Using Authentic Audio in Dictogloss Activities

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Research in Second Language Acquisition has demonstrated the effectiveness of using authentic materials in the classroom (e.g. Duquette, Dunnett, & Papalia, 1987; Peacock, 1997; Thanajaro, 2000; Valdman, 1992). Though many definitions of authentic materials have been proposed (Duquette, Dunnett, & Papalia, 1987; Harner, 1983, p. 146; Lee, 1995; Nunan, 1988, pp. 99-102, 1989, p. 54; Rings, 1986; Taylor, 1994; Widdowson, 1978, 1990; Willis, 1998), an especially succinct and useful definition is that of Nunan (1989), who defines authentic materials as “any material which has not been specifically produced for the purposes of language teaching” (p. 54).¹ Authentic audio materials include spoken narratives, conversations, interviews, speeches, news broadcasts, advertisements, songs, poetry recitations, stories, movies, and television programs. Authentic texts include letters, stories, poems, new articles, brochures, e-mail correspondence, diary entries, labels, signs, and comic strips (see Larimer & Schleicher, 1999). Essentially, any of these materials can be considered authentic if they are not adapted in any way. The current study’s focus lies solely on the use of authentic audio materials in language teaching and, more specifically, the incorporation of authentic audio accessed from the internet into dictogloss activities.

Since the level of linguistic sophistication of authentic audio materials varies greatly, language instructors should select passages with students’ abilities in mind. If an overly challenging or complex audio passage is selected for use in the classroom, students may become frustrated and linguistically insecure. Though many authentic materials may be too advanced for beginning learners, the use of authentic materials should be introduced in a language course as early as possible. After all, “[t]here is little point in learners studying language that is unnatural or untypical of the language they will meet in real life” (Willis, 1998, p. 46). Several of the authentic materials previously mentioned might be more suitable for beginning language learners since they are generally less complex linguistically than other sources. Basic level authentic texts, such as signs, brochures, and labels, are extremely common and merely have to be selected wisely by the language educator in accordance with the level of his or her students. However, finding beginning level authentic audio materials is much more difficult, though not impossible. Therefore, it may be necessary for educators to wait until learners are ready before authentic audio materials are used in the classroom. Following Tomlinson (1998),

Readyness can be achieved by materials which create situations requiring the use of variational features not previously taught, by materials which ensure that the learners have gained sufficient mastery over the developmental features of the previous stage before teaching a new one and by materials which roughly tune the input so that it contains some features which are slightly above each learner’s current state of proficiency. (p. 12)
Of course, with authentic materials the input cannot be "tuned", but rather selected in such a way as to include features which learners will be able to comprehend.

Historically, the use of non-authentic materials in language instruction has been much more common than the use of authentic materials. Though non-authentic materials are not without their merits, especially for beginning language learners, denying learners exposure to authentic linguistic input will inevitably lead to limited, artificial production. It may be true that many language learners will encounter authentic language outside of the classroom setting and will gradually adjust their production/comprehension to more accurately reflect that of native speakers. However, why not expose learners to authentic language earlier? In this way, learners are much better equipped to function in real-life communicative scenarios. By being exposed to authentic auditory input, learners are exposed to native speaker discourse strategies that are generally removed from audio materials adapted for the purposes of instruction (Carter, Hughes, & McCarthy, 1998; Porter & Roberts, 1981). A variety of rich discourse features, such as pauses, discourse markers, intonation, stress, speech rate, and articulatory features are sacrificed for the sake of comprehensibility when, in fact, the removal of such features may not only make comprehension more difficult but also denies learners exposure to them.

Another significant advantage of using authentic materials in the language classroom is that they are generally more interesting than non-authentic materials because they more accurately reflect the target language culture. Listening to an authentic news broadcast is perhaps more engaging to most learners than listening to a pre-scripted imitation that has been simplified for the purpose of instruction, although, again, student interest seems to depend more on the material’s content rather than on its authenticity. Instructors should choose materials that are of interest to their students (which can be easily assessed by way of a written questionnaire during the first week of instruction). The affective impact that authentic materials have on learners is two-fold. First, the more dynamic nature of these materials more readily engages learners in more attentive participation. Since authentic materials serve a larger purpose for native speakers in general, their validity as a learning tool is instantly recognized by learners, who, as a result, view classroom activities as more meaningful. Also, when learners realize that they are able to process authentic language, their confidence increases.

