

# **Identifying Errors made by EFL College Students in Dictation**

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## **Abstract**

A test is an important device for teachers and for learners; for teachers in that it helps to assess the students' EL performance and for learners in that it helps them to discover the areas of weakness and strength in their performances.

Dictation is one of the integrative tests that have proved their proficiency in measuring different language skills, like listening comprehension and spelling . It is a reading passage (100 to 200 words) which is read by the teacher three times at a normal speed . The students' task is to write down what the teacher read in the second reading . However, experienced instructors in the field of TEFL realise that learners have many errors in writing .

Hence, the present study aims at identifying, classification and explaining the errors that EFL college students make during applying dictation tests .

The sample of the study is 55 students randomly chosen from the second-year students at the Department of English, College of Basic Education , Al-Mustansiriyah University during the academic year 2005 / 2006.

The instrument of the study is a ready test which consists of a 162- word passage. The passage is intended to test advanced students' dictation. The test is submitted to a jury of specialists to ensure its validity.

The test results revealed that the sample subjects have many errors which the researcher classified into comprehension, grammatical and spelling errors. Spelling errors formed the largest percentage of the total number of errors which are, in turn, classified into subcategories .

In the light of the obtained results some conclusions are drawn, number of recommendations are made, and several suggestions for further research are presented .

## **1.Introduction**

### **1.1 Problem of the Study and its Significance:**

Language tests play an essential role in evaluating and assessing the teaching learning process; they help in discovering problematic areas that need to be drilled or reexplained . Darwesh and Al-Jarah (1997:9) assert that "tests help the language teacher to discover his learners' errors and prepare the necessary remedial exercises.

Dictation is one of the famous integrative test . It involves the ability to write the language accurately, correctly associating symbols with sounds and making any adjustments required by the syntax of the written language (Rivers,1983:59)

It has been claimed that what the learners write reveals an evidence about many aspects of their language ability . Moreover, errors that are generated by dictation correspond closely to the kinds of errors learners make in real life language uses (Oller, 1979: 299) .This high lights the importance of dictation as a testing device in diagnosing the students' errors in many aspects of the target language.

Through the researcher's experience as an instructor in EFL teaching at the college level and by her contact with specialists of this field, she has noticed that the college students make lots of errors in writing English. According to the researcher's view, these errors need to be identified and analyzed . Hence, she has intended to conduct a study to identify and analyze the students' errors in dictation .

Such a study is very important for teachers and students of EFL since it may help in identifying the errors that the students commit in writing EFL, and in recommending the remedy to avoid the identified errors .

### **1.2 Aim of the Study:**

This study is an attempt to identify, analyse and explain the errors of EFL college students in the College of Basic Education in dictation .

### **1.3 Limits of the Study:**

The population of the study is limited to second- year students at the Department of English, College of Basic Education , Al-Mustansiriyah University for the academic year 2005-2006 .

### **1.4 Definition of Basic terms:**

**1. Identification:** It refers to the method that the researcher followed in diagnosing students' errors in dictation .

**2. Errors:** Cunningsworth (1984: 84) defines errors as "systematic deviation from the norms of the language being learned. They are usually caused by false generalizations about the language by the learner".

**3. Dictation:** It is an integrative test which requires that the students demonstrate precise knowledge of structure and lexicon without taking the escape route of paraphrase or ellipsis ( Rivers, 1981 :359) .

According to Cunningsworth, (1984:86) "it is an exercise or test involving the learners writing down the language which is spoken to them" .

The researcher defines dictation as a test consists of a passage read by the teacher for the students whom task is to write what they hear .

## **2. Theoretical Background:**

### **2.1 The Value of Dictation in the Teaching & Learning Process:**

Dictation plays a vital role in the teaching and learning process . Many researchers proved its validity, reliability, practicality and instructional value (Davis,1982:145 & Manzi, 1992: 38, as cited in Al- Musalli, 1999:61) .

Dictation provides a test of the students' skill in comprehending the spoken language by presenting a series of sentences in sequence up on a particular subject (Allen, 1970:V) .

Finally it is a useful means of helping to consolidate vocabulary and structures that have recently been learnt, because the students have , at the same time, to listen, to think, to write and to read ( what they have written down ) .

This co-operation of the ear, the brain, the muscles of the arm and the eye is a powerful aid to imprinting recently learnt material on the memory (Hill,1971:viii) .

