

# The Effect of Transcribing on Beginning Learners' Dictation

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**Abstract**—In its undulating trend through the history of language teaching, dictation has been used as a tool in both teaching and testing. It has been employed as a tool for either helping learners with some language skills/sub-skills or testing their language proficiency. Considering that dictation tests tap learners' overall language proficiency, it is logical to think that improving learners ability in taking dictation improves their language proficiency. In this study we have considered dictation as an end, have proposed transcribing as a technique to improve it, and have examined the effect of transcribing on dictation. Thirty one elementary female learners participated in this study. The findings of the study show that transcribing has a significant positive effect on learners' dictation. Therefore, we recommend transcribing exercise as one of the techniques to help elementary learners improve their language proficiency.

**Index Terms**—dictation, transcribing, elementary EFL learners

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dictation can be used both as a useful device in testing and a helpful activity for learning (Morris, 1983; Sawyer & Silver, 1961). It can also be employed as a teaching device (Whitaker 1976). Dictation was firstly associated with the Grammar Translation Method and was neglected with the dominance of Audiolingual Method in the 1960s. However, it regained popularity later because a) it highly correlates with tests of overall language proficiency and b) it tests language as a whole as opposed to testing language components in isolation.

To date, dictation has been used either as a tool to improve language skills, especially the listening skill, or as a device to measure language improvement. (P. Habibi; Nemati; & S. Habibi, 2012; Jafarpur & Yamini, 1993; Celce-Murcia, 1996; Gilbert, 1996; Davis, 1995; Rost, 1991). In other words, it has been used as a means to other ends not as an end itself. As mentioned earlier, the ability in taking dictation correlates directly with overall language proficiency. Therefore, we can conclude that considering dictation as an end and trying to improve it contributes not only to the improvement of a single language skill or sub-skill, but also to overall language proficiency. But the question is: How to improve dictation?

There have been, to the best of our knowledge, almost no attempts to find valid ways to improve dictation. Since the input (aural), the output (written), and the process in both dictation and transcribing are almost the same, transcribing seems to be a valid way to practice and improve dictation ability. Hence, this study tries to find if transcribing influences learners' dictation-taking ability.

In short, unlike previous studies, in this study we consider dictation as an end and examine the effect of transcribing exercise on it. To this end, we try to answer the following question:

1. Does transcribing have a significant effect on elementary EFL learners' dictation ability?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Definition of dictation*

Dictation is the activity of writing down what is orally said or read. Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 157) have defined dictation as

a technique used in both language teaching and language testing in which a passage is read aloud to students or test takers, with pauses during which they must try to write down what they have heard as accurately as possible.

Davis and Rinvulcri (2002) have also defined dictation as decoding sounds in aural input and then recoding them in writing.

### *History of dictation*

Influenced by changing attitudes in the area of language teaching, dictation has waxed and waned in popularity throughout the history of language teaching. It is closely associated with Grammar Translation Method. By the

emergence of Natural Method, using dictation declined since this method gives more weight to oral skills of listening and speaking while teaching reading and writing is discouraged.

The sharpest decline in using dictation occurred in the 1960s by the development of Audiolingual Method (Brown, 2007). The proponents of this method, in which language is basically seen as speech not writing, “either directly attacked it [dictation] or tacitly rejected it by failing to make any mention of it whatsoever” (Stansfield, 1985, p. 124). This opposition against dictation was mainly because of its failure to test components of language in isolation. Throughout the sixties, dictation was ignored due to the dominance of Audiolingual Method.

Dictation regained legitimacy in 1970 when search for integrative measures of language proficiency began. Different varieties of dictation have continued to be used as a valid device in teaching and testing since then.

#### ***Different types of dictation***

Dictation has been used in different forms. In fact, the base form of dictation is standard dictation and other forms have emerged to compensate for its shortcomings. They include partial dictation, elicited imitation, dicto-comp, and dictation with competing noise (Farhady, Ja'farpur, & Birjandi, 2007).

Partial dictation seems to be the best of all types of dictation, especially for the purpose of this study. In standard dictation the passage is usually played for three times. In the first and third times, the passage is read at normal speech rate without any pauses. The second time, however, includes pauses in order to allow time for the test-takers to write what they hear (Jafarpur & Yamini, 1993). Partial dictation is deemed to be a better measure than standard dictation on the grounds that in partial dictation the second reading which is deviant from real-life discourse can be discarded. Moreover, it is more economical and more natural (Johansson as cited in Cai, 2013) and needs less subjective judgment on the part of rater (Oller, 1979).

