

READING AND DICTATION AS DIAGNOSTIC APPROACHES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING PROCESS AMONG JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ADO-EKITI, EKITI STATE

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ABSTRACT

In Nigeria, learning English as a second language has continued to pose great challenge to Learners. This research investigates the potency of Dictation and Reading Exercises as viable diagnostic tools in English Language learning among Junior Secondary School ESL Learners in Ado – Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. The survey research design was employed for the study. A self-constructed questionnaire named Students’ Dispositions towards Dictation and Reading (SDTDR) was used as the research instrument. A correlation co-efficient of 0.75 was obtained and this was significant at 0.05. A total of seventy five respondents were randomly selected from five Junior Secondary Schools in Ado Local Government Area. Frequency counts and Percentages were used to analyze the data. The results of the research give an insight into the problems associated with the second language (L2) learning of which JSS ESL Learners in Ado Ekiti are not left out. The problems identified include: Pronunciation difficulties, Spelling Challenges, Mother tongue interference, Vocabulary inadequacy and Comprehension incapability. Also, the findings show that regular dictations and reading exercises in language classes help in easy detection and correction of English Language deficiencies for the improvement of Language Learning endeavours. Based on the findings, it is recommended that dictation and reading exercises in language classes should be used regularly for easy discovery and correction of English Language deficiencies for learners’ better linguistic outputs.

KEY WORDS: Reading, Dictation, English Language learning process, Second language

Introduction

Dictation in its simplest form refers to a person reading aloud so that the listener(s) can write down what is said. This offers an assessment of students' listening skills. The practice with dictation involves both visual and auditory inputs. Rost (2002) expresses listening in its broadest sense as a process of receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation); constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation) and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation). Therefore, listening remains a complex active processes of interpretation through which listeners match what they hear with what they already know.

Dictation is a device used to test a language learners listening comprehension. This measures the level of proficiency and detects problematic areas especially in spelling. It can be an effective tool for working on accuracy and fluency in all the four skills when used effectively. Dictation, more than a testing technique, is a learning activity which helps students develop their accuracy in listening and writing and reinforces structure and vocabulary. It has been a feature of language classrooms for hundreds of years whereby teachers repeat words and sentences as many times as possible at a slow speed to make sure that the students have written them down. It goes without saying that dictation is not the only way for measuring spelling, there are other alternatives such as multiple choice, matching and writing the missing letters (Sasan& Mehdi: 2010).

Categories of Dictation

Four types of dictation that can be used in language learning/testing have been identified by Sawyer and Silver (1961). These include:

The Phonemic item Dictation: This involves the presentation of the individual sounds of a language and their contrasts, thereby facilitating their accurate production. This dictation is an excellent way of teaching beginners to stop imposing the sound system of their native language on the sound system of English.

The Phonemic Text Dictation: It involves the recitation of a passage which students phonetically transcribe. The phonemic item dictation is valuable as a way to understand how English sounds change in connected speech.

The Orthographic Item Dictation: This is the dictation of individual words in isolation for transcription, similar to the traditional spelling test. It is useful for reinforcing the correlation between spelling system and sound system of a language.

The Orthographic Text Dictation: This form of dictation deals with the broadest learning possibilities in which students transcribe a unified passage and the classic dictation exercise that the foreign language teachers are familiar with. Apart from reinforcing the spelling/sound correlations of English, the orthographic text dictation uncovers comprehension and grammatical weakness in learners which the teachers can analyze and address in future lessons.

Alkire (2002) suggests that the good time to deliver a dictation is at the

beginning of the class. The reasons are: to focus the students on English right away, calm them down and ensure punctuality. Beyond these reasons, it performs the function of a formative and diagnostic tests with feedback provided to both the students and the teacher.

Kolawole (2008) highlights the three stages involved in the dictation process:

- i. The examinee/learner care-fully listens to the utterances by the teacher
- ii. He interprets the utterances
- iii. He spells the result of his interpretation of the sounds heard.