### **2.2 Dictation as a Teaching Device:**

In the teaching of English, dictation plays an important role as an extremely useful teaching device . It is one of the commonest types of tasks in language classrooms ( Rivers,1981:359) .It provides the foreign learner with a controlled situation in which he can easily and smoothly practice writing meaningful sentences in a controlled and normal situation with the least possibility of mistakes (Shani,1977:63).

Dictation can also be used as a help in teaching spelling . Students should carefully read sentences containing words whose spelling the teacher wants them to be learnt ;then they should turn their books over and write the sentence down . Finally, the teacher should give them a dictation containing the words whose spelling they have been learning (Hill,1971: x).

Shani (1977:65) asserts "the most important function of dictation is providing drill in understanding connected speech" . Learners listen to meaningful phrases and whole sentences before writing them down. This is what learners are going to meet in real- life situations : a stream of speech is divided up into sentences .

Taking down dictation improves the students' ability to comprehend the flow of speech, to remember what they have heard long enough , to write it down quickly and legibly, to spell; and to punctuate (Hill, 1971:viii) .

### **2.3 Dictation as a Testing Device:**

Dictation is an excellent measure of overall language proficiency and has proved useful as an elicitation technique for diagnostic data (Oller&Streiff,1975:36) .It is a useful instrument for testing short – term instructional goals as well as integrated language .

Dictation is a test of students' ability to convert the language signals they receive through the ear into written signals ;to spell English; and punctuate it (Hill,1971:vi) .

Dictation can give information about a wide range of features including listening skills which may be important in placing learners in classes where the target language will be the language of instruction .It is an integrative test type that measures a large number of listening skills since the examinees taking the dictation tests are engaged in the same process of analysis and synthesis used in this process of speech perception ( Al- Musalli, 1999:138) .

Dictation is also partly a test of pronunciation. For example, a student who persistently writes '*sheep*' for '*ship*', '*leave*' for '*live*', obviously has trouble in distinguishing between the sounds /i:/ and /i/, both when listening and when speaking (Hill, 1971: viii).

### **2.4 Techniques of Administering Dictation :**

Most researchers like Heaton (1975) Shani (1977:67) Brown (1987:229) and Baker (1989:74) assert that the satisfactory way of presenting dictation should involve three readings. In the first reading, the teacher reads the passage at a normal speed ( to get a general impression of the subject-matter) while

students listen. In the second reading the passage is broken up by the teacher into phrases or chunks of language enough to challenge learners; the learners write what they hear during pauses. In the third reading learners hear the passage again at a normal speed and check their written renditions. Punctuation marks are indicated by the teacher as they write the passage .

All the researchers mentioned above recommend the teacher to read throughout the whole dictation passage in rhythm units and phrases as far as possible because reading a text word by word is extremely harmful and only serves to increase the difficulty of the dictation by obscuring the meaning of each phrase. Moreover, students are going to deal with connected sentences in real life and not single words.

In giving dictation for teaching rather than for testing purposes, the teacher can read the piece twice instead of once before the students are asked to write . After the two minutes' interval; he can get one pupil to write the dictation on the blackboard while he is dictating it; or he can walk around, note what words the students are having trouble with and write them up on the blackboard as the dictation progresses(Hill,1971: x).

### **2.5 Factors Affecting the Dictation Difficulty:**

Oller (1979:229) mentions a number of factors that make the dictation tests difficult for the examinees, these factors can be recognized as follows :

- 1.The difficulty of the text itself.
- 2.Speed of presentation.
3. Length of bursts between pauses .
4. Signals – to- noise ratio .
5. Number of presentations .
6. Dialect of speaker and of listener .

### **2.6 Advantages of Dictation :**

Scholars present advantages for dictation procedures ;some of them are stated here:

- 1.Dictation can give students valuable practice in note taking .
- 2.It can serve as an excellent review exercise .
- 3.It ensures attentive listening, trains pupils to distinguish sounds and helps to fix concepts of punctuation .
- 4.It can develop all four language skills in an integrative way.
- 5.It helps to develop short- term memory. Students practice retaining meaningful phrases or whole sentences before writing them down .
- 6.Dictation tests are fairly easy to construct ( compared with discrete point tests) and can be assessed in a fairly objective manner (unlike free writing or interview performances) .
- 7.Dictation is easy in administration and correction due to the mechanical nature of its correction " the one wrong word = one mistake" method is sufficient for most purposes .
- 8.Dictation tests can be used to provide students with opportunities for purposeful listening and speech comprehension (Finocchiaro, 1969: 196, Shani 1977:68, Rivers,1981:361, Baker 1989:74 and Alkine,2001:2).

