and group A's "parts" are in italics.

Edmonton boy "flies" to safety

A seven-year-old boy / who was dropped from the third floor / *of a burning building* / and fell through a makeshift safety net / *says he felt like he was flying.* / Allard Shingoose dropped his son, / *little Allard Jr.*, / eight metres from their smoke-filled apartment / *as fire raged through a suite below.* / The boy ripped through / *an outstretched blanket* / and landed on his head. / *He needed seven stitches* / to close the cut / *at the back of his head.* /

"I felt like I was flying. / *I thought I was going to bounce back up,"* / he said later. /

The hard part was his landing. / "It felt like my head was going to bust," / *he said with a smile.*

Variations on this basic procedure are possible. For example, the teacher could make the reconstruction task more challenging by deliberately omitting all coordinating conjunctions from the dictated text. Alternatively, the passage could be taped in advance, with a male reading the group A parts and a female the group B parts.

3. DICTO-COMP

Although the clicker gap and split dictation techniques contain new wrinkles, they emulate traditional dictation in requiring students to transcribe a passage while it is being read to them. The third innovative procedure I would like to describe, called *dicto-comp*, introduces a radically different pattern: students must try to reproduce the passage on their own, *after dictation is completed.* This technique was first suggested by Wishon and Burks (1968), and is described in fair detail by Riley (1972) and Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988, pp. 151-2). It can be used to provide practice in any structure, from simple to complex.

As a first step, the teacher selects (or makes up) a passage containing a number of instances of the structure to be practised

(e.g., any tense or combination of tenses; the passive voice; relative clauses). Students must already have been made aware, through previous instruction, of the form and meaning of the target structure, and in fact it is probably a good idea for the teacher to review the structure prior to the dictation and point out that it will be contained in the text.

The teacher then reads the dicto-comp to the students three times, at a normal speed. The students listen but do not write until after the last dictation. After each of the first two readings, the students are allowed to ask questions about words or phrases that confuse them, and they can discuss the meaning of the passage. During these clarification sessions, the students should be allowed to jot down unfamiliar words, idioms, or expressions that are discussed. After the third and final reading, the students try to reproduce the original as accurately as possible. When they cannot remember the exact wording of a sentence, they should produce their best approximation. T should remind them at this point to pay particular attention to reproducing all occurrences of the target structure. As a last step, some version of the correction phase can be carried out. Collaboration would certainly be a useful experience here, as students could compare and modify their individual versions of the text.

As a simple example, consider the following text, a modification of a passage in Wajnryb (1990, p. 45), which is intended to provide practice in using the passive voice.

> Man is an enemy to many animals. Raccoons and foxes are trapped for their furs. Alligators are killed and their skins are used for purses and shoes. Elephants are destroyed for their ivory, which is used for jewellery. Whales are hunted for their oil. Whole species are being endangered for fashion!

This is clearly the sort of passage that would give rise to a good deal of questioning, discussion, and vocabulary learning. The teacher should encourage as much communication as possible during the clarification phases, since complete understanding is crucial to the students' success in replicating the text.

Celce-Murcia and Hilles mention an interesting variation of this technique, which I call (somewhat paradoxically) *visual dicto-comp*. Under this procedure the exercise is carried out visually, with the written passage shown for short periods of time using an overhead projector; the students read it three times instead of listening to it. Discussion occurs after the first and second "showings," and

following the third viewing, the students attempt to reproduce it.

An obvious advantage to dicto-comp, whether aural or visual, is that students are required to reproduce the target structure as part of a *whole text* which they *understand*. The meaning of this structure is therefore reinforced and internalized as a natural by-product of the task, as are discourse-related conditions on use.

4. DICTOGLOSS

The final technique I have chosen to discuss, called *dictogloss*, is the most sophisticated dictation variant I have encountered. This procedure has apparently gained a great deal of popularity in Australia, where it originated. Its leading proponent is the Australian teacher-trainer Ruth Wajnryb, whose book *Grammar Dictation* (1990) describes the technique in exhaustive detail and contains sixty suggested dictation "activities," twenty at each of three levels—pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced. The ESL teacher wishing to explore this method further would be well advised to refer to this excellent sourcebook.

Dictogloss is specifically designed to teach grammar. It resembles dicto-comp in that students are required to recreate the text following the dictation phase rather than during it, though the two techniques differ in a number of important respects. The dictogloss procedure contains four stages, which I summarize below in what I hope is sufficient detail to allow interested teachers to try out the technique with their classes.

