Using Dictogloss to Advance Proficiency and Accuracy in Teaching Arabic

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Abstract
This study investigates the effectiveness of using dictogloss in making students notice and reproduce key vocabulary and highlighted structural features in a college intermediate level Arabic L2 class. Dictogloss is a technique used in second language classes to make students pay attention to the relationship between form and meaning. Students listened to a short text containing the target form(s) read aloud by the instructor. Students were asked to work in small groups/pairs to reconstruct the original text. Data for this study were obtained from individual student notes, group-generated text reconstructions, and post-dictogloss reflections. The results of this classroom-based investigation show a significant gap between individual student notes and the final groups-reconstructed texts in terms of both quantity and quality.

Second language (L2) teachers face the dilemma of how to teach grammar within the communicative language teaching approach while at the same time assuring that learners process or notice key targeted forms. Second language acquisition (SLA) research indicates that the language accuracy of learners in immersion programs on certain forms lags significantly behind their fluency (Swain, 1993). There is heightened discussion in SLA on how to incorporate effectively the teaching of grammar in a communicative approach, i.e., focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Norris & Ortega, 2000). The challenge in teaching grammar or form in a learner-centered, communicative language teaching approach lies in the (in)ability of learners to notice the targeted form and make the necessary form-meaning connection (Thornburry, 1997). In this study, the targeted form is the imperative verb in Arabic. The form of the imperative verb in Arabic differs from the form of the present tense in terms of prefixes and suffixes. The morphosyntactic difference is illustrated in the example below:

- ta-ktub-ee_nā you (feminine) are writing (present tense verb)
- u-ktub-ee write down (you. feminine) (imperative verb)

This study highlights a classroom-based action research project on using dictogloss with an intermediate proficiency, college-level Arabic class. The purpose of the inquiry was to find out if using dictogloss could ensure that learners notice or pay attention to the imperative in the context of learning about food recipes and subsequently be able to produce the target forms in their reconstruction of the original text. In particular, the study compares individual written notes of group members
with the group’s reconstructed text with regard to the correct production of the imperative verb in Arabic and learners’ ability to comprehend and produce key vocabulary from the original text. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Among key structural forms and vocabulary, in which domain do individual students demonstrate a greater degree of ‘noticing’ from dictogloss activities?

2. Does working in groups substantially improve performance on both categories above?

3. To what extent does the collectively reconstructed text match the original one with regard to key vocabulary, imperative verbs, and discourse markers?

**Literature Review**

Dictogloss is an integrative approach that focuses on form and meaning as well as on comprehension and production at the same time (Jacobs, 2003; Vasiljevic, 2010). Because of its design, dictogloss provides learners with goal-oriented tasks suitable for collaborative work in which learners interact with each other while negotiating meaning. While performing a dictogloss task, students collaborate with each other using their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, context, and style to reconstruct a text that has been read to them by their instructor (Swain & Lapkin, 2001; Thornburry, 1997). The essence of a dictogloss activity can be summed in the following steps. First, the teacher reads aloud a pre-selected text at a normal speed during which students individually listen and take notes. Second, students work in pairs or small groups in order to reconstruct the original text. Then, each group shares its reconstructed text with the rest of the class. Finally, the teacher provides feedback to each group or to the class as a whole. It is important to note that dictogloss is different from dictation because it does not require reproducing a text word for word where emphasis would be more focused on discrete items, with limited focus on the global meaning of the whole text (Wajnryb, 1990). In contrast, reconstructing the text in a dictogloss activity depends largely on understanding the text’s message or comprehensive meaning and finding relationships between different parts of the text (Mayo, 2002; Qin, 2008). Another important characteristic of dictogloss that sets it apart from dictation is that text reconstruction requires collaboration between members of the group, giving students opportunity to review previously studied concepts and vocabulary as they engage (together) to clarify meaning beyond their initial interpretations or potential misunderstandings gleaned via the independent aural task.

