Error Analysis of Dictation Exercises

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Introduction

History of Dictation Usage in Western Countries

While dictation was apparently employed in language classrooms as long ago as the sixteenth century (Stansfield, 1985), its usage has been well documented from the beginning of the last century. For example, in 1915 dictation was employed in the United States as a component of the Spanish, French, and German examinations conducted by the Modern Language Association of the Middle States and Maryland (ibid.). Similarly, in Australia the 1916 Higher Examination paper for French consisted of a translation exercise into French, a translation exercise into English, and the dictation of a literary passage (The University of Adelaide, 1916).

Dictation remained popular in language education from this period right through until the 1960s, and was endorsed by proponents of a range of different teaching methods, including the grammar-translation method, the direct method, and the reading method. However, dictation began to fall out of favour with the advent of the audio-lingual method, which was influenced by structural linguistics and behaviourist psychology. Structural linguistics considered language primarily to be a form of speech rather than of writing, and as a consequence written exercises in general began to fall out of favour. Behaviourist psychology considered language skills to be the result of habit formations in interaction and since dictation exercises bore no relation to this direction they were again deemed to be unhelpful for learning purposes (Stansfield, 1985). However, as late as the pre-communicative years, the 'O' level French exam in the U.K. still consisted primarily of translation and dictation exercises (ibid.). This observation suggests that the primary instruction and assessment methods used in language education did not change much from the time of the 1916 French exam until the late 1960s. More recently, however, in the several decades since the 1970s, the communicative methodology has focused on developing interactive and meaningful oral communication tasks, and the dictation of literary texts has consequently been largely abandoned.

Dictation hence appears to be best categorized as belonging to the *traditional learning* era when the grammar-translation method was current, with learning focused on the explicit study of grammatical structures combined with the translation of short passages. Indeed, this situation would appear to fit well with the current educational context in Japan, where *yakudoku* (literally "*translation reading*"; see Gorsuch, 1997) remains a prevalent teaching method (Takeda, 2002), although it is certainly no longer the exclusive methodology. Indeed, given that dictation is such a traditional activity, its absence from the Japanese assessment system is somewhat surprising. Perhaps this is due to foreign language teaching methodology in Japan having developed from the traditional study of Chinese language, which focused on meticulous and accurate translation of ancient Chinese texts. By way of contrast, the European tradition of foreign language education was more expansive, and included translation and dictation exercises as useful components of the teaching methodology.

Given that translation exercises have stood the test of time, and still do not conflict with modern language teaching methodology because of the centrality of the *meaning* of a text, perhaps dictation exercises should be adopted in Japanese education in order to foster the students' awareness of the relationship between meaning and sound in their formative years of English study.

Practical Benefits of Dictation Exercises

Dictation exercises provide students with a holistic learning experience that incorporates the essential advantage of developing a focus on both the meaning and form in oral texts. While primary to achieving successful results, listening discrimination skills alone do not usually guarantee the faithful rendition of a text (see Morris, 1983). Comprehension at the textual level is also necessary to assist students to bridge the gaps that exist in their listening skills and aural vocabularies. Further, since dictation is dealing with written form, it requires that both grammar and spelling be correctly recorded. For this reason, dictation exercises can provide substantial benefits by encouraging a simultaneous focus on, as well as the accurate processing of, both meaning and form. Indeed, this simultaneous focus on dual macro-levels is a key language skill that is typically mirrored in natural communication processes, where rapid comprehension is achieved through the simultaneous processing of both areas, with each area of language expertise complementing the other to provide consistent and complete comprehension. Hence this type of approach to language instruction is advocated by many educators, including Bacheller, who complains about the frequent over-attention that is paid by teachers to correct form at the expense of a more important focus on meaning:

> [L]anguages might be better learned if students were systematically and consistently pointed to the meaning of what is being said. This would rule out, it seems, much discrete point teaching that emphasizes surface details while casually forgetting about meaning. (Bacheller, 1980, p. 71)

