

The Impact of Dictation Exercises on English Majors' Language Skills

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of dictation exercises in Chinese English classrooms on the language skills of English majors. 120 participants from three parallel classes participated in a continuous experiment for 16 weeks within a semester. The experimental results show that dictation scores are significantly correlated with the overall scores of TEM4 (Test for English Majors, Band 4), indicating that systematic dictation exercises contribute to improving the listening level and dictation ability of English majors. The results also show that short-term dictation exercises are more effective for students with relatively high English proficiency. This study points out that dictation exercises, as a time-saving and effective classroom dictation practice, can be promoted and applied in English majors' classes.

Keywords

Dictation exercise, English proficiency, Language skills, Test.

1. Introduction

Dictation exercises constitute an integral component of certain national English assessments within China. Specifically, the Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM4) has consistently incorporated dictation as a segment, thereby underscoring its importance in the pedagogy of English majors at higher education institutions. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of both domestic and international scholarly investigations into dictation practices. However, some empirical studies suggest that following a regimen of dictation practice, no significant disparities are observed between experimental and control groups across various dimensions of linguistic competence[1]. Conversely, other empirical research supports the efficacy of dictation practice in enhancing listening skills[2]. Oller posits that dictation represents a form of integrative testing[3], while Heaton views it as a tool for evaluating students' listening comprehension abilities[4]. Building on this foundational research, the present study aims to empirically investigate the impact of dictation exercises within English classrooms on the language skills of English majors. Furthermore, this study seeks to determine whether two distinct types of dictation exercises—standard dictation and partial dictation—exhibit differential effects on the linguistic proficiency of English majors.

2. Theoretical Background

In the realm of foreign language pedagogy, dictation stands as a valuable and indispensable exercise [5]. Its origins trace back to the early Middle Ages when educators, constrained by the limited availability of written materials, employed this method to convey knowledge in their native tongues directly to their pupils. The adoption of dictation in second language instruction emerged during the sixteenth century amidst initial explorations into modern foreign

languages[6]. Over time, however, dictation has experienced fluctuations in its acceptance within linguistic and psychological circles.

2.1. Dictation Types

Dictation has always been considered a useful classroom activity, and various types of dictation have been developed to achieve educational purposes. Different versions of dictation exercises meet the special needs of beginner and advanced students as well as intermediate students. Oller mention five types of dictation exercises. They are: standard dictation, partial dictation, dicta-comp and dictogloss, elicited imitation dictation, and dictation with competing noise[7]. Since standard dictation and partial dictation are the main ones frequently used by language teachers, this study is focusing on these two types of dictation[8].

Standard dictation, also known as "ordinary dictation",. is requires students to write down material dictated by the teacher or played back from a recording. Typically, a passage is presented three times.

Partial dictation, also known as dictation with gaps, is similar to standard dictation, but students are provided with a written text or material where certain sections are missing. Students must listen to the oral material and fill in the blanks in the text.

2.2. Techniques Related to Dictation

According to Nation, dictation can be described as a technique from which the learners receive some spoken input, hold this in their memory for a short time, and then write what they hear[9]. 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.Nation shows us a figure on how dictation is related to several other techniques. We can see from figure 1 that the main difference between the four techniques (dictation, delayed repetition, writing , speaking) 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.

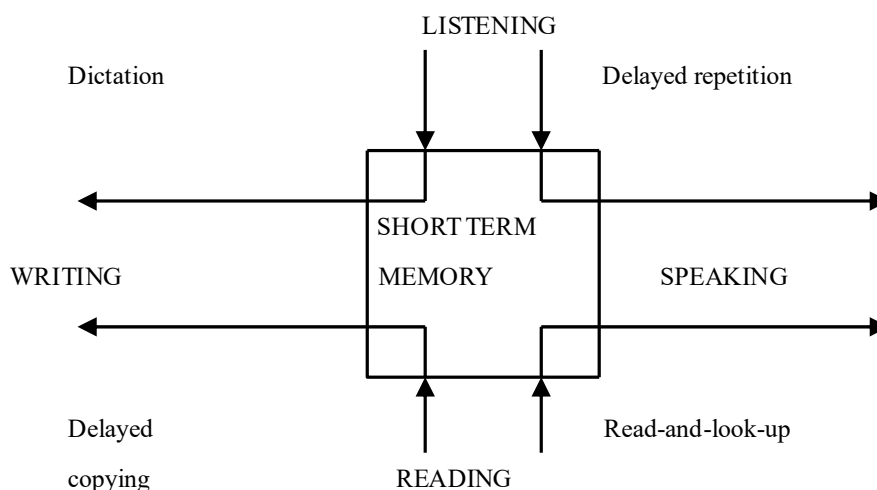


Figure 1. Dictation and related techniques

Krashen puts forth that second languages are acquired by understanding messages or by receiving “comprehensible input”[10]. Krashen’s Input hypothesis claims that an important “condition for language acquisition is that the acquirer understand (via hearing or reading)

input language that contains structure 'a bit beyond' his or her current level of competence. However, reading and listening are not enough for a learner. He or she needs to be pushed toward the delivery of a message that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed precisely, coherently, and appropriately [11]. Dictation allows the language learners to both comprehend and produce the language in the context of meaningful discourse[12]. In other words, dictation can embody the lineaments of comprehensible input and comprehensible output.

