Paper

Effectiveness of Dictation in Improving English Listening Ability of Japanese High School Students

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The aim of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of dictation in improving listening ability of Japanese high school students. Japanese learners' listening ability is quite poor, as is found in the data of a recent TOEFL test. When Japanese learners of English find it more difficult to understand the spoken text than they do with the written one of the same content, one probable hurdle they cannot overcome is translation of the sounds into the corresponding linguistic forms. The paper focused on dictation because, to do dictation, the learner is first required to recognize the words and phrases in the sound chain before writing them down. In the experiment, dictation was given eight times as treatment to the participants in the experimental group. Their scores on the post-test improved significantly in comparison with the control group. It can be concluded from the experiment that dictation is effective in improving English listening ability of Japanese high school students.

Key Words: *listening, dictation, word recognition*

1. Introduction

More focus on listening can be seen in Japanese high school educational scenes in recent years, especially since the introduction of a listening test in 2006 by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations. In addition, according to the new curriculum guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), which came into effect in 2013, priority in English language education should be placed on nurturing communicative ability. The guidelines stipulate that English classes, in principle, be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English, transforming classes into real communication scenes. In the background is the idea that English oral skills are essential in order for the country to develop human resources that can survive the 21st century where globalization is ever more accelerated. In other words, in order to fully meet the demand of the future society, teachers in high schools should keep focusing not only on reading and writing but also on speaking and listening.

There are two reasons why listening should be more focused than the other three language skills. One is that high school students will be required to understand spoken English, if all the English classes are to be conducted in English only. The other is that listening competence is the first and foremost prerequisite in acquisition of language, be it that of one's mother tongue or that of a foreign one and that one can acquire language by listening first[1), 2)]. Moreover the basis of language is sound and there are languages without any written forms but no language without sound[1), 3)] so that listening skills must come first.

How can listening skills be effectively developed? Multiple-choice listening exercises as well as shadowing practices and reading aloud the texts are

among popular methods to improve listening skills and, as to dictation, there have been some positive arguments[4), 5), 6), 7)] as well as negative ones[8), 9)]. In this paper, we would like once again to focus on this traditional activity of dictation, analyze it scientifically, and examine it empirically through research.

2. Listening and dictation

2. 1 Processes of foreign language listening

In listening, a learner is given a continuous and linear sound chain in which his or her ears find no self-sufficient, meaningful, or clear-cut divisions. As Saussure[3)] pointed out, the main characteristics of the sound chain is that it is linear and, unlike visual signals, which can provide more than one dimension simultaneously, auditory signals are available only in their linearity of time; they form a chain. When a learner listens, he or she cuts this continuous and linear sound chain apart in a meaningful manner and interprets the sound, which is no simple or easy matter. Oller[10)] observed that "neither words nor word-orders are supplied to the student in a clear and unambiguous form. Rather, the student is given a sequence of sounds from which an intended set of words in sequence must be extracted" (p. 257). Thus, when a learner listens, he or she tries to decode what a speaker has encoded, that is, what the speaker means. In other words, to listen is to extract an intended set of words in sequence from a sequence of seemingly meaningless linear sounds.

What competence is necessary, then, for a learner to be successful in listening? First, let us focus on the processes of listening. An ordinary person usually takes the following three processes in listening:

(1) the listener perceives sounds,

(2) the listener decodes the sounds he or she has perceived, recognizing them as certain linguistic forms, and

(3) the listener decodes the forms he or she has recognized, this time comprehending the meaning of the forms.

Let us call the processes "Perception," "Recognition," and "Comprehension," respectively. **Figure 1** shows how this model works.

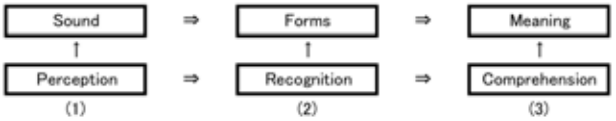

Fig. 1 Processes of listening.

Of these three listening processes, the first process of perception is of no difficulty for an ordinary learner (We don't discuss hearing defection in this paper). As for recognition and comprehension, however, the learner needs to undergo the following processes. In the second process of recognition, the learner converts the sounds into linguistic forms; that is, recognize the forms, and in the third process of comprehension, the learner interprets the meaning of the forms he or she has just recognized and understands what the speaker means.

What a learner needs in recognition is, first, competence to recognize the spoken words. Second, he or she must recognize them in an instant. Third, the learner must recognize the words and phrases, in the order from the front to the end, linearly and in real time. Fourth, the learner needs to have competence to keep the forms he or she has just decoded in his or her working memory.

