

Dictogloss Tasks to Promote Cooperative Learning and Vocabulary Acquisition

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Abstract

This article describes the dictogloss method, an integrated skills technique that promotes oral interaction and written output through the exploration of a text via its contents and language features. Students collaborated over a period of four weeks to complete a series of four tasks with the aims of increasing their breadth and depth of knowledge of business vocabulary and getting them accustomed to collaborative group-work. The paper begins with an introduction to how cooperative-learning techniques can be utilized to benefit our students. Next, an outline of the dictogloss procedure is presented, followed by a modified version that the author used in her classroom. Finally, potential benefits to our students of using task-based dictogloss activities in class are outlined.

1. Introduction

It is probably safe to say that many English instructors in Japan can imagine the scene of a teacher prompting and prodding students to speak out, in English, in class. The product is often little more than a robotic drill-like form of repetition of little benefit to students in terms of providing opportunities for form focused output or meaningful input / output. More difficult to picture is students working independently in pairs or groups, remaining on task for the duration of an activity, and using English spontaneously without being pleaded with or bribed in some form by the instructor. The writer has found that by utilizing the dictogloss technique, an output-oriented focus on form type of instruction, a majority of students seem to become actively engaged and remain focused and on task for the duration of the activity.

Dictagloss has proven to be a tool that has helped the author to motivate a great number of students to not only engage in the learning process, often completely in English, but also to enjoy working collaboratively to complete a task. Littlewood points out that (1981:68). "Indeed, it is when the results of successful listening contribute to some further purpose that the learners are most strongly and realistically motivated." A dictagloss activity requires students to utilize the four language skills all the while focusing on form. Most students seem to feel a sense of accomplishment and perceive that their English skills have improved as a direct result of the tasks. (For a sample of student comments on the activities, see Appendix A.)

2. Cooperative Learning

Teachers are usually highly trained in how to organize and utilize materials and curriculum, and with how to interact with students. It is not always the case though, that teachers spend enough thought or attention to how we can organize the class so that students can optimally interact with one another. Student interaction often becomes a neglected aspect of instruction.

Simply placing people in a room, seating them together and telling them they are a group does not mean they will cooperate effectively. True cooperation means working together to reach shared goals. In cooperative situations, individuals will seek outcomes that benefit not only themselves, but all the members of the group. Cooperative learning involves the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own, and each other's, learning.

Interaction patterns among students impacts their learning, their feelings toward the school, the teacher and other students, and their self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). In a competitive setting, students work against each other to achieve a goal that only a few students can attain. In an individualistic setting, students work by themselves to accomplish learning goals unrelated to those of others.

1. Johnson & Johnson, (1989) explain that for a cooperative group to reach its full potential, to be healthy and be more effective than competitive or individualistic efforts, a set of conditions need to be present in the dynamic:

Positive interdependence: the teacher must set a clear task and group goal to instill the feeling that the group either succeeds or fails together. Success depends on each member being connected to the group.

2. Individual and group accountability: each member must be accountable for contributing his or her share of the work required to complete group goals. Individual students who need more support and encouragement are given aid. Students learn together so that they can subsequently perform higher as individuals.
3. Promotive face-to-face interaction: a group culture of encouragement and help is formally established. Students are expected to help and encourage each other and to share resources. This includes orally explaining how to solve problems, teaching one's knowledge to others, checking for understanding, discussing concepts and connecting present with past learning. Doing so promotes learning teams to become both academic and personal support systems.
4. Interpersonal and small group skills: teachers have to teach teamwork skills just as purposefully and precisely as they do academic skills. Students engage simultaneously in academically focused task-work and interpersonally geared teamwork. Group members must know how and when to show leadership,

make decisions, communicate clearly, and defer potential group conflict.

5. Group processing: group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships. Groups need to describe what member actions are helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what behaviors to continue or change. This feedback loop can help to ensure continued group success.

Dictogloss is an activity that naturally incorporates the elements of cooperative learning listed above. Grabe & Stoller, (1997: 8) explain: "Cooperative learning requires that students work together (typically in small groups of four to six) to learn information and carry out a range of tasks. The purpose is to promote peer group support and peer instruction (cf. Vygotskian learning theory)." The successful performance of a dictogloss activity includes all of the above features and more. Students commonly work in groups of three or four, transmit and learn new information while engaging in a task. In addition, peer support and instruction, or scaffolding (Bruner, 1978), are vital components of dictogloss.