Dictation is also an important source for revealing a range of routine problems, including difficulties with listening comprehension, ignorance of collocation patterns, and weaknesses in grammar and spelling. Importantly, dictation involves students in simultaneously processing multiple dimensions of their language knowledge. As Morris argues, "dictations have involved the students in an active reinterpretation of material presented to them aurally" (1983, p. 124). Indeed, this direction provides an essential foundation for development of oral communication ability, so the use of dictation clearly merits attention in the contemporary EFL classroom. Other common well-established benefits of dictation also remain relevant in modern-day Japan. For example, dictation has long been extolled by language educators because it simultaneously involves both auditory and visual senses, as well as the intelligence, in active engagement:

> In dictation we have the most perfect combination of faculties and functions. There is the accurate tongue, speaking to the listening and discriminating ear ; there is the reproductive hand, bringing back to the intelligent and critical eye that which the mind has heard by the ear - all the faculties of perception, conception and expression are alert and in harmonious cooperation. I can imagine no method that could appeal more strongly to the attention or to the intelligence. (Joynes 1900, p. xxviii cited in Stansfield, 1985, 122)

Collocation has also previously been discussed as an area of language education deserving of considerably more attention in Japan (e.g., see: Stephens & Blight, 2003; Weschler, 2003).

Collocation refers to the tendency for certain combinations of words to co-occur with high frequency. We believe that dictation should be used to increase Japanese students' exposure to oral English with attention drawn to the natural use of collocations. This approach has the potential to improve on the common situation whereby students often attempt to combine words together that are suggested from their first language. By contrast, the act of comprehending collocations and then reproducing them in written form would heighten their awareness of typical usage patterns. Another obvious benefit of dictation involves the improvement of students' sentence-level writing skills through the close attention to sequential words in an oral text. Since students are focused on understanding each consecutive spoken word, the textual relationship and grammatical fit between words is intrinsically also considered during the response process.

In summary, dictation should not be viewed as simply a test of discrete listening skills combined with knowledge of grammar and punctuation. Rather, dictation operates at a holistic level to assess a comprehensive range of skills combined with various aspects of language knowledge. For this reason, Thornbury argues that such tasks of "reformulation and reconstruction" significantly "allow for consciousness-raising at a whole range of levels : discoursal, syntactic, lexical and phonological" (1997, p. 334). Similarly, Bacheller argues that dictation is suitable for classroom usage and student assessment because "it clearly shows how well the learner is able to grasp the meaning of what is said and how well he is able to reconstruct the surface form used to express that meaning" (1980, p. 68).

Study Methodology

This research investigates the use of dictation exercises with freshmen and sophomore classes (mostly the former) of varied majors at a private university in western Japan. The dictation texts were taken from *Grammar Dictation* (Wajnryb, 1990), and were each up to eight lines long (comprising about a standard paragraph size). Wajnryb's well-known Dictogloss technique was initially attemped, but was found to be too difficult for the students, and a traditional dictation methodology employed instead. The texts were generally graded at the pre-intermediate level, with some intermediate texts being used with higher-level classes, and were regarded as appropriate in terms of difficulty level, vocabulary items, and interest value. The dictation exercises were employed on twenty-four occasions during the school year.

The weekly dictations were employed primarily for the purpose of developing listening comprehension, memory skills, and knowledge of grammar and spelling, rather than as an assessment instrument, although the test scores were incorporated (as a minor component) in the students' final grades. The exercises took twenty minutes of class time and commenced with the teacher reading the text four times (. . . sometimes five times, for more difficult texts) and the students listening and attempting to record each text word-for-word as accurately as possible. The text was first read slowly (but naturally) twice, and then read another two times with the teacher employing a degree of phonological exaggeration designed to facilitate comprehension (including pronouncing words separately and distinctly, and emphasizing final consonants, such as '-s').

After the listening stage was completed, the students got together in small groups (of about four members), and worked together to recreate the text as completely as possible. Group work is regarded as culturally appropriate for Japanese students, as well as facilitating learning through active engagement in the dictation exercises. The group stage also provided opportunities for peer correction and support, which are also important in the learning process. Students discussed their different versions and attempted to collaboratively solve any problems they

encountered. During this stage, students were encouraged to use dictionaries to check their spelling. Producing the group text therefore required a collaborative reconstruction involving the four students synthesizing their partially correct individual versions. The teacher then collected the group versions, checked and corrected the errors, and returned them so the students could learn from their mistakes.