In order to achieve effective and methodologically sound incorporation of dictogloss in language teaching, the teacher has to keep in mind certain principles (Nabei, 1996). Dictogloss should be preceded by a preview of the target vocabulary and structures. This preview can be in the form of a focused lesson that highlights a specific grammar structure and topical vocabulary. The second tenet is to read the selected text two or three times at a normal speed. During the oral readings, students take notes but are advised not to attempt to write every word they hear. After the teacher finishes the text readings, students work in pairs or small groups to reconstruct the text using their notes and their previous knowledge about the topic. Finally, the teacher should provide feedback to the class by comparing groups’ recon-
structured texts with the original, paying attention to key vocabulary, targeted forms, and discourse markers (where applicable).

Research shows that students talking about language while on task correlated positively with language learning (Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki, & Brooks, 2009). In the realm of form, dictogloss provides students with a good environment for hypothesis testing, which is vital for interlanguage development and progress towards L2 target forms (Johnson & Swain, 1997). The dialogue occurring within each group in order to reconstruct the text is intended to improve learners’ accuracy (Swain, 1998). In addition to form improvement, if dictogloss is designed and administered properly, it can be an effective communication-rich activity that requires purposeful oral production and negotiation of meaning in order to reach the goal of text reconstruction. Qin (2008) found that dictogloss improved students’ comprehension as well as written production. Jacobs (2003) praised dictogloss because “[it] embodies sound principles of language teaching which include: learner autonomy, cooperation among learners, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment, and teachers as co-learners” (p. 2). The benefits derived from using dictogloss can be attributed to the fact that it is a learner-centered procedure requiring active learner engagement throughout the various steps of the entire task. Students listen when the text is read to them making them intentionally notice key features of the text. They collaborate with their peers on all aspects related to reconstruction of the text: vocabulary, forms, discourse, and meaning.

It may be argued that other focus-on-form techniques can also produce similar or better results. In a study examining the quality and quantity of group interaction Mayo (2002) compared dictogloss with text reconstruction in which parts of the written text are deleted. The study found that dictogloss procedure produced less focus-on-form episodes during group work. Mayo concluded that “the dictogloss was not so successful in encouraging talk on language-related issues due, perhaps, to the difference in input modality, which led learners to focus on producing a coherent paragraph and not on discussing and reflecting on their language choices” (p. 170). To remedy this shortcoming of students paying less attention to form and more to meaning in dictogloss, Nabei (1996) suggested that learners’ production could benefit more from improved access to input during the preview stage through topic discussion, written activities, and comprehension activities. Nabei also suggested teacher intervention by providing feedback during the reconstruction phase, and not waiting until the final stage. Despite these potential limitations, dictogloss remains nonetheless a relatively easy to plan and easy to administer instructional technique with important benefits.

Methods

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in the context of an intermediate level Arabic class. The class is considered an upper level (fourth semester and up) course because it is beyond the basic language courses (three semesters) offered at the college where the study took place. Students take this class either because they want to continue studying Arabic to obtain a minor in Arabic or because they are required to do so by their
program of study. For students who are continuing with Arabic studies to obtain a minor, they will have to take four more upper level courses in Arabic to qualify for the minor, and for those enrolled because of their major, this course will be their final Arabic class in the program. The focus of this course was on building proficiency; therefore, the scope of the course was wide, i.e. not limited to one content area. The course covered the first seven units of Alosh (2006): *Ahaln wa Sahlan: Functional Modern Standard Arabic for Intermediate Learners*. There were seventeen students enrolled in this class; eight students, classified as heritage language learners, came from households where Arabic is spoken by at least one parent, and nine students came from backgrounds where no Arabic is used at home, classifying them as non-heritage language learners. Non-heritage learners had an average of 200 hours of classroom Arabic instruction prior to taking this class. This study is based on data collected only from seven non-heritage learners who were grouped together in two separate groups. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

**Data Collection and Procedures**

There were three data sources for this study. The primary sources were individual student notes prepared during the reading stage, and group text reconstruction. Although individual notes did not result in a text, they were an important source of data because they show how students interpreted the text. In contrast, group reconstructions show a final and complete product derived from individual notes and negotiation of meaning within each group. The third data source was a post-activity group reflection in which students in each group described how they reconstructed the text.

