

DEVELOPING INTENSIVE LISTENING SKILLS: A CASE STUDY OF THE LONG-TERM DICTATION TASKS USING RAPID SPEECH

Lee Seung Chun

Universiti Utara Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of dictation of rapid speech on developing listening skills and the impact dictation had on students' listening/speaking ability. Fifty undergraduate TESL program students participated in the research. They were given the opportunity to practice listening through dictation (listening cloze) for the AP news segments twice a week for a period of twelve weeks. They were also given three dictation tasks each week (two AP news segments and another news article from *the Economist* or from CNN). Their job was to produce the whole text of each one through intensive listening and meticulous transcription. They were also engaged once in a dictation task based on a BBC documentary. They achieved significant gains in terms of the TOEFL and dictation scores through dictation practice. In addition, three questionnaires completed by the students shed light on how dictation helped them improve listening and speaking skills.

Introduction

Even though dictation has been recommended as one of the useful techniques for improving listening comprehension (Blanche, 2004; Brown, 1986; Celce-Murcia, 1996; Field, 2003; Nation & Newton, 2009; Pica, 2000; Rost, 2002; Ur, 1991; Wilson, 2003), many language teachers today seem to relegate dictation to the periphery of language teaching and learning. Dickinson (1991) argues that "for a generation of EFL methodology, dictation represented all that was negative in everything that had gone before: it was uncommunicative, inauthentic, and, most importantly it made the teacher feel guilty" (p. 180).

But this perception is mistaken (Blanche, 2004), considering the research findings in the last few decades which demonstrate that, without explicit and form-focused instruction, extensive exposure to meaning-based input does not lead to the development of syntactic and lexical accuracy in an L2. Dictation, as a consciousness raising activity, helps language learning by making learners focus on the language form of phrase and clause level constructions and by providing feedback on the accuracy of their perceptions (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Take note that there are several classroom tasks that are particularly effective in differentially involving teachers and learners to focus on features of L2 grammar, but are reminiscent of traditional activities. Pica (2000) mentions a few candidates such as dictation, grammar exercises, and recitation, arguing they integrate traditional concerns for grammar instruction with the communicative technique of group work. These three activities help learners focus their attention on grammatical features and forms in conjunction with meaning, facilitating their grammar learning in a more effective manner than communication experiences alone can do.

On similar lines, Morris (1983) promotes dictation as a neglected technique in need of reappraisal. After sharing evidence of mistakes actually made by EFL learners on three dictations, she points out that their errors fall into three other major categories, not only into the category of spelling errors which has been frequently related to dictation: comprehension errors, meaning errors and structural errors. These errors suggest that dictation is not a test of spelling but a process of involving the students in “an active reinterpretation of material presented to them aurally” (p. 124). Based on these observations, she suggests that teachers should not sell short “the potential of dictation as a means of reinforcing grammatical structure and lexical power” (p. 125).

Despite agreement over the validity and effectiveness of dictation, little concrete work has been done to provide a method of dictation instruction that would equip students to use dictation appropriately and effectively. In particular, most recent research on dictation tasks has been limited almost exclusively to the focus-on-form or processing instruction applications for dictogloss (e.g., Doughty and Williams, 1998; Swain, 1998; Qin, 2008). Only a small amount of research has attempted to confirm how pure dictation controlled by learners is used for listening comprehension and pronunciation practice as learners engage in spoken language interactional tasks. Furthermore, there are no studies in recent years that examine how learners’ actual dictation use contributes to their L2 oral proficiency. Therefore, the current study addresses the issue of whether intensive dictation tasks can help L2 learners enhance listening comprehension and speaking or pronunciation performance as well. In addition, this study puts emphasis on listening to rapid speech, considering Cohen’s (1994) suggestion that dictation can serve as a communicative test if the speech rate is fast enough.

Background

Listening: A Difficult Skill in Language Learning

It is not surprising at all that L2 learners perceive listening as difficult. Arnold (2000) comments on the pressure it places on them to process input rapidly. Buck (2001) emphasizes the complexity of the listening process, in which the listeners must use a wider variety of knowledge sources, linguistic (for bottom-up processing) and non-linguistic (for top-down processing), to interpret rapidly

incoming data. These two types of processing or approaches should not be regarded as mutually exclusive but as essentially complementary (Lynch, 2006).

However, many researchers (e.g., Field, 2000) argue that we should not disregard the primacy of bottom-up processing, centering on the perceptual features of “speech as a physical phenomenon” (Field, 2003, p. 325). What hinders L2 listening has much to do with auditory or perceptual aspects of L2 texts. Although top-down processing is used by all listeners, it is not the ideal, and we should keep in mind that the learners’ ultimate aim is to rely less on contextual guesswork, and more on hearing what was actually said. It is in this context that Wilson (2003) suggests ‘discovery listening’ (p. 337), a technique based on the notion of ‘bottom-up primacy’, which makes a case for ‘noticing’ as a method of improving listening ability by getting students to discover and then prioritize their listening difficulties after reconstructing a text. This position finds its echo in the argument of Tsui and Fullilove (1998) and Wu (1998) that the ability to handle linguistic processing rather than non-linguistic or strategy-based processing is a differentiating factor between skilled and unskilled listeners.

The Listening Process is not Known

Another perplexing aspect facing listening comprehension is that we cannot inspect the listening process in the way that we can do the speaking and writing processes. In order to assess listening comprehension, we have to depend on some ‘indirect methods’ such as answering questions or performing tasks. In this context we should remember Brown’s (1986) call for a diagnostic approach to teaching listening, i.e., the teacher is really ready to improve the student’s performance only when the teacher is equipped with some method of examining the student’s problems.