Error Analysis and Interpretation

The errors appearing in the students' group texts are now analysed in terms of seven error categories and the significance of each type of error is interpreted. The classification of the error categories has not been taken from a previous research study. Rather, the categories were created in response to the errors that naturally occurred in the data. This approach appeared to be more appropriate than adopting and modifying classifications previously derived in writing textbooks (e.g., see Ingram & King, 1987, p. 124-125), since such classifications are not directly related to dictation exercises. However, several categories used in the present study are also presented by Ingram and King (1987) (i.e., Spelling, Punctuation, Wrong Word, and Article). The following error categories are ranked according to the most serious types being considered first in the analysis.

Wrong Word (n=90)

Many errors consisted of students recording a different word to the one that was spoken. In cases when two words sound similar, native speakers tend to implicitly identify the correct word from the topical and grammatical context being employed. However, foreign language students have smaller contextual vocabularies and more limited appreciation of the underlying grammatical rules, which explains the high frequency of this type of error in the current study. Some examples evident in the students' texts included: "voices" for "boy's", "folks" for "parks", "throw out" for "throughout", "two" for "to", "would" for "world", and "trouble" for "travel". These types of errors should always be regarded as serious since they suggest comprehension problems on the part of the students that would generally impede effective communication processes (see: Morris, 1983).

weather [whether]; trip [tip]; account [can't]; of [from]; line [lie]; over (x5) [of a]; in [with]; seen [seeing]; adept [addict]; a man [among]; at [a]; on [in]; almost [enormous]; been (x7) [being]; halt [part]; adventures (x2), adventurous (x2) [adventurers]; spend (x2) [spent]; pat [pad]; two (x3) [to]; there (x4) [their]; call [pull]; head [heard]; run (x5) [ran]; play [flames]; had [heard]; was [would]; play [playing]; complain (x2), complex [complaint]; to [too]; an [are]; running to (x2) [run into]; a parently, apartly [apparently]; mouse [mice]; counts [accounts]; cycle [circle]; bitten [beaten]; two days [today]; newspaper is [newspapers]; mam [man]; a list [at least]; or [your]; futures (x3) [features]; trouble [travel]; rabbits [rubbish in it]; trouble (x4) [travel]; voices [boy's]; buy [by]; well [while]; would [world]; passed [past]; throw out [throughout]; arrive [alive]; environment [employment]; folks [parks]; rest [least]; a [up]; advertise [advertisements]; jewel [jewellery]

Missing Final Consonant (n=33)

Another common problem area involves sounds at the ends of words when they are spoken weakly or merged with subsequent sounds, causing difficulties in the students' perception. Since the end of a word is sometimes spoken as if running into the following word (i.e., without a clear pause occurring to signify the word

boundary), it seemed likely that students might experience difficulty in this area. This type of error should also be construed as rather serious since the final consonant position often provides important grammatical information (such as the associated number or person) being referred to in the text. As Gilbert argues, "These sounds are often softened or dropped in various forms of English, but if they serve as grammar markers, they are essential for both intelligibility and listening comprehension" (2006, p. 11). Indeed, in one class, as many as three out of five groups omitted the possessive */-s /* in the expression: "world['s] youngest mother". However, this form should have been apparent from three different perspectives : listening, grammar, and collocation. Such errors hence also appear to indicate grammatical weaknesses underlying the students' aural perception, since "the most central structures of English grammar involve consonantal endings and unstressed function words" (Court, 1972, p. 288).

route [s]; it ['s]; advertisement [s] (x3) ; doctor [s]; gadget [s]; can ['t]; meet [s]; affect [s] (x4) ; resident [s]; amount [s]; feature [s]; elephant [s]; handbag [s]; endanger[ed] (x2) ; track[ed]; whale[s] (x 3) ; skin[s]; club[bed]; zone[s]; complaint [s]; account[s]; subject[s]; world['s] (x3)

Extra Final Consonant (n=13)

This error also relates to students having difficulty in correctly identifying word boundaries (see also : *Missing Final Consonant*). The students added an extra consonant sound to the end of a word on thirteen occasions in the dictation exercises. For example, the term "real estate" was incorrectly transcribed by two groups, who added / -s / to the ending. It is not clear, however, whether this error was caused by poor aural perception or a grammatical misunderstanding that the term should be represented in the 〈countable / plural〉 form. Further, when we review the other errors listed below, it is evident that the final consonant position again often contains important grammatical markers. Hence the errors occurring in this category most probably also indicate that students have misunderstood important contextual information, including the possessive / -s / , the contracted / -s / , the plural / -s / , and the past tense marker / -d / (on five occasions).