In the first stage, *preparation*, the teacher introduces the topic of the passage in some imaginative and interesting manner. This activates the students' background schema and promotes receptivity and comprehension. T also pre-teaches any unfamiliar vocabulary items necessary in the text, and then organizes the students into groups of 3 or 4.

In the *dictation* stage, a short text containing a number of instances of the target structure (or structures) is read to the students twice at normal speed. During the first reading, the students do not write—they simply listen for meaning. On the second reading, they jot down important words and phrases that will ultimately help them to reconstruct the text. Content words like nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc., are best for this purpose; function words like prepositions, articles, etc., should generally be ignored, as students will not have time to copy everything. (T should pause 2 or 3 seconds between sentences in the second reading.)

Then, in the *reconstruction* stage, the students work in their small groups to produce their own written versions of the text. They pool the information they have written down and try to "reconstruct a version of the text from their shared resources" (Wajnryb, 1990). One student in each group acts a scribe, writing down the group's text as it emerges from discussion and negotiation. Both text interpretation and text reconstruction depend heavily on intragroup cooperation, and it is this collaborative aspect which most obviously distinguishes dictogloss from dicto-comp.

Finally, the different group versions are examined and compared during the *analysis and correction* stage, with special attention devoted to the target structure(s). There are many ways of conducting this final phase. For example, representatives from the different groups could write their versions on the chalkboard, and these could be compared sentence by sentence. Overhead transparencies, with all first sentences written on one transparency, all second sentences on another, etc., could also be used. Other variations (e.g., using photocopies) are possible. But whatever method is chosen by T, the students should be encouraged to *compare* the various versions and *discuss* the language choices made. By doing this, they will be led to understand the source of their errors, and (ideally at least) the resulting "consciousness raising" will help to promote the internalization of the correct rules.

Before giving an example of the procedure, I must emphasize one crucial point about the students' task: the aim of a dictogloss activity is *not* for the students to reproduce the original text exactly. As Wajnryb (1990) observes, the objective is for each group of students to produce "its own reconstructed version, aiming at grammatical accuracy and textual cohesion but not at replicating the original text." Students are asked to try to maintain the informational content of the dictated passage, however, so even though the actual sentences may differ in structure from those of the original text, their basic meaning should be the same. Clearly, the dictation task under these conditions becomes an exercise in creative language production rather than a matter of mere imitation.

As an example of dictogloss, I offer the following intermediate-level passage entitled "Koala Suicide" (Wajnryb, 1990, pp. 67-8). The preparation stage might begin with a warm-up featuring pictures of koalas and subsequent class discussion about them. Pre-dictation vocabulary instruction could include words and phrases like *zoo-keeper, to take one's job seriously, anxious,* and *to hang oneself.* The teacher would then dictate the following text (omitting the sentence numbers):

<1> A zoo-keeper in Japan has killed himself. <2> His wife said that he had always taken his job very seriously. <3> She told police that he had recently been looking after four koalas in the zoo and that this responsibility had made him very anxious. <4> She said he had been worried that the koalas might get sick, as this had happened at other zoos. <5> The police statement said that the man hanged himself from a tree in the zoo.

The obvious target structure here is the past perfect tense, though other structures (e.g., past tense, "that clauses" for reported speech) are practised as well.

Wajnryb (1988, 1990) discusses "the value of dictogloss" at considerable length, listing a number of important benefits of the technique, and I will not attempt to recapitulate her arguments here. Many of these benefits are obvious from my description above. For example, dictogloss simulates the real language acquisition process by treating learning as a matter of active involvement, and it promotes considerable communication and group interaction among students. One interesting advantage noted by Wajnryb is that dictogloss constitutes a kind of compromise between contemporary and traditional approaches to teaching grammar. The trend today is for ESL teachers to work towards developing their students' structural knowledge through experiential, communication-based activities, whereas students accustomed to more traditional language-teaching methods often crave "grammar lessons." Dictogloss satisfies both preferences: it is experiential, communicative, and oriented towards active creativity, while at the same time it focuses on grammatical structures in a deliberate and methodical fashion.

To conclude, dictation appears to be a promising general method for teaching ESL grammar. Specific techniques like the four described above are easy to implement in the classroom and effective in focusing students' attention on target structures. I hope this brief review will encourage ESL teachers to experiment with these and other innovative dictation techniques, with the aim of adding variety and interest to their repertoires for grammar instruction.

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