Digital Sources of Authentic Audio and their Pedagogical Applications

A wide variety of authentic audio materials can be found on the internet. Many of these files, however, can only be streamed (which is to say that they cannot be downloaded) and will require the use of a computer in the classroom. Aside from websites that show audiovisual materials exclusively, such as youtube.com, there are multiple news websites that include video. Appendix A features a list of some of these sites, which are all free and include authentic videos. If necessary, the video portion can be reduced so as to make the file "audio only". Videos can be played as many times as needed and include pause, rewind, fast forward, and volume options. Though the sites listed in Appendix A are all in Spanish, a comprehensive media website that allows for the access of news sites in multiple world languages can be found at www.webpage.com/language/media.html. Also, an extremely useful database of podcasts (essentially an MP3 file which automatically downloads to one’s computer every week) in nearly 20 languages can be found at www.podcast.net/cat/89.
A variety of activities using authentic audio clips can be incorporated into language classes. The most traditional audio comprehension activity is question-and-answer. This activity proves very useful with students of varying abilities since questions can range from the most basic (i.e. topic of passage, sequence of events, essential elements of information, etc.) to much more advanced (i.e. meaning of figurative language, interpretation of opinions, implications of events, etc.). Another common audio activity is transcription (either partial or full), which seems beneficial to word recognition and the discovery of articulation patterns (Davis & Rinvolucri, 1988). The main problem with each of these activities, however, is that learners are generally not engaged with one another and therefore have fewer opportunities to produce the target language.

There are several interactive tasks that can be utilized in order to circumvent deficiencies related to traditional audio comprehension activities. For example, learners can listen to an incomplete audio passage and then, with a partner, predict how the passage will end (and perhaps try to mimic the source material speakers). Another possible audio activity involves the comparison of two similar audio clips by small groups of students. By comparing two distinct yet similar audio clips, learners are able to develop critical thinking skills. Two-way information gap tasks, “which require the exchange of information among all participants, each of whom possesses some piece of information [...] needed by all other participants to solve [a] problem”, are also very useful for audio comprehension practice (Doughty & Pica, 1986, p. 307). For example, one group of students listens to the first half of an audio clip while the other group of students listens to the second half of the clip. The different groups must then ask each other questions in order to collect information that they need but do not have. Finally, an activity that I have devised for use in my classes that seems to work particularly well at motivating student interest while sharpening analytical skills involves students finding authentic audio clips on the internet and then devising three to five questions based on what they have heard. They then minimize the audio source and change seats with a fellow student in order to listen to a new audio passage and answer questions related to it. After discussing each other's answers, students naturally enter into free conversation based on a variety of different topics that they have generated for themselves.

Most of the audio comprehension activities such as the ones just described involve extensive preparation on the part of the language instructor. There are websites, however, such as SCOLA (www.scola.org), El Mensual (www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/news/), and GLOSS (www.lingnet.org) that offer listening comprehension exercises based on authentic audio materials. For the most part, these exercises appear to have been designed for the individual learner and, for this reason, seem more suitable for use outside of the classroom. Of course, the audio portion of exercises alone could be used as a basis for some of the activities just described. SCOLA exercises make use of audiovisual clips in over 25 languages from television stations around the world. Each exercise (referred to as “Insta-class Lessons”) includes a written transcript of the audio clip, its translation, and a corresponding quiz. El Mensual, an online audio magazine in Spanish, allows users to select audio files by topic or grammatical point. Learning activities include a variety of different types of quizzes, along with written transcripts of audio passages. The Department of Defense has also developed an on-line audio learning tool referred to as GLOSS (Global Language Online Support System) that is used frequently by faculty and students at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) in Monterey, California. GLOSS consists of authentic audio materials for 15 languages (Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dari, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi,
Indonesian, Korean, Kurdish, Persian, Russian, Serbian, and Spanish) that can be used with learners of varying skill levels (2, 2+, 3, and 3+/4). Activities are categorized by linguistic focus (structural, lexical, and discourse) and topic (including society, security, environment, politics, culture, economy, geography, and science). Students check their comprehension of audio through a variety of exercises such as multiple choice and short answer questions, partial transcription, comparison of similar broadcasts, etc. Additionally, each GLOSS activity includes an answer key, alternate audio, a glossary, teacher's notes, and a complete written transcript of each audio clip.