police ['s]; open [ed] (x2) ; chocolate [s]; rain [d]; time [s]; that ['s]; prone [d]; real estate[s] (x2) ; it[s]; part[s]; broaden[ed];

Spelling Errors (n=109)

Producing correct spelling was expected to be a challenge for the students because of the frequently irregular relationship between orthography and sound that exists in English. A common example was confusion of the */ r /* and */l /* phonemes (e. g., "honestry" for "honestly"), and this error most likely occurs on account of perception difficulties. In many other cases the reason for the spelling error was not so obvious. Furthermore, the high frequency of spelling errors is surprising, since students were encouraged to check the spellings of difficult words in their dictionaries prior to submitting their group texts. Evidently, the error frequency would have been even higher without recourse to dictionaries. Perhaps this result can be explained in terms of the intrinsically difficult nature of English spelling, particularly in comparison to *Romaji* transliterations. However, as a general category, *Spelling Errors* can be considered relatively unimportant because they do not interfere with listening comprehension or otherwise impede meaningful communication. In Bacheller (1980), for example, the students were not even penalised for spelling errors since the errors were expected to have no impact in spoken conversation, and native speakers also sometimes

make similar errors.

buillding ; throw ; visiter (x5) ; sence ; ploblems ; roots ; familier ; delection ; dissappointment ; regulary ; finaly (x2) ; relived ; relieaved ; quit ; nictine ; paied ; socity ; flowen ; amouns ; faild ; dence ; safty (x3) ; draged (x4) ; thlough ; prased ; relesed ; unfortunetely ; unfortunaly ; accounte ; far ; farmar (x3) ; jeneral ; payed ; critisize ; goverment ; speach (x2) ; erectricity ; univercity ; theer ; clubed (x6) ; destroied (x2) ; destroyd ; tence ; ibory ; endangerd ; endanjered ; jewely ; jowelry ; huntered ; gides ; nervouse ; shose ; wheter ; forcast (x2) ; emproyment ; remorte ; advertisments ; adverstisments ; entertament ; redio ; helth (x2) ; helthy ; rabbish ; cas ; sity ; survice ; carreer ; personarity ; personalty ; parson ; babys ; honestry (x2) ; broader ; broadern ; broder ; subjeckts ; gratly ; choises ; spieces ; exploting ; sheared ; alchol ; firight ; redio ; chiled ; paformed ; lawer

Punctuation Errors (n=28)

Punctuation Errors can be considered another type of error that are not overly serious, since they are also sometimes made by native speakers. Moreover, with the comon abbreviated informal communication style used today in many routine emails and text-messages, punctuation is sometimes even abandoned. Hence in terms of the hierarchy of skills essential to learners for effective communication processes to occur, punctuation rates rather low down on the scale. However, the use of correct punctuation by a student does reveal that a correct understanding of both meaning and grammar has occurred during the listening stage. For example, in the expression : "girls' career choices", not one of the six groups correctly wrote and positioned the apostrophe, although it is not clear from their errors whether they understood the plural meaning. Four groups correctly anticipated the need for an apostrophe, but incorrectly placed it in the singular position : "girl's". Another group omitted the apostrophe, and the final group omitted the entire word. These types of errors are relatively minor in importance, since they are more relevant to written form than the intended meaning.

passer by, passer. by [passer-by]; travelers (x3) [traveler's]; visitors (x4) [visitor's]; earthies [earth's]; Are you superstitious // would you. . . , [missed sentence break]; people, friday, an, he [capital letter for new sentence]; someones (x3) [someone's]; newspaper's [newspapers]; todays' [today's]; that's [that]; man [man's]; girls, girl's (x5) [girls']

Article Errors (n=17)