## **2.7 Types of Dictation:**

There are three main types of dictation ; these can be summarized as follows:

### **2.7.1 Dictation of Single Words:**

In this type, the teacher selects a certain number of isolated words, writes them on the board and then asks the learners to practice them at home. Next day the teacher reads each word twice and asks learners to write down (Darwesh & Al- Jarah, 1997:94).

### **2.7.2 Partial Dictation:**

This type is an easy task from the examinee's point of view because more sensory information is given concerning the message : partial written version and a complete spoken version, but it takes more effort to prepare from the view point of the examiner ( Oller,1979:264).

Here the learners are given printed copies of a passage in which certain words have been deleted . As the teacher reads the passage, the learners have to fill in the blanks ( Darwesh & Al-Jarah, 1997:95 ) .

### **2.7.3 Full Dictation:**

It differs from partial dictation in that the pupils write out an entire passage.

This type of dictation is somewhat longer to administer and score than the partial one ( Ibid ) .

In this study , the full dictation type is adopted .

## **3. Procedures:**

### **3.1 Population and Sample:**

The population of the present study is the second-year students the Department of English in the College of Basic Education, in Al- Mustansiriyah University for the Academic year 2005-2006 . The sample consists of 52 students randomly selected from this population which is 77 students. The sample represents 67% of its original population .

### **3.2 Instrument ( The Test ):**

The instrument of the study is a ready test which has been chosen from a book entitled "*English Sounds and Spelling: Dictation Pieces*" by Hill (1971) . The passages of this book have been prepared for those adult and secondary school students learning English as a second language who are ready to take dictation from passages outside the content of their material course book . The passage of the test is chosen from the fourth section of the book which contains advanced dictation passages . The content of the passage entitled "*The Haunted House*" is neutral; it does not require specific knowledge. The passage has been exposed to specialists in TEFL and linguistics to decide its validity and suitability for the students' level and it has received the agreement of the experts.

### **3.3 Administration of the Test:**

After maintaining the test validity and suitability, it has been administered to 55 students randomly selected from the second-year classes of the English Department, College of Basic Education. The students were told that the scores of the test would be taken into consideration in the assessment of the students' class efforts to motivate them. Good examination conditions were provided for the testees and complete control was exercised to ensure that no extraneous

factor would interfere as a possible variable in the administration of the test. The researcher read the passage three times .In the first time she read the passage at a normal speed while students listen . In the second time the researcher read the passage slowly in small groups of words, without any repetition and asked the students to write what they heard during pauses. Finally the researcher re- read the passage at a normal speed and told the students to check their writing. The researcher told the students where to punctuate. The application of the test took about 15 minutes.

### **3.4 Scoring Method:**

Scoring method states the way of correcting the testees' answers (a way upon which the researcher depends in interpreting the obtained results properly). Dictation tests are easy to score; they are usually scored by regarding each wrong word = one mistake (error) (Oller,1971:276). The total number of errors for each students is not counted because the aim of the present study is to recognize and analyze errors, not to assess students' achievement.

### **3.5 Statistical Means:**

The following statistical procedures have been used in the analysis of the obtained data :

- 1.Frqencies: This procedure is used to count the number of the students' errors at each category and the total number of errors .
- 2.Percentage: It is used to find out the percentage for each category of errors.

### **4.Results, Conclusion, Recommendations & Suggestions:**

This part is devoted to achieve the aim of this study; that is; identifying the errors made by second –year EFL college students.

#### **4.1Results:**

##### **4.1.1 Identification of Errors:**

Having finished the administration of the dictation test, the researcher scored the responses of the testees and found that the total number of errors made by these testees is 1023.

##### **4.1.2 Classification of Errors:**

The results state that the testees have many errors in dictation, the researcher classified these errors according to their occurrences into three types: comprehension, grammatical and spelling errors. Before explaining these errors, it is useful to rank their categories and subcategories according to their frequencies in order to have a clear idea of the gravity of errors and in which fields they are mainly focused. Table 1 shows this.

