

**The Text as a Rich Source to Promote
Language Awareness: The Use
of the Dictogloss**

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Throughout history, the teaching of a second or foreign language has experienced *the pendulum effect*, as some methods (e.g., grammar-translation) focus on form and others (e.g., the communicative approach) focus on meaning (Schmidt, 1995). • Focus-on-form approaches promote *language awareness*, which is usually defined as explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning and use (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2001); that is to say, learners are helped to become aware of linguistic forms and of the functioning of the linguistic system. Focus-on-meaning approaches accentuate communication.

We contend, however, that the focus-on-form and the focus-on-meaning approaches are not exclusive. Rather, they must be worked on together. Although the real influence of language awareness on foreign language learning has been controversial (Ellis, 1997), several studies (Lasagabaster, 1998, 2001; Leow, 1997; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt 1990, 1993) have clearly shown that awareness has a facilitative role in this process. Linguistic competence has to be developed together with the sociolinguistic, discursal, and strategic competences. In this sense, grammar is seen "not as the central organising principle of communication, but roughly as an important component of communication" (Richards, 1985, p. 148).

In this article we present the *dictogloss--a* teaching technique that combines focus on form and focus on meaning. The activities involve students in thinking about the linguistic forms and functions as well as the meaning within a text, while they form their own attitudes toward the text and achieve control of the language learning process. Therefore, our aim is to foster students' language awareness (James & Garret, 1991).

The Text as a Means to Boost Language Awareness

The heart of the dictogloss is an oral text, in other words, an oral passage made up of a set of sentences that are connected to each other. Teachers and publishers agree that the text is better than isolated grammar exercises for working on several linguistic aspects (the grammatical and lexical relationships between different elements of a text, for example) because it is ruled by several discursal conditions (Carter & McRae, 1996; Kowal & Swain, 1994; Lasagabaster &

Sierra, 2001). The text helps the learner to better understand the functioning of the whole linguistic system. By using the text, the student can analyze the functioning of the language as a whole and in a real way, instead of being exposed to activities devoid of textual references. If we want our students to reflect on language, we must establish a context of text production and comprehension, taking into consideration the circumstances surrounding the communicative context as well as the grammatical and textual rules. The choice of an appropriate text, therefore, is of the utmost importance because it must be included in a wider project or set of objectives.

Our approach is to work on the four dimensions of communicative competence—linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursal, and strategic (Canale & Swain, 1980). Thus, we have chosen an oral text because it allows us to concentrate on several aspects that would be more difficult to deal with in a written text; for example, speakers in real-life situations change the rate at which they talk and use fillers and repetition to give themselves time to think.

We have chosen the dictogloss (Kowal & Swain, 1997; Wajnryb, 1990) as a means to develop our students' language awareness. In this activity, learners reconstruct a text that is read aloud. According to Kowal and Swain (1994, p. 73), this promotes language learning by (a) making them aware of gaps in their knowledge, which they would subsequently seek to fill; (b) raising their awareness of the links between form, function, and meaning of words as they work to construct their intended message; and (c) obtaining feedback from their peers and their teacher as they complete the task.

The Dictogloss

First of all, it has to be pointed out that the dictogloss is well suited for students, irrespective of their linguistic proficiency, since it has proven to be very successful even with mixed-ability groups (Kowal & Swain, 1997). In our case it is aimed at upper-intermediate/advanced students.

Choosing a Text

A dictogloss text should be authentic and interesting to the learners. Due to the usual heterogeneous nature of groups, the chosen text should appeal to a wide variety of tastes. Furthermore, the language used in the text should be in accordance with the students' command of the target language. Thus, the two main questions to bear in mind are attractiveness and linguistic adequacy. * In this case we have chosen a satirical text about women's rights from the BBC Radio 4 program, *On the Hour*, which was broadcast during the 1980s. Students enjoy both the topic and the humorous and ironic manner in which it is treated in this radio sketch. By building on the strange claims made in the text, this dictogloss can be followed by an interesting debate on gender relationships. Because the whole text (see the Appendix) is rather long, lasting about 2 minutes, an extract was chosen for the dictogloss.

