

Todd Hull, 2023

Volume 7 Issue 2, pp. 114-124

Received: 26<sup>th</sup> April 2023

Revised: 01<sup>st</sup> August 2023, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2023

Accepted: 21<sup>st</sup> August 2023

Date of Publication: 15<sup>th</sup> September 2023

DOI- <https://doi.org/10.20319/pijtel.2023.72.114124>

This paper can be cited as: Hull, T. (2023). *Communicative Dictation for Adult Foreign Language Learners in University Academic Contexts*. *PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning*, 7(2), 114-24.

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## **COMMUNICATIVE DICTATION FOR ADULT FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC CONTEXTS**

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### **Abstract**

*Dictation is an effective tool in facilitating foreign language acquisition. But traditional dictation, while having some benefits for acquiring a foreign language, was neither engaging for students nor did it focus on the actual, real world communication that is fundamental to the communicative approach of today. Dictogloss introduced communicative dictation and has been used widely in classrooms around the world. But, however dictation is done in the classroom, it can 1) feel to adult learners at least somewhat like something for children and 2) even when designed for adults, typical dictation topics can be perceived to be more at home in a language institute than an academic university setting. This paper will summarize types of traditional dictation, outline the characteristics of dictogloss and how it is an improvement on traditional dictation, review some*

of the research on its additional benefits for acquiring a foreign language, and suggest how it can be used at the university level.

### **Keywords**

*Dictogloss, EFL, Listening Skills, Dictation, Communicative Approach, CLIL*

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## **1. Introduction**

Dictation has not been popular with students. And its bad reputation has often been well-deserved due to the traditional format of a teacher reading a passage, students writing it down, and then everybody forgetting about it (unless students are informed that it will be on a test in which case it might be remembered for a bit longer). But the benefits of dictation are significant and it is thus something foreign language educators should try to include in their courses. Fortunately, dictation has come a long way since the days of the one-room school grammar teacher rapping the knuckles of those who could not (or would not) get every word right. Dictogloss, which integrates dictation with the communicative approach, updates dictation for the modern era. The communicative approach is “based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning.” (British Council 2017). In a dictogloss activity or task, learners have to communicate rather than being passive recipients of linguistic input. Oppong Frimpong (2021, p. 1) emphasizes that this type of interaction between learners greatly aids in their acquisition of a foreign language. Before outlining the characteristics of dictogloss, a review of traditional types of dictation is in order.

## **2. Traditional Types of Dictation**

Alkire (2002, p. 1) outlines four types of dictation and their benefits to language acquisition:

1) **Phonemic Item Dictation:** In this type of dictation, learners are presented with individual sounds of a language. The teacher may read out letters of the alphabet that represent sounds that are traditionally challenging to non-native speakers. Distinguishing between the voiced bilabial stop represented by the letter *b* and the voiced labiodental fricative represented by the letter *v* is one example. Many speakers of other languages have trouble with the liquid lateral represented in English by the letter *l* and the retroflex represented by *r*. The voiceless bilabial stop represented by the English letter *p* and the voiceless labiodental fricative spelled with an *f* is a third example.

Alkire states that the benefit of this type of dictation is that “it increases the students' ability to recognize the sounds of a language and their contrasts, thereby facilitating their accurate production.”

2) **Phonemic Text Dictation:** Here students listen to a text and transcribe it using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) or another system designed to accurately reflect sounds of a language independent from their spellings. It is “valuable as a way to understand how English sounds change in connected speech.”

3) **Orthographic Item Dictation:** In this type of dictation, individual words are read out loud and students must write them correctly. Alkire comments that this is similar to a traditional spelling test common in classrooms around the world and is “useful for reinforcing the correlation between the spelling system and sound system of a language.”

4) **Orthographic Text Dictation:** In this learners hear a whole passage and write it down. “This is the classic dictation exercise all foreign language teachers are familiar with. Besides reinforcing the spelling/sound correlations of English, the orthographic text dictation uncovers comprehension and grammatical weaknesses in learners which the teacher can analyze and address in future lessons.”

