

## Dictation or Consolidation: A Comparative Study on the Effectiveness of Two Learning Strategies for Improvement of Listening Ability

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**Abstract:** This study investigated the effectiveness of two learning strategies, a dictation practice and a consolidation practice, for improving listening ability. Fifty-nine university-level students were divided into two classes. The experimental group (class A) was given weekly dictation homework for 15 weeks. The control group (class B) was given a consolidation homework. Both groups listened to the tape-recorded passages and were asked to write down the English they heard (dictation) or write down a summary in Japanese (consolidation). After 15 weeks of experimental sessions, no significant difference was found in the students' scores on the post-tests. But the scores of the Aural Perception test of the dictation group increased more and the scores of JACET listening comprehension test of the consolidation group increased more. The possible causes for why a significant difference was not found are also discussed.

**Key words:** listening, perception, comprehension, dictation, consolidation.

### INTRODUCTION

The ultimate goal of listening practice is to facilitate learners to be able to understand the gist of the entire utterance they hear.

Some researchers argue that the best way to give students practice in this skill is to ask them to summarize the main points of a given text, either orally or in writing (Ur 1984, Kalivoda 1980). In the present study, this strategy is referred to as 'consolidation' according to Kazue Yoshida's definition (Yoshida 1984). Others, on the other hand, argue that this strategy is too advanced for learners with low listening ability. Rivers (1966) discussed that students must go through two stages in order to attain desired listening ability. The first stage is a recognition stage in which learners learn to concentrate on distinguishing each sound, word, idiom, and form of the utterance. After they achieve the

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first stage, the second stage is a selection stage in which learners learn to skim important words and ignore redundant words. This means learners have to be able to recognize each sound or form of the utterance before they become able to select important words out of the whole utterance. Tripp (1981) also criticized Kalivoda by arguing that finding key-words and skimming the given information is only possible for those who could already understand the entire utterance.

Dictation has been strongly supported by empirical research as an effective teaching device or learning strategy to improve learners' listening ability (Rivers & Temperley 1978, Sutherland 1967, Yoshida 1978, 1980). Sutherland argues that students who are exposed to properly handled dictation exercises not only learn to recognize the relationship of speech to writing at an earlier stage, but that such students also improve more rapidly in their ability to comprehend stretches of spoken material; their ears become more sensitive and discriminating. It is a primary factor in listening that a learner can identify sounds they hear and recognize them as meaningful words. Unless learners can identify the sounds, they cannot judge if the word is necessary for understanding the general idea of the entire utterance or not. It is also said that Japanese learners of English have difficulty in discriminating junctured words (Takefuta 1982, 1984, Yoshida 1984, Flaherty 1979). Yoshida and Flaherty argue that students are likely to perceive junctured words as a meaningless word. Takefuta points out that it is hard for Japanese learners to recognize unstressed words in an utterance. Sutherland also argues that many students never hear certain unstressed syllables and one-syllable function words and that they never fully realize their problems of incorrectly identifying what they hear. It is important for learners to be able to 'expect' the parts that they cannot hear. It is, however, more important for learners with low listening ability to be able to recognize enough words, function words as well as content words, to the level that they can 'expect' the meaning of the entire utterance. It is believed that dictation activities will help students to become more conscious of the structure of spoken language.

When we teach the listening course in a limited time, which is only a 90-minute-class session a week, it is essential for us to seek for the most effective learning strategy to improve students' listening ability. Now we have two strategies, dictation and consolidation, advocated by many researchers as desirable learning strategies. To date, however, no study has compared the validity of these strategies. In this study, we compared dictation and consolidation, and examined which strategy is more effective for improving students' listening ability. We gave a weekly dictation task to the experimental group for

15 weeks. To the control group, we gave a consolidation task. Our aim was to see if there would be any difference between the two groups in their performance on the given listening tests after 15 weeks of practice. As mentioned above, consolidation is an activity in which students listen and summarize the passage in Japanese. In this activity, students may not pay close attention to each sound but try to find key words ignoring redundant ones. Dictation is an activity in which students write down what they hear paying close attention to the sounds they listen to. Doing so, it is believed that they will also learn to 'expect' the words they cannot hear, which is another important factor in listening.

