

What Makes the Gap between Advanced Level Class and Basic One? Analysis of English Dictation Tests

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Abstract

In this paper, an investigation was conducted to find whether or not fill-in-the-blank type English dictation tests could be used to measure students' English general ability by comparing scores of the TOEIC-IP test. In addition, the disadvantages of students filling in blanks on dictation tests in which they listen to English at natural speed were also examined. Substantiated evidence from data analysis results of dictation tests in advanced level classes correlated strongly with student scores of the TOEIC-IP test. These results suggest that dictation tests can be used to measure students' general English ability at the advanced level. Results also clarified weaknesses of students when filling in blanks during dictation tests are commonly irrespective of their English levels. It was also verified that the gap between advanced level English classes and basic level classes derived from the different learning levels of *vocabulary*, *guessing skill*, *weak sound* and *mutation (t->r)*. In conclusion, when teaching classes especially at the basic level, it is extremely important for teachers to design lesson plans and assign homework on the basis of empirical test analysis for students to overcome these weaknesses.

Keywords: cloze-type English dictation test, correlation between dictation test and TOEIC-IP test, Japanese EFL university students, courses of different abilities

1. Introduction

In the course of teaching English and giving examinations to university students, instructors are sometimes distressed with the gap between classes with students who possess a higher level of English ability and other classes. It is widely known that the gap depends on the placement level of university admissions examinations for entering specific departments or colleges. Students who must obtain a higher level of English in their university admission, such as students trying in medical departments, tend to have a better command of English, while other students with a lower placement level of admission tend to have a lower ability of English; in spite of the fact that in the standard Japanese education system almost all students commonly learn English for six years before entering a university.

Over the last several years, I have been giving my students examinations in class using a Web-based English dictation program (*e-cloze*¹), which I have developed. This online system easily enables teachers to provide cloze-type dictation tests to their own students based on any content the teachers would like to use. English teachers without much computer skills can easily make Web-based partial dictation tests by following simple procedures when using this system. By using this system, I gave the same dictation tests to different classes with different levels of English in order to understand the specific differences which made these classes different in terms of students' English skills. The analysis of the data obtained by this system will give us hints for firm and steady steps to teach English. It is crucially important for teachers to understand what creates the gap between classes of different levels, because the effective and efficient methods of teaching English should vary depending on the levels of students in our classrooms.

Research has examined English dictation tests in the Japanese university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. For instance, Ota

(2012) conducted error analyses of English dictation tests with Japanese university EFL students and discussed the relationship between the results of English dictation tests and the students' general command of English. Moriyama (2009) pointed out that the correlative relationship between the results of English dictation tests and English listening skill had not been clarified sufficiently and was still open to debate.

In this paper, I will compare and analyze dictation results of an advanced level class and a basic level class (both freshman classes) obtained by the Web-based English dictation system (*e-cloze*), and will also discuss what makes up the differences in those classes. In Section 2, the correlation between the results of in-class dictation tests and TOEIC-IP test scores which students took in the same semester will be analyzed. Furthermore, whether or not we can measure students' English ability by English dictation tests will be discussed. Section 3 is devoted to analyzing the results of the English dictation tests and also clarifying what the difference is between two classes of different levels. As a conclusion to this paper, the important points that should be emphasized in teaching English will be presented by considering the gap between classes of different levels.

2. English Dictation Tests vs. TOEIC-IP

Tests of English are supposed to be given for the purpose of measuring a kind of or kinds of English skills, but as suggested by Moriyama (2009), it is not clear yet what kind of skills can be measured by English dictation tests. On the other hand, it is recognized that dictation tests are “widely believed to be effective in improving the listening comprehension ability” (Kojima & Ota, 2012, p. 29).

In this section, the results of the dictation tests and the TOEIC-IP test, which students took in the same semester, are compared. For the sake of simplicity, in the present paper, I call the advanced class, Class-A, and the

basic class, Class-B. I taught English to both classes for a semester in 2013, and both are first-year classes of the same university. All students are native speakers of Japanese and they have been learning EFL at least for six years in junior and senior high schools. Class-A consists of 36 students of Faculty of Medicine, and Class-B is 37 students of Faculty of Engineering. The former faculty requires its applicants to get much higher scores of examination subjects including English than the latter faculty. This difference can be easily confirmed by checking the score of TOEIC-IP (Table 1) taken three months after university entrance.

Table 1.