This approach can be realized effectively in dictation tasks because dictation is involved in the most effective remedial listening works (Field, 2003). In these exercises, students’ problems in relation to listening can be naturally detected because learners utter and write down short sentences in an authentic text, freely sharing the difficult linguistic features embedded in them. Priority is still given to attention to errors of listening over attention to errors of spelling. Field’s (1998, 2003) argument for a skill-based approach to teaching listening is in keeping with the previous approach, which involves pre-listening, while-listening and an extended post-listening session in which the learners’ listening problems can be investigated and remediated through short dictation exercises. Wilson’s (2003) proposal for discovery listening is also in very much the same mould. ‘Discovery listening’ focuses students’ attention on sound and word recognition by the use of the *dictogloss* activity, prompting students in a group to pay attention to form while working through meaning. Its main goal is to help students notice the differences between their reconstructed group account and the original text, and then ‘discover’ the reasons for their listening difficulties.

It should be noted that these diagnostic or remedial approaches to teaching listening involve types of dictation tasks, whether they be short dictation exercises or *dictogloss* tasks, a recent modified version of pure dictation. Dictation has the merit of assessing and facilitating performance at all stages of the 'speech perception' process. In other words, students' errors in the process of dictation tests can show the origin of their listening difficulties: whether they are related to acoustic, phonemic, lexical, morphological, syntactic, or semantic interpretation (Buck, 2001). In that sense, dictation has been recognized as a good test of 'expectancy grammar' (Oller, 1971, 1979), i.e., the combined knowledge of the linguistic rules which lead to expectations allowing listeners or readers to comprehend language input and speakers or writers to produce intelligent output. Now with the principled moderation of dictation, we have a significant tool to teach listening proficiency with, not just to test it.

Dictation: Bridging the Gap between Listening and Speaking

To make language teaching as realistic as possible, however, we need to recognize the real communication situation where people employ incremental language skills not in isolation but in tandem. When we are engaged in a conversation, we need to be able to comprehend and speak at the same time, which requires L2 teachers to adopt integrated instruction to address these two skills simultaneously. As a matter of fact, teaching listening can be naturally and easily tied to instruction on speaking and pronunciation skills and cross-cultural pragmatics. This scenario also fits in well with SLA principles in general. Pica (2000, p. 6) reviews the key conditions are required for successful SLA, yet are under-addressed through experiences in communication alone:

- (1) learners must be given L2 input that is made meaningful and comprehensible;
- (2) they must selectively attend to the form of the input as well as its meaning;
and
- (3) they must produce the L2, and be given feedback in order to modify their production toward greater comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy.

This is another way of saying that comprehension input is just a necessary, if critical, condition for language acquisition, but it is not a sufficient condition for it. It has to be complemented by some kind of output whether it can be 'comprehensible output' or 'pushed out' or 'stretched output' followed by some feedback if it is to be internalized in L2 learners' interlanguage and contribute to language acquisition. That may be the major reason many researchers (e.g. Richards, 2005) puts emphasis on the value of using the listening comprehension process as a springboard to the language acquisition process. Commenting on the lack of concern of the natural approach concerning how comprehension is supposed to facilitate language learning, Richards quotes Schmidt (1990), draws particular attention to the role of noticing in language learning. In order to develop language proficiency, L2 learners have to try

to incorporate new linguistic items into their interlanguage, which involves cognitive processes such as restructuring, complexification and producing stretched output.

If consciousness of features of the input can serve as a trigger which activates the first stage in the process of incorporating new linguistic features into language competence, dictation practice deserves significant attention. They primarily aim at enhancing the noticing or raising consciousness of L2 learners about linguistic components in their process. By making quick feedback on the performances and pertinent guidance available, dictation can help L2 learners both think out and sound out errors in comprehension and writing in a proactive manner. Even if this aspect is sometimes not utilized by those who routinely use dictation, dictation can facilitate the development of linguistic competence of L2 learners by getting them to try out and experiment in using newly **noticed language forms** so that new learning items may become incorporated into their linguistic repertoire.

This aspect of dictation to connect linguistic input with intake and further uptake has not been found out only in recent years. It was already recognized by Slobin and Welsh (1973), Oller (1972) and Natalicio (1979). They view dictation as requiring the full comprehension and production processes involved in other kinds of linguistic performance. Slobin and Welsh (1973) state that "sentence recognition and imitation are filtered through the individual's productive linguistic system" (p. 496), and Oller (1973, pp. 196-197) argues that in dictation tasks, "the student is not simply copying down words, but is involved in an active and complex process of analysis-by-synthesis." That is why Oller (1971) suggests in the conclusion of his study about dictation as a device for testing foreign-language proficiency that the learner's performance in dictation is the outcome of not separate, discrete skills but integrated skills in the aggregate. Dictation may be one of the most efficient means of obtaining information about literate students' overall language proficiency.

Method

Research Design

The present study investigates the effects of dictation practice of rapid speech on developing listening comprehension ability and the probable reasons for these effects. The gains are then related to the students' own perceptions of dictation practice in their retrospective self-report. The study asked the following three questions.

1. Does the dictation practice of rapid speech have a significant effect on listening comprehension ability?
2. What kind of impact does dictation practice have on students' listening and speaking vability?
3. How do the students perceive the dictation practice and other related tasks in their retrospective data?

Participants

The participants consisted of sixty-one undergraduate TESL programme students in a tertiary institution in Malaysia. They belonged to two separate classes of “Phonetics and Phonology” led by the researcher. However, some of them did not do both pre- and posttests due to personal reasons, so their scores were excluded in the data analysis. The number of students who did both tests was fifty. In order not to disrupt the instruction plan, dictation practice was given in the natural flow of the phonetics and phonology instruction and as home assignments.