What a learner needs in comprehension, on the other hand, is, first, competence to instantly come up with the meanings of the forms he or she has just recognized. Second, the learner must grasp mutual relationships between those individual forms and analyze the syntax, finding out subjects, objects, and verbs. Third, based on the information the learner has garnered during the above two operations, he or she must comprehensively understand the meaning of the whole sentence with the help of his or her limited working memory. It goes without saying that all these three operations must be conducted instantly, simultaneously, and linearly.

2. 2 Difficulties in listening comprehension for Japanese learners

What Japanese learners find hard is the second process of recognition rather than the third process of comprehension. When they cannot successfully understand the spoken sentences, Japanese learners most likely get trapped in the second process, unable

to translate the sounds they have perceived into the forms.

One reason for this failure to recognize the words spoken would be the fact that Japanese learners are more accustomed to reading the letters visually than to listening to the sounds auditorily, in comprehending the sentences. They find it fairly easy to understand the sentences if they are shown the visual images of the content. When the input is visual, Japanese learners have little difficulty in perceiving it as linguistic forms. Ito[11] did an experiment to see if there is a difference in understanding between a group of participants who just listened and another group allowed to see the script while listening and concluded that the greatest obstacle for Japanese listeners is the conversion from the sound to the corresponding linguistic forms. One of the reasons for this is the EFL environment in Japan. The Japanese don't learn English as a daily necessity as people in ESL do and chances are slim that they use English in their everyday life. This means that their exposure to English is limited in the school environment, where they are most commonly required to read English.

Another difficulty felt by Japanese learners would be related to a feature unique to listening; that is, they must comprehend the sentences or utterances linearly, from the head of the sentence running down to the end, in real time, within a limited amount of time, or rather instantly, since they are not allowed to go back along the utterances. However, this difficulty is not unique to listening and is supposedly shared by learners required to read a text and comprehend it or grasp its outline in a limited amount of time. The main problem in listening for Japanese learners should be that they cannot successfully recognize sounds as corresponding linguistic forms.

2. 3 What is dictation?

According to Davis and Rinvolucri[12], dictation is to decode the sounds of a language and to recode them in writing. Morris[13] called dictation an "active re-interpretation by the learner" (p. 126). Also, Oller[10] argues that dictation activates the learner's internalized grammar of expectancy and improves the learner's integrated skills of the languages, defining the processes undergone by a learner when he or she does dictation as follows. First, the learner must discriminate phonological units; then make decisions concerning word boundaries in order to discover sequences of words and phrases that make sense, and finally translate this analysis into a graphemic representation. **Figure 2** is a model of dictation suggested by Oller [10].

In short, to do dictation is to unravel and segment, i.e., to decode, linear and continuous sound sequences or chains strung together without any obvious boundaries, to recode and reconstruct them rather actively into words, phrases, and sentences, and to write them down. Before anything, it takes word recognition, that is translation of the sound into the corresponding linguistic forms, to do dictation because, otherwise, it would be impossible for listeners to write down the phonetic input.

2. 4 Merits of dictation

As has been suggested, Japanese learners of English have difficulty in recognizing sounds as corresponding linguistic forms. If they were to get over this obstacle, some of the problems they face in listening would be cleared up. Dictation is a method to unravel and segment linear and continuous sound chains strung together without any obvious boundaries, to reconstruct them rather actively into words, phrases, and sentences, and to write them down. Therefore, dictation may be a suitable method that can work directly on the weak point in listening of Japanese learners, because it may help learners to combine and internalize their auditory forms and visual ones by requiring them to translate sounds into forms and then forms into written forms.

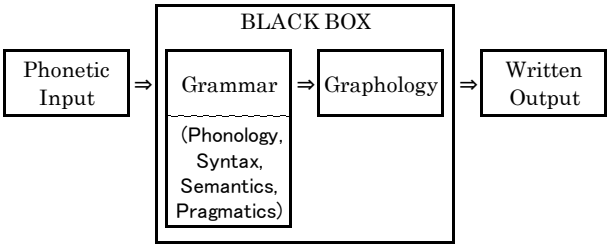

Fig. 2 Model of dictation by Oller[10].

Ito[11] indicated that "dictation practice using natural English speech as cues from the early stages is highly recommended" (p. 22) and suggested that dictation is an effective way to string together an auditory image a learner has with a corresponding visual one in written forms, saying that dictation practice will help the learners realize and internalize flexible correspondence between visual forms of English words and their spoken counterparts.