Scores of TOEIC-IP (2013)²

<u>Class-A</u>	<u>Listening</u>	<u>Reading</u>	<u>Total</u>
<i>M</i>	278.5	283.1	561.5
<i>SD</i>	63.1	78.4	130.0

<u>Class-B</u>	<u>Listening</u>	<u>Reading</u>	<u>Total</u>
<i>M</i>	212.9	171.4	384.3
<i>SD</i>	45.5	56.3	92.6

English dictation tests were, as already mentioned, conducted in class by using the Web-based software *e-cloze*. The sample of the dictation tests is shown in the Appendix. Class-A took six dictation tests and Class-B took five tests. The audio clips used in the tests are of English natural speed (around 200 words per minutes). It should also be noted that the students were permitted to listen to the audio clip repeatedly with a time limit. The scores of the English dictation tests are shown below:

Table 2.
Scores of English Dictation Tests (2013)

	Class-A	Class-B
<i>N</i>	36	37
<i>M</i>	40.2	26.7
<i>SD</i>	12.21	7.79
<i>Max</i>	68.1	42.1
<i>Min</i>	15.3	9.6

The correlation between the scores of dictation tests and TOEIC-IP is shown below (Table 3):

Table 3.
Correlation³ between Dictation Tests and TOEIC-IP

Correlation	Class-A	Class-B
with Listening	0.73132	0.46166
with Reading	0.76509	0.27209
with Total	0.80258	0.39235

This statistical result indicates that there is a stronger correlation between dictation tests and TOEIC-IP test in Class-A (Advanced Class) than in Class-B (Basic Class). This result suggests that the score on a dictation test given to students with advanced levels of English can be a rough indication of their ability of English, however, at the lower level, such as in Class-B (Basic Class), the a score of a dictation test does not necessarily reflect general English ability. This sort of tendency can be confirmed by the results shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6, which show the correlations among the dictation test scores given to four classes including Class-A and Class-B. Furthermore, Tables 4, 5, and 6 can be schematized as shown in Figures 1, 2,

and 3 below.

Table 4.

Correlation between Dictation tests and TOEIC-IP (Total Score)

	TOEIC-IP (Ave. of Total Score)	Correlation with Dictation tests
Class-A	561.5	0.80258
Class-B	384.3	0.39235
Class-C	570.7	0.81773
Class-D	466.8	0.51962

Table 5.

Correlation between Dictation tests and TOEIC-IP (Listening)

	TOEIC-IP (Ave. of Listening Score)	Correlation with Dictation tests
Class-A	278.5	0.73132
Class-B	212.9	0.46166
Class-C	291.3	0.81533
Class-D	254.9	0.46253

Table 6.

Correlation between Dictation tests and TOEIC-IP (Reading)

	TOEIC-IP (Ave. of Reading Score)	Correlation with Dictation tests
Class-A	278.5	0.73132
Class-B	212.9	0.46166
Class-C	291.3	0.81533
Class-D	254.9	0.46253

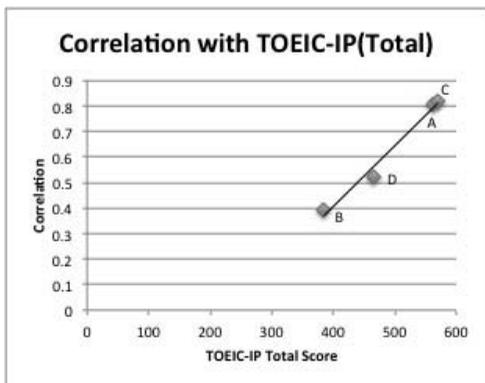


Figure 1. Dictation vs. TOEIC-IP (Total Score)

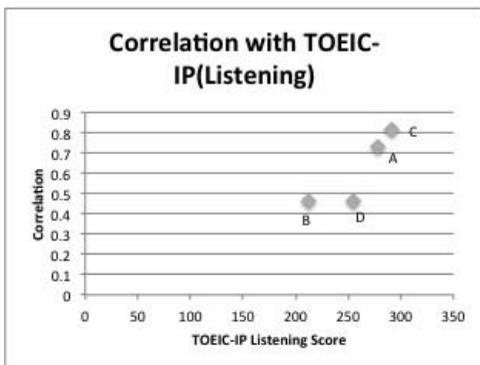


Figure 2. Dictation vs. TOEIC-IP (Listening)

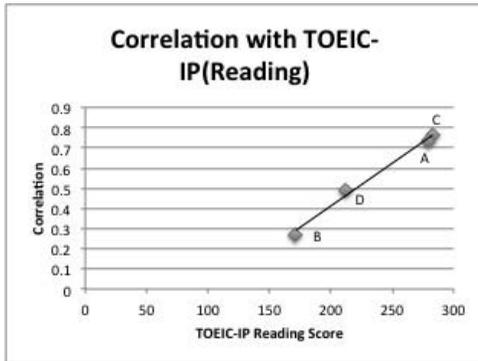


Figure 3. Dictation vs. TOEIC-IP (Reading)

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show that in classes with a higher TOEIC-IP scores, in this case the average total score, meaning the combination of listening and reading scores, the students' scores on dictation tests correlate strongly with their scores of TOEIC-IP test, while in classes with a lower average total score on the TOEIC-IP tests, the results of the dictation tests do not correlate strongly, at least in contrast with their scores on the TOEIC-IP tests. This result confirms that in classes with higher English ability, the scores of dictation tests reflect their English abilities. Nevertheless, there still remains the issue of how well a TOEIC-IP test score reflects the examinee's true listening and reading abilities of English.