Our hypothesis was that the experimental group which was assigned to do dictation would do better in listening comprehension tests because, after working on their dictation assignments more than ten times paying close attention to each word, they would be able to recognize words better than the control group which was assigned to summarize the passage but did not have to pay so close an attention to sounds and words. It was also anticipated, however, that the dictation group would be trained only to look at the "trees" not the "woods", i. e., they might not be able to get the general idea of the passage, while the consolidation group might do better in grasping the outline of the passage they listen to.

## METHOD

### 1. Subjects

Fifty-nine first year students (1 man and 58 women) in the Nursing Course at Fukui Medical University, enrolled in English II, which is a required listening course using the Language Lab, participated as subjects. All of them were born and educated in Japan and have never lived abroad. All had studied English at least 6 years before they entered the university.

### 2. Experimental and Control Groups

The students were divided into two classes (30 students in class A and 29 students in class B) according to their students numbers. Each class received the identical instruction with the same textbook in different class periods. In this study, we assigned class A to be the experimental group which was given 'dictation' tasks, and class B to be the control group which was given 'consolidation' tasks. There was no significant difference in their performance of English in the entrance examination ( $t=0.08$ ). We gave all students a 20-blank cloze test at the beginning of the semester in May as a relative measure

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of overall knowledge and proficiency of English. We also tested their level of listening ability at the beginning of the semester using the JACET basic listening comprehension test (JACET listening test). With both tests, there was no significant difference between the average scores of the two classes, either. (Table 1, 2, and 3)

Table 1: The mean score of English in Entrance Examination (Equivalent scores)

Class	Entrance Examination			
	n	Mean	SD	t-value
A	30	83.2	15.4	0.08
B	29	82.9	16.3	(n.s.)

Table 2: The mean score of Cloze Test (Full point: 20)

Class	Cloze Test			
	n	Mean	SD	t-value
A	30	9.2	2.48	1.15
B	29	10.0	2.79	(n.s.)

### 3. Procedure

The experiment was conducted from May to September in 1997 as part of the course activity of English II, a listening course using LL equipment. In each lesson, both class A and class B had the same instruction and listening activities. After each lesson, students were given their assignments. Both classes were given the same tape-recorded English passage (approximately 150-200 words) or dialogue. The students in class A were told to write down in English what they heard (dictation homework). The students in class B were told to write the outline of the passage in Japanese (consolidation homework). They were allowed to listen to the tape as many times as they wished and also could stop the tape at any point while completing their homework. The students had to submit the homework in the next class. They were given 11 assignments during the semester. In the first lesson in May, we conducted the Aural Perception Test by SONY Language Laboratory (AP test) and JACET basic listening comprehension test (JACET listening test) as pre-tests to measure students' ability to perceive English sounds and listening comprehension ability. In the 13th lesson, when the students had finished their 10th assignment, we conducted a dictation test and a consolidation test as a post-test to see if there was any difference between class A and B in their performance in dictation and consolidation. In the 14th lesson, when the students had finished their 11th assignment, we conducted the same AP

test and JACET listening test as post-tests to examine how students' performance changed after the 15 weeks of experimental sessions. At the end of the semester, a questionnaire was given to see how students had worked on the homework.

#### 4. Homework Materials and Tests

##### 1) Homework

Tape recorded passages or dialogues from the textbook 'New Standard LL English Course' (Taishukan) were given to the students. The length of each was approximately 150-200 words. (Appendix A)

##### 2) JACET Basic Listening Comprehension Test

This test consists of four parts, each with 10 questions. In Part 1, students choose the correct sentences which best describe the pictures given. In Part 2, 10 questions are read on the tape and students choose the appropriate answers to the questions. In Part 3, short dialogues and then a question about each dialogue are read. Students choose the correct answers to the questions. In Part 4, passages (50-70 words) and one or two questions about each passage are read on the tape and students choose the correct answers.

##### 3) Aural Perception Test by SONY Language Laboratory

This test is composed of 50 questions. In each question, three similar sentences are read, and students discriminate the sounds of the key words in the sentences.

