

Analyzing a group of EFL learners' products Of two dictations: foreseeing orthographical difficulties and planning pronunciation exercises

Análisis del producto de dos dictados por parte de un grupo de estudiantes de inglés: anticipando dificultades ortográficas y planeando ejercicios de pronunciación

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*Abstract*

This article analyzes the phoneme-grapheme correspondence in the products of two orthographic-text dictations taken by a group of sixteen English majors at the School of Modern Languages at the University of Costa Rica. Accordingly, before administering the dictation of the first text, the author looks for a correlation between a list of foreseen spelling difficulties and the possible mistakes the students will eventually make while decoding and transcribing the troublesome words and phrases of the text. Once the spelling difficulties have been identified, the author presents a series of pronunciation activities to help learners raise awareness towards this spotted difficulty. After this group of students carries out these pronunciation activities, the author administers a second dictation to observe the improvement reached and the effect of formal instruction on the students' second dictation.

*Keywords:* dictation; spelling; listening comprehension; orthography; pronunciation activities

*Resumen*

Este artículo analiza la correspondencia fonema-grafema en los productos de dos dictados llevados a cabo por un grupo de dieciséis estudiantes de la carrera de inglés de la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas en la Universidad de Costa Rica. De la misma manera, antes de administrar el dictado del primer texto, el autor busca una correlación entre una lista de dificultades ortográficas y los posibles errores que los y las estudiantes podrán eventualmente cometer al decodificar y transcribir las palabras y frases difíciles. Una vez identificadas las dificultades ortográficas, el autor presenta una serie de actividades de pronunciación con el fin de ayudar a los y las estudiantes a crear conciencia acerca de la dificultad previamente encontrada. Después de que este grupo de estudiantes lleva a cabo las actividades de pronunciación, el autor administra un segundo dictado para observar el mejoramiento alcanzado así como el efecto de la instrucción formal en el segundo dictado.

*Palabras claves:* dictado; comprensión auditiva; ortografía, actividades de pronunciación

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### *Introduction and objectives*

Although some English instructors might think of dictation as an old-fashioned language activity, it is still a valuable teaching tool when it comes to foreseeing learners' language difficulties while decoding the content of a given text and transcribing it. While some English teachers may consider that dictation is a highly challenging task, others occasionally rely on it as a merely evaluative exercise. On the other hand, if used effectively, dictation can bring useful insights related to learners' listening comprehension problems and their effects on decoding discourse and encountering possible spelling problems. After carefully selecting a passage to be dictated, instructors can predict students' difficulties in terms of letter-sound correspondence and examine these predictions at the moment of analyzing the student products (transcripts) of a dictation. As a result, informed decisions can be made in order to adapt and implement pronunciation exercises which will help students overcome those troublesome items and improve their aural reception and orthography.

Thus, this article intends to help novice English teachers, especially those who teach first-year English courses at University of Costa Rica, learn about the benefits of conducting dictation in their EFL lessons at a low-intermediate level. The main objectives of this study are the following:

- a. Highlight the strengths of dictation.
- b. Foresee possible orthographical difficulties to be encountered by a group of low-intermediate students of English in their comprehension and transcription of two different passages.
- c. Examine a correlation between the foreseen difficulties and the probable mistakes made by the subjects after taking the dictations and transcribing both texts.
- d. Implement a series of pronunciation activities that target the most significant difficulties.
- e. Study the most troublesome words or phrases of a second passage before administering its dictation.
- f. Evaluate the improvement reached by the students after the formal instruction of one pronunciation aspect and spelling.
- g. Design a series of exercises that include dictation in the semi-guided practice.
- h. List a series of recommendations teachers should consider before planning a dictation in the English lessons.

## *Review of Literature*

### *The Notion of Dictation*

Dictation is a challenging task that many instructors rarely incorporate in their lessons. Davis and Rinvolucri (1988, p.4) concisely explain that “dictation is one of those exercises in which, if it is well done, the teacher’s planned activity prompts reactions, simultaneously and immediately subsequently, by *all* the students in the group.” Undoubtedly, dictation is a language exercise which involves higher cognitive skills from EFL learners despite their proficiency level. Thus, students are challenged to interpret meaning from oral discourse (*decoding*). They encounter a new oral text without, in most scenarios, conducting any vocabulary-building exercise or pre-listening comprehension activities unless the topic of the passage to be dictated correlates with the course or lesson themes. In some cases, students cannot rely on their background knowledge to make sense of the text to identify topic-related words; this occurs because the dictation is not necessarily preceded by a series of warm-up activities or vocabulary-building exercises. Students need to associate letters to sounds and transcribe a given passage (*recoding*) with very limited time. They are expected, in most cases, to accurately write down the text they hear. However, if students are not exposed to frequent listening comprehension tasks, the process of transferring an oral text to the written mode may be overwhelming for those with a low level of proficiency.