Dictogloss

One way in which the use of authentic digitized materials can effectively improve second language learners' audio comprehension abilities is through the use of dictogloss, an integrated-skills, task-based activity in which students reconstruct a dictated passage through collaboration (Jacobs & Small, 2003; Nunan, 1991, pp. 28-9; Wajnryb, 1990). Following Nunan (1991), dictogloss activities involve the following four stages:

**Preparation**

At this stage, teachers prepare students for the text they will be hearing by asking questions and discussing a stimulus picture, by discussing vocabulary, by ensuring that students know what they are supposed to do, and by ensuring that the students are in the appropriate groups.

**Dictation**

Learners hear the dictation twice. The first time, they listen only and get a general feeling for the text. The second time they take down notes, being encouraged to listen for content words which will assist them in reconstructing the text. For reasons of consistency, it is preferable that students listen to a cassette recording rather than teacher-read text.

**Reconstruction**

At the conclusion of the dictation, learners pool notes and produce their version of the text. During this stage it is important that the teacher does not provide any language input.

**Analysis and correction**

There are various ways of dealing with this stage. The small group versions can be reproduced on the board or overhead projector, the texts can be photocopied and distributed, or the students can compare their version with the original, sentence by sentence (pg. 28).

The procedural description just outlined clearly shows that "dictogloss represents a major shift from traditional dictation. When implemented conscientiously, dictogloss embodies sound principles of language teaching which include: learner autonomy, cooperation among learners, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment, and teachers as co-learners" (Jacobs & Small, 2003, p. 2).

A variation of this activity, which makes use of authentic audio materials derived from the digital sources discussed previously (i.e. podcasts, streaming video and audio, and audiovisual clips), demands even more of learners. The language they hear is delivered considerably faster than that of a traditional dictation and usually contains much denser language. Even more so than with dictated text, by working with authentic

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audio material “learners are in a position where they lack enough data to reproduce with ease the text to which they have been exposed … They are therefore obliged to call on their pre-existing knowledge of language — their grammatical competence — to see them through the task” (Wajnryb, 1990, p. 12). Now we will focus on more specific differences between traditional dictogloss activities and dictogloss activities which utilize authentic audio materials. Ideally, dictogloss activities using authentic audio should be carried out according to the following procedure:

Activate Schemata

Students brainstorm ideas/vocabulary related to a visual stimulus related to the audio clip they will hear during the lesson. This activates learners’ previous knowledge of a specific topic, which will consequently strengthen the new linguistic input they receive.

Listen for Essential Information

Students listen to an authentic audio clip from the internet (according to the proficiency level and subject deemed appropriate by the instructor) and are encouraged to take notes on essential information.

Students Formulate Questions

Each student formulates three questions based on the audio passage in order to strengthen analytical skills. Then students ask a classmate the questions and conversation is pursued by the professor.

Listen for Details

Students are then told that they will be competing in pairs or small groups. The team that can most accurately reconstruct the audio passage (not word-for-word, of course) will win. They are instructed to write down as many details as possible. Students then listen to the audio passage a second time.

Negotiation

In teams, students work together to reconstruct the audio passage on a sheet of paper. They should be careful not to reveal information to the other team.

Comparative Analysis

Instructor gathers the teams’ reconstructed audio passages, displays the written gloss for all to see using a Smart Board (or a projector), and, with colored markers, checks off the information listed by each team, comparing them to see which team has the most precise information. The team whose reconstructed audio passage most closely approximates that of the original gloss wins the “game”.

The use of authentic materials in a dictogloss lesson provides learners with real-world themes which can be used for further exploration in authentic follow-up tasks. A variety of follow-up activities can be used in order to more fully integrate linguistic skills through further student interaction, such as: a) a role-play scenario involving participants similar to those involved in the audio passage used during the lesson. For example, based on a Spanish-language broadcast about a hostage situation, students would play the roles of the kidnapper and hostage negotiator (in pairs) or the kidnapper, the hostage, a relative of the hostage, and the hostage negotiator (in groups of four), b) debate (if the audio
passage involves controversial issues), and c) the elaboration of strategies/procedures to solve a problem. For example, given a news broadcast detailing a fire in a Paraguayan supermarket, teams could devise exit strategies, rescue plans, etc. For a possible lesson plan including the role-play activity just mentioned, refer to Appendix B.

