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Report on the Action Research Project on English Dictation in a Local Primary School

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This is a report on an action research project which investigates the extent to which dictation can help pupils learn English as their second language in a local government-subsidized Chinese primary school. It documents a teacher-initiated, classroom-based action research which turned English dictation exercises from the traditional types into innovative ones in three upper primary classes. Respondents came from a sample of 97 average-ability pupils from three primary four to six classes in the school. The researcher compared pupils' perspectives before and after the study and reported the consequent changes in pupils' perceptions of their dictation lessons. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through two sets of structured questionnaires, two semi-structured interviews and teacher's class observation.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Dictation is an activity to write down something that someone says or reads out as it is being said or immediately after it is said. Although not many writers have written on dictation as an individual topic and internationally there is hardly any research which looks into the effect of dictation on second language learning, the use of dictation as one of the favourite language teaching and learning methodologies has gone through a long history. Dictation has long played a significant role in the English language curriculum in Hong Kong, particularly in primary schools because it is clearly stated in the primary school English language syllabuses. Dictation is therefore conventionally treated as an isolated and independent lesson in most schools' weekly timetables. Teachers often follow the mode of 'seen' dictation as suggested by the former Education Department in the school syllabus (Curriculum Development Council, 1997). Thus, dictation often acts as a memorization exercise or a spelling-checking assessment in which teachers read the text, pupils dictate it, and then the teachers read the text the third time for pupils to check through their work (Raimes, 1983; Davis & Rinvolucri, 1988; Careless, 1999). Pupils, particularly the less capable pupils, either work under stress or give up in the boring and threatening lesson. They gradually develop a negative attitude towards dictation lessons that hinders their learning. In fact rather than mechanical drilling or assessing, dictation can also be treated as a teaching and learning exercise in which pupils learn to improve their language learning. Teachers can make use of different genre and a number of dictation activities to conduct their lessons so as to change a boring, threatening and stressful classroom atmosphere into a relaxing, supportive and enjoyable learning environment which subsequently brings a positive influence on learners' performance (Davis & Rinvolucri, 1988;. Wajnryb, 1992; Curriculum Development Council,

1997, Goh & Fraser, 1998).

THE RESEARCH

Objective

The objective of this project was to find out to what extent could dictation activities help pupils' learning of English as their second language in a traditional local Chinese primary school.

Research Questions

1. Can dictation lessons be meaningful and interesting?
2. If so, can dictation activities help pupils' learning of English as their second language?

Sampling

Pupils came from class 4A, 5A and 6A of a traditional Chinese primary subsidized school at the Eastern District on Hong Kong Island. There were 31 pupils in 4A, 33 pupils in 5A and 33 pupils in 6A. In total, 97 pupils participated in the study. Their age ranged from ten to fifteen. They sat in rows in normal classroom setting. These pupils mostly came from working class families. Their English classes were their only opportunities to be exposed to the English language. The majority of them had studied English for a number of years since kindergarten. They were able to listen, speak and write simple English. But one-third of them have arrived in Hong Kong from Mainland China for less than five years. They had only learned English for three to four years. Their limited experience in the language often hindered their second language learning. However, all learners were hard working.

Time Duration

The project was carried out from 25th February, 2002 to 7th June, 2002 with a total length of three and a half months. During the period there were the Chinese New Year holiday, Easter holiday, a test and a mid-term examination.

Methodology

An action research study, which was classroom-based and teacher-initiated, was undertaken. Action research is a process of study done by systematically collecting data on one's everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to some conclusions about what future practice should be. It involves a self-reflective cycle of identifying a situation or problem, planning a change, acting and observing the processes and consequences, and then re-planning, and so forth (Figure 1). It offers a valuable opportunity for teachers to be involved in the research to collect first-hand information (McNiff, 1993; Atweb, Kemmis & Weeks, 1998). Action research was applied in this study because it enabled the teacher researcher of this project to follow the steps in the spiral that helped her reflect upon her teaching and improve her pupils' situation. She intended to see if the plan would work well or if any necessary modification or amendment would be needed to improve her pupils' language learning.

Figure 1 The self-reflective spiral in action research

(Kemmis, S. and Wilkinson, M., 1998 in Atweb, Kemmis & Weeks ed., 1998)

Pupils from class 4A, 5A and 6A were chosen as sampling. Most of them were of average academic standard although a few were a bit below average standard because many of them were new immigrants who had arrived from Mainland China for less than five years. The project began and ended with interviews and questionnaires. In total two interviews were conducted and three questionnaires were administered. A semi-structured interview and a structured questionnaire were conducted at the start of the study to collect data on pupils' perceptions of their traditional dictation lessons. Then, a variety of innovative dictation activities were introduced to replace the traditional dictation exercises pupils used to have. A checklist was used to help the teacher researcher to observe pupils' behaviour and performance during class. Afterwards, another semi-structured interview was conducted and an identical questionnaire was distributed to pupils to gather their perceptions of their dictation lessons after the changes. Finally, an additional questionnaire was distributed to pupils to collect their overall opinions about their dictation lessons after their new experiences. Pupils' perceptions and opinions before and after the changes were compared and analysed.