##### 4) Dictation Test

The students listened to a passage (83 words) from the book 'A Practical Course in Listening Drills' (Taishukan). The passage was tape-recorded by a native speaker of English. It was read three times. The first time, it was read at a natural speed, the second time, it was read with some pauses between some segments, and the third time, it was read without pauses at a slower rate than the first time. Students were asked to write down the English sentences they heard. They were allowed to take notes while listening. (Appendix B)

##### 5) Consolidation Test

The students listened to a passage (150 words) from the book 'Elementary Stories for Reproduction: American Series' (Oxford University Press). The passage was taperecord-

ed by a native speaker of English, and the students listened to it three times. They were asked to summarize the passage in Japanese, allowed to take notes while listening. (Appendix C)

#### 5. Post-test Questionnaire

At the end of the experimental sessions, students answered a questionnaire that asked how they had worked on their homework. (Appendix D)

### RESULTS

Table 3 shows the mean scores of the first and the second JACET listening test of Class A and B. With the first JACET listening test, there was no significant difference between the two classes ( $t=0.57$ ). With the second JACET listening test, there was no significant difference, either ( $t=0.197$ ). As for the difference between the first and the second JACET test, the score of the second JACET test was higher than the first one with both classes. The difference between the first and the second test was remarkably significant ( $t=3.7$  for Class A and  $t=5.85$  for Class B). The mean increasing ratio (2nd/1st test) was 17% for class A and 24% for class B. We must note here that we used the raw scores in the comparison of the first (pre-test) and the second test (post-test) because we used the same tests in order to see how the scores of the second test of individual students would change from their own score of the first test. We did not establish their relative positions in the class. The same is true of the score comparison of AP test. Table 4 shows the mean scores of the first and the second AP test of Class A and B. With the first AP test, there was no significant difference between the two classes ( $t=0.95$ ). With the second AP test, there was no significant difference, either ( $t=0.40$ ). As for the difference between the first and the second AP test, the score of the second AP test was higher than the first one with both classes. The difference between the first and the second test was significant ( $t=3.87$  for Class A and  $t=3.03$  for Class B). The mean increasing ratio (2nd/1st test) was 17% for class A and 8% for class B.

Table 3: The mean scores of 1st and 2nd JACET listening test (Full point: 40)

Class	JACET test (1st)				JACET test (2nd)			2nd-1st Difference	Increasing Ratio
	n	Mean	SD	t-value	Mean	SD	t-value		
A	30	21.9	5.5	0.57	24.9	5.4	0.197	+3.0( $t=3.7^*$ )	+17%
B	29	20.9	5.0	(n.s.)	25.4	5.18	(n.s.)	+4.5( $t=5.85^*$ )	+24%

\* $p < 0.05$

Table 4: The mean scores of 1st and 2nd AP test (Full point: 50)

Class	AP test (1st)				AP test (2nd)			2nd-1st Difference	Increasing Ratio
	n	Mean	SD	t-value	Mean	SD	t-value		
A	30	23.6	4.86	0.95	27.1	4.97	0.4	+3.5 (t=3.87*)	+17%
B	29	24.8	4.31	(n.s.)	26.6	4.56	(n.s.)	+1.8 (t=3.03*)	+ 8%

\*p<0.05

Table 5 shows the mean scores of the dictation test of class A and class B. The score of class A was higher than that of class B even though the difference does not reach the significant level (t=1.57).

Table 6 shows the mean scores of the consolidation test of class A and B. The score of class A was slightly higher than class B, but the difference is far below the significant level (t=0.93).

Table 5: The mean score of the Dictation test (Full point: 83)

Class	Dictation test			
	n	Mean	SD	t-value
A	30	53.9(64.9%)	8.9	1.57
B	29	50.1(60.4%)	9.36	(n.s.)

Table 6: The mean score of the Consolidation test (Full point: 20)

Class	Consolidation test			
	n	Mean	SD	t-value
A	30	8.4	4.19	0.93
B	29	7.4	3.8	(n.s.)