**Table 1: The Frequencies of Errors in Various Categories**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Frequencies</b>
Grammatical Errors	137
Comprehension Errors	225
Spelling Errors	661
Failure to represent long vowel	141
Failure to represent short vowels	95
Omission of the double consonants	91

Dropping the final "e" in some words	71
Deletion of non pronounced consonants letters	54
Replacing a consonant letter by another	47
Wrong addition of the vowel letter e at the end of some words	39
Failure to represent redundant vowels	36
Writing z instead of s in words ending with s pronounced / z /	34
Writing the letter e instead of the letter y	27
Omission of a vowel letter inserted between two consonants	26
Total	1023

**4.1.2.1 Grammatical Errors:**

The frequencies of this type of errors made by the testees are 137 with a percentage of 13.40; for example: not changing the final y into i or f into v when adding inflectional suffixes; e.g.,

- thefes → thieves
- storys → stories
- replied → replied

**4.1.2.2 Comprehension Errors:**

The number of this errors is 225 of the total number of all errors with percentage of 21.99; e.g.,

- no → know
- by → buy
- paper → neighbor
- fires → fairs
- glass → ghost
- must → most
- herd → heard

**4.1.2.3 Spelling Errors:**

These formed the largest number of errors. The total 661 errors with a percentage of 64.61. These errors are classified into many types and are introduced according to their descendant ranks.

**4.1.2.3.1 Failure to Represent Long Vowels:**

The total number of this type of errors is 141 with a percentage of 21.33. They represent largest number of the spelling errors that the tests committed. Examples of such errors are as follows:

- hanted → haunted
- belive → believe
- trou → true
- neer → near

**4.1.2.3.2 Failure to Represent Short Vowels:**

It is found that the total number of these errors is 95 with a percentage of 14.37; e.g.,  
impty → empty

wend → wind

village → vellage

fulled → filled

#### **4.1.2.3.3 Omission of Double Consonants:**

The total number of mistakes is 91 with a percentage 13.77. for example:

finaly → finally

mater → matter

dificult → difficult

vilage → village

#### **4.1.2.3.4 Dropping the Final "e" in Some Words:**

This error appears in 71 out of the total number of errors with a percentage of 10.74; e.g.,

larg → large

cas → case

hous → house

spok → spoke

#### **4.1.2.3.5 Deletion of non Pronounced Consonants Letters:**

The total number of errors made by the testees is 54 with a percentage of 8.17. The following are examples of such errors:

gost → ghost

wich → which

somewere → somewhere

#### **4.1.2.3.6 Replacing a Consonant Letter by Another:**

The total number of this type of errors is 47 with a percentage of 7.11; e.g.,  
sertainly → certainly

kas → case

#### **4.1.2.3.7 Wrong Addition of the Vowel Letter e at the end of Some Words:**

The total number is 39 errors with a percentage of 5.90 ; e.g.,

glade → glad

lacale → local

churche → church

#### **4.1.2.3.8 Failure to Represent Redundant Vowels:**

This type of errors constitutes 36 ones with a percentage of 5.45 ; e.g.,

naiber → neighbor

#### **4.1.2.3.9 Writing z instead of s in Words Ending with s Pronounced /z/:**

The total number of these errors is 34 with a percentage of 5.14; e.g.,

noize → noise

treez → trees

#### **4.1.2.3.10 Writing the Letter e instead of the Letter y:**

It is found that the total number of errors is 27 with a percentage of 4.09; e.g.,

empte → empty

certainle → certainly



finalli → finally

**4.1.2.3.11 Omission of a Vowel Letter Inserted between two Consonants:**

The total number is 26 errors with a percentage of 3.93; e.g.,

whther → whether

diffficult → difficult

flled → filled

Table 2 summarizes the frequencies and percentages of all errors . It clearly shows the ranking order of the categories of errors and gives an indicator of their gravity .

**Table 2: The Frequencies and Percentages of Errors**

Categories	Frequencies	Percentages
Grammatical Errors	137	21.99
Comprehension Errors	225	13.40
Spelling Errors	661	64.61
Total	1023	100.00

**4.2 Discussion of Results (Explanation of Errors) :**

The investigation carried out has revealed several findings. It is found out that the second-year college students have lots of errors in writing down dictation. Most of the errors made by the testees are transfer errors.