Sociocultural theories emphasize the social nature of teaching through joint activity. Building on the work of Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotsky, researchers such as Bruner (*ibid.*) describe that children learn skills by participating in authentic activities with more able peers who participate with and assist the more novice learner to perform at a more complex level than he or she could on his or her own. The novice is then able to internalize ways of thinking and problem solving needed to scaffold their learning so that they can eventually succeed in tasks on their own (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

3. Dictogloss

3.1 Standard Procedure

Wanjryb (1990) is credited with developing a new form of grammar-focused dictation termed dictogloss. It was created as an alternative method of teaching grammar through a focus on form in the shape of a classroom dictation activity. Students listen to a short passage read, usually twice, at normal speed, and write down key words and phrases. They then collaborate in pairs or small groups to create a reconstructed version of the original text. Dictogloss is an activity that incorporates the four language skills. Learners listen to a text, write what they hear then share what they have heard and written with partners by speaking and listening. Students are able to ask questions in the group about spelling and unknown vocabulary. In addition, they are encouraged to think grammatically to fill in missed information resulting from listening gaps.

3.2 Steps

1. Preparation: the learners engage in some discussion about the topic in the

upcoming text and do some preparatory vocabulary work.

2. Dictation: students listen to a short text, usually between four to six sentences, read at a normal speed by the teacher, or played from an audio recording. Learners will typically hear the text twice; the first time with pens down listening for meaning, and the second time taking notes of mostly key, or content, words. Students should not try to write everything down.
3. Reconstruction: students work together in small groups to reconstruct the text, in complete sentences, from their shared resources. Students discuss and negotiate to cohesively reproduce the text. It should be as semantically and grammatically accurate as possible to the original text but need not be identical.
4. Analysis and correction: students read their final product to compare and evaluate their answers. They should finally sort out any errors, especially focusing on form, or the targeted grammatical structure and meaning, and make corrections compared to the original text.

3.3 Modified Procedure

Dictogloss type activities have traditionally been used to get students to reflect on their own output and notice particular grammatical constructions (Wajnryb, 1990), or to focus on form. The author teaches English in the Faculty of Business Administration at a university in Tokyo, thus wanted to give her students some explicit exposure to vocabulary typically used in business English textbooks. For that reason, she designed a series of four modified dictogloss activities.

Sixty tokens (see Appendix B) were collected from a variety of Business English textbooks familiar to the author. The author sorted the tokens into three groups of twenty using the Compleat Lexical Tutor vocabulary profiler (Cobb, T. <http://www.lextutor.ca/>). Twenty tokens were from the 01~1000 frequency list, the next group of twenty from the 1001 ~ 2001 list with the final twenty coming from the Academic Word List (AWL). Finally, the author wrote a total of twenty sentences using the sixty tokens. They were separated into four dictagloss tasks (four treatments) of five sentences each with three tokens per sentence. (For a sample of sentences, see Appendix D.)

A pre-test containing the sixty tokens was administered in class during the second week of lessons. Students were instructed to record their answers on the test sheet. (For a sample of the instructions, see Appendix C). From the results of the pre-test, 117 students from four classes were placed in heterogeneous groups of four, which remained unchanged over the course of the four treatments.

3.4 Modified Steps

The dictogloss was presented as a quick-paced classroom dictation activity. Students were familiar with how a dictogloss is performed as a preview dictogloss

had been done in an earlier class to model the activity.

1. Preparation: the students are seated in their dedicated groups and are told they will hear a series of five sentences containing some business vocabulary. They are provided with a specially created task sheet to write their answers on. They are not given time to preview or discuss in their groups. Next, they are instructed to put their pens down in preparation for the task. A CD has been pre-recorded by the teacher at a slightly slower than normal speaking speed. This was done to ensure consistency of delivery across all four treatments for each of the four treatment groups. The CDs contain instructions for the entire activity; the dictogloss sentences, and pauses from start to finish.
2. Dictation: for the first listening there is a fifteen second break between each sentence. Students have previously been told they should discuss what they have heard in that time but to not write anything. For the second listening, students are told to write down key words and phrases using a black or blue pen, not a pencil, while listening. There is a fifteen second pause between sentences, giving students ample time to individually write what they have heard.
3. Reconstruction and analysis: At the end of the second listening students have ten minutes to share what they have heard and recorded with each other. When time is up, students listen a third time and add any missing information to their sentences. They have ten minutes after the final listening to reconstruct the sentences from their shared resources. They are told to reconstruct the sentences exactly as they heard them and that all final answers must be exactly the same for every student in the group.
4. Correction: students are instructed to use a red pen for the correction phase. One answer key is provided to each group and students make corrections to their sentences in red pen. The focus vocabulary on the answer sheets is glossed with a Japanese translation provided. All task and correction sheets are collected after ten minutes. (For a sample of a correction sheet, see Appendix D.)

Conclusion

Dictogloss is a tool that embodies a variety of principles of language learning in both the affective and cognitive domains. Positive group interaction and interdependence can have an impact on student attitudes towards working together to reach a common goal. It can set the scene for a more active form of learning by encouraging students to communicate and collaborate in order to successfully complete the activity thus giving them a sense of achievement and autonomy. The only way the task can be completed is by using the target language. Learners have no choice but to communicate in English if they are to successfully complete the task. This gives dictogloss, a challenging and

rewarding activity, the potential to seriously enhance our students' language skills and attitudes towards using English to communicate in the classroom. Most importantly, according to survey feedback, the vast majority of students report becoming very engaged in the task. They cooperate and collaborate with their peers to achieve a common goal, and get a lot of satisfaction doing the activity. Finally, if properly introduced by the instructor and effectively utilized, dictogloss can serve as a motivating factor for students to take part in meaningful form focused activities that can eventually help them to become more active and collaborative members of the classroom learning-community.