He cites Finocchiaro's (1969, p. 3) summary of the value of dictation overall for foreign language learners: “[Dictation] ensures attentive listening; it trains pupils to distinguish sounds; it helps fix concepts of punctuation; it enables pupils to learn to transfer oral sounds to written symbols; it helps to develop aural comprehension; and it assists in self-evaluation.” Thornbury (1997, p. 2) reviews the research supporting the benefits of “noticing” in the foreign language classroom, namely that when learners become consciously aware of aspects of the language they are studying (specifically, “noticing both what is present in input and absent in output”), they become better users of the language. Dictation allows learners to do this noticing, to be consciously aware of language points they need for communication in the target language. J.D. Brown (2005, p. 30) says of dictation that:

*The skills involved are at least listening comprehension and writing, but different aspects of these two skills come into play as well...distinguishing between phonemes is important as are grammar, vocabulary, and spelling knowledge. In short, dictation is*

*testing many different things at the same time and does so in the context of extended text. Advocates...would argue that such a test is complex in a similar fashion to the ways actual language use is complex. They would also argue that language tested in integrative procedures like dictation...is being tested in the more natural, or at least larger, context of extended text.*

### **3. What is Dictogloss and How is it Used?**

Dictogloss is a type of dictation where learners hear a text and then attempt to reconstruct it in collaboration with other learners. It was developed in the 1980s by Ruth Rajnryb and then expanded to book length treatment in her *Grammar Dictation* (1990). The classic dictogloss activity proceeds in four stages:

1. *Preparation*, when the learner finds out about the topic of the text and is prepared for some of the vocabulary.
2. *Dictation*, when the learner hears the text and takes fragmentary notes.
3. *Reconstruction*, when the learner reconstructs the text on the basis of the fragments recorded in stage 2.
4. *Analysis and correction*, when learners analyze and correct their texts. (Rajnryb, 1990, p. 7)

She also elaborates five elements of the collaborative aspect of the procedure that accord with the communicative approach:

- a) a short, dense text is read (twice) to the learners at normal speed;
- b) as it is being read, the learners jot down familiar words and phrases;
- c) working in small groups, the learners pool their battered texts and strive to reconstruct a version of the text from their shared resources;
- d) each group of students produces their own reconstructed version, aiming at grammatical accuracy and textual cohesion but not at replicating the original text;
- e) the various versions are analyzed and compared and learners refine their own texts in the light of the shared scrutiny and discussion. (Rajnryb, 1990, p. 5)



acquisition in their study of learners in a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) context when learners working in pairs outperformed those working individually. Smith (2013, p. 69), in addition to providing practical advice for implementing dictogloss in the classroom, aligns with the general consensus on the benefits of the procedure, stating that it “promotes communicative competence through the use of all four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking)...Dictogloss also encourages an understanding of both content and organizational structure of a text and its language features,” though she notes that there is an imbalance in the research on listening comprehension when in fact she says that it promotes all four skills as well as improving grammatical accuracy. Vasiljevic (2010, p. 46) adds that in contrast to just giving students a list of discussion questions, “in a dictogloss class, students’ interaction is much more natural,” one of the main tenets of the communicative approach. The process of listening and then reconstructing the text can aid in the academic skill of note taking. (Mujazin et al., 2022, p. 316)

Before each dictation activity, Rajnryb starts with a preparation phase. Research supporting the main part of a dictogloss activity, listening to a text and then collaborating with others to reconstruct it and solving problems using the real world using real communication, is fairly well established. But less emphasized is a body of evidence that the preparation phase also facilitates learning. This step “primes” the brain for learning. Emblematic of the literature on priming is the American National Institutes of Health (NIH) statement that “researchers found that prior exposure to ... categories...primed the brain for learning” (Reynolds, 2022) in a summary of a study by Unger and Sloutsky (2022, p. 1001), who state that “incidental exposure did produce a ready-to-learn effect, even when learners showed no evidence of robust category learning during exposure.” So the preparation phase plays an important and underemphasized role in priming the brain for learning.

Some dictogloss activities use predicting in the preparation stage. For example, before a dictogloss activity involving a text about an environmental incident, the teacher may present students with some key terms from the text such as: rainforest, animals, oil, corporation, indigenous people, court, compensation. Students are then asked to predict things about the incident and guess the content of the text. However, prediction may not be popular with all adult learners. Kavaliauskienė and Darginavičienė (2009, p. 6) found that only 42% of law school students found this stage useful. While 66% of graduate school psychology students supported it, that is still not a high number, especially in comparison with the 92-100% of both groups who

believed that dictation improved listening skills; that post-dictation exercises aided in comprehension; and that dictation usefully highlights issues with grammar, spelling and punctuation. While prediction is beneficial for learning, other types of preparation can be used for learners who do not show a favorable disposition towards prediction. Ferlazzo (2011) omits the prediction stage from his summary of the steps of a dictogloss activity. And this paper, while not rejecting prediction for adult learners, holds that it is better in the language institute setting than the university classroom.