Procedures

In the first session of the first week (each week had two class sessions each of which was for 90 minutes), students were given two pre-test measures, a TOEFL listening comprehension test and a dictation test. They were given a short piece of information about the nature of these tests which could indicate their current level of listening comprehension proficiency but would not influence their real grade on the course they were taking that semester. The TOEFL listening comprehension test consisted of 50 questions in multiple-choice format. The dictation test was conducted as follows: Students listened to a passage of 220 words with 28 pauses and wrote down what they had heard. This involved listening to the passage twice: the first time, they just listened and tried to understand; the second time, the passage was broken into 28 short segments, with a pause between each, and during these pauses test-takers wrote down what they had heard (Buck, 2001).

The pretests were followed by a comprehensive coursework preview, during which they were introduced to how to carry out listening and pronunciation activities in their individual study time as well as in the classroom. Some examples were given to them so that they would be familiar with the processes they would be engaged in.

Students were given the opportunity to practice listening comprehension through one type of dictation task (listening cloze) based on AP news segments twice a week for a period of 12 weeks during the semester. The news texts were duplicated with blanks for the words or structures that were determined to be important. In addition, they were given two to three dictation tasks (pure dictation) each week, consisting of two AP news segments and one CNN news segment or one news article from *the Economist* every week. Their job was to produce the whole written text for each one through intensive listening and meticulous transcription. In addition, they were also given a dictation task (phonemic transcription) on a BBC documentary for a period of one month. Out of consideration for their workload on the BBC transcription assignment they did not have any news article other than two AP news segments during two weeks (the fifth and sixth week). They were reminded and encouraged to give sufficient time consistently everyday to this dictation work rather than wait until the eleventh hour to finish off the assignments.

The AP newsreaders, the main resource of this research, spoke at an average rate of 155 words per minute. Each news segment (around 40 seconds long) was regarded as a rapid speech segment, considering that the average speed of ordinary American speakers of English is 125 words per minute. However the perception of the rapid speech takes on a psychological note mainly because listeners can usually think 400 to 500 words per minute as they listen. Thus, it is expected that the difference between thought speed and speech speed can be made a source of tremendous power, with training in listening. Listeners have enough capability to listen to everything the speaker says, and they can listen between the lines and do some evaluating as the speech progresses. Around two dozen students mentioned that the sheer speed they experienced in the first session began to lose its impact as time went on with their practice.

In the last week (the 14th week of the semester), students were given the posttest measures: a TOEFL listening comprehension test and a dictation test. Each measure was administered in the same manner as in the pre-test. Immediately after they finished the post-tests, the students were given a questionnaire of 21 closed-response questions. Another two sets of retrospective data, an open-ended questionnaire and a final reflection paper were given to students as reflective tools for the previous dictation practice. The former was given after the post-test and the latter one week before the post-test. Both of them were collected a few days after the post-test session.

The TOEFL listening tests were scored by the researcher. Each of the 50 items was given just one mark. However, two independent assessors did the scoring of the pre- and post-test of dictation. Neither was involved in the tests. Both raters were given around 40 minutes moderation training for scoring the dictation tests in order to make them familiar with the guidelines for scoring and to lessen the possibility of deviation from the guidelines in the real scoring procedure. Each rater scored the pre- and post-tests of dictation for one class. The raters were not given any information about the candidates' English proficiency so there was no halo effect.

For the scoring the dictation tasks, the two raters followed Buck's (2001, p. 75) method of scoring dictation, which is to delete marks. Starting with the number of words for each segment and one mark is subtracted for each mistake. Intrusions count as one mistake each, as do omissions. Simple spelling mistakes were ignored because the dictation tests were not designed to be tests of spelling. This could result in a minus score for some sections, in which case it is customary to score this as zero. Since the participants in this study were regarded as higher ability test-takers, the replacement of individual words by synonyms was marked as correct.

Instruments

The first research question, the effect of dictation practice on listening comprehension ability, was assessed by the comparison between the students' pre- and posttest listening performance. The pretest listening comprehension test had a TOEFL (listening comprehension section) test and a dictation test. The TOEFL test had 50 items and the dictation test consisted of 220 words with 28 pauses. An identical listening comprehension test was conducted a posttest in order to ensure fair and equal comparison over time. It was assumed that effects deriving from test familiarity would be minimal, considering the time that elapsed between the tests (12 weeks).

As for the 2nd and 3rd questions, the researcher used the following data:

- (1) A student questionnaire (Appendix 1) relating to their views on dictation practice. It had a format of five-point Likert-scale questions (from 1: Not at all to 5: Very much). It was given immediately after the post-test administration in the classroom.
- (2) Student retrospective feedback (an open-ended questionnaire and a final reflection paper, Appendix 2 & 3) indicating responses to dictation activities.
- (3) Researcher observations on classroom processes, dictation activities, and dictation practice at their rooms.

Two types of retrospective data were collected. The first one was a questionnaire consisting of 21 closed-response questions, including (a) a comparison between phonemic transcription and simple dictation/classroom dictation activities and individual dictation activities/ rapid speech dictation and slow speech dictation (b) effects of dictations on various areas related to spoken language proficiency (c) use of techniques to promote spoken language proficiency and (d) affective responses to dictation activities. The second set of retrospective data consisted of an open-ended questionnaire and a final reflection paper. The former had two parts: (a) questions about ordinary listening experiences including problems in listening comprehension and strategies employed by students (b) questions about dictation activities including the time spent on dictation tasks and students' perceptions about how much and in what ways the dictation activities had helped them improve in listening and/or speaking proficiency. The latter had six general questions including questions about specific examples of insights and perspectives they gained from the course and the positive or negative experiences relating to their lessons. In order to make sure that closed-response questions and open-ended questions were clear and unambiguous, they were pilot-tested by seven students who were not involved in the study but had experience of dictation tasks before. They were asked to look over the questionnaire critically and point out any probably unclear and ambiguous expressions.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1: Does the dictation practice of rapid speech have a significant effect on listening comprehension ability?