Moreover, in translating sounds into forms, learners also need to make up for information they have missed and must cope with reduced sounds in unstressed words or syllables and with such sound changes as are caused by assimilation, liaison, and elision. Fujinaga[14] suggested that mistakes learners make in listening are mainly caused by their failure to listen to unstressed or weakened syllables and to cope with sound changes.

In order to successfully cope with these sound changes or missing information, learners must compensate for them by themselves and must actively reconstruct the original sentences uttered by the speaker. By requiring learners to add missing information and reconstruct the original forms and to write them down, dictation helps learners develop a skill of prediction, which is extremely important in listening. This is another merit of dictation, because to listen is to add extra information from the context, speculate on the speaker's intention and actively reconstruct the original sentence, based on the limited information given as sounds. In a nutshell, listening is an active guesswork and this is a very important aspect of listening.

In the past, dictation was dismissed as ineffective[15, 16]. Most of the approaches to teaching listening emphasized listening for gist or top-down processing and listening strategies. In addition, many published textbooks often relied on practicing comprehension and word recognition was generally neglected in favor of using the context to work out meaning. Recently, however, dictation has been reevaluated as a useful approach to listening as it helps lead learners to better comprehension through correct word recognition, even though there has also been skepticism about dictation[8, 9]. Wilson[17] insisted on the importance of dictation, saying that numerous small misperceptions on the level of word recognition have a cumulative effect, blocking the path to correct comprehension. Field[18] also emphasized the importance of recognizing words in connected speech. In addition, Nation and Newton[19] claimed that dictations help make learners focus on linguistic forms. In Japan, too, quite a few books have recently been published on dictation. Matsuoka[20] insisted that dictation would enable learners to listen accurately, saying, "When you are satisfied, thinking you have grasped the outline of the story, it is highly likely that you actually have not comprehended it accurately. Dictation will enable you to accurately comprehend every detail of the story" (p. 7).

2. 5 Research question

Considering these discussions, it is probable that dictation improves learners' word recognition but the effectiveness of dictation on English learners of Japanese high schools has hardly yet been empirically studied. Therefore, the following research question has been formulated; "Is dictation practice effective in improving English listening ability of Japanese high school students?"

3. Experiment

3. 1 Method

(1) Participants

The participants in the experimental group were 26 second-year female students of a private high school in Nara Prefecture and those in the control group were 43 first-year female students of the same school. Those in the experimental group had already studied English more than four years at the time of the experiment, which was conducted in autumn, 2011 and their grades in English were generally good. On the other hand, the participants in the control group had studied English more than three years at the time of the experiment and all of them belong to a course which had some curricula unique to its own, not shared by the other courses, such as English conversation, English discussion, and many classes taught by English native speakers. Students in this course are highly motivated and the course curriculum has already covered four and half years'

worth of study in English under the scheme of finishing all junior high school curricula in the first two years.

(2) Procdure

The treatment given to the participants in the experimental group was dictation of an English text about 1000 words long, which was divided into eight parts. The students in the experimental group had seven English classes a week, four for English Ⅱ, and three for English Writing (mainly grammar). The tests and the treatment were given in one of the three English Writing classes. The students in the control group also had seven English classes a week, four for English Ⅰ, two for English Ⅱ, and one for Oral Communication Ⅰ. The pre-test and the post-test were conducted in one of the two English Ⅱ classes. The whole experiment was conducted from September to November in 2011. First, the pre-test was given in both groups at the beginning of September and after that those only in the experimental group were assigned treatment, that is, dictation practices given eight times for about two months; no treatment at all for the control group except for regular English lessons. Finally, the post-test for both groups was conducted in November.

Sentences the participants were required to write down in the dictations became gradually longer and their overall load heavier, as the treatment proceeded from the first dictation practice to the eighth. The time spent on dictation each time was 30 minutes. The details were as follows. In the first phase of the treatment, the participants were given a fill-in-the-blanks-style dictation, with one word for each blank, the first letter of the word provided as a hint. In the second phase, dictation style was exactly the same as in the first except that there were no hints about the word's first letter. From the third phase to the fifth, the number of words for each blank increased, from two to three, to four to five and in the sixth phase an unspecified number of words were required for each blank. In the last two phases, the participants were asked to write whole sentences. In the seventh, a full sentence from one period to another was blanked out while in the eighth and final phase, the whole text must be written down.

