

Dictogloss Procedure

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Decades of research on immersion programs have shown that although students develop both excellent listening and reading comprehension skills even at early grade levels, and although they are able to get their meaning across in the immersion language, even at intermediate and higher grade levels they often do so with non-target-like morphology and syntax. What can be done pedagogically to move immersion students toward more native-like proficiency in the immersion language?

Rationale:

Swain has long argued for the importance of output in immersion programs and has argued that several functions of output may have an impact on accuracy in the immersion language, or may push students along in their interlanguage development.

Three functions of output (Swain, 1995):

Noticing—a form used in input must be consciously noticed in order for it to be acquired. The act of noticing needs to occur during language production, that is, while they are attempting to use the target language. The activity of producing the target language may prompt second language learners to recognize consciously some of their linguistic problems. Researchers have noted the importance of learners' noticing the "gap" in their interlanguage, that is noticing the difference between what they want to say and what they are able to say.

Hypothesis formulation and testing—learners may use language production as a way of trying out new language forms and structures as they stretch their interlanguage; they may use their output to test what works and what doesn't.

Metatalk—learners use language to reflect on language use. It's a surfacing of language used in problem-solving, for cognitive purposes. *Metatalk produced in the context of making meaning* may serve the function of deepening the students' awareness of forms and rules and the relationship of those forms and rules to the meaning they're trying to express.

The "dictogloss" (Wajnryb, 1990) has been proposed as a procedure that encourages students to reflect on their own output. Kowal and Swain (1997) and Swain (1998) report on the dictogloss technique and studies that have been conducted with 8th grade French immersion learners.

Steps:

- Model the steps of the process with students prior to having them co-construct a dictogloss on their own.
- Create a short passage that embeds a particular grammatical form you wish to emphasize. It should be a form that students know well but that is often produced inaccurately by students. Try to incorporate a majority of vocabulary that students know.
- Review difficult or possibly unknown vocabulary that appears in the dictogloss.
- Provide a short (3-5 min.) review lesson on the grammatical form being emphasized.
- Read the dictogloss through once at a normal speed, asking students to listen carefully.
- Read the dictogloss a second time, and encourage students to jot down notes.
- Have pairs of students work together for approximately 20-25 minutes to reconstruct the dictogloss, reminding students that they should try to write their text so that it will be as close to the original as possible in grammar and content. Kowal told her students that the original sense of each sentence needed to be present and the reconstructed sentences had to be as grammatically accurate as the students could manage, but the words and phrases didn't have to be identical to the ones in the original passage. During this time students form hypotheses and test them, using available resources such as dictionaries and verb reference books. The activity should also encourage noticing and, ideally, metatalk.
- Select at least one student example and use it to engage in whole-class discussion with particular focus on the grammatical form emphasized. The students' co-constructed texts should be compared with the original dictogloss.

What research on the dictogloss technique has shown:

Kowal and Swain (1997) have found evidence of noticing, hypothesis-testing, and metatalk when using the dictogloss technique with 8th grade French immersion students. The teacher using this technique found that students often focused on more than just the grammatical aspect being emphasized. They discussed grammatical aspects but also orthographic and semantic issues. The pair work and whole class discussion afterwards did promote student discussion about the links between meaning and form in relation to the composing process. A follow-up study (see discussion in Swain, 1998) showed that when students, through dialogue, reached a correct solution (that is, the problem they discuss is solved correctly), there was a strong tendency for them to perform accurately on a posttest on that item 1 week later. Similarly, when students co-constructed an incorrect solution, they tended to be inaccurate on the posttest given a week later. In other words, students tend to "stick with" the knowledge they had co-constructed collaboratively. Such results strongly suggest that when students reflect consciously on the language they are producing, this may be a source of language learning.

Implications for teaching:

- value of collaborative work for second language learning
- carefully consider the task characteristics; not just any task will elicit metatalk
- a task that elicits metatalk from one group of learners may not do so from another group; this may be due to the level of learners' proficiency, the age of the learners, etc.
- familiarity with the task procedures is key; teacher modeling and role-playing of the activity is useful
- because students tend to remember their incorrect solutions, it is critical to provide students with feedback. So the teacher needs to be available during collaborative activities and attend to the accuracy of the final product.

Questions for Reflection:

1. For what age groups might the dictogloss technique be useful and why?
2. How might you use this technique, and in what context(s)?
3. What grammatical forms challenge your students? In small groups, decide on a grammatical feature to emphasize and try to create a short dictogloss.

References:

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