There are four central ways in which language learners benefit from dictation. Through dictation, students have an opportunity to reflect on the spoken and written modes of discourse. However, Fields (2007, p.29) draws attention to this advantage and points out that “in a non-phonetic language such as English, pronunciation of the written form of words, as well as spelling of their spoken form, can be problematic.” As a consequence, the spelling system of English compared with the one of Asian languages, for example, plays a crucial role in the success of putting this kind of exercise into practice. Another advantage of dictation has to do with the evaluation of student transcriptions. Alkire (2008, p.4) indicates that both students and instructors can focus on *comprehension errors* on phonology (i.e., *face* instead of *phase*) and grammar (i.e., *He’s live there* instead of *He’s lived there*) as well as *spelling errors* (i.e., *reciept* instead of *receipt*). A third advantage relies on the fact that EFL students combine different language skills in one single activity; in fact, “by simultaneously listening, reading and writing, students are processing these structures and vocabulary integratively” (Fields, 2007, p.29). A fourth significant advantage intermingles the concept of collaborative learning with error correction. In relation to this, Davis and Rinvolucri (1988) say that

There is no call for the teacher to take on responsibility for correcting dictation scripts. Such work requires care, of course, but it does not require the kind of linguistic judgment that only the teacher can make. Correcting a dictation is a straightforward task which students are quite capable of doing for themselves, extending their activity from the dictation into the correction and providing them with opportunities to ‘over-learn’ the language as well as collaborate with each other in the learning process. Such work is good introduction to the habit of student self-correction, and in particular collaborative correction approaches. The teacher can usefully introduce these in more difficult areas, such as working on difficult compositions (p.4-5).

In large groups, individuals can become autonomous learners who monitor and self-correct their own transcripts without depending on their instructor’s feedback. By doing so, cooperative-language learning can be established after taking a dictation. As part of an optional follow-up activity, students can give their opinions on the challenges of taking a dictation and the mistakes they made. At a higher cognitive task, students may be able to explain why they make certain mistakes and develop a whole-class discussion on this. To sum up, Fields (2007) lists some of the key strengths or benefits of incorporating dictation in the EFL classroom:

- Dictations are motivating—students overwhelmingly report enjoying the activity and finding it useful.
- Dictation involves the active participation of the entire class, no matter how large.
- Dictation can be done at any level.
- Dictation usually has a calming effect on students.
- Used at the beginning of the lesson, dictation has the effect of focusing the class and bringing students to task.
- Texts used for dictation can be exploited for many other kinds of activities afterwards (p.29).

Before conducting a dictation, EFL instructors need to choose a specific type of dictation that best suits the objective of the lesson. The traditional *orthographic text dictation* is widely known in most EFL settings. In this case, the instructor reads or plays a passage at a normal speed. Afterwards, the same text, which has been divided into thought groups, is read again with a short pause after each thought group. To finish, the teacher goes over the text again for students to check their transcripts. The orthographic text dictation may be adapted in a way that teachers can also dictate isolated sentences, a list of vocabulary items or minimal pairs. Even though this type of dictation has been effectively used for years, Fields explains that “one criticism of traditional dictation is its focus on form and the parroting of language rather than any meaningful communication or originality on the part of the students” (2007, p.30). It is worth noting that for

the purpose of this study, the author implemented the orthographical text dictation of two paragraphs.

A second major type of dictation is called *unexploded dictation*. Brown and Barnard (1975) explained that students use a recording to write the text down; “the text has no special pauses like ordinary dictation so the learners need to use the pause and replay buttons often” (in Nation, 2008, p.25). A third kind of dictation, which is less traditional or mechanical, is called *dictogloss*. This is a semi-controlled dictation in which the instructor reads a text while students reconstruct it without transcribing exactly the same words they have heard. DeFilippo and Sadow pointed out that dictogloss “is an excellent way to develop a connection between what the learner hears and the written language. In this listening-speaking text, however, the focus is on getting the gist or main idea of a sentence or a short paragraph and preparing students to take notes” (2003, p.8). Within more communicative settings, this type of dictation allows students to interact more to compare their jottings (brief pieces of information that were written down quickly) in pairs or small groups.

#### *Dictation and Sound-letter Correspondence*

There are several reasons why Spanish speakers, especially at a low-intermediate proficiency level, have difficulty at the moment of transcribing a dictation and dealing with the intricacies of English pronunciation and spelling. Dale and Poms (1999, p.256) explain that “non-native speakers of English frequently have difficulty recognizing sounds absent in their native language.” Practor and Wallace (1985, 206-207) expand on this issue and wrote that:

[...] the spelling of English is much less systematic than that of most other languages. There are more than twice as many vowel sounds in English as there are vowel letters in the Roman alphabet with which English is written. It has therefore been necessary to devise various combinations of symbols, some of them unsystematic, to represent vowel sounds. The symbols *w* and *y* have had to be used to represent both consonant and vowel sounds. English has borrowed an enormous number of words from other languages, and has borrowed elements of foreign English spelling systems with the words. [...] Irregular, nonsystematic English spellings therefore abound.

