

Instruction through Dictogloss

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Abstract

In this study, 20 participants joined a dictogloss activity in a school in Japan. Their reconstructed sentences (herein, “dictogloss protocol”) were scrutinized mainly in terms of acquiring language form. In addition, we analyzed what they noticed through the activity from their comments written after it. We found that the participants paid more attention to the language features when their burden of grasping the meaning of the text was less. Some of them also paid attention to the strategies of listening and constructing the sentences (writing), the discourse of the story, as well as various language features.

Keywords

dictogloss, focus on form (F on F), grammar instruction

Introduction

As the necessity of communicative language teaching (CLT) has been recognized among the teachers who teach English in classrooms in Japan, the method of teaching that puts weightage on meaning rather than language features (herein, form) has become mainstream. This is a promising trend because the increase of linguistic interaction especially for verbal exchange in a globalized world demands this from those who speak the language. As Stockwell (2010) pointed out, attention to form is considered a luxury and is possible only when conditions for attention to meaning have been met. However, it seems that the pendulum of communicative teaching swings too much and some lessons have learners concentrate only on understanding the meaning of a passage or text without connecting it to the acquirement of form.

Maeda and Okanojyo (2010) revealed that the learners’ lack of ability to differentiate between the four parts of speech, such as a noun, a verb, an adjective, and an adverb was detected when they had communicative language teaching that did not have appropriate instruction on form. Stockwell (2010) observed that when lessons are overwhelmingly focused on meaning, there is limited focus on form by the learners. The teachers in schools have witnessed this and some of them insist that conventional grammar be taught necessarily. As Maeda (2015) pointed out, the natural approach, as Krashen (1985) advocated, and conventional grammar teaching, which some teachers refer to, are as incompatible as oil and water. Thus, we strongly believe that the third approach, called “Focus on Form” will make a contribution to English classroom teaching in Japan in terms of a balance between the first two

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approaches.

What is Focus on Form Instruction?

Long (1991) defined Focus on Form as drawing students' attention to linguistic elements as they are encountered incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication. What should be emphasized here is that Focus on Form will not work out without focusing on meaning or communication. Long and Robinson (1998) said that Focus on Form consists of an occasional shift of attention to the linguistic code feature triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production; that is, consciousness raising and noticing through Focus on Form is expected. As Izumi (2009) pointed out, Focus on Form will have learners pay attention to the structure of a passage and language features, though it does not amount to returning to the conventional grammar teaching. In addition, he insisted that what is important in Focus on Form is to integrate the communicative aspect with grammar practice and it is not an issue of portion between the two on only the surface. Schmidt (1994) said that there is no learning without attention and noticing. Noticing is a complex cognitive process, which involves intake of both meaning and form (Batstone, 1996). However, teachers in Japan tend to spell out the answer or conclusion too explicitly without giving enough time to learners to ponder and consider something, which could lead to them noticing things. Thus, we strongly believe that dictogloss will provide learners with a good chance to pay attention not only to meaning but also to the form. Stockwell (2010) insisted that intervention through the use of the dictogloss procedure may help shift attention to form without neglecting attention to meaning in students learning a language.