It is also found out that the testees ( sample of this study ) have many errors in mastering many aspects of the English writing system. In specific, they have, grammatical, comprehension and spelling errors which the study has stated in detail.

The researcher has noticed that the testees make grammatical mistakes as a result of not mastering specific grammatical aspects like not changing y into i in making plural.

Comprehension errors of the testees may be attributed to the students' lack of extensive reading.

Another phenomenon which catches the attention of the researcher is the large number of spelling errors that the testees commit in dictation test; these errors are found to be caused by the following reasons:

- a. Testees' unawareness that long vowels like / u: / can be represented in writing by different letters like: *stood* – *true*, or that short vowels like /i/ can be represented by different letters like y in : *certainly*.
- b. Dependence of testees on the rules of the mother tongue in pronunciation and spelling ; they write only the pronounced letters. This is evident in omitting the silent letters in some words:  
*wich* → *which*  
*gost* → *ghost*
- c. The testees' failure to realize that some consonant letters have two or more shapes of pronunciation. For example, the letter c can be pronounced as / k/ or / s / and the letter s as / z / or / s /.

The results of this study can be attributed to a number of reasons, such as :

1. The poor level of EFL college students' listening comprehension.
2. The complexity of grammatical structures of the English language for non-native speakers or the students' carelessness in learning them.
3. The difference between Arabic and English sounds systems.
4. The non- phonetic nature of English spelling.
5. The complexity of the English spelling system.
6. The interference of the first language.
7. The lack of correspondence between the sound of a word and the way it is spelt.
8. The careless writing of many of EFL college students.
9. The lack of spelling and dictation lessons in the college syllabuses.

#### **4.3 Conclusions:**

The researcher has drawn a number of conclusions in the light of the study findings:

1. The level of second – year EFL students in the college of Basic Education in dictation is poor.
2. Second- year EFL students' writing is weak.
3. Spelling errors are the most frequent ones in EFL students' dictation.
4. Different sources of students' errors are anticipated for their explanation such as: the difference between Arabic & English sound systems and the interference of the first language.
5. Students' comprehension errors reveal their difficulties in perception and poor vocabulary repertoire.
6. Students' poor standard in dictation gives an inadequate indicator of their standard in other skills such as writing and listening.
7. Students fail to pay attention to the context in which the words occur.
8. The level of the testees in English grammar is weak.

#### **4.4 Recommendations:**

In order to help EFL students to avoid making grammatical, comprehension and spelling errors in writing EFL, the following points are recommended:

1. Grammar lessons need to emphasize specific aspects like; addition of some prefix, making plural and accompanied changes.
2. Comprehension lessons should give students practice in identifying some words that have the same pronunciation but different meanings.
3. Dialogue and conversation drills should be centered around the problematic sounds.
4. In phonetic lessons students need to be acquainted with different ways of pronouncing the same letters or combinations of letters and given exercises to discover spelling rules.
5. Students need to recognize that there are some letters which can produce two sounds.
6. Students should practise the spelling of words that contain problematic sounds.

#### **4.5 Suggestion for Further Research:**

On the findings of this study, the following are suggested as further studies:

1. A similar study in other grades of the college.

2. A similar study in other stages such as the primary and preparatory stages.
3. A similar study to identify the grammatical errors of students in writing composition.
4. A study to compare the types and frequencies of errors committed by EFL students of different college levels in dictation.

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## **Appendix A**

### **The Dictation Test**

#### *"The Haunted House"*

Most of the people in the village / were afraid of ghosts and spirits / and there was a large house / near the church / which everyone believed to be haunted./ It stood / in a large garden / filled with old trees / and it had been empty / for sometimes./ A stranger to the place, / who found it difficult / to get somewhere to live, / finally bought it / without knowing anything / about the local fears. / After sometimes, / one of his neighbours / spoke to him on the matter,/ and asked him / whether any of the stories about it / were true. / The man replied that he had certainly heard / many noises at night, / but they had all been caused / by such things / as broken windows or open doors / which had been moved to and fro / by the wind. / He said that, / in any case, / he was glad to know / that the house / had such a name / as it would be left alone / by thieves and burglars.

.....  
\*The slanted lines state the stops that the teacher used during her reading the dictation test for the testees.