The first research question asked whether there was significant improvement in the students' listening comprehension proficiency through dictation activities during the 12 weeks. Dependent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the means of the pre and post TOEFL listening comprehension and dictation tests and they indicated that students achieved significant gains in both measures. Table 1 shows the results for the pre and post TOEFL listening comprehension tests and dictation tests respectively. The mean score of the TOEFL test at the beginning of the semester was 38.26 compared to 39.70 at the end. This difference was statistically significant ($t = 2.31, p < .05$). Table 1 also shows the results for the dictation measures: mean scores for dictation work also greatly improved from the beginning to the end of the semester (118.70 compared to 144.92). Again the difference was statistically significant, ($t = 7.40, p < .01$) and the huge gain scores were remarkable: 26.220. The students in this study, then, significantly improved in their listening comprehension ability based on both the TOEFL and dictation measures.

Table 1: Results of Dependent Samples *t* tests on Test Score Gains (N = 50)

	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	Gains	t	p
TOEFL	38.26 (5.352)	39.70 (5.658)	1.440	2.312*	.025
Dictation	118.70 (38.476)	144.92 (38.394)	26.220	7.400**	.000

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Pappas (1977) argues that dictation has been regarded as a useful means of developing learners' listening comprehension and verbal retention skills. If listening is simply described as making sense of what we hear, it assumes that we have to identify correctly what has been said. Yet speech recognition can be far from straightforward to EFL/ESL listeners, primarily because English presents to them particular difficulties in the form of acoustic blurring of lexical boundaries in connected speech. No wonder Field (2003) argues that "the commonest perceptual cause of breakdown of understanding is lexical segmentation, the identification of words in connected speech" (p. 327).

Increasing evidence exists that L2 listeners' ability to cope at this linguistic end of processing may well be a key to success; bottom-up processing is more important than top-down at limited levels of L2 listening proficiency. This point naturally leads

to the significant pedagogic implication that learners should be helped to direct their attention to practice in rapid and accurate linguistic decoding rather than contextual and schematic guessing (Lynch, 2006). Dictation can come into play in this context, as a tool to provide the substantial practice of intensive linguistic listening processing to the L2 learners.

Based on the findings of this study, it could be argued that dictation helps L2 language learning by making learners focus on the language form of phrase and clause level constructions as well as the one at lexis level. Students gained significant benefit from consistent dictation of short news segments and quite long news articles whose structures take on prominent discourse features with various rhetorical modes of organization. The value of dictation may be further increased if the learners know what mistakes they made. Providing feedback on the accuracy of their dictation practice, may serve as consciousness raising activities to the learners. The consciousness raising comes from the subsequent feedback about the errors and gaps in their perception. (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Research Question 2: What kind of impact does dictation practice have on students' listening and speaking ability?

Three types of questionnaires completed by the students shed light on how much and in what ways the dictation activities helped them improve in listening and speaking proficiency. The descriptive analysis of the nine questions indicating the effects of dictation on listening comprehension and listening-related areas is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of the Closed-Response Questionnaire (Questions Related to the Effects of Dictation)

Effects of Dictations	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Q1 (Effect of dictation)	49	3	5	4.14	.764
Q7 (Attention)	49	2	5	4.20	.763
Q8 (Discovery of weakness)	49	3	5	4.24	.723
Q9 (Discovery of listening difficulties)	49	1	5	3.61	.909
Q10 (Focus on words & expressions)	49	2	5	3.92	.786
Q11 (Inferencing)	49	2	5	3.61	.731
Q12 (Pronunciation)	49	3	5	4.12	.666
Q13 (Speaking)	49	2	5	3.82	.834
Q14 (Memory)	49	2	5	3.29	.736

Internal-consistency reliability estimated by Cronbach's alpha for these ten items was .726. Table 2 indicates that dictation had significant effects on the following areas: General effect (Q1), facilitating attention (Q7), discovering weaknesses in listening (Q8), discovering listening difficulties (Q9), facilitating focus on words and expressions (Q10), developing inferencing ability (Q11), developing good pronunciation (Q12), developing speaking ability (Q13), facilitating good memory (Q14). In particular, Q1 (M = 4.14), Q7 (M = 4.20), Q8 (M = 4.24) and Q12 (M = 4.12) were viewed most favorably by the students. They agreed that dictation tasks facilitated 'to a great extent' focusing attention in listening, finding weakness in listening and developing good pronunciation. In addition, Q10 (M = 3.92, SD = .786) and Q13 (M = 3.82, SD = .834) were viewed favorably to almost the same degree as the previous three items. Students indicated that dictation practice helped significantly to focus on certain words and expressions and develop speaking performance. Inferencing ability (Q11) and memory skills (Q14) were more than 'to some extent' related to dictation in which they achieved low means compared to the previous items. This means that dictation practice helped improve the ability to make inferences from context and improve memory skills for the target language items.

When this study was planned and conducted using real phonology classes, developing listening comprehension ability through intensive dictation practice was the main target. However, according to the students' responses from self-reports, dictation practice also had significant effects on developing other oral capabilities such as pronunciation and speaking performance and memory skills.