As to the speed of the CD for listening, a rather slow speed of around 140 words per minute on average was applied every time. No change was made about the speed as the treatment proceeded. The number of times the participants listened to the text each time was not specified. Nor was the time spent on dictation. The participants listened to the same text as many times as possible in the 30-minute frame. Also, there were no pauses applied for the time to write down. Oller, Irvine, and Atai[21] used the following procedure for dictation. In the instructions on the tape Oller et al.[21] included, "The first time you hear each paragraph, just listen. The second time there will be pauses for you to write down what you hear. The third time you may check what you've written" (p. 248). Besides, in this experiment, the participants were given big hints on punctuation during the second time around; where the commas and periods were was indicated[21]. However, the dictations would become unnecessarily easier if the participants were provided with information on punctuation, so that no such methods were taken in the present experiment. In order to secure the time for dictation, instead, the CD was pushed back and forth many times instead of placing any pauses in between. The CD was played through the text for a couple of times to finish the dictations.

Japanese translation of the text was distributed to let the participants check the meanings after the English script was given and correction of the dictation was done. If the subjects could check the meanings of the script before the dictation activities, the translation would become big hints just as sub-titles would in the movies. This would help them recognize and focus only on the forms of what is spoken about, even though this might be just another way of doing the whole thing. Finocchiaro and Bonomo[22] gave the summary of the text to the students in dictation practices beforehand and also explained to them about difficult words, sentence structures and the places of punctuation marks in advance. They even read in chunks of the meaning, placing pauses, which might have been of great help to the students in recognition of forms as well as comprehension. This whole procedure, however, was not the case with the experiment conducted in

2011, because the present author considered such hints would not help improve the learners' recognition of the forms. No summaries, no explanations, and no translations of the text were provided beforehand.

Finally, as to the corrections of the dictations the participants had had, they were made to do the corrections individually every time, before the script was given. These corrections of the dictations by themselves before the script was given, relying on their own knowledge about English itself and the context they had understood, must have greatly helped them realize the important roles their knowledge about syntax and vocabulary played in the process of listening. Davis & Rinvolucri[12] acknowledged the importance of correction by students, saying, "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 phase and providing them with opportunities to 'over-learn' the language" (p. 4). After the distribution of the script, the participants were asked to check their corrections and the meaning of the text, before listening to the same text twice or thrice with special attention to the parts they had missed or made mistakes on, so that they could identify the auditory images with the written ones.

(3) Material

The material of the dictations was a full story of a fantastic fiction *Little Brother* by Bruce Holland Rogers, which appeared in the 2011 April issue of *English Journal* published by ALC Press. The material was selected as dictation texts mainly because its storyline was quite intriguing. As Finocchiaro and Bonomo[22] observed about dictation, interesting and familiar materials motivate learners when they write down. Morris[13] also argues that "the subject matter should be potentially interesting to the learner" (p. 126).

The whole story of *Little Brother*, which had 1,087 words altogether, was divided into 8 parts. As far as text length is concerned, too long texts or too short ones should not be recommended[13]. The texts must be "sufficiently long to demonstrate the learner's ability to reprocess the text" (p. 126) and also should be long enough to "elicit a number of errors that would form the basis of teaching points" (p. 126). Overlong texts are not suitable for dictation, either, because they "are less economical in terms of teaching points, as there are too many things for the learner to concentrate on" (p.126). The texts Morris[13] used in her experiment varied from 100 to 190 words in length and in the experiment, the 1,087-word text was divided into 8 parts so that each part had 136 words on average.

(4) Tests

The listening test used in the Make-up Test by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations in 2010 (30 minutes, 50 points) was assigned to both the control and experimental groups for both the pre-test and the post-test. The test was made up of 25 multiple-choice questions. It consisted of four parts. In the first part, the students were required to choose the right answers, referring to pictures, figures, and numbers, while listening to short dialogues. The second part consisted of questions in which the students must select the right response to the last utterance after listening to short dialogues. In the third part, longer dialogues were given and a table or a figure must be completed, or the right answer must be selected. In the final part, monologues were given, followed by several questions pertaining to the content of the monologues and the right answer must be chosen from the available options.

Since the same test was used for both the pre-test and the post-test, no correct answers were shown after the tests. In addition, all the question booklets as well as the answer sheets were collected. There was about three-month hiatus between the pre-test and the post-test so that there might be least practice effects possible from taking the same test twice. Moreover, the participants were not allowed to take notes either in the question booklet or on the answer sheet during the test.