Students demonstrate considerable difficulty when using both the definite and indefinite article in their writing exercises, so we were interested to observe whether this pattern was also evident in the dictation exercises. Interestingly, this error did not occur as frequently as anticipated. The errors that did occur were mostly students adding an extra "a" when it did not actually appear. In such instances, it is possible they were misinterpreting a reduced sound occurring between words as an article form, and in such situations were also unable to verify the grammatical context for the presence of an article. Articles were also sometimes either omitted or confused in the students' final texts.

a (x2) [the]; the [a]; the [omitted]; a (x3) [omitted]; a (x10) [added, viz : "a jewelry" for "jewelry"]

Other Errors (n=25)

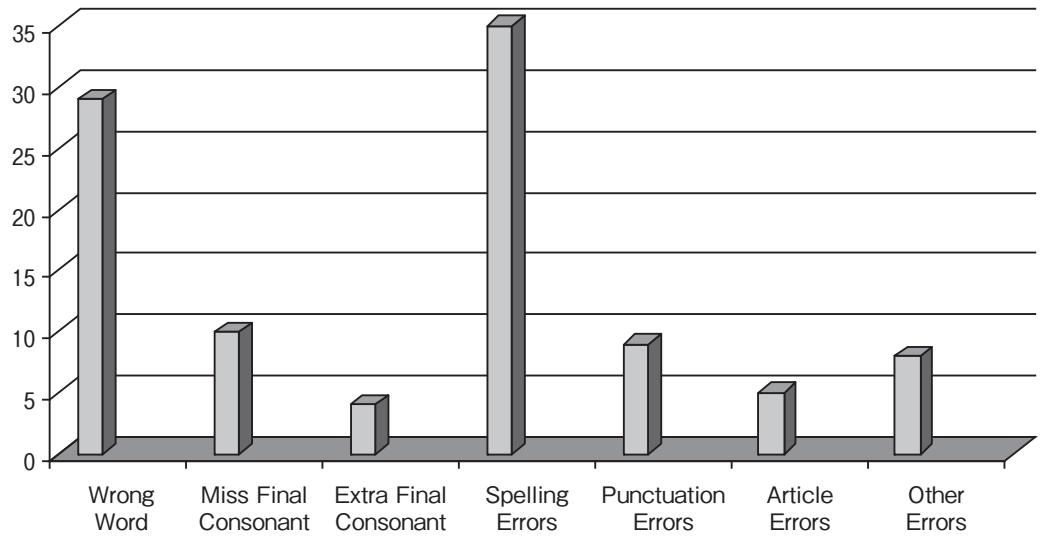
Almost all of the *Other Errors* were word omissions. It appears to be a common strategy employed by students to omit difficult parts of a text that could not be readily perceived, rather than attempting to guess at words and potentially make errors. Words (or word groups) may have been omitted because the word was unfamiliar, because the word could not be perceived aurally, or because students did not keep up with the speed of the dictation. There was just one other type of error evident (apart from omission), when an extra "be" was added in one text.

jewellery [omitted]; called (x2) [omitted]; food [omitted]; missing [omitted]; to be [omitted]; be [extra]; art [omitted]; in it (x2) [omitted]; that [omitted]; harmful [omitted]; old [omitted]; general [omitted]; by [omitted]; would [omitted]; of [omitted]; his [omitted]; are (x2) [omitted]; is [omitted]; may [omitted]; girls' [omitted]; find [omitted]; no [omitted]

Summary of Results

A total of 315 errors were identified in the students' reconstructed texts. The results for the seven error categories were tabulated and charted (Figure 1) to provide a useful summary. Two major categories of errors were common throughout the dictation exercises, *Spelling Errors* (35%) and *Wrong Word* errors (29%). Further, serious difficulties with perceiving the ends of words were also evident, since when combined the *Extra Final Consonant* and *Omit Final Consonant* categories comprise a sizable 14% of the total errors. It is likely that this result has been partially caused by negative transfer effects, since Japanese learners typically expect consonants to be followed by vowels. Word endings that feature consonant clusters would hence be consistently problematic. *Punctuation Errors*, which mostly relate to problems with how to correctly use apostrophes, accounted for another 9% of errors. The *Other Errors* category contributed 8% of the total errors, and usually consisted of words being omitted. Finally, *Article Errors* resulted in a small 5% of errors, and did

Figure 1 : Percentage Frequencies for Error Categories



Wrong Word	Miss Final Consonant	Extra Final Consonant	Spelling Errors	Punctuation Errors	Article Errors	Other Errors
29% (90)	10% (33)	4 % (13)	35% (109)	9 % (28)	5 % (17)	8 % (25)

not appear as commonly in the dictation exercises as in the students' writing exercises. Hence it appears that students have significantly more difficulty interpreting when to use an article than perceiving an article when it is spoken in a sentence.