3. Dictation Data Analyses

This section begins with the analysis of the dictation data obtained by *e-cloze*. The result of the dictation tests on *e-cloze* is automatically totaled by the CGI-based program as in Figure 4.

The distribution of this proportion is in accordance with a five-grade evaluation system based on a statistical normal distribution. By using these Difficulty Levels, we can easily understand which words that were filled-in are relatively difficult for the students to do as an in-class dictation exercise. Table 7 and 8 show the grammatical or phonetic categories that fall into Difficulty Level 4 or 5 in Class-A and Class-B.

Table 7.

Categories in Difficulty Level 4/5 at Class-A (Advanced Class)

[Class-A]	Test1		Test2		Test3		Sum
Category	Level4	Level5	Level4	Level5	Level4	Level5	
vocabulary	3	2		3	1	2	11
guessing skill	3		4		7		14
spelling mistake					1		1
sing/pl (-s)							0
weak sound	3		3	1	4	1	12
weak (initial)							0
weak (end)	1		2				3
vowel distinction			1		1		2
l/r distinction							0
s/th distinction							0
th/f distinction							0
mutation (t->r)			1			1	2
mutation (elision)					1		1
Sum	10	2	11	4	15	4	46

Table 8.

Categories in Difficulty Level 4/5 at Class-B (Basic Class)

[Class-B]	Test1		Test2		Test3		Sum
Category	Level4	Level5	Level4	Level5	Level4	Level5	
vocabulary	3	7	1	4		5	20
guessing skill	5	2	5	2	4	6	24
spelling mistake	1						1
sing/pl (-s)	1						1
weak	5	2	5	3	7	5	27
weak (initial)	1				3		4
weak (end)				2			2
vowel distinction					1	1	2
l/r distinction							0
s/th distinction							0
th/f distinction	1						1
mutation (t->r)				1	2	2	5
mutation (elision)					2	1	3
Sum	17	11	11	12	19	20	90

Test 1, 2, and 3 in Table 7 (Class-A) and 8 (Class-B) are exactly the same dictation tests. The sample of Test 3 can be seen in the Appendix placed at the end of this paper. The categories in Table 7 and 8 represent the most likely factors of wrong answers. The factors of wrong answers should not be identified in a decisive fashion, because a wrong answer may be driven by multiple factors in terms of not only phonetic but also grammatical or even semantic reasons. The categories presented here should be understood and used as an explanatory simplification.

The difference between *vocabulary* and *guessing skill* here is that the former indicates the word is not correctly answered simply because they do not know the word or it is a difficult word for the students. In the latter case, the word is not correctly answered although the students have enough

vocabulary to write down a word. A category *Weak* means the word is pronounced weakly without a stress accent, such as in function words and personal pronouns.

On first inspection as in Table 7 and 8, the number of wrong answers in Class-B is about twice as large as the ones in Class-A, but this is a matter of the difference in level when students entered the university. What is at issue here is that both in Class-A and Class-B, the students incorrectly answered the question of similar categories such as *vocabulary*, *guessing skill* and *weak sound*, and the proportion of each category is not so different. Namely, the categories Japanese university EFL students are not good at in dictation are basically common irrespective of level of English abilities or to say the least dictation skills.

Let us now consider the differences in the results of English dictation tests between Class-A and Class-B. In order to understand the difference in Class-A and Class-B on dictation tests, it would be appropriate to extract the filled-in words that show a different accuracy rate between Class-A and Class-B. This analysis will lead us to the understanding of what phonetic or grammatical points needs to be emphasized in order to improve the students' English skills in basic classes like Class-B. Table 9 shown below indicates the frequencies where there is a difference in Difficulty Level between Class-A and Class-B with reference to the results of Tests 1, 2, and 3.

Table 9.