The Effectiveness of Dictogloss as Focus on Form Instruction

Stockwell (2010) said that dictogloss is an output-oriented focus on form. Potential cognitive conflict may arise while comparing the reconstructed text with the dictated text. It is believed that this might indicate that 'noticing' is being promoted during the dictogloss procedure (Stockwell, 2010). In dictogloss, incidental learning occurs in two ways, first by instructing learners to focus on the meaning of the text and second, by not making them aware that they will be subsequently tested on the text (Stockwell, 2010). As we noted in the Introduction section of this paper, it is true that some teachers insist on the necessity of conventional grammar teaching. However, teachers have had heated debates over the amount and type of attention to form, with some teachers completely rejecting attention to form in favor of a wholly 'meaning-focused' approach, while others see this as a call to return to discrete-point grammar instruction (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Dictogloss can be easily adopted to fit either of these two camps (Stockwell, 2010). As Stockwell pointed out, a significant amount of what is learned during a dictogloss procedure is learned incidentally, since learners are focused on meaning. In this paper, we will scrutinize learners' dictogloss protocol. There are a lot of studies to reveal the effectiveness of dictogloss (Maeda, 2008; Abbasian & Mohammadiet, 2013). Farrell (2003) insisted that when implemented conscientiously, dictogloss embodies sound principles of language teaching which include: learner autonomy, cooperation among learners, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, development of thinking skills, alternative assessment, and encouragement of teachers as co-learners. However, there are only a few studies that scrutinize learners' productions by dictogloss, and they discuss the features of

learners' productions rather than the effectiveness of dictogloss itself. Stockwell (2010) said that it appears that dictogloss might be useful in measuring the amount of incidental noticing of the pedagogical grammar target incorporated in a dictogloss activity. Collaborative learning may prompt learners to focus on linguistic rules as they attempt to fill out the text (Stockwell, 2010). There is also benefit from the metatalk within a group, which helps participants understand the relationship between meaning, form, and usage (Long & Robinson, 1998). Schmidt (1990) stated that in dictogloss, unconscious learning, by contrast, may be seen as an unintended by-product of communicative interaction. Doughty and Williams (1998) said that dictogloss may be a part of more efficient language learning experience in that it can speed up natural acquisition processes.

A Close Inspection of the Dictogloss Protocol

Participants. Twenty Japanese high school students from first grade participated in the present study. All of the participants were native Japanese speakers aged between 15–16 years. All of them had studied English for more than three years but their overall English proficiency was basic. They were specializing in commercial subjects. None of them had stayed abroad for no more than three months.

Material. A short story from the authorized textbook was used in this study (see Appendix A). It consisted of 40 words and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL) was 4.0. The story was already taught in lessons. The participants understood the outline of the story to some extent before the dictogloss activity was conducted.

Procedure. The procedure of dictogloss was originally introduced by Wajnryb (1990). While it can be adopted in environments with speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL), it is not educationally efficient in environments with

speakers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), such as in Japan. Therefore, Maeda (2008) advocated a more detailed educational procedure of dictogloss in EFL environments, which has been summarized below. This procedure was adopted by us to conduct this study. As we can see in step (h), learners were supposed to write short comments about what they found and noticed through dictogloss. Awareness raising was expected at the end of this process.

(a) A short, dense text was read (three times) to the learners at speed of 140 /wpm.

(b) In the first listening, learners just listened to the story without doing anything to grasp the whole point of the story.

(c) As it was read for the second and third time, the learners jotted down familiar words and phrases that they regarded as important.

(d) Working in small groups, the learners strove to reconstruct a version of the text from their shared resources.

(e) Each group of students produced its own reconstructed version, aiming at textual cohesion and the appropriateness of the situation without replicating the original text.

(f) Another chance to listen to the story was given to learners to fill the gaps in their version of the story and the original story.

(g) The various versions were analyzed and compared and the students refined their own texts in light of this shared scrutiny and discussion.

(h) In addition to the shared scrutiny and discussion in the previous step, writing the shared comment about what learners found and noticed through dictogloss was required.

The participants formed pairs to practice dictogloss. This process was expected to promote cooperative active learning through the interaction with classmates.

Results

We will now examine a few dictogloss protocols (Case 1 to Case 4) and comments of participants.

Case 1 (see Appendix B)

The members of this pair noticed the importance of grasping only key words while listening rather than everything they heard. Teachers often hear learners complain that they cannot follow the story they are listening to while listening. We believe that this came from the learners' sense of obligation to listen to everything. When we saw their protocols, we noticed a tendency of missing the verbs such as "have" in "*we don't raw egg" when the sentence should have been "we don't have raw egg." Another example of missing objects is "*Why don't you try tomorrow" instead of "Why don't you try one tomorrow?" Their comment after the reconstruction of the story ideally should have come from scrutiny and discussion in the group.