## **5. Dictogloss and Adult Learners**

Dictation is useful for acquiring aspects of a foreign language. But it faces the problem of being unpopular with students due to its traditional rote learning characteristics. Also, while it shows efficacy in aiding language acquisition, in traditional dictation students are not using that language in a natural way. They are not communicating in classrooms where communication is the explicitly stated goal. Lack of student interest and lack of real world communication in traditional dictation are the main gaps Rajnryb (1990, p. 1) set out to fill in developing dictogloss. She states that it addresses the issue of student disengagement by offering dictation tasks in which “learners are actively engaged in the learning process.” And she adds that the element of meaningful communication in a dictogloss task “requires learners in the classroom to interact with each other.” The increase in student motivation that Dictogloss offers can help address the lack of progress in foreign language acquisition raised by educators assessing national efforts to improve language proficiency. (Tipprachaban, 2022, p. 2)

The topics in Rajnryb’s book, *Grammar dictation*, are geared towards adult learners (she specifically says that her method is for learners fifteen years of age and above). But her topics often feel more like those for private language institutes than for the university classroom. For example, some of the topics her lessons for advanced adult learners are: life after death, sleep patterns, middle children, and school uniforms. (To be fair, she also has some discussions that would fit into a university classroom like guns and the law.) Many of the dictogloss lessons and resources around the world center on similar topics to Rajnryb’s. There is nothing wrong with them, but topics for the university classroom include subjects such as critical media literacy, the legal implications of one’s beliefs about the heritability of personality traits, and the feasibility of

renewable energy. These topics, while more advanced than those of the learning environment of the language institute, nevertheless lend themselves to dictogloss.

## **6. Dictogloss in the University Classroom**

The general format proposed for incorporating dictogloss into the university classroom is to start with a dictogloss activity and then, after learners have reconstructed the text, add more writing and speaking practice. Learners respond to the topic in writing and then discuss their ideas with their classmates.

The preparation phase for a dictogloss activity in a university classroom in East Asia such as in Japan or South Korea would often involve learners expressing an opinion about a general idea concerning the topic. For a lesson on renewable energy students might be asked to think of one type of renewable energy and list some of its benefits and limitations. For the topic of immigration, students could list one pro and one con of immigration in their country. Before a lesson on the branches of government and their powers students might be asked to write a few sentences about a time in the history of their country when one branch assumed too much power. After expressing their ideas, students would discuss them briefly with a partner.

The passage that they hear for the main dictation part of the dictogloss activity would represent a more specific statement or claim related to the topic. For a lesson addressing renewable energy, they might listen to an opinion from an advocate of renewable energy stating that the failure of the world to move more quickly towards 100% renewable energy is political and not due to any technical constraints. For a lesson concerning the implications of the heritability of personality traits, they could hear an expert in the field state that 50% of the variation in human personality is genetic, but that that does not imply genetic determinism or justify broad statements such as that criminals cannot ever become productive members of society. For a lesson for teachers in training, they might listen to a statement from a cognitive scientist asserting that learning happens best in an “analog” classroom in which there is very limited use of technology.

After completing the dictogloss procedure of reconstructing the texts in collaboration with classmates, students respond in writing and then share their ideas orally with classmates. Since this is an in-class activity where time is limited, their written response would be in the form of a single paragraph. This is a good way to reinforce and practice writing formats such as reasons-examples, cause-effect, opinion, opinion with counterargument, and any other writing formats



common in academic settings and useful for standardized tests like the TOEFL and IELTS. After learners have responded to the text in writing, they then exchange their ideas with classmates to give speaking practice. To add listening and comprehension practice, students could be required to take notes on their interlocutors' ideas before responding to them in a naturalistic and conversational format.

## **7. Conclusion**

Dictogloss has traditional dictation's benefits of focusing learners' attention on necessary language points through promoting noticing. Thornbury (1997, p. 2) It also includes benefits such as sharpening the skills of distinguishing sounds in a language, putting those sounds into writing, and aiding comprehension Alkire (2002, p. 1). In addition, dictogloss has modernized the practice of dictation and brought it into the era of communicative language learning and teaching by adding the element of real world communication that students must engage in to successfully complete a dictogloss activity (British Council, 2017). While the topics that Rajnryb and other practitioners of dictogloss use are for adults, those topics are often more at home in the classrooms of language institutes than those of the university. But the dictogloss procedure can be seamlessly integrated into topics appropriate for university classrooms and is a valuable tool for university level EFL educators. A profitable area for future research would be attending to group and pair dynamics during dictogloss interactions to ensure that all participants are contributing according to their level of language competence.

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