The dictogloss procedure was administered after covering a unit on Syrian foods where the imperative verb is used extensively. The dictogloss text was an adaptation of the main passage from the same unit (shown below). The text was read aloud three times at a normal speed by the instructor. Students were instructed to individually take notes during the readings, but not to attempt to write what they hear word-for-word. Students were then divided into four groups (A, B, C, and D). Groups B and C consisted of non-heritage learners only, while groups D and A included both heritage and non-heritage learners. This study reports finding from groups B and C only. At the end of the entire dictogloss activity, students were asked to reflect as a group upon their experience and how they approached the text reconstruction task.

**Arabic text**

 إليكم طريقة تحضير الهريسة: أولاً: أخلطي السميد وجوز الهند والسكر. في وعاء آخر أخلطي اللبن مع الخميرة إلى أن تفور الخلطة، ثم أضيفي قشر الليمون إلى خلطة اللبن والخميرة. أضيفي هذه الخلطة إلى السميد والسكر وجوز الهند ثانياً: ادهني الصينية بالزبدة وصبي فيها الخلطة

ثالثاً: ضعمي الصينية في الفرن لمدة عشرين دقيقة.

**English translation**

Here is the recipe for preparing “Harisa’ (a kind of dessert):
First. Mix semolina, coconut (shaves) and sugar. In another bowl mix yogurt and yeast until the mixture rises, then add lemon peel to the yogurt and yeast mixture. Add to this mixture the semolina, sugar and coconut (shaves).

Second: Dab the baking sheet with butter and pour the mixture inside it.

Third: Place the baking sheet in the oven for twenty minutes.

**Imperative verbs: total (7)**

- اخلطي
- أضيفي
- ضعي

**Key words: total (12)**


**Data analysis and results**

Tables 1 and 2 show texts produced by groups C and B, respectively. In each table, individual student notes are first presented followed by the collective group text reconstruction.

**Table 1: group (C)**

![Figure 1: Mark (C)](image_url)
Figure 2: Jumana (C)

Figure 3: Hala (C)
Figure 4: Aya (C)

Figures 4 and 5 show handwritten notes related to a recipe or process, possibly in a culinary context. The text is not legible in the image provided.
Table 2: group (B)

Figure 6: Emma (B)

Figure 7: Kathy (B)
Figure 8: Yelin (B)

Figure 9: group (B) reconstructed text

- Group B: Ema, Yelin, Kathy

الخلط سبد وسكر وجوز الهند
في وعاء آخر إخلطي اللبنان و الحميرة
و أضيفي قطر الليمون إلى الخلطة أو أضيفي قطر الليمون إلى الخلطة في المربع
و أضيفي خلطة سبد وسكر وجوز الهند
إضفي الخلطة أخر. إدهني الصينية بذرة
وصبي فيها الخلطة وضعي الصينية
في فرن لمدة سرين دقيقة.
The data were analyzed for the number of imperatives and key vocabulary items produced by individuals and groups. First, I compared the number of imperative verbs produced correctly by each individual student with the number of imperatives in the original text (total 7). I also compared the number of imperatives produced by each group as a whole with the number of imperatives found in the original text. Then, I counted the number of these key words that occurred in each individual student production and in each collective group production and compared with total key vocabulary items in the original text (12). Finally, I compared the reconstructed group texts with the original text in terms of discourse (order of steps). Therefore, there were three criteria for this analysis:

1. Correct form of the imperative verb in individual student notes as well as in group production of reconstructed text
2. Production of key content vocabulary words and imperative verbs in individual student notes as well as in group production of reconstructed text
3. Discourse or order of steps in the group product compared to original

Table 3: group (C) production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/group</th>
<th>Imperatives (7)</th>
<th>Key Vocab (12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark-C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumana-C</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hala-C</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aya-C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group-C</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: group (B) production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student/group</th>
<th>Imperatives (7)</th>
<th>Key Vocab (12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ema-B</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy-B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelin-B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group-B</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows that individual notes for group (C) were varied in terms of the amount of imperatives and key vocabulary words recorded. Jumana produced the most notes in the group in terms of the number of imperative verbs and key vocabulary. Hala was unable to note down any imperative verbs, while Mark produced only one imperative verb. Aya recorded two imperatives. In terms of key vocabulary, Mark and Jumana wrote down eight each out of twelve key words, while Hala and Aya recorded half of that amount. In contrast to individual notes, all seven imperative verbs were produced in the group (C) reconstructed text (figure 5 above). However, the gender feature on all seven imperatives was reproduced as masculine, whereas in the original text, the gender form was feminine in all imperatives. Group (B) also missed discourse markers (first, second, and third), but the order of steps
matched that of the original.