- (1) *Listening comprehension improvement:* Many students remarked that their listening comprehension proficiency had improved after consistent dictation practice during that semester:

"The first positive experience that I got from this class is when listening to the AP radio news. During the first class, I did not understand at all what the speaker of the AP radio news is talking about. But after spending so many times by listening and doing the dictation activities, my listening ability had improved. Not only that, I'm also able to understand the context of the information well".
(S36)

"I believe that all my friends share the same belief that the dictation activities really helped us (especially myself) who are weak in listening. The dictation activities really helped me improve my listening skills. Listening to AP news is a new and great experience for me. I believe that AP news really helped me to improve my pronunciation and also listening skills. To be able to speak or pronounce the same as the person in AP news sometimes made me feel proud".
(S34)

“The most unforgettable experience in this subject is our weekly dictation assignment! I enjoy doing this activity even though sometimes I feel like giving up doing it. I can say that this activity helps me a lot in my listening skill and I learn how to listen to the important word in the conversation. Now I think that I can write very fast! Besides that I think that I can be an accurate guesser as there are a lot of words that I have to guess while doing my dictation assignment”. (S11)

- (2) *Speaking skills improvement:* The previous student (S11) also included significant comments on the effect of dictation on speaking and pronunciation skills. Further evidence on dictation’s influence on the students’ oral skills was found in their responses to the open-ended questions. The following are the most common responses on these aspects:

“My original goal in this class surprisingly has been achieved, thanks to all the dictation assignments that we did in class and on my own. I can speak better, compared to last time and it is mainly because I have got the chance to hear so many voice clips in class and when I did my work. These, definitely have helped me a lot in distinguishing and discriminating sounds better, thus, have made me a better listener and of course, speaker”. (S5)

“These assignments really helped me to improve my listening and speaking skills in general. Even though listening to it over and over again to complete the assignment can be stressful at times, but to see the extent of how it could help improve my English clearly does show that it is worth all the effort. I would definitely adapt this in my teaching when I’m a teacher one day, not using the AP news for primary students of course.” (S35)

“I did not notice the improvement at the beginning of the session, but after a few tasks that I have done through the transcription activities, I began to realize that my listening skill has improved and so as my memorizing skills. ... I also started to appreciate the English language day by day. I could speak some rare words that I never used before while speaking to my friends. The exercise really helped me in my daily life even in the classroom or outdoor.”(S45)

- (3) *Pronunciation skills improvement:* Some students commented on the probable reasons for the improvement of their pronunciation skills: finding model speakers and listening to the different varieties of the English language.

“You have also taught us some other ways to improve our English pronunciation. I found out that it is good to have model speakers so I can imitate his or her accent and practice it time and time again.”(MA)

“Listening activities/dictation activities also gave me experiences about the styles of English pronunciation around the world like in China, US and others. After this, I’ll try to continue my dictation activities with BBC news, English songs and interviews like I did every week during this semester.” (S28)

“After doing a lot of the dictation assignment, I think it did help me a lot in improving my listening skills. This is due to listening to different varieties of English and pace of the recording. Now I can catch up with the words said by people even if they speak in a fast pace. Not only that, listening to the recording also helped me to improve the pronunciation of certain words. This helped me a lot in my conversation where now I can use the correct pronunciation while talking to other people. Now I can even correct the pronunciation of other people if they pronounce it wrongly.” (S40)

All these outcomes speak volumes about the positive effect of dictation on oral abilities as well as aural skills. In addition, they may give us a clue about why dictation has been recognized as an integrative or "hybrid" language test (i.e., mixing listening and writing) during the last few decades. On one hand, dictation has been recognized as providing a good supplement to other listening tests (Hughes, 1989; Weir, 1990, 1993) On the other hand, dictation appears to provide a more accurate sample of learner competence than the "pure" language tests which focus on measuring each of the four skills separately. Dictation tests have been demonstrated to measure effectively and efficiently what a language test is expected to measure, i.e., communication and global language skills (Natalicio, 1979). It is remarkable that Oller (1979) took a further step beyond this position, claiming that dictations are pragmatic tests because they “require time constrained processing of the meanings coded in discourse” (p. 263).

Research Question 3: How do the students perceive the dictation practices and other related tasks in their retrospective data?

The research question addressed in this section is concerned with the students’ affective perception of the dictation and other related tasks such as mirroring, shadowing and tracking used to improve oral skills while or after dictation practice. The descriptive analysis of these items is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis of the Closed-Response Questionnaire (Questions Related to the Perceptions of Dictation and Other Tasks)

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Q2 (Com. w/ phonemic transcription)	49	1	5	3.47	1.023
Q3 (Com. bet. class & individual d.)	49	1	5	2.90	1.005
Q4 (Com. bet. rapid & slow speech d.)	49	1	5	3.24	1.146
Q5 (Boring)	49	1	4	2.31	.796
Q6 (Difficult)	49	1	5	2.43	.890
Q15 (Mirroring)	49	1	5	2.53	.892
Q16 (Shadowing)	49	1	5	3.04	.865
Q17 (Tracking)	49	1	5	2.84	1.028
Q18 (Enjoying dictation)	49	1	5	3.16	.874
Q19 (Fun & informative)	49	2	5	3.65	.969
Q20 (Consistent practice)	49	1	5	2.94	.944
Q21 (Recommendation of dictation)	49	3	5	4.45	.679

(1) *Affective perception of dictation practice*: Table 3 indicates that students perceive dictation practice as ‘a little’ boring (Q5: M = 2.31) and difficult (Q6: M = 2.43) but they show ambivalent feelings toward them by demonstrating ‘to a great extent’ a preference for them (Q18: M = 3.16; Q19: M = 3.65). Several students made the following comments in their self-report.

a) *Dictation is too difficult and boring*

“Normally I take about 1 hour to complete the 40 seconds dictation. I am not a good listener. I cannot focus on the listening part and sometimes I need to listen for many times before I could understand what they are talking. During class, I am so afraid if the lecturer does the dictation activities in class. I don’t know what to do. Dictation activities are sometimes difficult for me.”(S15)