Partial dictation, in this study, is also preferred to elicited imitation since elicited imitation takes too much time to administer. Partial dictation also seems to be a more appropriate measure for beginners than dicto-comp and dictation with competing noise (Farhady, Ja'farpur, & Birjandi, 2007). Therefore, in this study partial dictation has been used as the measurement tool.

#### ***Controversy over dictation***

##### ***Dictation as a testing device***

Dictation as a device in both testing and teaching has been controversial in the area of SLA.

From a testing point of view, dictation is widely known as a measure of overall language proficiency. However, it has met a lot of opposition. Lado (1961), for example, believes that dictation is not a good device to measure any aspect of language on the grounds that everything is dictated to test takers. Harris (1969, p. 5) considered dictation as an ‘uneconomical’ and ‘imprecise’ testing device. Believing that it tended to test many interrelated elements at the same time, Rivers (1968) accepted dictation as a teaching device but not as a testing device. Dictation was also considered as a complicated technique which was of little use in real life activity (Bennett, 1968).

This disapproval of dictation may have been the result of inadequacies of the psychological and linguistic theories which were used as the basis of language teaching methods in the 1950s and 1960s. Based on structural linguistics which was dominant then, language is broken down to its component parts and each part is taught and tested in isolation. According to Behaviourism, learning involves habit formation. This is achieved in language learning through oral practice. Consequently, dictation which integrated different skills especially listening and writing with less emphasis on speaking was rejected (Jafarpur & Yamini, 1993).

Regarding language skills, dictation has been mostly used for assessing listening. Despite the above-mentioned disadvantages, its advantages speak well for the inclusion of dictation among the possibilities for assessing listening comprehension. It is easy to construct, administer, and score in a well-established scoring system (Irvine, Atai, and Oller, 1974).

In spite of oppositions, dictation as a testing device has enjoyed some support. Advocates of dictation as a testing device contend that it is a good measure of language proficiency, inasmuch as it highly correlates with other integrative language proficiency tests such as TOEFL and cloze (Oller 1971; Irvine, Atai, Oller, 1974, Jafarpur and Yamini, 1993). Oller (1971), for example, contends that dictation “seems to be the best single measure of the totality of English language skills being tested” (p. 255).

##### ***Dictation as a teaching device***

Regarding the teaching value of dictation, a few believe that it is not of help to the improvement of learners’ proficiency. Cartledge (1968) believes that dictation cannot be considered as a teaching device. It can only provide learners with some practice in oral comprehension. Similarly, Jafarpur and Yamini (1993) have questioned the effectiveness of dictation as a teaching device.

On the other hand, proponents of dictation advocate it as a useful teaching device which can help learners improve some aspects of their language proficiency. Dictation has been proved to be a valuable device to improve learners’ listening comprehension (Sawyer and Silver, 1961; Finocchiaro, 1969; Oller, 1971; Pappas, 1977). Oller and Streiff (1975) believe that dictation invokes learners’ internalized expectancy grammar. It also makes learners listen attentively, trains them in distinguishing sounds and converting spoken language to written language. Acknowledging the testing function of dictation, Morris (1983) views dictation as a learning activity which helps learners in listening and writing more accurately as well as in reinforcing grammar and vocabulary. Whitaker (1976) claims that “... wherever aural

comprehension is prized, together with literacy and ability to read the FL [Foreign Language], dictation may be found to be both profitable for teaching, and valid for testing” (p. 92). Valette (1964) also believes that dictation helps learners in language learning by invoking their awareness of the written language. Lambert (1986) and Kelly (1992) believe that the combination of input from two channels, eye and ear, is more effective for second language comprehension and memory than one-channel inputs. Jafarpur and Yamini (1993) also consider dictation as a dual-access processing model which “...allows the language learner to both comprehend and produce the language in the context of meaningful discourse” (p. 360).

#### **Validity of dictation**

Dictation is a valid technique to measure language proficiency (Kaga 1991; Farhady and Malekpour, 1997), although it may be inconsistent with current research and theory on communicative competence. It is believed that language proficiency consists of several interrelated components, not just one language component which can be measured by dictation (Bachman & Palmer 1981, 1982). Using dictation is also incompatible with the theoretical perspectives on second language proficiency provided by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1981). These emphasize the importance of language for communication in real life. In contrast, dictation requires a verbatim recall and taking down of what is auditorily presented, an activity which is rarely related to daily communication.

In answer to the above-mentioned contradictions Fouly and Cziko (1985, p. 556) stated:

The theoretical basis of the dictation procedure as a measure of language proficiency lies not in any superficial similarity to “real” language use, but rather is grounded in the similar types of knowledge [expectancy grammar] and psychological processes believed to underlie both language use and dictation test performance (p. 556).