The Pedagogical Strengths of a Dictogloss Lesson

The use of dictogloss activities such as those just discussed fulfills a wide variety of current SLA methodological imperatives. First of all, dictogloss activities are almost completely student-centered, with the instructor serving as a true facilitator. When one considers the steps of a dictogloss lesson proposed above, it becomes clear that the focus is never on the instructor, who is only actually involved in the initial and final stages of the lesson (activating schemata and comparing learners’ reconstructed audio transcripts with the original, respectively). Even in these phases of the lesson, however, the focus is still centered on either visual images (phase one) or the original audio transcript (phase six). Second, the combination of authentic materials and tasks that require higher order cognitive skills (namely, analysis and synthesis) helps learners to internalize unfamiliar language and concepts that they will encounter in the target culture.

Unlike with traditional audio comprehension activities, during a dictogloss lesson learners do not perform tasks individually. Instead, learners are engaged in communicative, task-based activities that involve pair and/or group work. According to Nunan (1991), “dictogloss exploits the principle that two heads are better than one. Students are able to pool their resources, and even low-level learners are able, through collaborative action, to ‘outperform their competence’” (p. 29). The need to collaborate in order to complete the task of reconstructing an authentic audio passage forces learners to negotiate verbally various aspects of a particular passage (i.e. what is important, the order in which information was given, the structures that were used, etc.). According to Wajnryb (1990), learners’ “reason for interacting is genuine and not ‘display-based’ or teacher-constructed. One might argue, in fact, that in this case the interaction may be more important than the result of the interaction” (p. 17).

In addition to using auditory and verbal skills, learners also engage in comparative analysis through reading and listening in dictogloss activities (as the instructor reads their reconstruction and they compare this with the original audio transcript). Through comparison, learners are able to gauge their use of language with that of native speakers and modify this usage whenever necessary (with the instructor’s guidance). This is especially true for syntactic structures. Since learners have to reconstruct whole discourse based on discourse fragments during dictogloss activities, they are given the opportunity to experiment with syntactic structures of the target language and compare them with those produced by native speakers. They also give learners the opportunity to induce grammar patterns, which are normally presented as rules in most traditional language textbooks. Grammatical accuracy is extremely important in dictogloss activities since it partially determines who will win the “game” (described in step 6). Though the authentic listening material may not be inherently motivating to learners (due to its content), the desire to win while competing with another group certainly is.
The Practical Benefits of a Dictogloss Lesson

Now that we have discussed the pedagogical aspects of dictogloss activities, we now turn to something that is also of great importance for all language instructors, which are the practical benefits of these activities. Many language professionals realize that much time is spent looking for authentic audio materials, especially since they must be appropriate for learners according to their general ability range. There are a host of problems even once a level-appropriate audio clip has been found, such as the length of the clip, its quality, its subject matter, or the use of infrequent language, regionalisms, or slang. Another concern is that transcribing authentic audio passages is extremely time-consuming. It is true that many language instructors simply do not have enough time to prepare these materials on a consistent basis. Fortunately, two of the internet sites previously mentioned (GLOSS [www.lingnet.org] and SCOLA [www.scola.org]) already contain authentic audio passages with accompanying written transcripts for each passage.

An added feature of GLOSS is that it allows users to search materials of varying ability levels. Websites like SCOLA, which do not have this feature, can still be used with beginners of the language, however. Authentic audio materials can still be used at this level if the instructor either: 1) reads a transcript of the original audio clip or 2) allows for pauses between sentences of a more advanced level clip. Though each of these techniques makes the audio in question only quasi-authentic at best, it could serve as a bridge for using authentic materials later in the course. Dictogloss activities are also helpful to language educators since they serve as an alternative to textbook-based instruction for students at higher levels. In other words, regardless of how useful a given traditional language textbook may be in class, these activities provide variation and allow learners and instructors alike the opportunity to break the routine.