According to him, dictation can come in two ways either through direct reading (by the teacher or examiner) or by playing cassettes where English passages have already been recorded. For the reading (direct) form, the passage is read thrice, the teacher repeats words and sentences at a gradually reduced speed to make sure that students are able to write them accordingly. In evaluating transcriptions, it will require care in terms of distinguishing between COMPREHENSION errors and SPELLING errors.

Comprehension errors include both phonological mistakes and grammatical mistakes. A phonological mistake may be the spelling of words like “worm” as “warm”, “wonder” as “wander”, “Quay” as “key” and so on. A grammatical mistake may be transcribing “Yesterday he worked” as “Yesterday, he work”; “There are five sense organs” as “There are fivesense organ”.

We can define **spelling errors** as those that may likely be made by a native speaker(e.g. receive/recieve; Tomorrow/

tomorrow). From the data, the teacher can gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of students.

Reading

Reading to Kolawole (2008) involves understanding written language. It is the oral delivery of a written text which requires good pronunciation, articulation, fluency, expression, stress pattern and intonation. The language teacher looks for all these in reading which have to agree with the English Phonetic practices.

As one of the skills which involves recognizing words and phrases in scripts, using one’s knowledge of the outside world to make predictions and interpret a text could be difficult to teach or measure because it requires natural ability on the part of the learner in that they just have to get used to the phonetic symbols and their corresponding letters, master those single sounds before turning to the pages.

Fluency, reading in a fast and fluid manner, is what often distinguishes, to observers, the reading performance of a good reader from a poor reader. Fluent readers are able to read orally with speed and accuracy and with proper expression. It is one of the several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension.

The National Reading Panel (2000) submits that to become good readers children must develop: phonemic awareness, phonic skills, ability to read words in text accurately and fluently and conscious and deliberate application of comprehension strategies as they read. The panel found that many difficulties in learning to read were caused by inadequate phonemic awareness and that

systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness directly caused improvement in children's reading and spelling skills. The evidence for these casual claims is so clear cut that the panel concluded that systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness should be an important component of classroom reading instruction for children in pre-school and beyond who have not been taught phoneme concepts or who have difficulties understanding that the words in oral language are composed of smaller speech sounds – sounds that will be linked to the letters of the alphabet.

Forms of Reading

The National Reading Panel (2000) identifies two forms of reading, viz;

Guided Oral Reading: This form encourages students to read passages aloud with systematic and explicit guidance and feedback from teachers, peers or parents who correct their mistakes. This, they claim, has a significant and positive impact on new word recognition, fluency, efficiency, accuracy and comprehension with ease.

Independent Silent Reading: This form encourages students to read silently on their own, inside and outside the classroom with minimal guidance or feedback.

The main objectives of reading exercises in the junior secondary schools are to test the students' proficiency in recognizing words and their understanding of what it meant. There is the indirect consideration of speed along with accuracy in these two aspects of reading. Thus, the ultimate goal is speed and accuracy in word recognition which are

the major requisites for speed and accuracy in comprehension.

Inhibiting Factors to Efficient Reading

Several causes of inefficient reading have been identified, some of which are:

1. **Insufficient/low vocabulary Power:** A reader (oral or silent) with inadequate vocabulary will definitely not have the ability to cope with the volume of lexical items offered by the author, hence, reading deficiency prevails.
2. **Unwholesome Reading Environment:** The physical environment influences the ability to understand, comprehend, retain and recall what is read. Reading environment should be comfortable, serene, well-lighted and properly ventilated.
3. **Poor Retention:** Forgetfulness is inimical to efficient reading while the ability to remember what is previously read aids readability. Therefore, any physiological disorder – emotional disturbance, insomnia (lack of sleep), hunger and other bodily discomfort that can cause forgetfulness has to be dealt with.
4. **A word at a Goal:** This is also known as “word-for-word reading, that is, ascribing meaning to individual words while reading makes the author's meaning distorted, lowers reading rate and injects boredom. This is often caused by excessive fixation. Instead of this, phrase reading or “thought Unit” reading should be encouraged.
5. **Vocalization and Sub-vocalization:** This involves reading aloud or reading silently with lips or head movement that often cause distraction in reading and comprehension.