Presenter: . . . we've just received this report through the line from CBN's Barbara Wintergreen. What it's about I've no idea because I haven't actually had a chance to listen to it yet.

Reporter: A woman's place may be in the home, but from 5 tomorrow it's definitely not in the state of Nebraska. Nebraska Governor Mike Morgan has won Supreme Court approval for controversial legislation banning women from his state.

* *Editor's note:* In selecting an appropriate oral text, educators in the US must also take into consideration fair use guidelines for off-air taping of radio programs for educational use. A summary of these guidelines may be found in "Is Fair Use a License to Steal?" by L. Starr, 2000, Education World, <http://www.education-world.com/acurr/curr280b.shtml>

Governor: The issue is what kind of America we want. What kind of America do we want to take into the millennium? Now we want an America that is strong and full of purpose, and now when you are trying to make a decision based on strength and strength of purpose, you do not want a woman around. 10

Interviewer: What does your mother think of this legislation?

Governor: My mother is dead.

Interviewer: Your wife? 19

Governor: My wife is dead.

Interviewer: I'm sorry about that.

Reporter: The Supreme Court ruling paves the way for other 22 states to bring in female clearance bills of their own, and all the signs are that women could be banned from three fifths of America by the fall!

Prelistening Activity

A prelistening strategy helps our students understand the whole text, analogous to looking at a map before getting into the car. One of our aims is to encourage our students to create expectations about what they are going to listen to by eliciting information from them about the main topic. For this text we ask these questions: *What is celebrated on the 8th of March? Do you think that the role of women in society has changed in the last decades? Do men and women really have the same rights?* These questions are used to foster a short discussion about the main theme of the text.

The Dictogloss Technique

For the dictogloss, the students listen to the original text three times. The first time, students are advised just to listen and not to take

notes. The second time, they hear the text with a pause of 3 to 8 seconds after each sentence (depending on its length) so they can take notes. The third time, they hear the whole text without pauses. Students are given 20 minutes to rewrite the text in their own words, working in pairs. Then they write their version of the text on a transparency to be discussed by the whole class. Although the teacher introduces the task, the activity is not teacher-led. The teacher's role is to help the students while they work and to review the final output. The class then compares the reconstructed texts with the original, distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable differences.

Awareness-Raising Activities

We build on the dictogloss by selecting from a variety of awareness-raising activities, some adapted from proposals by Thornbury (1997) and Willis (1996), so that we can tackle several communicative aspects in more depth. We have divided examples of these activities into four different dimensions of communicative competence—linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, and strategic—according to Canale and Swain's (1980) framework. All these activities are aimed at advanced students. Of course there is no need to do all of them; teachers should choose those that fit their particular purposes.

Linguistic Competence

Linguistic competence comprises the semantic, lexical, morphosyntactic, and phonological aspects of the language. It involves not only knowing the rules but also applying them.

Semantic level

1. Students spot vocabulary differences between the original text and their reconstructed versions. The students check their own versions or those of their partners, highlight the differences, and bring them to the whole class for discussion. They share their versions using the overhead projector and report on the differences using fully formulated sentences, e.g., "In the original the governor said, 'What *kind* of America do we want?' but we said, 'What *type* of America do we want?'" The teacher provides

feedback to students related to the appropriateness of the students' choices, taking into account the original text.

2. The teacher introduces the term *noticing* into classroom metalanguage to help students concentrate on the differences between their own output and that of native speakers (Willis, 1996).
3. Each student writes a sentence that summarizes the main idea of the text. The class discusses the summaries.
4. Using an English-English dictionary, students express specified phrases in their own words and see if their partners can figure out which ones they are. Examples include *through the line*; *ruling paves the way for other states*; and *bring in female clearance bills*.
5. The teacher introduces the terms *cognate* and *false cognate* or *false friend* into the classroom metalanguage and asks the class how many cognates or false cognates they can find in the text. In the sample text, for Spanish speakers there are several cognates (*received*, *idea*, *definitely*, *legislation*, *decision*) and one "false friend" (*actually*).

Lexical level

6. Learners sort a jumble of words from two sentences, from the original text or from some of the sentences on the transparencies, into five categories (nouns, verbs, prepositions, adverbs and adjectives) and then reconstruct the two sentences. We may omit some words to make the task a bit more difficult.
7. Each student looks up in an English-English dictionary the meanings of five words from the text. A partner tries to guess the words by reading the definitions. Alternatively, students can write their own definitions.