Conclusion

The incorporation of authentic on-line audio materials into classroom activities poses many advantages to both learners and educators. Authentic language is the type of language that most learners will encounter outside of the classroom. Since target language proficiency in real-life contexts is the very aim of most language teaching, it is imperative that language learners be exposed to this language and that they do something with it. A particularly useful audio comprehension activity in which authentic materials can be easily incorporated with little or no work for the language educator is dictogloss. Unlike traditional audio comprehension activities, dictogloss requires learners to interact with one another. Group or pair collaboration encourages the negotiation of meaning, peer repair, and active participation, all as a result of the necessity to complete a group task. Furthermore, by comparing their output to that of native speakers, second language learners achieve greater metalinguistic awareness. Dictogloss activities using authentic audio provide them with opportunities to narrow the gap between their own interlanguage and the native discourse to which they are exposed, thereby allowing for the gradual acquisition of native speaker structures.
Appendices

Appendix A

The following internet sites include authentic audiovisual clips in Spanish:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/multimedia/video
http://www.elmundo.es/videos/index.html
http://es.news.yahoo.com/videos/
http://www.clarin.com/
http://www.elpais.com/videos/
http://www.univision.com/content/content.jhtml?cid=974459

Appendix B

Sample Lesson Plan Using Dictogloss

Topic: Hostage negotiation

Objective: To become more familiar with hostage negotiation and simulate a hostage negotiation situation.

Materials: SmartBoard (photos and audio script); Lingnet GLOSS audio sample “Rehenes” (Level 2, Listening).

Lead-In: Students will brainstorm (orally) what they know about hostage situations given a visual stimulus. This will activate schema related to this topic that students already have (2 min.).

Task A

1. We will listen to an actual news broadcast from Voice of America concerning the kidnapping of employees from the Chilean embassy in Costa Rica by an embassy policeman. Students will be encouraged to take notes on essential information (2 min.);

2. Each student will formulate three questions based on the audio sample in order to strengthen analytical skills (2 min.);

3. In pairs, students will ask each other the questions they have just created and will answer them in order to facilitate listening comprehension (2 min.);

4. I tell students that they will now be competing in pairs. The team that can most accurately reconstruct the broadcast (NOT WORD-FOR-WORD) will win. They
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will be instructed to write down as much detail from the broadcast as possible. We will then re-listen to the audio sample (3 min.);

5. In teams, students work together to reconstruct the news broadcast (by WRITING IT DOWN) (4 min.);

6. I gather their reconstructed broadcasts and display the written gloss for all to see. With colored SmartBoard markers, I check off the information listed by each team and compare to see who wins the “game” (4 min.).

Task B

In same pairs, students role-play a hostage situation. One student plays the part of the kidnapper and the other the negotiator. (5 min.).

Follow-Up: Students are asked (1) if they would like to be hostage negotiators, and (2) why or why not. (Remainder of lesson).

Notes

1. It should be noted that defining authenticity in multiple realms (i.e. in language, in tasks, or in situations) or differentiating between genuine and authentic instances of language use (Widdowson, 1978, pp. 79-80) will not be explored in this study.

2. Peacock (1997, pp. 150-2) rejects this claim based on impressionistic self-reported data from students involved in his study. Though these data were analyzed statistically and found to be significant, the source of these data is questionable. The students observed during this study were asked to rate authentic materials with regards to how interesting they were irrespective of students’ interests in their content or identification with the target culture. Authentic materials will only pique student interest if they deal with topics that are of great interest to them. Furthermore, if students are intrinsically unmotivated to study the target language or if they do not identify with the target language culture, they will scarcely consider any authentic materials to be interesting.

3. Fortunately, instructors who do not have access to a computer while teaching still have options for finding and using audio files from the internet. Podcasts, which are available for download for free from iTunes, can be saved to a CD-R and played back to students on a standard CD player.

4. The website that administers El Mensual (www.bbc.co.uk/languages) also includes audio comprehension exercises in French, German, Italian, Mandarin, Portuguese, and Greek.

5. These skills levels are defined in the Interagency Linguistic Roundtable Language Skill Level Descriptions (www.govtir.org).

References


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