

# Video Dictogloss: A Noticing Task

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## ABSTRACT

In English Discussion Class (EDC) lessons, students are asked to perform certain functions, marked by set phrases, in the service of taking part in topic-based academic discussions. These functions are presented and reviewed by instructors through a variety of techniques, all of which are aimed at raising students' awareness of the purpose and practicalities of using them. The Noticing Hypothesis outlines principles regarding how calling learners' attention to particular forms, within a communicative context, greatly increases the chances that they will acquire them. The focus of this paper is the description of a classroom activity based on this hypothesis that is designed to promote use of EDC target language. The activity, a *video dictogloss*, comprises a task in which students watch a teacher-created video of a discussion and then work together to reconstruct it in written form.

## INTRODUCTION

The Noticing Hypothesis states, at its basic level, that language learners must consciously register the input they receive in order for it to have an effect on their language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990). In other words, simply reading or listening to a target feature, even if it is part of a comprehensible text, will not, by itself, result in the student learning that feature. For this to happen, they must, through some means, be made consciously aware of the target language and the role it plays. An additional aspect of the hypothesis says that, if they are to overcome errors, learners must “*notice the gap*” (Schmidt, 2010) between their own spoken and written output and input featuring the target language.

This has obvious application to EDC lessons in which students are expected to use functional language in order to take part in interactive academic discussions (Hurling, 2012). According to the hypothesis, the acquisition of function phrases can only come about if learners notice them being used in a meaningful way. Throughout the course, instructors introduce and review these phrases using activities that raise students' awareness of them. This paper will consider how the Noticing Hypothesis may inform the design of such an activity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Noticing Hypothesis has received criticism, especially with regards to the lack of robust cognitive and SLA theories to support it and claims that it can comment only on declarative knowledge but not procedural knowledge (Truscott, 1998). However, without delving into the arguments regarding the psychological nature of *awareness* and *attention* that the Noticing Hypothesis generates (and which are beyond the scope of this paper), research into form-focused instruction indicates that calling students' attention to specific target forms within a communicative context (i.e. focus-on-form) can lead to the acquisition of implicit knowledge under certain conditions (Ellis, 2002). These conditions include the simplicity of the target structure and the type of instruction, two variables that can be easily controlled in the EDC classroom and the suitability of which will be demonstrated in the activity described in this paper. A simplified interpretation of the Noticing Hypothesis, therefore, will be used to support this activity, i.e. the principle that focusing learners' attention on input featuring the target language, and on a corresponding deficiency in their current output, may lead to more frequent and more accurate use.

Thornbury (1997) suggests two types of activities that may promote *noticing* of specific language forms, the first of which is a reformulation task. This kind of activity involves the teacher providing a “correct” version of a student’s output and may take many different forms, from simple, but explicit, recasts to more extensive error correction. This fits into a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in that the focus is on communicative utterances as a starting point, which are then followed by a consideration of how different language forms can be used in aid of that communication (Spada, 2007). Instead of pointing out errors, another way that a teacher might reformulate student content is by providing students with an “enhanced” version of their content, e.g. one that features more functional language and therefore potentially makes clearer the intent of the utterance. In fact, a Test-Teach-Test function presentation (a common EDC activity) may be an example of this type of noticing task, in which the “Teach” stage involves the instructor reformulating students’ content from the first “Test” stage to include target phrases. When conducted this way, the Test-Teach-Test allows students to clearly notice the gap between their initial output and the input provided by the instructor featuring the target language. The final “Test” stage, therefore, becomes a chance for them to close the gap.

The second type of task that Thornbury (1997) suggests to promote noticing is a reconstruction activity. Whereas a reformulation starts with student output that is adapted by the teacher, a reconstruction starts with input provided by the teacher and the students are asked to create their version of it. The similarity between the two types of task is that students are then expected to compare the two texts and be made aware of the differences in order to attend to a target form. Many classroom activities include an element of reconstruction, including grammar translations, ‘listen-and-repeat’, and dictations, the traditional versions of which have fallen in popularity somewhat in the current teaching climate that favors more communicative activities. However, many teachers have demonstrated ways of adapting these types of tasks to involve meaningful interaction among students (for examples, see Duff, 1989; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Wajnryb, 1990).