## DISCUSSION

After the 15 weeks of the experimental sessions, there was no significant difference between the experimental (dictation) and control (consolidation) groups on any of the tests (JACET listening test, AP test, and the consolidation test) except for the dictation test, in which the experimental group did better than the control group. But the increasing ratios from the first to the second JACET listening test and AP test suggest interesting differences between both classes.

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In the JACET listening test, which is a measurement of the overall listening ability in English, the mean score of the consolidation group increased by 24% whereas that of the dictation group increased only by 17%. On the other hand, in the AP test, which is a measurement of the ability to perceive English sounds, the mean score of the dictation group increased by 17% but that of the consolidation group increased only by 8%. This might suggest that the students who were given intensive dictation assignments increased their ability of distinguishing sounds and that the students who were given intensive consolidation assignments increased their overall English listening ability.

We must admit, however, that this is a pilot study we conducted to compare the effect of dictation and consolidation exercises on improving students' listening ability and that there were several shortcomings in the experimental paradigm, which might have affected the results of the present study. Thus, we cannot further discuss the validity of the dictation and consolidation practice. Instead, we should discuss how the deficiencies of the experimental design were brought about and how to conduct classroom research in our next study.

First and the most important of all, we failed to control the manner in which students worked on the task, especially for students in class B, who were given the consolidation homework. We gave each task as homework, and this was the biggest reason why we were not able to have enough control over the manner in which the students performed the task. It was expected that the students in class B, who worked on the consolidation homework, would listen to the whole passage, not sentence by sentence, and try to grasp the gist of the story in order to summarize it in Japanese. On the other hand, the students in class A, who worked on the dictation homework, were expected to listen to the passage sentence by sentence until they could take down the whole passage. In this way, we hoped that we could make a difference between the consolidation and the dictation homework.

According to the post-experiment questionnaire on how the students had done their homework, however, it was discovered that among the 29 students in class B, who were given the consolidation homework, 16 students (55% of the class) stopped the tape sentence by sentence and 9 (31%) students stopped the tape after meaningful chunk of words and wrote down the Japanese meaning. They wrote the outline of the story afterwards. Only 4 students took down the outline by listening to the whole passage many times. We further asked students in class B if they took notes while listening and if they did, which language, English or Japanese, they used. Twenty-six (90%) students took notes; 12 (41%) students in English, 9 (31%) students in Japanese, and 5 (17%) students in both languages. This indicates that 25 (86%) students in class B stopped the tape either at the sentence or phrase level and 12 (41%) took notes in English. Similarly, among



the 30 students in class A, which was given the dictation homework, 15 (50%) students stopped the tape sentence by sentence and 11 (37%) students, after a meaningful chunk of words and wrote down the English they listened to. Four (13%) students listened to the whole sentence before they wrote. This shows that there was no difference between class A and B in terms of the manner of listening when the students worked on the dictation or the consolidation homework. (Appendix D)

Giving the task as homework entailed another unexpected problem as well. Quite a few students copied others' homework. In the questionnaire, we asked if they had done their homework all by themselves or if they had copied someone else's homework. According to the answers, 18 out of 30 students (60%) in class A and 12 out of 29 students (40%) in class B did the homework all by themselves, whereas 12 (40%) students in class A and 17 (59%) students in class B copied someone else's homework. It is even assumed that some of them did not listen to the tape at all.

We gave the task in the form of homework for the following reasons: we thought that it would not be enough if we gave students listening task only in each class session, which is run only once a week. We strongly believed in the necessity to give students enough time to listen to English, ideally every day. The passages given as homework were about 150 to 200-word-level, and it was surmised that students would have to work on it spending at least one hour. We never anticipated that the above problems would occur because the task was given in the form of homework. How to give various language tasks effectively in and out of class will be a fundamental question we should solve in the future study.