Validity of dictation has also been questioned by those critics who believe that dictation measures lower-order skills rather than higher-order ones (Alderson, 1978). However, some believe that successful performance in dictation entails using both lower and higher order abilities (Oller, 1979, Cohen, 1980). Cai (2013), for example, compared partial dictation and gap-filling on summaries which is believed to measure more higher order skills. He concluded that “partial dictation measures the same construct as test forms believed to measure more higher-order abilities” (p. 177).

### III. METHOD

#### **Participants**

A total of 31 elementary female learners aged between 14 and 16 participated in this study. The participants, who were attending TICE English Language School in Sabzevar, Iran, were randomly assigned to control (N=15) and experimental (N=16) groups. The class met for 27 sessions of two hours. Both groups were conducted by the same instructor who was also the first researcher.

The subjects had learned English through print in the formal educational system of Iran which puts more emphasis on the written mode of language, especially reading, at the expense of the spoken mode. Consequently, the language spoken in the subjects’ schools was their native language, Farsi. Their only exposure to spoken English in school has been limited to listening to either their non-native teachers reading a passage or a tape/CD recorded by non-native speakers. They were chosen because they represented a block of elementary learners whose familiarity with spoken English was limited, what the nature of this study demands.

#### **Instrument**

A partial dictation test was prepared by the first researcher to serve as the instrument of the study. It was mainly chosen and adopted from the participants’ course book, “*Top Notch Fundamentals*” (Saslow & Asher, 2012) and an additional book, “*Tactics for Listening*” by Richards (2010). The latter provides some partial dictation exercises for each unit. The level and content of the book corresponds to those of the participants’ course book.

After selecting the dictations, the deleted words were checked to determine if they had been covered during the term and if they were familiar for the learners. Some deletions were replaced and some words were deleted. In deleting the words, the following points were taken into account:

1. The words to be deleted were mostly content words.
2. They were chosen in a way that they could not be easily guessed by the test-takers from the context.
3. Most of the blanks started at the second sentence.
4. For each blank only one word was deleted.

The number of deleted words and syllables for each section of the test is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
NUMBER OF DELETED WORDS AND SYLLABLES FOR THE PARTIAL DICTATION TEST

	Dictation 1	Dictation 2	Dictation 3	Dictation 4	Dictation 5	Dictation 6	total
Deleted words	2	7	8	8	9	5	39
Deleted syllables	3	8	10	11	13	13	58

Altogether, there were 58 syllables (39 words) deleted. The dictations were ordered based on their level of difficulty with the easiest one at the beginning and the hardest one at the end of the test.

The test consisted of six conversations. Dictation 1, with only two words deleted, was a conversation about giving directions and served as warm-up. Dictation 2 was a conversation in which two people were greeting. In Dictation 3

dates and months were deleted and in Dictation 4 the deleted words were related to clothing. The blanks of Dictation 5 were related to family and jobs. The last section, Dictation 6, presented a conversation in which words relevant to occupations and places were deleted.

After the test was ready, it was reviewed by two qualified teachers of the same book for appropriacy of level, relevance of content, and familiarity of the deleted words for the learners. After being judged to have face and content validity, the test was examined for reliability. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the test was found to be .84.

### **Procedure**

#### *Scoring procedure*

After the data were collected, the exam papers were scored. To ensure consistency in scoring, the papers were scored by two raters according to pre-established scoring rules. When contradictions in scoring appeared, the raters discussed the issues to reach an agreement.

The following rules were used in scoring the partial dictation test:

1. Based on Farhady and Malekpour's recommendation (1997), syllable was considered as unit of scoring. Therefore, each syllable written correctly was given a point. For example, the word *receptionist* received four points, one for each syllable while the word *great* was given only one point since it has only one syllable. The word *going* which was spelled as *doing* by some participants received only one point since only the second syllable was written correctly.
2. Spelling errors, based on Brown (2004), were ignored as long as the words seemed to have been heard correctly. An example was the word *phone* which was written as *phon* by some test-takers. However, if a test-taker wrote a word with different meaning and spelling but same pronunciation (homophone) instead of the original word, it was not given any score. Some examples of this type of error were: writing *have* instead of *how*, *leave* instead of *live*, and *were* instead of *wear*.
3. Grammatical errors such as *can* instead of *can't* were considered as errors and given no point on the grounds that they had not been heard correctly.
4. Illegible (difficult and impossible to read) words and additional words not in the original text were given no points.