In their collective group reflection following the dictogloss activity, group (C) provided insight into how they went about completing this task. They wrote “We visualized the steps and used context clues [for example] the butter and what it is used for. [We] looked for imperatives and wrote down what we knew the first time and added more the second and third time around. Reading the passage prior to this helped and it was familiar. Writing our own recipes helped us a lot.”

Table 4 shows the results form group (B). Individuals in group (B) produced more imperative verbs than in group (C); however, none of them produced all imperatives individually. Only Ema was able to write down all key words. The final product of this group is similar to that of group (C). Both groups produced all seven imperative verbs and all twelve key vocabulary items. However, unlike group (C), group (B) marked all imperative verbs’ feminine feature as in the original. Although this group missed the discourse markers (first, second and third), they reconstructed the text as a paragraph with correct order of steps. In their collective reflection group (B) wrote “We focused on instruction (steps) rather than individual words getting them perfectly. We focused on key ideas and we listened for words that let us know what steps we were on (first, second).”

Discussion

Dictogloss portends to counter students’ lack of ‘noticing’ of important vocabulary and structural forms and ultimately to improve their linguistic accuracy by making form-meaning connections. In this study, dictogloss was used to ascertain learners’ ability to ‘notice’ and ultimately produce imperative verbs in Arabic and key vocabulary from a recipe. The dictogloss was administered at the end of a food unit that included reading a recipe passage, discussion of the reading passage, and group presentations of favorite recipes. Therefore, there was ample opportunity for students to learn about the use of imperatives and key recipe words in a meaningful and communication-rich environment.

The results of this study show that when students worked collaboratively on the reconstruction of the original text, they were able to reconstruct a matching text having the same targeted forms and vocabulary. They were able to do this despite the fact that their individual notes were sketchy and do not represent all features of the original text. The gap between the limited production of key vocab and key verb forms as student worked independently, and the complete production of highlighted vocabulary and verb forms when they collaborated in group work has been bridged. In order to close the gap, students were involved in communication-rich interaction. Although it may be suggested that more proficient students in the group prompted the improvement by providing more input, it can still be argued that the discussion within the group yielded clear benefit as weaker students learn the key structures and vocabulary from their stronger peers, who in turn reinforce their knowledge through the act of teaching. All learners gain from dictogloss activities that necessitate deliberate focus on the key structures and vocabulary essential to comprehending authentic texts and ultimately being able to reconstruct them.

In conclusion, this experience of using dictogloss to reinforce noticing and ultimately production of the imperative verb and some key lexicon showed positive
results represented in the groups’ ability to comprehend and reconstruct a text that matches the theme that they have been learning about, i.e. foods. It is evident from the groups’ reconstructed texts that both accuracy of target forms and the ability to understand and reproduce target-like texts have been achieved through collaborative work within the framework of a dictogloss task. Despite the fact that neither of the two groups produced the discourse markers (first, second, and third) in their reconstructed texts, the order of the steps in the recipe is maintained. The results also show that group (C) changed the gender feature on all imperative verbs from feminine to masculine by dropping the feminine marker –ee at the end of the imperative verb. There are two plausible explanations for this deviation in group (C) reconstruction. It is possible that the students in this group reconstructed by addressing it to the (male) instructor. The second explanation has to do with markedness theory in SLA, which stipulates that acquisition of marked grammatical features is delayed compared to unmarked ones of the same structure. The gender of Arabic verbs is either male or female, and the male feature is less marked (Husseinali, 2006); therefore, it is acquired first.

In light of these findings, this study has limitations that affect generalizability of its results. First, there is no documentation of interaction incidents inside the groups. Recording and collecting discussions inside the groups would have shed some light on how learners went about reconstructing their texts. Second, the results are based on only one dictogloss task administered within a normal class time. Future studies on dictogloss could benefit by avoiding both limitations in the research design.

References