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Appendix A: A Sample of Homework

**Mrs. Roper**

Jim lived with his parents. When he was twenty-one years old, he got a job in a different town. He left home and moved to a little flat. He lived there by himself. He wanted to find someone to clean his flat for him. He asked many people about this. He always said, "Do you know anyone who can clean my flat?" Finally, one of his fellow workers told him about an old cleaning woman named Mrs. Roper. He introduced Mrs. Roper to Jim. Mrs. Roper was a nice, charming old lady, but she didn't have much energy. She came to Jim's flat every morning and worked for an hour. Two weeks passed, and Jim's flat was still dirty. He looked in the mirror in his bedroom. It was very dusty. He wanted to tell her something. So he wrote a message in the dust on the mirror. It said, "I'm coughing because everything in this room is very dusty." The next evening, when Jim came home and went into his bedroom, he looked at the mirror. He could still see his message in the dust on it. "That silly woman," he thought, "forgot to clean the mirror." Then he saw a bottle in front of the mirror. He was surprised. It was a bottle of cough medicine from Mrs. Roper.

Appendix B: The Dictation Test

One day George and Ken talked about languages. George told him that nearly three thousand languages are spoken in the world today. Ken also learned that although Chinese is spoken by the largest number of people, English is considered an international language; for example, it is most used for the world's mail. Ken asked George about the best way to learn a foreign language. George answered that the best way is to go and live in a country where the language is spoken.

Appendix C: The Consolidation Test

Mr. and Mrs. Williams got married when he was twenty-three and she was twenty. Twenty-five years later, they had a big party, and a photographer came and took some photographs of them. Then the photographer gave Mrs. Williams a card and said, "They will be ready next Wednesday. You can get them from our studio." "No," Mrs. Williams said, "please send them to us." The photographs arrived a week later, but Mrs. Williams

was not happy when she saw them. She got into her car and drove to the photographer's studio. She went inside and said angrily, "You took some photographs of me and my husband last week, but I'm not going to pay for them." "Oh, why not?" the photographer asked. "Because my husband looks like a monkey," Mrs. Williams said. "Well," the photographer answered, "that isn't our fault. Why didn't you think of that before you married him?"

Appendix D: 英語IIアンケート (宿題について)

☆a クラス (ディクテーション)

- あなたはどんなふうにして英語を書き取っていましたか。
  - a 一文ずつテープをとめて書き取った。……………15
  - b 適当な意味の切れ目毎にテープをとめて書き取った。……………11
  - c 一語ずつテープをとめて書き取った。…………… 0
  - d 全体を聞いてから分かりにくい単語でとめて書き取った。…………… 4

☆b クラス (コンソリデーション)

- あなたはどんなふうにしてどのように要約していましたか。
  - a 全文を通して何度か聴いて要点を日本語でまとめた。…………… 4
  - b 一文ずつテープをとめて日本語の意味を書き取った。……………16
  - c 適当な意味の切れ目毎にテープをとめて日本語の意味を書き取った。…………… 9
- そのときあなたはメモをとりましたか。
  - a とった。……………26 (英語で 12 日本語で 9 日英両方で 5)
  - b とらなかった。…………… 2
- メモをとらなかったと答えた人について
  - a 頭の中で日本語で内容を覚えていて要約した。…………… 1
  - b 頭の中で英語で内容を覚えていて要約した。…………… 1

☆a, b クラス共通

- 何回ぐらい繰り返してテープをききましたか。
 

	a クラス	b クラス
a 1回……………	1	0
b 2、3回……………	10	7
c 4、5回……………	14	15
d それ以上……………	5	7

●あなたは宿題の英文を全文を通して聴きましたか。		
	a クラス	b クラス
a 聴いた 1回だけ……………	6	8
2、3回……………	18	12
それ以上……………	3	5
d 聴かなかった……………	3	2
●あなたは宿題の英文の意味が分かりましたか。		
a いつも大部分が分かった。……………	2	0
b たまに分からない時もあったが それ以外のときは大部分が分かった。……………	19	15
c いつも少しは分かった。……………	6	10
d たまに分かる時もあったがいつもあまり分からなかった。……………	3	3
e いつも全く分からなかった。……………	0	1
●あなたは自分で宿題に取り組んでいましたか。		
a いつも自分だけで取り組んだ。……………	18	12
b 友人のものを写したことがある。……………	12	17
c いつも友人のものを写していた。……………	0	0
●今回の宿題は自分のヒヤリング力向上のために役だったと思いますか。		
a 思う。……………	12	12
b 少しは思う。……………	17	15
c 全然思わない。……………	1	1