Morphosyntactic level.

8. The students use their knowledge of grammar to reconstruct the text from a set of nouns and adverbs from the original, e.g., *woman, place, home, tomorrow, definitely, state, Nebraska*. To complete this task successfully, students need to understand not only the grammar but also the concept and form of a paragraph.
9. Students look for words ending in *-ly* in the text and classify them by lexical category. In this text these words are used with the negative form of the verb (*I haven't actually had a chance; It's definitely not in the state of Nebraska*). Students notice the position of each adverb.
10. Students look at words ending in *-ing* in the text (*ruling, banning, and trying*) and comment on how they are used, noting whether they are nouns, adjectives, or verbs in the present continuous tense.

Phonological level.

11. To practice discrete sounds, students choose words that have sounds in common, as in the following examples.
 - a) Which sound is in all these words?
mother Governor matter other
 - b) Which stressed vowel sound is the odd one out?
 - 1) *just mother that won*
 - 2) *report Morgan purpose court*
12. Looking at the text, students focus on the letters *s* and *a* and discuss the different ways they are pronounced.
13. Students listen to excerpts of the text (lines 1-9) and discuss the conditions that affect how the letter *h* is pronounced.

Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence entails knowing what to say and how to say it in the right place and at the right moment. It is the knowledge of the sociocultural rules and of the appropriateness of the message, taking into account the communicative situation. These activities

require students to think about such issues and thus avoid the very commonplace state of second language learners who remain unaware of the effectiveness and appropriateness of their language use.

14. Students focus on a speaker's statements—in this case the governor's—and decide whether they are appropriate, taking into account his social position.
15. Students engage in a role play related to the text. In this example, pairs of students continue the interview with the governor and ask him all the questions that come to their minds. The students playing the role of the interviewer have to stand up for women's rights but, realizing they are working for a broadcasting network and speaking to a governor, must use appropriate language. Similarly, their partners take on the role of the governor (and espouse his ideas), reproducing the language that would be used in a formal, public communicative situation and endeavoring to avoid colloquial or slang expressions. In the meantime, those watching the performances note all those expressions that are not in the appropriate register. After groups finish their performances, the class discusses the appropriateness of the language used.

Discoursal Competence

Discoursal competence is the capability to recognize and produce coherent texts. To achieve discoursal competence, a student must master the discourse rules. Apart from producing grammatically correct sentences, the student has to be able to organize them appropriately. To develop discoursal competence, students respond to questions like these.

16. How many paragraphs have you used in your own version of the text? Why?
17. What do *you* (line 15), *that* (line 21), and *their* (line 23) refer to?
18. How is cohesion achieved in the text? What does the reporter do so that the governor's words become part of the text?

19. Look at the words in the text and think of their first meaning. Have they a different meaning once you take into account the intonation, stress, or context? Why?

Strategic Competence

Strategic competence, the capability of compensating for deficiencies in their linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discoursal competence, enables students to interact despite having a limited command of the language. Students practice different strategies, including paraphrasing, using nonlinguistic resources (e.g., eye movements or gestures), avoiding complex issues, repeating phrases to allow time to think, changing rate of speech, using fillers (*you know; well*), and other ways to overcome communication difficulties. Although vital for students to learn how to use, unfortunately strategic competence is rarely given consideration in textbooks.

Role plays can be used to develop strategic competence as well as sociolinguistic competence. Different pairs can focus on different aspects of communication as they prepare and perform their role plays.

20. When participants leave the room to prepare their role plays, the rest of the students are asked to pay attention to the nonlinguistic resources (e.g., eye movements and gestures) to which their classmates resort. They discuss their observations after the performance.

21. As they prepare to perform a role play of an interview, students consider what sorts of strategies they could use to give themselves time to think. For example, in the interview with the governor, how might they respond to the governor's unexpected and cutting answers? At this stage, students should think of different strategies, such as using fillers (*well; now; um*), changing the subject (*by the way; incidentally*), indicating an additional point (*in any case; furthermore*), reformulating the utterance (*in other words; rather*), or changing their rate of speech. They then put their ideas into practice while acting out the interview.