In addition, first-year English majors at the School of Modern Languages, for example, do not receive formal instruction on phonetic writing, and instructors cannot rely on the phonetic transcription as a teaching tool. The lack of phoneme-grapheme correspondence causes that EFL novice learners struggle, for instance, with the representation of consonant /dʒ/ in its initial, middle, and final occurrence as in words such as **j**aw, **e**ducation, **c**ordial, **w**edge, and **c**age. The substitution of vowel sounds also occurs due to inconsistencies between learners’ L1 (Spanish) and the target language, being English in this study. Regarding the study of vowels, one must advise students

about the regularity that also exists between the pronunciation of stressed vowels and the spelling pattern. Practor and Wallace (1985, 221) exemplify this point as they indicate that letter **a** in short position before letter **l** is pronounced with sound /ɔ/ as in *all*, *salt*, *ball*, or *talk* with two exceptions: *half* and *shall*. By pointing this out, learners will become acquainted with the irregularity and regularity between English phonology and orthography.

Linking is, for example, another aspect that makes students face difficulties with the dictation of thought groups rather than words in isolation. Identifying accurately the boundaries as well as the connections of final consonants and initial vowels in connected speech is quite a challenge principally for novice learners. Furthermore, syllabication in English increases the level of difficulty of taking a dictation since “the spelling of a word can differ from the syllabication of its pronunciation. For example, in *stylistics* the first syllable of the spelling is *styl*, but the first syllable of the pronunciation is /stal/” (Richards et al, 1992, p.367).

#### *Description of the Course LM-1001 Integrated English I and its Participants*

LM-1001 Integrated English I is a team-taught course that belongs to the B.A. in English and the B.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the University of Costa Rica. Its level of proficiency is low-intermediate. Language macro (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and micro (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) skills are taught during sixteen weeks. Content is presented and evaluated holistically following a communicative approach. Learners attend classes four days a week during a period of thirteen hours. The course has ten hours of instruction as regular lessons and three hours of computer-laboratory or audio-lingual laboratory sessions each week.

#### *Participants*

The 16 Spanish speakers of this study, whose ages range from 18 to 25, were enrolled in the first-year English course LM-1001 Integrated English I at the School of Modern Language at the University of Costa Rica. Most English majors are part of the program of B.A. in English; the rest belongs to the B.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Although these students attended classes four times a week, the writer worked with them two days a week (Monday and Wednesday).

The textbook is *Interactions I: Integrated Skills*, and its first eight chapters are covered throughout the semester. Thus, the main themes and pronunciation contents of this course are summarized in the table below (Baker et al., 2003):

Table 1. Chapter topics and pronunciation contents of the course LM-1001

UNIT	Main Themes	Pronunciation Content
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ College life</li> <li>▪ International students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Word stress and reductions</li> <li>▪ The –s and –es ending</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Experiencing nature</li> <li>▪ Global climate changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Long and reduced forms</li> <li>▪ Word stress</li> <li>▪ Can vs. Can't</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Nutrition</li> <li>▪ The changing global diet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stress words and reductions</li> <li>▪ Word stress in numbers</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In the community</li> <li>▪ Directions around the world</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stress words and reductions</li> <li>▪ Comparing long and reduced forms</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Home</li> <li>▪ History of the changing family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The -ed ending</li> </ul>
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Cultures of the world</li> <li>▪ Coming-of-age in different cultures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stress words and reductions</li> </ul>
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Entertainment and the media</li> <li>▪ Cross-cultural communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Comparing long and reduced forms</li> </ul>
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Social life</li> <li>▪ Meeting the perfect mate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Intonation with exclamation</li> <li>▪ Word stress</li> </ul>

Elaboración propia

*Procedure of the First Dictation*

Since one of the objectives of this study is to foresee the orthographical difficulties of a group of EFL learners at a low-intermediate level, the writer chose a group of first-year English majors. The next task consisted of the following steps:

- Select a text with an appropriate level of difficulty and extension.
- Choose a topic-related text that correlates with one of the theme of the course textbook so that students feel familiarized with its content.
- Foresee the orthographical difficulties that this text may comprise.
- Divide the text into thought groups.
- Monitor pauses and the number of repetitions.
- Dictate the text at the beginning of the semester (first week of instruction).
- Tabulate the chosen words to analyze how students spelled them.
- Analyze the correlation between the foreseen difficulties and the words written by students.

Thus, the following paragraph was selected and adapted from Davis and Rinvoluceri (1988, p.122) to meet the objectives of the study.