Case 2 (see Appendix C)

The feature of this pair was found noticing more detailed points such as the importance of the article "a" and the plural forms of words, as well as the importance of subject and verb. Their focus was on accuracy when they noticed the importance of the article "a" and plural "s." However, their protocol showed the same errors that the previous pair made: missing of verbs or objects. They corrected their protocol by insertions with a colored pen. Teachers ought to take such errors as feedback from the class. Maeda (2008) said that this approach by teachers had learners reduce such errors in writing.

Case 3 (see Appendix D)

The members of this pair mentioned the discourse of the story. They noticed the roles played by a narrative sentence and an interrogative sentence.

Stockwell (2010) insisted that a significant advantage of dictogloss is that it focuses on the whole text; therefore, learners are concerned not only with sentence level grammar but also with that of the discourse. In addition, the participants noticed the existence of synonyms such as "like and prefer" and "have and eat." This was a very important observation in terms of features of English as a language system. We believe that there were few teachers who did not face trouble in teaching vocabularies. One of the best ways for vocabulary building is increasing the number of synonyms they use.

Case 4 (see Appendix E)

The members of this pair noticed the usage of a pronoun. As for the fifth sentence, the original story says, "Why don't you try one tomorrow?" However, they wrote, "Why don't you try raw egg tomorrow." This was an evidence of their effort to compensate the words that they missed taking note of. They made an effort to understand the meaning through the context. By refining their own texts in light of shared scrutiny and discussion, they discovered the use of a pronoun — "one."

What is Important after Reconstruction of Original Story?

Fotos (1993) investigated learner-noticing produced by two types of grammar consciousness-raising treatments designed to develop formal knowledge of problematic grammatical structures: teacher-fronted grammar lessons and interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks. The results indicated that task performance was as effective as formal instruction in the promotion of subsequent significant amounts of noticing, as compared to the noticing produced by the control group. However, this result did not suggest that formal knowledge of

problematic grammatical structures is unnecessary. Fotos (1993) also said that the view that formal instruction is important for raising learner consciousness of grammatical structures has gained wide attention recently. He said that this view has a critical role in language processing assigned to noticing the target structures in subsequent communicative input. It means that teachers should take out time for learners to review the target points in the dictogloss practice. Teachers sometimes need to also impart knowledge of language features or feedback of learners' protocols to help learners easily grasp the concept of Focus on Form. A number of learners who developed knowledge about grammatical structures went on to notice those structures in communicative input after their consciousness had been raised (Fotos, 1993).

Conclusion

As we examined four case studies, we saw that learners noticed various things such as the importance of having a listening strategy, accuracy, attention to discourse and the usage of pronouns. The reasons why they noticed such important points, not only of language form but also language strategies, are: (a) collaborative learning, (b) materials used in the dictogloss activity comprising a taught text, and (c) enough time for review, scrutiny, discussion and writing of comments.

As for collaborative learning, N. Ibrahim et al. (2015) mentioned that when students are working in groups, they are a part of a community whereby everyone lend support to one another. What is important here is that the participants are learners and not teachers. In other words, they will not teach each other but pursue discussions cooperatively. A pair of participants noticed the use of a pronoun "one" during the dictogloss activity. A teacher would have asked: what does this "one" refer to? Learners

would be expected to answer, "a raw egg." However, through this dictogloss activity, reverse procedure was noticed: students found, by themselves, that they were able to use "one" as a pronoun instead of "a raw egg."