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Appendix A - Student Comments

Collaborative benefits of group-work:

- I enjoyed the activity because I've [sic] the chance to talk with my group members and we exchanged our ideas and finally made the sentences perfectly.
- To cooperate with group members were [sic] exciting.
- My team helped me in the dictogloss very much.
- First time, I could not hear much. But some time later I could hear a little. I was very happy.
- The dictagloss is very difficult to me but it's very instructive for me.
- It was little bit hard. I sometimes felt disappointed myself but my friends helped me then.

Perceived improvements to the four skills and vocabulary:

- Dictagloss activity was a great experience to improve my listening and writing skill. Talking with my group members was very interesting.
- This activity is very useful to improve my English skills. And I got a custom [sic] that I always listen carefully.
- The rule to speak only English was good for me. My speaking ability was improved by this rule.
- Since we must think about the sentence's meaning, I got a listening ability, reading ability and writing ability
- I think my listening ability improved!
- Dictogloss activity was especially effective for improving listening skills
A fresh listening training type, it's good!
- It is very useful for me to improve my listening skill and remember many business words.
- I think dictagloss style activity really helps me to understand the meaning of the vocabulary well.
- I could learn a lot of business vocabulary which I didn't know that [sic].

Appendix B – List of Sixty Tokens

Treatments A through D contained five tokens from each frequency list for a total of fifteen words per treatment:

1-1000 frequency list=1

1001-2000 frequency list=2

Academic Word List=AWL

TREATMENT A: meeting (1), signature (1), consider (1), profit (1), appointment (1), congratulate (2), formal (2), audience (2), confidence (2), reputation (2), respond (AWL), schedule (AWL), dynamic (AWL), export (AWL), terminate (AWL)

TREATMENT B: description (1), experience (1), introduce (1), losses (1), manufacture (1), information (2), polite (2), desk (2), loyal (2), repair (2), colleague (AWL), contract (AWL), invest (AWL), overseas (AWL), procedure (AWL)

TREATMENT C: suggest (1), exchange (1), report (1), propose (1), gains (1), apologize (2), frequent (2), promptly (2), request (2), staff (2), edit (AWL), brief (AWL), objective (AWL), analysis (AWL), chart (AWL)

TREATMENT D: possible (1), refuse (1), develop (1), market (1), opportunity (1), convenient (2), discuss (2), informal (2), advise (2), solve (2), document (AWL), function (AWL), previous (AWL), corporate (AWL), ensure (AWL)

Appendix C – Instruction Sample From Rating Sheet

Word Rating Sheet

Name: _____ Student number: _____

Class name / number: _____ Department: _____

このページとページの裏の単語を読み、どの程度その単語を知っているかを1～4の番号で答え、3、4の場合は指示に従ってそれぞれ記入してください。

1 = その単語をまったく知らない。

2 = その単語を見たり聞いたりしたことがあるが、意味は分からない。

3 = その単語の意味を知っている。意味は_____である。(番号の右の欄に単語の意味を日本語で書くこと。)

4 = その単語の意味を知っていて、それを使って英文を作れる。(番号の右の欄に単語の意味を日本語で書き、「4」の欄にその単語を使った英文を書くこと。)

記入例：



単語	番号 (1, 2, 3 or 4)	3、4 単語の意味を日本語 で書きなさい。	4 その単語を使った英文を書きなさい。
sell	4	売る	I will sell my old comic books at Book-Off.
summary	2		
calculate	3	計算する	
applaud	1		



Appendix D – Sample of Glossed Sentence Correction Sheet for Treatment A

DICTAGLOSS CORRECTION HANDOUT (A)

Instructions: Check your answers. Correct all spelling and punctuation mistakes and write down any missing words.

1. Because this is a **formal** agreement, please write your **signature** on this sheet before I can **consider** offering you the position of manager.

formal: 正式な

signature: 署名

consider: 考慮する

2. After the **meeting**, many participants **congratulated** the young CEO for making such a large **profit** for the company.

meeting: 会議

congratulate: 祝う

profit: 利益

3. The **audience** listened carefully to the **dynamic** presenter as she carefully **responded** to all their questions.

audience: 聴衆

dynamic: 動的な

respond: 応じる

4. I don't have much **confidence** that our order will arrive on **schedule** from the ABC Company since they don't have a very good **reputation**.

confidence: 自信

schedule: 定刻

reputation: 評判

5. The company website said they had **terminated exporting** to Japan and if you needed to speak to a manager you must make an **appointment**.

terminate: 終了する

export: 輸出する

appointment: 予約

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