Reading Assessment

Assessment is a way of evaluating up on learning outcomes. It is important because it influences decision making as a whole which will direct and alter students' learning outcomes. There are two levels of reading assessment namely: Reading Comprehension and Reading Accuracy Test.

Reading Comprehension Assessment:

This reading test involves asking a student to read a passage or text as appropriate to his level, and then asking some explicit questions (detailed too) about the context of the text. Other variations involve asking the child to retell the story in his own words or summarize the main ideas or the moral lessons of the story. This form of assessment helps to discover students' level of understanding and assimilation.

One of the factors that affect reading comprehension is the reader's background knowledge of the text or language which helps in the grasp of meaning. Coupled with this is the reader's cultural knowledge which gains pre-eminence when a reader reads a text with cultural elements which he is less familiar with and is most responsible for distortions of meaning in reading comprehension.

A reader from a different linguistic environment who speaks a non-standard dialect may face problems in reading not only because of sub-culture differences but also because of differences in linguistic knowledge. In sum, it seems that even though cultural and background knowledge play a great role in reading comprehension, without linguistic knowledge, no reading may exist at all, hence, its indispensability.

Statement of the Problem

The breath-taking process of acquiring English as a second language (L2) among Nigerian students is laden with myriads of problems ranging from availability of qualified language teachers to relevant language teaching auxiliaries. Unfortunately, a high percentage of students has a very low level of reading proficiency, vocabulary development, spelling difficulties, pronunciation weakness, sound distinction challenges, graphological defects, poor information and stress placement disorder.

Purpose of the Study

The research seeks to inquire into the problems of English Language acquisition as related to Junior Secondary School Students in Ado – Ekiti, Ekiti State using dictation and reading as measuring instruments and to draw the attention of both teachers and students to these veritable tools to facilitate English Language teaching and learning.

Research Questions

The following questions were raised in order to make conclusions from the fact that may be gathered:

1. What are the problems JSS ELS learners in Ado- Ekiti face in the process of acquiring English Language skills in the areas of sound distinctions and spellings drills?
2. What has regular dictation and reading exercises helped to do in language skills acquisition – listening, speaking, reading and writing?

Significance of the Study

This study is of great importance in that it highlights the problems encountered

by ESL learners in Ado- Ekiti with special reference to reading and dictation as measuring techniques. Concerned language trainers and curriculum planners are exposed to dictation and reading as vital techniques of teaching a language and evaluating students' performance. As an eye opener, parents come to know the proficiency level of their wards in the target language; students' awareness are awakened towards the relevance of reading and dictation and their potentials are boosted to effective English Language learning. The outcome of this work could provide the appropriate pedagogical linguistic model that makes language learning a pleasurable pragmatic experience for learners of English language in our schools.

Methodology

This work is a descriptive research of a survey type. It focuses on the existing norms. Hence, the study involved the use of questions for the purpose of collecting information on English Language Acquisition Problems among Junior Secondary Schools in Ado – Ekiti, Ekiti State.

Population and sample

The population for this study comprised of all Junior Secondary School English teachers and students in Ado Local Government Area, Ekiti State. A total of seventy five respondents were randomly selected from five Junior

Secondary Schools in Ado Local Government Area.

Research Instrument

The instrument used in this study was questionnaire administered to elicit information on students' dispositions (reaction) towards Dictation and Reading (SDTDR) ($r=0.75$ at 0.05 level of significance) in language classes. The instrument has 6 items and was divided into two sections. The first section deals with students' bio-data while the second aspect focuses on students' dispositions towards Dictation and Reading. All the questionnaires were personally administered and retrieved immediately by the researchers.

Method of Data analysis

The raw scores obtained from the responses in the questionnaire were calculated using mean and percentages. The results were tabulated and displayed in frequency distribution tables.

Result and discussion of findings

RQ1. What are the problems JSS ELS learners in Ado- Ekiti face in the process of acquiring English Language skills in the areas of sound distinctions and spellings drills?