#### *The experiment*

Although the participants were judged to be homogeneous by the placement test of the institute, to ensure it further, they were also given a standardized partial dictation test at the onset of the study. The test revealed that the learners of the two groups were homogeneous. Since the participants were not familiar with the nature of spoken-based classes, starting the experiment was delayed in order for them to gain some experience of such classes. Consequently, they took the pretest on the sixth session.

After the sixth session, the experiment, which took 20 sessions, started. During the experiment, transcribing exercise was assigned to the experimental group as their homework. They were required to transcribe the listening sections and the videos of each unit of their course book (the script of these parts were not available for the students). Supplementary materials of the same topic and level were also chosen from "*Tactics for Listening*".

Each session, learners' homework was checked at the beginning of the class. The teacher randomly called one student at a time to read her transcription aloud while others were supposed to check their transcriptions. If the reader made a mistake, other students corrected her. If a mistake went unnoticed by the learners, the teacher would play that part for the learners and would ask them to listen carefully in order to catch what they had missed. If the learners failed to do so, the teacher himself would provide the correct word(s) for them.

The homework of the control group consisted of only listening to/watching the same files as the experimental group without any transcribing. At the onset of each session, the participants were randomly asked some questions from their homework. Each session every student answered at least one question.

After 20 sessions, the learners sat the partial dictation posttest in Session 26. First, the subjects listened to the teacher's instructions on how to do the test. Then they listened to each conversation twice before moving on to the next one. There was a pause of 15 seconds after each playing. While listening to the audio, the students read an incomplete transcript of the recording with 39 blanks to fill in.

Then the papers were scored by the same raters who had scored the pretest and according to the same rules used in scoring the pretest. The data were finally ready for the next step, data analysis.

#### *Data analysis*

The data collected through the instrument of the study underwent several statistical analyses. First, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality were employed to examine if the data followed a normal distribution. Then Levene's test was used to test homogeneity of variances in the two groups. The results of these test revealed that the data were parametric. In other words, they had normal distribution and homogenous variances. Therefore, an independent samples *t* test was conducted to compare the means of the two groups after the intervention.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A cursory examination of the descriptive statistics, which is presented in Table 2, indicated a difference between the means of the two groups. However, further analysis was needed to determine whether the differences were significant or not.

TABLE 2  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR PARTIAL DICTATION POSTTEST

	Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
Dictation posttests	Experimental	1636	52	43.87	1.16	4.67	
	Control	1522	46	35.00	1.70	6.59	

Since the data collected through the instrument were parametric, an independent samples *t* test was employed to see whether the observed difference between the two groups was statistically significant or not. The results of this test are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3  
RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T TEST FOR PARTIAL DICTATION POSTTEST

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI LL UL	
Dictation	Equal variances assumed	4.34	29	.00	8.87	2.04	4.69	13.05
	Equal variances not assumed	4.30	25.10	.00	8.87	2.06	4.62	13.12

Based upon these test results, the difference between the dictation ability of the experimental and control groups was statistically significant. This indicates that transcribing has had a positive effect on the dictation ability of the experimental group. The effect size for this analysis ( $d = 1.71$ ) was found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect ( $d = .80$ ).

As mentioned in the Section 1 of this study, dictation is usually treated as a device to achieve purposes such as improving listening and writing abilities. Since dictation integrates different skills and sub-skills, finding a technique which helps improving dictation is helping to the improvement of more than one area of language. Finding such a skill seems to be necessary because, based on the teaching experience of the researchers, when learners practice for a dictation test, they usually look at the words/sentences to be dictated and write them down several times. This does not seem to be a valid practice since the input provided by this type of practice is different from that of the test they are preparing for. That is, in the traditional way of practicing for dictation, the input is visual. However, in dictation test the input is aural. Because of similar types of input, procedure, and output in transcribing and dictation, transcribing seems to be a valid technique to improve dictation.

Considering the positive effect of transcribing on dictation, EFL teachers' of elementary levels are advised to include transcribing exercise as one of the techniques at their proposal to develop elementary EFL learners' overall language proficiency. Learners are also advised to use transcribing when they prepare for a dictation test.

## V. CONCLUSION

Dictation has been mostly used either as a holistic measure of language proficiency or as a means to help learners develop different language skills and sub-skills. Accepting these functions of dictation entails accepting that a technique which improves dictation also helps developing overall language proficiency. This study proposed transcribing and examined its effect on novice learners' ability in taking dictation. The results show that transcribing has a positive effect on learners' dictation ability. Therefore, teachers are recommended to assign transcribing exercise as homework. Moreover, considering similar procedures of dictation and transcribing, learners are encouraged to use transcribing in order to prepare for a dictation test.

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