3. 2 Results

(1) Descriptive statistics

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics concerning the results of the listening tests conducted as the pre-test and the post-test for the

control group and the experimental group. It gives the means and the standard deviations of both tests and the gains each participant achieved between the two tests. The population of the control group was 43 and that of the experimental group 26, but outliers of highs and lows (M±2SD) for both groups were excluded from the analysis so that the number of samples became 41 for the control group and 24 for the experimental group.

Out of 50 points, standard deviations in the pre-test were from 4.5 to 6.8, which means there were rather great variations in the points each participant in the two groups scored. Especially, in the control group, which had roughly two distinct types of students mixed together, with some having much greater grades in English than in other subjects and others who like English but whose goals are to get into art colleges so that their English grades are not so great, there were considerable variations in the scores. Also, despite the treatment, several students in the experimental group did worse in the post-test than in the pre-test. In the main, judging from the descriptive statistics, there seemed to be no practice effect from using the same test for both the pre-test and the post-test. Since there were only multiple-choice questions in the test, however, there must have been considerable number of right answers by guesswork. **Figure 3** shows how much the average score of each group had improved between the pre-test and the post-test.

Table 1 Results of the Pre-Test and the Post-Test for Each Group

Group	n	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Gains	
		M	*(SD)*	*M*	*(SD)*	*M*	*(SD)*
Control	41	19.17	(6.78)	19.95	(6.96)	0.78	(7.36)
Experimental	24	32.58	(4.55)	36.50	(5.32)	3.92	(4.84)

50 points each for the pre-test and the post-test

Table 2 Frequency distribution in gains from the pre-test to the post-test for the control group

Gains	-14	-12	-10	-8	-6	-4	-2	0	2	4	6	8	10	12	14
Frequency	1	1	3	2	4	2	4	3	2	6	4	3	4	0	2

n=41

Table 3 Frequency distribution in gains from the pre-test to the post-test for the experimental group

Gains	-14	-12	-10	-8	-6	-4	-2	0	2	4	6	8	10	12	14
Frequency	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	2	3	5	4	4	0	1	1

n=24

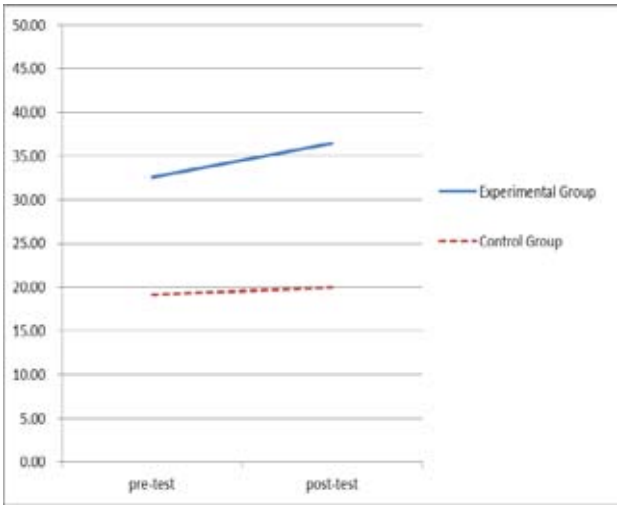

Fig. 3 Scores of the pre-test and the post-test and gains of each group.

(2) Comparison of gains

Considering that there had been a remarkable difference in listening levels between the control and experimental groups before the experiment, gains each participant had made from the pre-test to the post-test were calculated and frequency distribution for each group, control and experimental, was made. **Tables 2** and **3** show frequency distribution in gains each participant had made, for the control group and for the experimental group respectively.

As is shown in these two tables, in the control group (n=41), the number of students who lost in their scores was 17 (42%), the number of those whose scores remained unchanged was 3 (7%), and that of the students who gained was 21 (51%). In the experimental group (n=24), on the other hand, the number of students who lost was 4 (17%), the number of those who remained unchanged 2 (8%), and those who gained 18 (75%). Even though variations in gains were rather wide, in general the treatments had led to the improvement of listening ability of each student in the experimental group.

In order to verify whether the difference in the treatment had had any impact on each student's improvement in listening ability, gains were compared between the two groups. Based on the data of gains for both groups, an independent t-test was conducted. **Table 4** shows the result of the t-test.