## The Smoking Issue

*College campuses are the latest battleground for smokers and non-smokers. Throughout the country, lawmakers forced bars to go smoke-free. In step with the times, colleges banned it in the dorms and other institutions of higher learning have followed suit. For smokers' rights activists, this move is just another step in an anti-American drive to discriminate against and control a segment of the population. Some activists are shocked by smoking prohibition in college housing. They warned that the choice to ban smoking should be up to the individual owners rather than the government. On the other hand, other opponents point out that the decision to put these substances into your organism should extent as far as your neighbor's lungs. A research group for student affairs and institutional research conducted a survey of 927 residential students. A majority of students, smokers and non-smokers, said that smoking in private rooms within some halls is the preferred policy. For instance, smoking in the dorms is particularly controversial because the smoke comes up through vents and cracks and drives non-smokers crazy. Smokers argue, though, that smoking is not illegal if the lease does not prohibit it.*

*Source: Dictation for Discussion*

Once the text was revised, it was divided into thought groups; the slanted lines (/) mark the pauses during the dictation. Thus, this resulting text follows the divisions shown below:

- 1 The Smoking Issue (title)
- 2 College campuses are the latest battleground / for smokers and non-smokers /
- 3 Throughout the country, / lawmakers forced bars / to go smoke-free /
- 4 In step with the times, / colleges banned it in the dorms /
- 5 and other institutions of higher learning / followed suit /
- 6 For smokers' rights activists, / this move is just another step /
- 7 in an anti-American drive / to discriminate against and control /
- 8 a segment of the population. / Some activists are shocked / by smoking prohibition /
- 9 in college housing. / They warned / that the choice to ban smoking /
- 10 should be up to the individual owners / rather than the government /
- 11 On the other hand, / other opponents point out /
- 12 that the decision to put these substances / into your organism /
- 13 should extent / as far as your neighbor's lungs /
- 14 A research group / for student affairs and institutional research /
- 15 conducted a survey / of 927 residential students. / A majority of students, /
- 16 smokers and non-smokers, / said that smoking in private rooms /
- 17 within some halls / is the preferred policy. / For instance, / smoking in the dorms /



18 is particularly controversial / because the smoke comes up / through vents and cracks /  
 19 and drives non-smokers crazy. / Smokers argue, / though, / that smoking is not illegal /  
 20 if the lease does not prohibit it /

*Foreseeing Spelling Difficulties: First Dictation*

The table below has been divided in two parts: A and B. Each part includes the instructor’s predictions of the most difficult words to be correctly written by the group of first-year students during the text dictation process.

Table 2. List of possible problematic words for the target group

Part A		Part B	
• Past Regular Verbs		• Other possible troublesome words	
1. forced	(line 3)	1. battleground	(line 3)
2. banned it	(line 4)	2. throughout	(line 3)
3. followed	(line 5)	3. suit	(line 5)
4. shocked	(line 8)	4. neighbor’s lungs	(line 13)
5. warned	(line 9)	5. policy	(line 17)
6. conducted	(line 15)	6. though	(line 19)
7. preferred	(line 17)		

Elaboración propia

In terms of **Part A**, representing the correct spelling of the pronunciation of past regular verbs is not effortless, and the difficulty increases when the verb is accompanied by a pronoun, being this a case of linking such as *banned it*. In this same case, students are also expected to double the final consonant since it is a one-syllable verb that ends in vowel and consonant. The opposite case occurs with the word *warned* because learners are not expected to make this change due to the spelling of its simple form; however, students should duplicate the final *r* in the verb *prefer* since it is a two-word regular verb with the accent on the second syllable. In relation to **Part B**, the instructor decided to include those six words in the dictation because of the complexity of their spelling; for example, learners have to deal with silent letters, possessiveness, a case of plural noun, and a closed compound noun.

*Analysis of Student Products: First Dictation*

The following table shows the various ways in which learners wrote the words in **Part A**:

Table 3. Students' accuracy level regarding the spelling of past regular verbs

Learner #	Learners' orthographic representation of the first seven troublesome items (Part A)						
	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3	Word 4	Word 5	Word 6	Word 7
	Line 3	Line 4	Line 5	Line 8	Line 9	Line 15	Line 17
	<b>forced</b>	<b>banned it</b>	<b>followed</b>	<b>shocked</b>	<b>warned</b>	<b>conducted</b>	<b>preferred</b>
1	forced	banned	followed	shocked	warned	conducted	preferred
2	four	banded	follow	shock	worn	condoted	prefare
3	forst	banded	followed	shocked	warned	conducted	prefered
4	forest	banded	folowed	shocked	warmed	conducted	prefered
5	fors	banded	follow	shock	worned	conducted	prefer
6	forms	banded	follow	shock	worm	conducted	prefer
7	forst	banded	follow	shot	warred	conductive	prefer
8	for	banded	follow	schok	worm	∅	prefer
9	∅	∅	∅	schok	worm	∅	prefert
10	for	banded	followded	shock	warnd	conducted	prefered
11	forms	bandes	follow	shock	warm	conducted	prefer
12	four	banded	follow	shop	wornd	conducted	prefer
13	∅	bandit	∅	shock	∅	candocted	∅
14	force	∅	followed	short	wrong	comdotep	preper
15	for	bands	followed	shork	warm	conducte	prefer
16	forst	bandit	followed	chocked	wornt	conducted	prefer
<b>% of accuracy</b>	<b>6.25%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>31.25%</b>	<b>18.75%</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>6.25%</b>

Elaboración propia

There were some limitations and difficulties during this dictation. First, absenteeism is a common drawback with this population. In this case, the group of students originally had 20 students but only 16 came to class. Then, although the instructor analyzed the text to divide it into thought groups, for some students a few phrases were fairly long to be noted down. Therefore, repetition was the strategy used on the spot to facilitate comprehension. Finally, some students' handwriting was not clear or neat; for this reason, the instructor had to ask a few students for clarification during the process of preparing Table 3. In the table above, each number corresponds to a student, and each row shows how he or she spelled or represented the target word. As predicted, it was difficult for students to accurately write those seven past regular verbs. 50% of students wrote the verb *conducted* correctly, but just 6.25% could write the words *forced* and *preferred* accurately. The most difficult verb was *banned* due to the case of linking.