The activity featured in this paper is based on a teaching technique described by Wajnryb (1990): a grammar dictation, also known as a dictogloss. This is a reconstruction task that involves students hearing a text and then collaborating to reconstruct it in writing. The text usually features a target form that students may or may not notice during the reconstruction process, but which will be made prominent when they compare their output with the original input. Below are some of the advantages of this type of activity, as identified by Thornbury (1997):

- *It involves both top-down and bottom-up processing.* In other words, learners can use clues at the word, sentence, and discourse level to help them create their version of the text.
- *It encourages meaningful interaction among learners.* Even if this interaction is not necessarily focused on having students use the target language of the course, it does allow for opportunities for them to do so.
- *It allows for differences among learners.* This applies not only to considerations of “strong” and “weak” students, but also to the different strengths that individual students may bring to the task.
- *It provides learners with a clear link between form and meaning.* This most likely occurs during the noticing the gap stage, during which students can see how the use of specific forms has a communicative function.

In addition to the above, Wajnryb (1990) contends that “in the reconstruction stage, specifically in the group effort to create a text, learners expand their understanding of what options exist and are available to them in the language” (p. 12).

As its original name suggests, this task is most commonly employed to introduce grammatical items to students (e.g. by using a text that heavily features the use of the second conditional). However, it can also be suitably adapted to the type of functional language that is the target of EDC lessons. In addition, the adaptation of the activity described in this paper (see below) uses a video and audio version of the input so that the target phrases can be put in the context of a topic-based discussion among four participants (i.e. the type of interaction that the course aims to improve students' ability to take part in).

## PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

Preparation is a key stage of conducting a dictogloss activity, particularly with regards to the listening text. This must be carefully constructed to feature the target language that students are expected to be made aware of. This language is ideally presented in a meaningful context, mirroring the way in which students have heard it being used and have used it themselves. The aim of the dictogloss activity described in this paper was to review all six functions introduced to Level I (i.e. high-level) students in the Fall semester, to be conducted in Lesson 12 in preparation of Discussion Test 3 in the following lesson. Therefore, a short discussion, featuring the fictional characters from the textbook (Aki, Eri, Jun, and Ryo), was written, in which they use the listener and speaker sides of each function once (see Appendix A). The topic of the discussion was one of the Practice questions from Lesson 12. This discussion was performed by volunteer instructors and video recorded (see Appendix B). The video was then loaded onto two iPads.

## PROCEDURE

1. Students in two groups of four are given the topic question (*Is it always wrong to steal?*) and asked to briefly discuss it. The aim of this stage is mainly to prepare them for the content of the listening text that they will hear.
2. Each group of four students is given a blank discussion template (see Appendix C) and an iPad with the video of the discussion ready to play. Each student is given a blank piece of paper.
3. Students are told that they will watch a short video of some students discussing the same topic question. While watching the video, they should not write anything. However, as soon as the video has finished, they can take notes. Their ultimate task is to work together as a group to recreate the discussion in the video in writing, using the blank discussion template.
4. Students watch the video once, then individually take notes.
5. Students watch the video a second time, then work together to reconstruct the discussion in written form on the blank discussion template.
6. If students are having difficulty reconstructing the discussion, they may watch the video a third time.
7. Once students have finished their reconstructions, they look at a written version of the original dialogue and discuss any differences between the two.
8. Teacher leads a whole class discussion about any differences, with a particular focus on function use. (It is important to keep in mind that students are not expected to produce an accurate reproduction of the original text; the main goal is to capture the meaning.)