As for the materials, the story used in this study was already taught to students. They must have understood the context of the story to some extent before the dictogloss activity. However, learners were not taught the language features such as the usage of "one" as a pronoun. In CLT, instruction tends to end with the teacher asking a few questions or an interaction among students. The time spent on focusing on language features is never enough and, at best, teachers tend to give explanations in their mother tongue. However, in this study, learners naturally focused on language features, thinking about the meaning of the story. A text already taught must have reduced the burden of grasping the meaning of the passage and dictogloss must have ensured learners focus on language features. There are two different types of processing of language in cognitive psychology: controlled processing and automatic processing (Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). In this case, automatic processing was thought to work efficiently without the big burden for learners' working memory (WM). This is a very important aspect in an EFL environment. It is very hard for Japanese learners of English, especially for EFL beginners, to process the meaning of language features at the same time. It might appear that the material used in this study was too easy, but this level of "comfortable" sentence structure that did not give learners stress for comprehension, helped them focus on the language features.

Finally, we must discuss the time allotted for the review. Teachers tend to rush to the next page or unit of the textbook without taking enough time to review. However, learners naturally have the ability

to perceive and notice. In the original text about dictogloss by Wajnryb (1990), there was no mention of the step about learners' writing their comments. It simply ended with an analysis and a comparison with the original story. However, students' comments enable teachers to visualize their growth and give feedback easily. If their comments are shared in classroom, it will become a place to learn at together.

When we discuss the effectiveness of dictogloss in terms of Focus on Form Instruction, dictogloss can be said to achieve the concept of Focus on Form with learner autonomy and cooperation among learners. Some researchers insist that dictogloss will not enable learners to acquire grammatical competence. Yamamoto (2005) revealed that only

dictogloss instruction was not enough for learners to acquire the grammatical concept of causative verbs. Maeda (2008) said that the results of the grammar test that the participants of dictogloss activities took were not statistically significant. However, he revealed that the number of errors made by the participants reduced as the number of dictogloss practices increased. If we define "grammar" as the structure of a language, it may be difficult for learners to obtain such an ability. However, if we regard "grammar" as a language pattern used in communication, dictogloss creates the possibility to have learners notice how language is used in sentences. This should become a key role of Focus on Form Instruction.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The story used in this study.

How do you like your eggs for breakfast? I prefer sunny-side up. How about you? Most mornings, I have a raw egg on rice. Really? We don't eat a raw egg in the US. Why don't you try one tomorrow?

Appendix B: Case 1

■取ったメモから元の英文を復元してみよう

<p>How do you like your eggs for breakfast? I prefer sunny-side up. How about you? Most morning I have a raw eggs on rice. Really? we don't row egg in the U.S. Why don't you try tommrow</p>	<p>復元した。こと ・英文全てを、かりまことるより、 大切なところを、かりとせよと と、次にすることかできる</p>
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Appendix C: Case 2

■取ったメモから元の英文を復元してみよう

<p>How do you like your eggs for break fast. I prefer sunny-side up, How about you? Most morning, I have a raw egg on rice. Really? We don't raw egg in the US. Why don't you try ^{eat a} tomorrow</p>	<p>復元した。こと 主語と動詞を正確に 聞いたお話を聞いて、 at USを聞きとりに正確 聞きとる。</p>
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Appendix D: Case 3

■取ったメモから元の英文を復元してみよう

○ How do you like your eggs for breakfast?
 ○ I prefer sunny side up. How about you?
 ○ Most mornings, I have a raw egg on rice. Really?
 ○ We don't eat a raw egg in the U.S.
 ○ Why don't you try one tomorrow?

会話の最終には疑問文になる。
 同じ動詞を何度も使うのを避ける。(like → prefer, have → eat)

Appendix E: Case 4

■取ったメモから元の英文を復元してみよう

A How do you like your egg for breakfast?
 B I prefer sunny-side up, How about you?
 A Most mornings I have a raw egg on rice,
 B Really? ^{we} ~~I~~ don't ^{eat} have a raw eggs in the US.
 A Why don't to try ~~raw~~ egg tomorrow?

「気がいたって」 one
 2回目に言うときは省略形!