The following table shows the various ways in which the words in **Part B** were written:

Table 4. Students' accuracy level regarding the spelling six troublesome words

Learner #	Learners' orthographic representation (Part B)					
	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3	Word 4	Word 5	Word 6
	Line 3	Line 3	Line 5	Line 13	Line 17	Line 19
	<b>battleground</b>	<b>throughout</b>	<b>suit</b>	<b>neighbor's lungs</b>	<b>policy</b>	<b>though</b>
1	battleground	throughout	suit	neighbor's lungs	policy	though
2	bolter grand	trueout	sut	neerboors lats	∅	thod
3	battlegrounds	throughout	sout	neighbors' lungs	policy	though
4	battlegrown	through out	sud	neighboors longs	policibe	dow
5	battleground	threw out	suit	∅	policy	does
6	backourgrand	through out	sut	neightboards lands	police	dough
7	battle ground	throw out	sut	neighbors loungs	policy	though
8	butter round	true out	suit	neighbourhoods longs	office	∅
9	∅	through out	∅	∅	∅	∅
10	battleground	through out	suits	neighbor's lauughs	policy	thought
11	bettlers grounds	true out	suth	neighbors longs	police	dow
12	batterground	true out	suit	neighbors ∅	police	dough
13	back all around	true aut	∅	neighbors longs	∅	do
14	background	trought out	∅	∅	police	∅
15	backgrounds	true out	sut	neighbours lands	police	dou
16	∅	trough out	sut	neighbors lands	∅	douh
<b>% of accuracy</b>	<b>18.75%</b>	<b>12.50%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>12,50%</b>	<b>31,25%</b>	<b>18,75%</b>

Elaboración propia

Table 4 provides various elements on how listeners convey meaning and represent it orthographically. In fact, Celce-Murcia et al. (1996, p.269) indicate that “it is important for ESL/EFL teachers to understand the correspondences between English phonology and English orthography so that they can teach their learners (1) how to predict the pronunciation of a word given its spelling and (2) how to come up with a plausible spelling for a word given its pronunciation.” In relation to the second point, the data above indicate that some learners showed an approximate spelling for *battleground* and *throughout*, but they showed more serious spelling problems with the rest of the words. In the case of the word *battleground*, the student products show that it was segmented; interestingly, partial substitution occurred as this closed compound noun was written as *background*. Other deviant substitutions or word fragmentation took place with the words *suit* and *though*. In addition, Laufer (1990, cited in Celce-Murcia, 1996) refer to the term *synform* as “lexical forms that look and sound similar but are in fact different words with different meanings” (p.222). In other words, some of the non-native speakers who took this dictation transferred the correct word to a similar one (i.e., *threw out* instead of *throughout* or *police* instead of *policy*).

Regarding the phrase *neighbor's lungs*, this represented one of the most challenging phrases to write down correctly.

#### *Overall Analysis of the Results: Improving Learners' Orthography*

After observing learners' products of the first text dictated, the instructor could make the following informed decisions in order to help his learners monitor and reflect on the spelling of words; some will be part of the sample exercises:

- a. Instruct and prepare contextualized activities (presentation, controlled practice, guided practice, and communicative tasks) related to the pronunciation of –ed endings of past regular verbs. This included linking between past regular verbs and object pronouns.
- b. Instruct learners on the spelling changes that exist among one-syllable regular verbs (i.e., ban-banned and warn-warned) and polysyllabic regular verbs (i.e., *prefer-preferred* and *admit-admitted*) in the past form.
- c. Implement one dictation exercise at least one more time in the semester since students found it enjoyable and challenging; they expressed they were really interested in comparing student text with the original text.
- d. Make students aware of the *synforms* of English language (i.e., *though* and *thought*).
- e. Use cartoons, newspaper headlines or comic strips that contain examples of false segmentation since “the dividing up of utterances into individual words and syllables has long been a real problem for native as well as nonnative listeners” (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996, p.240). There are lots of comic strips that show how listeners misinterpret meaning due to segmentation problems.
- f. Explain the concept of silent consonant letters as well as the reasons why these are so frequent in English.
- g. Incorporate a *rebus* as part of pronunciation practice to raise students' awareness on the concept of homographs (words that share the same pronunciation but different meaning such as *night* and *knight*). By doing so, students use pictures that relate to words with a similar pronunciation. A rebus is a highly appealing and challenging exercise for learners.
- h. Include *graphotactics* to help learners focus on how a given word or phrase can be read forwards or backwards. These “are rare because the combinations of letters that can spell words left to right seldom spell right to left (Freeman and Freeman, 2004, p.111).”