“Sometimes I feel like I want to scream and cry but I know it won’t give benefit to me. Sir, we are loaded with other assignments. If you want to give us dictation, just don’t give us too much dictation. Too much dictation means we can’t enjoy our listening because we have to finish it quickly so that we can do other assignments too.”(S24)

Certainly, just as Wilson (2003) recognizes, dictation tasks require students to concentrate on bottom-up accuracy to a degree that would be unnecessary in real life. But this forces their attention on what they might otherwise miss. Numerous small representations are not necessarily trivial, and seem to have a cumulative effect. They also appear to slow down learners' ability to do top-down processing. It seems that better bottom-up processing ought to lead in turn to better top-down processing, and that teaching should reflect this.

b) *Enjoying the process of dictations*

"Since the first day I enjoy doing the dictation, I always look forward to doing the transcribing works. I feel it is fun as I can manage to remember most of the symbols, and, to hear the speaker talk the accent they talk is very fun for me. I started to practice transcription without referring to the book. To be able to master this, I took some time to learn the right articulation, and memorize it. The most important part is to be able to pronounce the word correctly then the transcription will come correctly. Once I master this, I was very happy and look forward to the happiness of transcription." (S1)

"I also found it funny as I cannot dictate the word for the first time doing the dictation. For 30 seconds dictation, it ended up to 30 minutes dictation. I kept on replay the news as I cannot get the word. These experiences are so valuable." (S1)

"The dictation exercises also have helped me a lot in my writing as there is many new things that I learned from it. I think that I am one of the AP news fan now and I will continue to find and listen to this news". (S11)

"Other than that, yes, I think I have changed, a bit. I think I am better listener now. I love doing the AP news dictations actually. It gave me a sense of euphoria whenever I figured out the right word."(S10)

These findings support the argument of Morris (1983) that it is particularly for the students at intermediate and advanced levels that dictation is most valuable. They will be able to respond to the challenge of dictation, and new material or old material presented in a novel way may be a source of motivation and interest to them.

c) *Texts are informative*

"The dictation exercises have also helped me a lot in my writing as there are many new things that I learned from it. I think that I am one of the AP news fan now and I will continue to find and listen to this news. Some of the news

is funny yet there is a lot of information in it. I will use all of this experience in my future teaching career. I hope that I can speak fluently with the correct pronunciation in order to make my students understand.” (S11)

“I have gained some insights and perspectives from this course. It is not only about the phonetic knowledge that we have learnt in class, but also from our lecturer’s sharing. For example, from the meaningful song sharing and AP news in the classroom we are exposed to others’ life perspectives and also additional knowledge on varieties of issues.”(S23)

“Besides that, from the dictation activities, I can know new words and the current issue like Bill Gates, the G8 in Hokkaido, community service, Linus Tovalds, Kimchi and so on.” (S28)

- (2) *A few comparisons among different types of dictation:* In general, students preferred phonemic transcription to simple dictation (Q2: M = 3.47), group dictation to individual dictation (Q3: M = 2.90), and rapid speech dictation to slow speech dictation (Q4: M = 3.24). The following are the most common responses on these aspects.

a) *Enjoying the phonemic transcription work*

“Other than that, I really enjoy doing our first assignment on BBC documentary. Before this, I could not recognize words with their specific phonemic symbols. After doing that task, now I am able to transcribe the original form of words into their phonemic forms and I am able to read the transcription text by looking at their phonemic symbols.’ (S8)

“I have improved my listening proficiency after doing the BBC documentary group assignment. Although it was tough but I enjoyed doing it and I can finish the next weekly assignment faster than before I did the group assignment. “(S29)

“Learning how to write and pronounce phonemic symbols is also beneficial to me. It is because I now know how to fully use my dictionary not only for finding words’ meaning but also for finding the correct pronunciation for words I do not know.... In future teaching, I can guide my students to learn how to pronounce words by referring to dictionary. Isn’t that great? My English language teachers in primary and secondary schools never taught me how to use dictionary to look for pronunciation, so it is now my responsibility to change this. I will provide my students with the opportunity to explore the dictionary for finding words’ pronunciation.”

- b) *Preference for classroom dictation practice:* There was no significant response related to this aspect, but some educated guess can be drawn from the different conditions of classroom dictation and individual dictation. In the classroom, the students were exposed to listening cloze, in which news texts were duplicated with blanks for the priority words or structures to be focused on. They seemed to like this format better because the answers were immediately given after their attempt to fill in the blanks. In the case of individual dictation, the original dictation scripts were not provided immediately after the dictation tasks since they were regarded as assignments. Under these circumstances, they might simply repeat themselves, make the same errors, or come up with new ones, and find that dictation practice is even more frustrating and complex than they thought it would be.
- c) *Making students more attentive to rapid speech:*
“The AP news is truly helpful. They do improve my listening and speaking skills. Seriously Dr, I become more sensitive to words and pronunciation since you gave us the news to listen and dictate. Now my ears are used to rapid conversations, and distinguishing English accents somehow seems a lot easier.”(S17)
- “We did the dictation exercises. For the first time, I heard the speaker speak so fast and I can’t catch most of words that he/she conveyed. But, with more exercises, I think I can listen to the conversation/ debate/news well right now. The dictation exercises make me learn how to distinguish different sound of words and content. Some words may be pronounced quite same or exactly same but when I knew the context, yes, I can predict what the suitable words for the content.” (S46)
- (3) Use of the techniques from theatre arts: Students did not seem to make the most of the techniques from theatre arts such as mirroring (Q15: M = 2.53), shadowing (Q16: M = 3.04) and tracking (Q17: M = 2.84) used to improve oral skills while or after dictation practices.