INNOVATIVE ENGLISH DICTATION ACTIVITIES

During the study, five different innovative dictation activities were implemented in ten weeks to replace the traditional dictation exercises. Pupils' interest and ability were considered. The activities were intentionally set from the easiest to the more challenging. Each activity was conducted twice to make sure pupils understood the rules and got used to the ways the activity worked. Clear instructions were given before the start of the activities so that pupils understood well what they were going to do. Considerable teacher's support was provided to pupils who had difficulties during the activities. At the end of each task pupils were given five to ten minutes to check their spelling mistakes using their reference books such as course books and dictionaries. The dictation activities used in this project were adapted from Davis & Rinvolucri's (1988) *Dictation*, Wajnryb's (1992) *Grammar Dictation* and the Curriculum Development Council's (1997) *Syllabuses for Primary Schools: English Language Primary 1-6* respectively. They include:

a. Jig-saw dictation

Pupils listened to a short text read by the teacher. They wrote down chunks of the text in the form of phrases or short sentences. This helped pupils develop their skills in understanding and listening to the gist of the text.

b. Partial dictation

Pupils worked in pairs. A text was divided in half. One read his/ her half of the text for his/ her partner to dictate. Two of them worked out the whole text. This provided pupils with an opportunity to complete a reading, speaking and writing task.

c. Running dictation

Pupils worked in groups of five to six. One member was responsible for writing the text while other members took turns to read out the text sentence by sentence. This provided pupils with an opportunity to work co-operatively.

d. Grammar dictation

Pupils worked in groups of four to five. They listened to a short text read by the teacher at normal speed and jotted down some important words. Then they pooled their resources, discussed and worked together to compose the text as nearest to the original text as possible. This enabled pupils to work out a speaking and writing task collaboratively.

e. Composition dictation

Pupils worked in groups of three to four. They listened to a text read by the teacher at normal speed and jotted down familiar words as they listened. Then they made use of their limited number of isolated words or fragments of sentences to reconstruct their version. Their texts did not need to be exactly the same as the original text. Pupils were allowed to discuss, compare, seek help from peers and edit their texts before the final submission. Examples of pupils' work and their activities were shown at Appendix 1 and 2.

Data Collection

Two semi-structured interviews, teacher researcher's close observation of pupils' performance during class and two sets of structured questionnaires were used to collect data in this study. Quantitative data came from the questionnaires and qualitative data came from the interviews and observation. In this way, data were triangulated to ensure validity (Seliger and Shohamy, 1989; Nunan, 1992; Bell, 1993; McDonough and Mcdonough, 1997).

a. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews (Appendix 3) were conducted. Five pupils per class, which represented approximately fifteen per cent of the sampling, were chosen at random to be interviewed to collect their open-ended opinions in details. These opinions complemented the deficiencies of the questionnaire so that pupils could explain their ideas in details. Same pupils were interviewed twice, before and after the implementation of the study.

b. Questionnaires

Two sets of face-to-face questionnaires were used. An identical Likert 5-scale questionnaire (Appendix 4) with twelve statements indicating the responses of 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'no opinion', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' was used to collect pupils' perceptions of dictation in the beginning and at the end of the project. This allowed respondents to provide a wide range of responses. Chinese translation was written under each statement to help pupils interpret the context more easily and clearly. Another simple 'Yes-No' questionnaire (Appendix 5) was used to collect pupils' overall opinions about the dictation activities. All questionnaires were conducted in class so that teacher could give a clear explanation to pupils and clarify all queries raised. In addition one hundred percent return rate could be ensured.

c. Observation

Teachers carefully observed pupils' performance during lessons. They made use of an observation checklist (Appendix 6) to record what had happened in class that helped them investigate, analyse and conclude their findings when the project came to an end.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The pupils interviewed stated that they always spent at least a half to one hour to prepare for their traditional dictation lessons before changes. They all viewed dictation as a kind of spelling-checking exercise. 12 out of 15 pupils (80% of the pupils) indicated they were working under stress and threat. 100% of the pupils declared that they were always trying hard to get high scores to satisfy their parents. They all thought that every learner had to undergo dictation lessons in their language learning process. All of them had strong belief that dictation helped their learning. They had never thought of any possibility of change in the way dictation could have been conducted. Some pupils expressed their concerns about having changes. They were insecure over any new ways of dictation which they had never experienced before and they did not have confidence in getting satisfactory results in their work in new ways of doing dictation.

After the introduction of the innovative dictation activities, pupils began to enjoy their dictation lessons. Some pupils immediately asked whether they would have the same kind of activities in their coming dictation lessons once the lesson was over. They looked forward to having the lessons again instead of avoiding them like what they did in the past. Data collected in the questionnaires revealed pupils' consistent and strong belief in the use of dictation in their learning. The figure was even higher than it was before the study. There was an increase of 17 pupils representing 17.5% of the sample. This is an encouraging finding because it reveals that pupils not only treat innovative dictation activities as interesting games but also as learning processes. 15 more pupils, an increase of 15.5%, found happiness in their dictation lessons and the satisfaction pupils gained from the innovative dictation lessons also increased by 12.4% or a total of 12 more pupils. Pupils who were previously worried about changes realised that dictation lessons could also be fun. 57 out of 97 pupils, representing 58.8% of the sample, either gave the responses of 'strongly agree' or 'agree' on having more dictation lessons. There was an increase of 15 pupils representing an increase of 22.7% who held positive responses when compared with the figure at the beginning of the study. In the final questionnaire, 78% of pupils expressed that they enjoyed their innovative dictation activities while 76% of the pupils expressed their preferences in having the new innovative dictation activities to the traditional exercises they used to have.

The rise in figures implies that pupils have developed a positive attitude towards their dictation lessons. They began to believe that learning could take place in relaxing and enjoyable dictation lessons. Their positive attitude led to their willingness in having more dictation lessons that might eventually enhance their language learning. Details were shown in the following diagrams.

Figure 2 Comparison of pupils' perceptions on dictation before and after the study

Dictation helps my learning

Pre-study

Post-study

Dictation makes me happy

Pre-study

Post-study

Dictation brings me satisfaction

Pre-study

Post-study

I like to have more dictation

Pre-study

Post-study

Figure 3 Summary of pupils' perceptions on dictation before and after intervention

Figure 4 Pupils' overall perception on dictation activities