Table 4 Inter-group comparison of gains: control vs. experimental

	Control Group		Experimental Group		*t*	*p*	*r*
	M	*(SD)*	*M*	*(SD)*			
Gains	0.78	(7.36)	3.92	(4.84)	2.07	0.043	0.25

Table 4 shows that the difference in gains between the two groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) even though the effect size was small ($r > .10$). From this result, it is plausible that the treatment of dictation practices given only to the experimental group had had a statistically significant effect on the group.

3. 3 Discussions

The research question was whether dictation practice is effective in improving English listening ability of Japanese high school students and, according to the data obtained from the experiment, it is probable that dictation might be helpful in improving their English listening skills.

The experimental group improved their scores considerably in the post-test while in the control group the gains in scores in the post-test were very small. However, considering the gap in the scores of the pre-test between the two groups, the difference of the gains each group had made between the two tests is important in measuring the effectiveness of the treatment. The result of the t-test concerning the gains shows that the dictation given to the experimental group had made a statistically significant difference in improving their listening skills. As to the fact that it had only a small effect size, however, there are some probable reasons.

The total amount of dictation as well as the number of times the practices were given was not sufficient. The dictation was given only once a week, 30 minutes each time, due mainly to the restrictions of the school curriculum. The time span for the experiment was not enough, either. Three months was not long enough and the dictations were given only eight times, as there were mid-term tests and school excursions between the pre-test and the post-test.

Nevertheless, thanks to these dictation practices, students said in a questionnaire conducted after the experiment that they had realized many things about listening. Many of the Japanese learners feel or even pretend that they can listen and understand the speaker pretty well even when they have missed out on the details or cannot recognize all the linguistic forms in the utterance. It is often the case that high school students rarely realize the importance of making up for missing information as well as of dealing with sound changes when they listen, but dictation practices did give them good opportunity to become aware of the importance of these aspects.

In listening, it goes without saying that grasping an outline of the text or utterance is important, but this is not all that is necessary in making a comprehensive and fundamental improvement in listening comprehension. Dictation is an effective method in improving a learner's listening ability in the sense that it develops several competences necessary in listening such as predictive competence and a rather complicated competence of filling up missing information with cues a learner has scooped up from the context and other hints, and of combining them with what he or she has successfully caught, in comprehending the whole text or utterance.

4. Conclusion

This paper has focused on some of the properties unique to listening and studied whether dictation is effective in improving listening ability of Japanese learners of English. According to the results of the experiment, it is plausible that dictation helps improve their listening ability. However, there are a few improvements to be made as to the experiment.

In the experiment, there was a considerable gap in listening comprehension levels between the control group and the experimental group (that of the experimental group was higher). Ideally, the control group and the experimental group should have been chosen so that the gap between the two groups was nigh zero or the level of the former was higher than that of the latter. Besides, the experiment should stretch over a sufficiently long period with many more practices in between.

In addition, in order to strictly measure the effectiveness of dictation itself on listening ability,

listening practices similar to those conducted in the experimental group but without dictation should have been conducted in the control group. In this experiment, no such equivalent listening practices were conducted in the control group so that it is not certain whether the improvement in the experimental group was due to the dictation itself or to the listening practice including dictation.

As to the way to conduct dictation practices, there are several options in terms of when to give the script, whether to give them a summary beforehand or not, whether to put pauses or not, how many times learners should listen, and how much they should write, to name a few. Especially, when they write only partially, or fill in blanks, learners may depend on written parts of the text for comprehension, not exclusively on their listening[9]. This is very likely to be true of Japanese learners, who are primarily accustomed to reading for comprehension. If that happens, their dictations completed may or may not result purely from their listening to the text. How to conduct dictation practices must be more thoroughly examined.

Another aspect that must be reconsidered is how to pick independent variables. There are several possible ways for this. First, even though the participants had dictation practices once a week in this experiment, it would be intriguing to study how treatment would become more, or possibly less, effective in proportion to increased practices as well as frequency or the time learners spend on dictation per lesson. If further increased effectiveness is to be confirmed, it will become a more authentic proof of dictation having positive effects on learners' listening ability. Second, to divide participants into three groups, upper, middle, and lower groups based on scores of the pre-test and see how effective dictation practices are according to their listening levels would also be interesting. Third, the level of the text used can also be an independent variable. Effectiveness may change depending on whether the text is easy, moderate, or difficult.

In every case mentioned above, more substantial, long-term empirical research is necessary. This research being a small step, further research concerning listening, listening and dictation, or listening and other related training methods should be conducted so that a more effective method of improving listening ability can be developed.

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