*Designing Pronunciation Tasks: A Sample Lesson on -ed Endings*

Even though first-year professors use a specific textbook in the course LM-1001 Integrated English I, the author prepared a list of exercises to reinforce the instruction on the pronunciation of -ed endings and to respond to his learners' lacks and needs. As a matter of fact, after observing the student products of the first dictation, it was necessary to design and implement a series of exercises to teach this pronunciation aspect. Richards (2001) points out that "whether the teacher uses a textbook, institutionally materials generally serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom" (251). In other words, the course textbook serves as the basis for the presentation and practice of -ed endings; however, learners had to be exposed to additional or further input and pronunciation practice. The following image (Baker et al., 2003, 120) shows the only explanation that the course textbook presents in chapter 5 in regards to this topic.

Image 1. Explanation that the course textbook presents in chapter 5

The image shows a textbook page with a light blue background. At the top, the word "Pronunciation" is written in a bold, dark blue font. Below this, there is a section titled "The -ed Ending" in a smaller, bold, dark blue font. The text explains that the -ed ending is pronounced in three ways, depending on the sound that comes before it. Three bullet points list the rules and examples:

- /ɪd/ after -d and -t  
Examples: waited, invited, needed
- /ɪt/ after -p, -k, -f, -s, -ch, -sh  
Examples: missed, watched, helped
- /ɪd/ after -b, -g, -j, -m, -n, -l, -r, -th, -v, -z  
Examples: lived, showed, listened

Below this section, there is a numbered exercise: "8 Distinguishing between -ed Endings. Listen and write the following words. Then check the sound you hear at the end of the word." The first item is "1. turned" followed by three checkboxes for the sounds /ɪd/, /ɪ/, and /ɪd/. The /ɪd/ checkbox is checked.

Source: Baker et al., 2003, 120


Although the information above is concise and clear, LM-1001 students need to expand on this content to fully understand the pronunciation rules. As a second exercise, students are only expected to identify eight verbs in isolation and check the sound in each case. On the following page, students have a guided practice in which a series of pictures is given. Each image includes three regular verbs, and students are asked to produce a sequence of events chronologically and pronounce the verbs correctly. The following image, which comes from the same source, contains this guided exercise (Baker et al., 2003, p.120).


## Image 2. Guided exercise

Chapter 5 Home 121

**9 Using -ed Endings.** With a partner, look at the pictures below. Talk about Jennifer's moving day. Use the past tense of the verbs under the pictures. Pronounce the -ed endings carefully.

**Example:**  
Jennifer moved into her new place. First, the movers carried the boxes inside. Then, Jennifer...

1.  move / carry / watch

2.  call / ask / describe

Source: Baker et al., 2003, 120

To sum up, these three parts contain the only presentation, controlled and guided practice for teachers to present this pronunciation aspect. For this reason, the instructor created the following series of exercises to fully reinforce this lack of content. It is important to mention that these textbook activities were done after the instructor implemented his additional materials.

### *Sample Lesson*

#### *Presentation of the Pronunciation of Past Regular Verbs*

- A.** To do so, the instructor introduced the topic by asking students what they did during the weekend and how they formed the past of regular verbs. Then, the three different rules were explained by using not only verbs in isolation but also short sentences. Also, a few concepts related to phonetics were given such as voiceless versus voiced sounds, single and compounds vowels, vocal cords, vibration, linking, and the like. Some phonetic symbols are presented.
- B.** Group and individual repetition of verbs in their simple and past form took place in this phase once the instructor modeled and pronounced several verbs.

#### *Controlled Practice and Feedback*

- A.** In pairs, students were given a series of sentences to be read loudly so that students focused on the correct pronunciation of verbs. Once they finished, they were asked to read minimum three sentences to the rest of the group. Again, immediate feedback was provided.
- B.** In pairs, learners received a list of sentences and past regular verbs. They had to complete each sentence by choosing the correct verbs. Then, they wrote the symbol that corresponds to the -ed ending.

- C. Card Game. As a third controlled exercise, all students were given three cards. A blue card indicated sound /t/, a pink card showed sound /d/, and a yellow represented sound /Id/. Then, the instructor (without pronouncing the word) picked up a card with a past regular verb so that students had to lift the correct card. This was done with at least fifteen verbs in the past form. Feedback was given immediately. This controlled practice was highly motivated for students as they participated actively. Finally, everybody repeated the verbs.
- D. As a concluding controlled exercise, students read a dialogue. Then, they wrote the correct symbol for each verb. To check the answers, students used the cards they previously had by reading each sentence and lifting the card as soon as they encountered a past regular verb. This certainly facilitated feedback. After they checked all the answers, they read the same conversation out loud with a partner.

*Semi-controlled Practice and Feedback*

It is worth mentioning that a semi-controlled exercise allows students to use the pronunciation aspect in a slightly communicative form. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) illustrate this with the use of an information gap activity to practice the /l/ and /r/ distinction, and this source explains that “this guided practice activity represents a departure from the controlled stage in which students simply read aloud sentences or short dialogues focusing on the articulation of a particular sound or sound contrast” (p.54). Thus, the following is a variation of the same activity to practice the pronunciation of –ed endings. Students asked what the person on the first column did during the week and filled in the blank spaces. Finally, they asked each other the same question as they complete the last line.