Further evidence on dictation’s influence on the students’ overall perception was found in their responses to the last question, “I will recommend the dictation practice to others who want to improve English proficiency.” In light of the previous findings, it is not unexpected that students responded to that question item with the highest level of agreement, among all the other question items (M = 4.45, SD = .679). They embraced dictation tasks with open arms, recommending them to other L2 learners, including their future students. Even though the dictation tasks were quite challenging to their cognitive and affective capacities, many of them were found

to have enjoyed the learning processes, tasting the sweet fruit of improving their listening and speaking skills which had eluded their grasp so far.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

This paper investigated the effects of dictation practice of rapid speech on developing listening comprehension ability and the impact dictation practice has on students' listening and speaking ability. The students in this study made significant gains in their listening comprehension ability based on both the TOEFL listening comprehension section and dictation measures. Based on the findings of this study, it could be argued that learners at limited levels of L2 listening proficiency should be helped to direct their attention to practice in rapid and accurate linguistic decoding rather than to contextual and topical guessing. The present study supports the findings of previous research that developing bottom-up processing ability is more relevant and important to those who are lacking in L2 listening proficiency.

The methods and suggestions proposed by previous research may differ in detail, but the current study proposes the use of dictation with rapid speech to tackle processing problems at local and text level. The findings of this study reveal that dictation greatly facilitates L2 listening comprehension by helping learners pay attention, discover their weaknesses in listening and focus on useful words and expressions. Dictation practice also helps improve the ability to make inferences from context and promotes good memory skills for the target language items in a meaningful manner. This is good evidence to support the argument that the ability to handle bottom-up processing can be integrated into the capacity to tackle top-down processing.

Based on the students' affective perceptions of dictation practice, they had a great preference for them even though, at the initial phase of dictation tasks, they felt some degree of boredom, difficulty and frustration. They feel rewarded and proud about coping with dictation tasks related to listening comprehension. Some of them went so far as to say that finding out the right words in dictation gave them a sense of euphoria, that they have become AP news fans now, and that they looked forward to the happiness of transcription, well beyond expressing that they enjoyed doing this activity. Who said that dictation is tedious, boring, uncommunicative and a bugbear, with a grimace and a tone of rejection? These findings support the 'learning-centered approach' in L2 teaching where teachers keep in sight the longer view, and move learners towards increasingly demanding challenges, so that no learning potential is wasted (Cameron, 2001). If we have the right rationale for adopting some tasks such as dictation or form-focused grammar activities in the L2 classroom, we need to go ahead against the grain of struggle and resistance from learners, not losing sight of the goal of the activities and of the enormous potential that lies beyond.

The present study found that selection of the right type of dictation is significantly related to learner's motivation and attitude towards the challenging activities of bottom-up processing. The availability of quite a few viable types in dictation practice raises the question of what effect these different dictation types have on students' aural-oral processing in the classroom. For instance from the current study, we may factor into our thinking phonemic transcription vs. pure dictation, group dictation with immediate feedback available vs. individual assignment dictation, and rapid speech dictation vs. slow speech dictation. The students in this study preferred the former types in each pair for consideration.

Another point is that, based on the responses from the students' self-report, dictation practice had significant effects on developing other oral capabilities such as pronunciation and speaking performance and memory skills. Even though they reported that they experienced the positive effect of dictation on their improvement of oral skills, the question of how this came about is yet to be known. Clearly, further research is needed to investigate empirically the effective ways to integrate the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and grammar, making the most of dictation practice. However, we can try out and explore some innovative ways to capitalize on the effects of dictation to achieve the goal of skills integration in the actual classroom setting. Take Brown's (2001) 'interactive dictation' for instance. It can be a good example we can put to use in the L2 classroom in order to enhance communication, collaboration, interaction, and self-directedness on the part of the students, promoting the integration of multiple language skills.

It is well-known that many ESL/EFL learners all over the world go through many ordeals and much frustration in the listening comprehension process just as one of my best students in terms of academic performances in TESL courses comments:

You had always promoted talks and videos to us and sometimes, I am hardly able to understand what is said in the talk or videos without the help of subtitles. Although I can be said to be as familiar with English, I still have difficulties dealing with it, so how would I expect my students to be perfect in the use of English with me as the only major source of learning and help. I have always admired my friends who are able to catch up all the words said by the native speaker easily and correctly like (WN)

Even though the present study was only exploratory in nature, its findings may contribute to an understanding of the nature of dictation and its effects on aural-oral skills, and enable L2 teachers and learners to make the most of its potential for enhancing their students' spoken language skills, using more effective and intriguing variations of dictation which best fit in with each teaching and learning condition (e.g., see Appendix 4).

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APPENDIX 1

A QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE DICTATION ACTIVITIES

The following statements are regarding listening behaviors and mental processes related to the dictation practices you have been engaged in for the last fourteen weeks. Write the number that best indicates your assessment regarding each statement related to the dictation activities. Your responses will be used only for the analysis and interpretation of this research on the effect of dictation practices on enhancing listening comprehension ability. Your individual response will not be revealed to anyone.

(1. Not at all 2. A little 3. To some extent 4. To a great extent 5. Very much)

Student No.:

Name in Full:

1. The dictation practices have been effective in developing listening comprehensionability.
2. The phonemic transcription works were more effective than simple dictation practices in developing listening comprehension ability.
3. The practice sessions in the classroom were more effective than my own dictation practices in developing listening comprehension ability.
4. The dictation practices on rapid speech have been more effective in developing listening proficiency than the ones of slow speech.
5. The dictation practices have been boring and tedious.
6. The listening texts for dictation practices were difficult for my proficiency level.
7. The dictation practices enabled me to pay attention when listening.
8. The dictation practices enabled me to identify my weaknesses and errors in listening comprehension process.