Table 1

Problems faced by learners of English as a second language

S/N	Items	Yes	No	Total
1	Do you have problem in spelling English words?	37 (49.3%)	38 (50.7%)	75 (100%)
2	Do you have the tendency of spelling English words in your mother tongue?	39 (52%)	36 (48%)	75 (100%)
3	Do you have difficulty distinguishing English sounds or matching English sounds with letters?	43 (57.3%)	32 (42.7%)	75 (100%)
4	Do you find it difficult pronouncing English words?	43 (57.3%)	32 (42.7%)	75 (100%)
5	Do you read fluently (fast) when you know the pronunciation of the English words you see?	56 (74.7%)	19 (25.3%)	75 (100%)
6	Do you comprehend easily while reading when you know the meaning of the English words you come across?	46 (61.3%)	29 (38.7%)	75 (100%)

From the analysis of the result got from the respondents from the first research question, an insight is gained into the myriad of the second Language learning problems faced by ESL learners (JSS) in Ado – Ekiti. These problems are identified to include: Pronunciation Problems,

Spelling Problems, Interference and Sound distinction inadequacies. The percentage response of respondents to YES (58.7%) and NO (41.3%) confirms that Junior Secondary School ESL learners in Ado – Ekiti too actually grapple with these L2 problems.

RQ2. What has regular dictation and reading exercises helped to do in language skills acquisition – listening, speaking, reading and writing?

Table 2:*Effects of regular dictation and reading exercises on English language skill acquisition*

S/N	Items	Yes	No	Total
7	Does regular dictation help your spelling and vocabulary development?	71 (94.7%)	4 (5.3%)	75 (100%)
8	Does frequent reading exercise help to discover and correct your pronunciation and comprehension problem?	54 (72%)	21 (28%)	75 (100%)

Considering the second research question which states that “what has regular dictation and reading activities helped to do in Language Skill acquisition?” The result proves that 94.7% of the total respondents agree with the research question that regular dictation helps to detect students’ weaknesses and improves students’ spellings, sound distinction, pronunciation and vocabulary, thus a booster to Language Skill acquisition.

The result also show that reading exercise has greatly proved to be a great instrument that can be used in discovering students’ pronunciation and comprehension deficiencies: 72% of the respondents including teachers and students testified to the efficacy of frequent reading in students’ language skill development.

Conclusion

The performance of students in English language has been greatly affected by first language interference giving birth to other problems like sound distinction, pronunciation, comprehension and vocabulary problems. Having investigated into the relevance of dictation and reading exercise in English language learning, sound distinction and production are found to be the foundation of language learning and acquisition.

In addition, students poor performance in English language is as a result of the problems encountered in the language acquisition process sequel to this is the failure to identify, measure and correct them early enough. Hence, quality time must be devoted to dictation and

reading exercises in schools especially among Junior Secondary Schools for early identification and correction of language learning problems for better language performance.

Recommendations

If the goal for a better performance of students in English Language both at lower and higher levels of use is to be achieved, the foundations must be solidly laid. The state Ministry of Education and the Teaching Service Commission should look into it that junior levels of education are the bedrock and foundations of all learning. Therefore, a firm foundation is ensured by allowing only teachers that are academically and professionally qualified to handle this very important subject. Only well trained teachers could use Dictation and Reading as viable linguistic pedagogical tools that can generate the level of interest in the learners in a language class. Also, good and well equipped language laboratories and learning promoting aura in our schools will do the job because these diagnostic approaches require rich linguistic environments for them to work.

Again, there is the need for the governments to organize workshops, conferences and seminars for the teachers where enlightenment on the relevance and potency of Dictation and Reading exercises as forms of diagnostic approach in language acquisition process will be given. Curriculum planners should earmark a quality and special time for Dictation and Reading exercises in language classes. The school administration too should ensure the devotion of special periods on the school

time table for Dictation and Reading exercises in English language classes with due monitoring.

Language teachers should, as the major facilitators, make each period of diagnostic test exercises (Dictation and Reading) lively and interesting by ensuring innovations and creativity, boredom should be eliminated, and with proper reinforcement (and punishment) students interest would be developed and great success achieved.

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