Table 5 Student A

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Eddie</b>	<i>Returned</i> from Spain		<i>Worked</i> on his project			<i>Passed</i> his French course	
<b>Laura</b>	<i>Looked</i> for a new house		<i>Called</i> his sister and <i>talked</i> about his new house		<i>Painted</i> her bedroom		<i>Enjoyed</i> a drink with her husband
<b>Your partner</b>							

Elaboración propia

Table 6 Student B

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>Eddie</b>	<i>Returned</i> from Spain	<i>Celebrated</i> with his friends		<i>Picked</i> up his parents at the airport	<i>Mailed</i> several documents and <i>answered</i> two letters		<i>Finished</i> this project
<b>Laura</b>		<i>Helped</i> her son with his school project		<i>Arrived</i> at the office and <i>decided</i> to hire an assistant		<i>Changed</i> some of her furniture	
<b>Your partner</b>							

Elaboración propia

- A. A similar second semi-controlled practice may also include the dictation of sentences to be done in pairs. Students take turns to dictate the various sentences or questions to complete the following conversation taken from Dale and Poms (1999, p.131).

Image 3 Student A and student B

<b>STUDENT A</b>	
Roberta: Kate, have you started your diet? I hope you haven't gained any weight.	
Kate:	_____
Roberta: Have you exercised at all?	
Kate:	_____
Roberta: Have you cleaned the house? Calories can be worked off!	
Kate:	_____
Roberta: Who baked this apple pie? Who cooked this ham?	
Kate:	_____
Roberta: Oh, no! I'll take this food home so you won't be tempted. I really enjoyed being with you. Your diet is great!	
Kate:	_____



**STUDENT B**

Roberta: \_\_\_\_\_

Kate:           I boiled eggs and sliced celery for lunch.

Roberta: \_\_\_\_\_

Kate:           I walked five miles and jogged in the park.

Roberta: \_\_\_\_\_

Kate:           I washed and waxed the floors. I even painted the bathroom.

Roberta: \_\_\_\_\_

Kate:           When I finished cleaning I was starved. I prepared this food for dinner.

Roberta:       \_\_\_\_\_

Kate:           What happened? Somehow, I missed out on all the fun.

Source: Dale and Poms, 1999, p.131

*Communicative Practice and Feedback*

The objective of this part of the framework is for English learners to express their own ideas and put into practice the target pronunciation aspect. An alternative task consists of the creation of different pieces of news to be carried out in groups of three students. The instructor may use authentic headlines taken from online newspapers. Students are asked to create a short story based on it and incorporate as many past regular verbs as possible. Then, each group creates a visual aid to present the story to the rest of the class. As a follow-up activity, the instructor could distribute the real stories for students to see if they had an approximate story.

*Procedure of the Second Dictation*

Before administering the second dictation, it is important to take into account that it took place at the end of the course, before the week of final tests. In contrast, the first dictation was administered during the first week of classes. Secondly, the instructor chose a text with an academic topic. Its level of difficulty and length were also appropriate for this population. Third, the same students who took the first dictation were the ones taken into consideration in this second part; however, one student was absent on that specific day. The second tabulation includes the student products of 15 learners. Finally, the objective in this case is to observe the effect of the formal and extensive instruction and practice of past regular verbs on the result of this last dictation; thus, the instructor focused on the accuracy in the spelling of eleven verbs. The text chosen is the following:

## *Plagiarism in College*

*Plagiarism is a serious problem in different institutions of higher learning. This issue is defined as copying someone else's ideas without giving appropriate credit. This action is absolutely prohibited in every course, and it has serious consequences on the learner's academic reputation. In different campuses throughout the country, professors are worried and shocked by the high number of written assignments that some students downloaded from the Internet. Recently, several professors reported many cases of plagiarism among students who enrolled courses in which term papers are mandatory. This population of undergraduate students preferred to steal the ideas from other students who conducted similar research studies. This occurs even when professors warned their students that if plagiarism has been identified, the preferred policy of the school may include suspension or even expulsion from college. Some other teachers argue, though, that they could just simply grade the paper with low grade instead of starting an investigation. For this reason, some people think that this issue should be up to the professor and the student who admitted to this action.*

Once again, after revising the content of the text, the writer divided it into thought groups. The slants mark the pauses during the dictation. Thus, this resulting text follows the divisions shown below:

- 1 Plagiarism in College (title)
- 2 Plagiarism is a serious problem / in different institutions of higher learning. /
- 3 This issue is defined as copying someone else's ideas / without giving appropriate credit. /
- 4 This action is absolutely prohibited in every course, / and it has serious consequences /
- 5 on the learner's academic reputation. / In different campuses throughout the country, /
- 6 professors are worried and shocked / by the high number of written assignments /
- 7 that some students downloaded from the Internet. / Recently, / several professors
- 8 reported many cases of plagiarism among students / who enrolled courses /
- 9 in which term papers are mandatory. / This population of undergraduate students /
- 10 preferred to steal the ideas from other students / who conducted similar research studies./
- 11 This occurs even when professors warned their students / that if plagiarism has been
- 12 identified, / the preferred policy of the school / may include suspension or even expulsion
- 13 from college. / Some other teachers argue, / though, / that they could just simply /
- 14 grade the paper with low grade / instead of starting an investigation. /
- 15 For this reason, / some people think that this issue / should be up to the professor /
- 16 and the student who admitted to this action. /

*Analysis of Student Products: Second Dictation*

At the end of the course, students showed a better understanding of the pronunciation of –ed endings. Such improvement can be seen in the number of past regular verbs that were written accurately. Table 7 shows how each student wrote each of the eleven verbs. Some verbs were segmented as a few students fragmented the word *downloaded* for *than lowered* or *than loaded* and *defined* for *definite* or *defend*. Word transfer also occurred; for example, the verb *shocked* was spelled as *chocked* or *shock*. In terms of consonant or vowel substitution, the verb *warned*, for instance, was written as *warm* or *were*. Interestingly, the words *conducted*, *worried* and *reported* had the highest percentage of accuracy while *preferred* and *prohibited* were the most troublesome.

Table 7 Student Product of Eleven Past Regular Verbs

Verb	LEARNERS														
	# 1	# 2	# 3	# 4	# 5	# 6	# 7	# 8	# 9	#1 0	#1 1	#1 2	#1 3	#1 4	#1 5
1. defined	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓
2. prohibited	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
3. worried	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. shocked	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. downloaded	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗
6. reported	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7. enrolled	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
8. preferred	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗
9. conducted	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
10. warned	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11. admitted	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗

Elaboración propia

It is relevant to highlight that the percentage of misspellings decreased compared to the first dictation. The percentages below indicate the level of accuracy of the verbs chosen to observe.

- defined (line 3) 33,3%
- prohibited (line 4) 26,66%
- worried (line 6) 87,50%
- shocked (line 6) 53,33%
- downloaded (line 7) 53,33%
- reported (line 8) 100%
- enrolled (line 8) 46,66%
- preferred (line 10) 20%
- conducted (line 10) 86,66%
- warned (line 11) 73,33%
- admitted (line 16) 33.33%

In addition, in this second dictation there were no omissions; all the students wrote either the correct verb or a similar form, but in this case, learners made an effort to write it down. Finally, just two subjects had all the verbs correct.

#### 12. *Suggestions for LM-1001 Teachers*

In general, EFL teachers can incorporate dictation with their groups as a means of assessing and recognizing troublesome spelling patterns to be studied throughout the course. Córdoba (2007) points out that “dictation can have its own value as an assessment device to help both students become aware of the sound-spelling correspondences and teachers determine what areas need reinforcement in the language class” (p.152). In fact, pronunciation and spelling are not the only areas of interest. Kidd (1992) expands on this and explains that “dictation activities also promote the conscious *learning* of structures. Students performing dictation exercises are generally required to transcribe the text as accurately as possible, and follow-up work usually involves various kinds of correction activities which focus directly on form” (p.51). As a result, students will benefit from an activity that has been neglected as it is considered by some teachers as too controlled to be part of a communicative approach. These are some general recommendations before dictating a text:

- a. Identify the main objective(s) behind the dictation itself (i.e., formal evaluation versus assessment).
- b. It is important to say that students need feedback as they show interest in comparing the original text dictated with the student product of that dictation.
- c. Select the type of dictation from its wide range of possibilities. For example, instead of conducting a traditional orthographic-text dictation, teachers may plan a *dictogloss* to make it more communicative and flexible. For example, students may listen to a song twice and, in pairs or small groups, they could try to reconstruct the lyrics by using their own words.
- d. The text being dictated may be authentic, and this is a critical issue since “one of the key criteria for activities in the communicative classroom is authenticity, and dictation does not seem to be an authentic use of language” (Fields, 2007, p.29). To bring authenticity to the classroom students may use songs, poems, proverbs, or authentic conversations.
- e. Regardless the type of text chosen, the instructor must carefully analyze its thought groups as well as possible pauses to facilitate comprehension. It is useful to time the dictation and foresee possible interruptions during the dictation.
- f. A dictation does not have to be done individually; on the contrary, by preparing information-gap activities, students may interact and establish cooperative learning.

- g. Based on the foreseen difficulties, instructors can make informed decisions on those aspects that can be reinforced in the classroom such as pronunciation or grammar aspects as well as spelling patterns. As a consequence, instructors need to become materials developers.

### *Conclusion*

No one can deny that dictation is a challenging activity for both, teachers and students. There is a wide variety of authentic texts that teachers can use to make dictation a more motivating and appealing exercise for students. If instructors carefully plan a dictation activity, students will benefit from a task that has been neglected in communicative methodologies. It is the teacher's creativity that will transform a traditional exercise into a motivating, enriching and different experience for a particular population.

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