(1. Not at all 2. A little 3. To some extent 4. To a great extent 5. Very much)

9. The dictation practices enabled me to discover the reasons for my listening difficulties.
10. The dictation practices enabled me to focus on useful words and expressions.
11. The dictation practices have developed the ability to make inferences from context.
12. The dictation practices have been effective in developing good pronunciation.
13. The dictation practices have been effective in developing speaking ability.
14. The dictation practices have had a significant effect on a good memory for the target language items.
15. I have used mirroring technique while listening to the dictation texts.

16. I have used shadowing technique while listening to the dictation texts.
17. I have used tracking technique while listening to the dictation texts.
18. I enjoyed the dictation practices.
19. The topics and content of dictation practices have been fun and informative.
20. I spent consistent time in the dictation practices during the last fourteen weeks.
21. I recommend the dictation practices to others who want to improve English proficiency.

Thank you very much!

APPENDIX 2

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS ON DICTATION ACTIVITIES

Describe your own behaviors or ideas related to ordinary listening experiences and the dictation activities you have been engaged in for the last fourteen weeks. Feel free to express your own ideas, for you will not get any disadvantage due to these answers.

Student No.: _____ Name in Full: _____

1. Ordinary Listening Experiences

- (1) What have been the major problems to you in listening comprehension processes?
- (2) Why do you think a certain listening task was easy or difficult to carry out for you?
- (3) What kinds of strategies did you take in listening comprehension processes?
- (4) What do you think is the most useful strategy in a listening task?

2. Dictation Activities

- (1) How often have you tried to use dictation activities for yourself before this semester?
- (2) How much time did you spend in the dictation activities during this semester?

_____ Minutes/week

- (3) Say how much and in what ways the dictation activities have been helping you improve listening and/or speaking proficiency.
- (4) What did you particularly find helpful about the phonemic transcription activity for BBC documentaries in improving listening and/or speaking proficiency?
- (5) What do you think of the effect of the dictation activities on a good memory for the target language items?
- (6) What did you particularly find difficult about the dictation activities in improving listening and/or speaking proficiency?
- (7) What do you think of the quality of the texts used for the dictation activities? Do they reflect properly organized discourse and good rhetorical structure?
- (8) Would you like to recommend the dictation activities to other English teachers and students?
- (9) Any other comments to help improve the dictation activities?

I greatly appreciate your willing cooperation in the whole process of dictation works during this semester. I hope all these experiences will make significant contributions to your English proficiency.

APPENDIX 3

FINAL REFLECTION PAPER

INSTRUCTIONS

The final reflection paper should articulate why this course on “Phonetics and Phonology” was a significant learning experience for you. It should include the following:

1. A review of your original goals and whether or not you achieved them.
2. Specific examples of insights and perspectives you have gained and how they relate to your future teaching career.
3. Positive and negative experiences and what you learned from them.
4. Description of how you might be “changed” somehow by the experiences.
5. Other comments on this course for the lecturer.

I hope to read not less than three pages on this occasion and this paper is due on or before **23 October 2008.*

APPENDIX 4

VARIATIONS OF ‘PURE’ DICTATION

(Rost, 2002, pp. 138-139; Nation & Newton, 2009, pp. 79-80)

(1) Dictogloss

Learners hear an extended passage, perhaps two minutes long, on a relatively complex exposition or story. The learners do not take notes. Following the hearing of the passage, the learners are asked to reconstruct the passage as completely and as accurately as they can. The students can work in pairs or small groups to construct a ‘group account’. This collaborative goal-oriented interaction ‘forces comprehensible output’ beyond what normally happens in a topical group conversation where the politeness strategy of deference (not pressing someone for precise meaning) normally outweighs the need for clarity. For teaching purposes, the passage can be read again after each group has constructed their passage. Indeed, the entire cycle can be repeated. This version of dictation focuses initially on inclusion of ideas and gradually focuses on details.

(2) *Dicto-comp*

The *dicto-comp* is similar to the *dictogloss*, but does not involve group work. In the *dicto-comp*, the learners listen as the teacher reads a text to them. The teacher may read it several times. Then, the learners write what they can remember without any further help. The main difference between dictation and the *dicto-comp* is that in dictation the learners have to remember a phrase of several words as accurately as possible. In the *dicto-comp* the learners have to remember the ideas in a text of more than one hundred words long and express them in the words of the original or in their own words. The *dicto-comp*, whose name comes from *dictation* and *composition*, reduces the cognitive load of a task (in this case a writing task) by preparing the learners well before they do the task.

(3) *Fast-speed dictation*

The teacher reads a passage at natural speed, with assimilations, etc. The students can ask for multiple repetitions of any part of the passage, but the teacher will not slow down her articulation of the phrase being repeated. This activity focuses students' attention on features of 'fast speech'.

(4) *Pause and paraphrase*

The teacher reads a passage and pauses periodically for the students to write paraphrases, not the exact words used. (Indeed, students may be instructed not to use the exact words they heard.) This activity focuses students on 'vocabulary flexibility', saying things in different ways, and in focusing on meaning as they listen.

(5) *Listening cloze*

The teacher provides a partially completed passage that the listeners fill in as they listen or after they listen. This activity allows focus on particular language features, e.g. verbs or noun phrases.

(6) *Error identification*

The teacher provides a fully transcribed passage, but with several errors. The students listen and identify (and correct) the errors. This activity focuses attention on detail: the errors may be grammatical or semantic.

(7) *Jigsaw dictation*

Students work in pairs. Each person in the pair has part of the full dictation. The students read their parts to the other in order to complete the passage. This activity encourages negotiation of meaning.