Some Final Considerations

Language teaching is complex. Approaches to language teaching that focus primarily on form or on meaning have failed to foster the development of learner autonomy (Ellis, 1997). Even in natural language acquisition contexts that guarantee sufficient quantity of input, complete formal accuracy is unlikely to be achieved without any focus on form (Ellis, 1995). Because we cannot communicate without using linguistic and even nonlinguistic tools, teachers should not oppose communicative competence to linguistic competence (Titone, 1996), which is why these competences should not be considered mutually exclusive domains.

We consider the text as a communicative unit, rather than the isolated sentence, to be ideal for building communicative competence. Our teaching experience has shown us that students can progress in all four dimensions of communicative competence, reaching serious and significant conclusions while enjoying the text that serves as their starting point. In addition, teachers can select particular texts and create activities according to their students' needs and interests, while effectively integrating the four language skills—listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

Language teachers should not be ashamed or afraid of using both grammar and communicative language activities. Some teachers do this with a sense of guilt (Maestri, 1995) because they believe it goes against the currently popular methodology. However, as noted earlier, research studies have demonstrated that the development of learners' language awareness is a very powerful and fruitful tool for language teaching and learning. By utilizing text-based activities like the dictogloss, learners become more aware of the positive relationship between linguistic knowledge and language performance. **The** dictogloss and related activities that we have described here emphasize language as a means of communication and at the same time boost student awareness of the linguistic system as rule-governed, thus intentionally promoting language learners' growth in every aspect of communicative competence.

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APPENDIX

Transcript of Radio Sketch

- Presenter: . . . we've just received this report through the line from CBN's Barbara Wintergreen. What it's about I've no idea because I haven't actually had a chance to listen to it yet.
- Reporter: A woman's place may be in the home, but from tomorrow it's definitely not in the state of Nebraska. Nebraska Governor Mike Morgan has won Supreme Court approval for controversial legislation banning women from his state.
- Governor: The issue is what kind of America we want. What kind of America do we want to take into the millennium? Now we want an America that is strong and full of purpose, and now when you are trying to make a decision based on strength and strength of purpose, you do not want a woman around.
- Interviewer: What does your mother think of this legislation?
- Governor: My mother is dead.
- Interviewer: Your wife?
- Governor: My wife is dead.
- Interviewer: I'm sorry about that.
- Reporter: The Supreme Court ruling paves the way for other states to bring in female clearance bills of their own, and all the signs are that women could be banned from three fifths of America by the fall.
- Morgan: I am wholly in favor of a state for women.

Interviewer: Just one?

Morgan: One state would be enough, er . . .

Interviewer: Which one do you propose?

Morgan: That would be a matter for the Supreme Court to

Interviewer: But not Nebraska?

Morgan: Certainly not Nebraska, no.

Demonstrators: Mother nature has disconnected the gender since
time immemorial . . .
Mother nature is . . . a woman . . .
If you are a woman . . .

Reporter: It's an issue that's divided the USA. Women's
league protester Donna Doubtfire dubs Morgan's
legislation "geographic gynofascism."

Demonstrator: It's geographic gynofascism.

Interviewer: So what do you mean by that?

Demonstrator: I mean that men are trying to segregate women
into some sort of pen where they have no rights
and no bodies and no minds and no future . . . A
woman's body is her own property and she alone
should be able to decide its location.

Reporter: Meanwhile, big bucks are being spent on a TV
gender fight:

Male voice: Honey?

Female voice: Yes dear?

Male voice: Get out!

Male voiceover: Paid for by the American Brotherhood.

Female voice: Senator Morgan says women should get out of the
home and out of the state. **We say . . .**
Baaaaaanalls .

Female voiceover: Paid for by the Sisters of America.

Male voice: Can you imagine what I would sound like if I were
a woman?

Female voice: I'd sound like this.

Male voice: See? Keep 'em out.

Demonstrator: You are running a spike into the solidarity of
women by saying that .

Reporter: So it looks as if this is one Supreme Court ruling
that definitely says "Wham, barn, no thank you,
ma'am!"¹

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