## VARIATIONS

Variations to a dictogloss activity mostly involve the amount of scaffolding provided to the students. For example, before watching the video, they can be given key vocabulary that features in the discussion, although not including words that are part of the target language. This would not detract from achieving the main aim of the task (noticing the function phrases), but may assist it by aiding overall comprehension of the discussion. Another form of support could be to encourage the students to strategize how they will undertake the reconstruction process, starting from the listening stage of the activity. For example, each student could listen only to what a specific character in the video says, or they could each be responsible for different parts of speech (e.g. nouns or verbs).

While the activity described above was used to review previously taught target functions, it may also be used to introduce new phrases as part of a function presentation. If used for this purpose, it is more likely (than in a review activity) that students would not include the function at all in their reconstruction. This would make the comparison stage of the activity more important as it would have to include a more in-depth discussion of how the target language affects the discussion.

## DISCUSSION

When conducted with my students, the video dictogloss activity appeared to encourage noticing of the functions that were under review. In their written reconstructions, both of the groups were able to demonstrate understanding of the general meaning of each utterance, even if they did not always mark them with relevant function phrases. Specifically, they sometimes marked them with target phrases, sometimes with “incorrect” versions of the phrases (e.g. “What means ‘poor’ here?”), and sometimes with no phrase at all. However, during the stage in which they compared their reconstructions with the original input, students spoke meaningfully about the differences, particularly with reference to the target functions.

Although no formal data was collected on the effect that the dictogloss review activity had on student performance, informal observations suggest that students generally used the phrases often and appropriately in subsequent activities. This may simply have been the result of having been reminded of the phrases, which the students were already aware were a key part of the course. However, reminders framed in a less meaningful and interactive way (e.g. the instructor only telling students to use the phrases more) do not generally seem to lead to the same results.

One of the key limitations of this kind of activity is not knowing how learners may respond to it in terms of difficulty level. If students are not able to reconstruct the discussion because they have not understood enough of the content, it may be discouraging and lack sufficient opportunities for noticing the target language. Because of this, it is better to err on the side of simplicity when writing the listening text. Another limitation is that students may not notice what part the functions are playing in the discussion or may not “notice the gap” between their reconstruction and the original text. To encourage this, the teacher must be prepared to ask questions in order to elicit understanding of how the target language aids the communicativeness of the discussion.

## CONCLUSION

The video dictogloss task described above was conducted to review previously taught target language as a trial activity in a relatively low-stakes context in terms of procedure and suitability in the EDC classroom. Having done so, the next step would be to adapt it into a function presentation. This would also allow for a better measurement of the activity’s effectiveness, as students’ acquisition of a new target function would be more dependent on its success. Such

efficacy, or lack thereof, could be measured in more quantifiable terms through use of experimental and control groups. The activity also lends itself to collecting qualitative data on students' reflections as it would be possible to ask them what, and to what extent, they noticed while completing the task.

## REFERENCES

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**APPENDIX A** – Dictogloss discussion script

Jun:	Is it always wrong to steal? <b>What are your views on this?</b>
Aki:	<b>I would say</b> it's not okay to steal.
Ryo:	<b>How about from a poor person's point of view?</b>
Aki:	<b>From a very poor person's perspective</b> , it's okay if they don't have enough food for their family.
Eri:	<b>What do you mean by 'very poor'?</b>
Aki:	<b>By 'very poor', I mean</b> someone with no money and no job.
Jun:	I see. <b>But why is stealing better than finding a job?</b>
Aki:	<b>Stealing is better because it's faster.</b> It takes a long time to find a job.
Ryo:	<b>What makes you say that?</b>
Aki:	<b>My mother told me.</b>
Eri:	<b>Are there any disadvantages of stealing?</b>
Aki:	<b>One disadvantage is</b> you might receive a punishment. That's why it's not okay to steal!

**APPENDIX B** – Screen shot of video recording



**APPENDIX C** – Blank discussion template

Jun:	
Aki:	
Ryo:	
Aki:	
Eri:	
Aki:	
Jun:	
Aki:	
Ryo:	
Aki:	
Eri:	
Aki:	