2.3. Dictation and Language Skills

The aims of language teaching courses are very commonly defined in terms of four skills: speaking, understanding speech (or listening), reading and writing.

Dictation is regarded as a complicated process and a integrative test on language skills and knowledge in many aspects, such as listening comprehension (including skills in appreciation and identification of pronunciation), knowledge on fundamental grammar and its application (i.e. the skills in endowing the listening material with structures) knowledge on vocabulary (including order, meaning and spelling of words), the ability on logical reasoning (including the skills of removing ambiguous meaning of the words and the ability of predicting), knowledge on using punctuation and the writing skills.[13] Successful dictation is the result of the influence of all these knowledge and skills, so dictation can accurately reflect the general language proficiency of a learner. Keim concludes that "students who were poorer communicators for their level were scoring poorly on the dictation, and those with better communicative skills were scoring better".[14]

3. Experimental Design and Procedures

This study aims to investigate the impact of dictation exercises on the language skills of English majors. Ninety English major university students from three parallel classes were randomly assigned into three groups: Control Group (CG), Experimental Group 1 (EG1), and Experimental Group 2 (EG2). Each group consisted of 40 students . A combination of quantitative research and qualitative surveys was employed to address the research questions.

The quantitative component included pre-tests, post-tests, and delayed post-tests. Pre-tests were conducted before the experiment to ensure homogeneity among the three groups. Post-tests were administered after the experiment to determine if there were significant differences between the two experimental groups and to observe the impact of the different types of dictation exercises on the students' language skills; the delayed post-test was designed to assess whether additional lessons would affect the students' performance in the proficiency test.

Additionally, a Likert scale survey was developed to examine whether the three groups had similar extracurricular English learning experiences. Besides the quantitative research, a qualitative survey was also designed to reveal whether students in the experimental groups believed dictation was effective in language learning.

The dictation exercises used were from "Dictation Techniques and Practice for English Majors Band 4 (Revised Edition)" , a textbook designed for practicing dictation skills among English majors. There were 30 passages for partial dictation practice and 96 for standard dictation practice. The topics of these passages range from daily life and customs to social issues. These topics are familiar to university students. For EG1, classroom dictation materials were selected from the standard dictation texts, while EG2 used materials from the partial dictation texts. The listening material used for dictation exercises were recorded by native English speakers.

All participants took part in a pre-test before the experiment using testing material from the TEM 4(2022) examination. Pre-test results showed no significant differences among the three groups in terms of writing, dictation, listening comprehension, cloze, vocabulary and grammar,

reading, and total scores. The experiment began in the second week of the semester and lasted for 16 weeks. In addition to the dictation exercises, all three groups followed the same curriculum and classroom activities in their comprehensive English classes. EG1 engaged in standard dictation exercises during the experiment, while EG2 practiced partial dictation. During the experiment, both experimental groups performed dictation exercises once a week. After 16 weeks of dictation practice, a post-test was administered to all three groups using materials from the TEM 4(2023) exam. Following the post-test, three additional class hours were arranged for the experimental groups to complete the teaching schedule, as dictation practice in class indeed required time. Furthermore, a questionnaire survey on attitude toward dictation was administered to the students in the experimental groups.

4. Findings

The result of the this study uphold the previous researches that regard dictation tests as a reasonable measure of English proficiency.[15]

Firstly, The scores of dictation exercises are highly correlated with the total scores of TEM 4 . Engaging in dictation practice can help students achieve better results in the dictation section of the TEM 4 examination.

Secondly, dictation training can help students reduce comprehension errors during dictation tasks. Systematic dictation exercises can improve students' listening abilities.

Thirdly, there is no significant difference between partial dictation exercises and standard dictation exercises in enhancing the language skills of English majors. In other words, partial dictation exercises can also help English majors improve their listening abilities. Additionally, English majors find partial dictation to be somewhat easier than standard dictation in a classroom setting.

Fourthly, English majors consider dictation an effective means of improving listening skills and grammatical knowledge. They view dictation practice as a beneficial learning exercise. A systematic period of dictation practice has a significant impact on students with relatively higher English proficiency levels.

5. Conclusion

The experiment proves that dictation is an effective practice for English majors. In Chinese English classrooms, dictation can serve as a good teaching tool, conducted in various forms of teaching activities. The results of the experiment show that both standard dictation practice and partial dictation practice can improve English majors' listening skill. So in listening class, teachers can use different types of dictation exercises to help students of varying levels improve their listening abilities. Teachers can manage practices using textbooks and audio materials. Both standard and partial dictation exercises can enhance the listening abilities of English majors and improve their performance in the dictation section of the TEM 4 exam. Since partial dictation takes less time in class and is easier to score, the results of this experiment tend to favor partial dictation in comprehensive English classes for English majors. Particularly for students with relatively lower English proficiency levels, partial dictation is more suitable. Furthermore, dictation exercises can also serve as a self-study method. Learners can choose appropriate textbooks and accompanying audio materials based on their language level for dictation practice. Learners can conduct intensive listening practice by dictating each word individually or engage in dictation exercises outside of class with peers.

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