Conclusions

This study has investigated the types of errors that can be identified using dictation exercises with Japanese university students. The two major categories of errors determined are *Spelling Errors* (35%) and *Wrong Word* (29%). The sounds naturally appearing at word endings (14%) also caused difficulty to many students. When we attempt to interpret the significance of these errors, subjective evaluations are typically required. The high frequency of spelling errors would have major implications for the students' performance in writing tasks, but would not largely affect their performance in everyday communication activities. The prevalence of *Wrong Word* errors appears to be more serious since they indicate misunderstandings by the students that are likely to result in comprehension difficulties and communication problems. Similarly, the routine difficulties with word endings are also considered significant since the final consonant position often contains important grammatical information, including distinctions relating to number and possessives.

The data analysis conducted in this study has provided evidence that dictation exercises can be utilised as a valuable diagnostic tool to identify problem areas and target learning goals for future classroom instruction. Dictation is useful because it reveals the nature of specific types of difficulties, and provides the teacher with direction for addressing the actual learning needs of the students. However, it is important to also recognize the limitations of this study. While we can observe and record the students' errors, it is sometimes difficult to accurately interpret the reasons for those errors being produced. As educators with a long history of teaching in Japan, we may have felt intuitively that we understood the reasons why errors occurred. However, our inferences for those reasons could not be established empirically or with any degree of scientific rigor. Further, there were numerous instances of errors produced in the samples that could have occurred for a variety of possible reasons. In such cases, we were required to use the most likely reason when assigning the error counts. Some examples of such problems include attempting to distinguish whether specific errors were *Spelling Errors* or *Wrong Word* errors (e. g., "delection" for "direction"; "there" for "their"; "spend" for "spent"; "arrive" for "alive"; "quit" for "quite"; "been" for "being"). This situation would benefit from more comprehensive research being undertaken in future projects, so that interpretations for the causes of the errors could be provided with a higher degree of certainty. Further, the frequent errors involving wrong lexical choice demonstrate that students have incorrectly processed the aural input, and highlight the potential for future research focusing on the learners' attempts to match sound to meaning.

It is also important to provide suggestions (based on the present research) for how teachers can improve the students' learning in English language classes at Japanese universities. First, the most frequent errors indicate that students often demonstrate poor spelling skills. This suggests that spelling should be more rigorously instructed and tested in classroom activities, most likely as a component of the students' written work. However, as has been previously mentioned, the significance of spelling errors is open to some interpretation, particularly on behalf of students who are more likely in the future to be involved in reading English than in writing English. Hence the more serious errors evident in this study appear to involve the students frequently interpreting spoken sounds as the

wrong word. This tendency can be attributed to limited vocabulary knowledge, although the situation is somewhat more complex than this analysis suggests. In some cases, the students may have previously learned a vocabulary term by sight but subsequently failed to recognize that term when it is spoken. Hence there is clear value in students learning to recognize vocabulary terms both by sight and by sound.

Finally, this study indicates a need for students to develop more sensitivity to correctly identifying word boundaries. A natural response to this dilemma would be for teachers to exaggerate the enunciation of word boundaries by pronouncing final consonants more distinctly or maintaining a longer pause between words. However, this type of remedy should be used with a marked degree of caution so as to prevent the spoken classroom language from becoming unnatural or unrealistic. The ultimate aim is for students to comprehend natural speech rhythms, and by exaggerating sounds at word boundaries teachers would also most likely distort the natural intonation patterns. Indeed, the linking of sounds at word boundaries is a common feature of natural speech, so it would be best if this could be instructed explicitly in the classroom by practising typical examples. In summary, we recommend that teachers should work to extend students' listening vocabulary to reduce *Wrong Word* errors, as well as practising listening to reduced forms and other common linking sounds appearing at word boundary positions. Further research is also necessary to identify ways to help students to more easily perceive naturally spoken word boundaries in listening comprehension activities.

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