Categories Different in Difficulty Level between Class-A and B

Category	Test1		Test2		Test3		Sum		
	1 Level Gap	2+ Level Gap	Level Gap						
vocabulary	6	1	2		3		11	1	12
guessing skill	10	2	10	4	16	5	36	11	47
spelling mistake	1		1				2	0	2
sing/pl (-s)	2				1		3	0	3
weak sound	8	1	8		11	1	27	2	29
weak (initial)	1			1	2		3	1	4
weak (ending)			2		1		3	0	3
vowel distinction					2		2	0	2
r/l distinction			1		1		2	0	2
s/th distinction	1						1	0	1
th/f distinction	1						1	0	1
mutation (t->r)	1		1		3	1	5	1	6
mutation (elision)					3		3	0	3

It should be noted that there were no filled-in words in Test 1-3 for Class-A where the number of Difficulty Level is larger than the one for Class-B. Namely, across every filled-in answer, the Difficulty Level in Class-B was the same level or larger than in Class-A. Hence, 'Gap' in Table 9 means that the number of Difficulty Level in the tests for Class-B is larger compared to the result of Class-A. '1 Level Gap' indicates the difference of Difficulty Level is one, and '2+ Level Gap' indicates the difference is two or more than two. For example, if the Difficulty Level is 3 in a test for Class-A, and 5 for Class-B, the filled-in word in fill-in-the-blank dictation tests is counted as '2+ Level Gap' in Table 9.

The frequencies of *vocabulary*, *guessing skill*, *weak sound* and *mutation (t->r)*⁴ are significant (Table 9). It means that the difference in accuracy rate with respect to these categories makes a difference between Class-A (advanced class) and Class-B (basic class). In other words, these are the weaknesses of less advanced English classes, and these points need to be emphasized when teaching English in basic classes. It can be inferred from results in Table 9 that students at basic level of English should get accustomed to the sounds of English spoken at natural speeds making an effort to have a larger vocabulary to improve their skills of English.

4. Concluding Remarks

This study investigated whether or not fill-in-the-blank type English dictation tests can be used to measure students' English ability and the difference in English dictation skills between advanced level and basic level classes. By comparing the scores on the TOEIC-IP test and an English dictation test given to an advanced class and basic class, result confirmed that dictation tests at advanced class correlates strongly with TOEIC-IP scores with reference to the Listening Section, Reading Section, and the Total score. Therefore, it was concluded that fill-in-the-blank type English dictation tests can be used.

Through the analysis of English dictation tests, it was clarified that the students' weaknesses in filling in blanks on English dictation tests are basically irrespective of levels of English. Students at all levels should increase their English vocabulary, and at the same time, should become used to the sound of natural English. In addition, substantial evidence from the results of dictation tests studied in this investigation that only build English vocabulary is not enough to fill in the blanks of dictation tests because the students are proved to be not good at catching weak sounds and guessing already known words. These catching and guessing skills can be acquired by listening to English at natural speed for a considerable amount of time. It was also clarified that the gap between Class-A (advanced class) and Class-B (basic class) is derived from the difference in accuracy rates concerning *vocabulary*, *guessing skill*, *weak sound* and *mutation (t->r)*. This result also informs us that especially in teaching classes at the basic level, it is crucially important for teachers to make lesson plans and assign homework on the basis of empirical test analysis in order for students to overcome those weaknesses.

Notes

1. For more details about *e-cloze*, see Nakashima (2011).
2. There were several students who didn't take TOEIC-IP test. The scores in Table 1 are the ones of students who took the test.
3. All correlation analyses in this paper were conducted using *Pearson's Correlation Coefficient*.
4. The category *mutation (t->r)* represents phonetic change of intervocalic alveolar flapping, which is frequently observed in American English. The examples found in the in-class dictation tests were: *water, getting, better, put in, put up, out of, at it*, etc.

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Appendix

Dictation Test Sample (Test 3) on *e-cloze*

★ e-cloze 解答用紙 [999999999: NAKASHIMA_Kohji] (NakashimaKohji_A03)

英文を聞き取って、空所に適切な語を書き入れなさい。【音声ファイル】
(数字は英語綴りで、入力フィールド間移動は、TAB / Shift-TAB が便利)

▶ 00:00 ◀

Some of you who have small children may have perhaps been 1) _____ in the embarrassing position of being unable to do your child's 2) _____ homework because of the 3) _____ revolution in mathematics teaching known as the New Math. So 4) _____ a public service 5) _____ 6) _____ I thought I would offer a 7) _____ lesson in the New Math. Tonight we're gonna cover subtraction. This is the first 8) _____ I've worked for a while that 9) _____ have a blackboard 10) _____ we will have to make do with more primitive visual aids, as they say in the "ed biz."

11) _____ the following subtraction problem, which I will 12) _____ 13) _____ 14) _____ :
342 - 173.

Now remember how we 15) _____ to do that. Three from two is nine; carry the one, and if you're 16) _____ 35 or went to a 17) _____ school you say seven from three 18) _____ six, but if you're 19) _____ 35 and went to a public school you say eight from four 20) _____ six; carry the one so we have 169, but in the new approach, as you know, the important thing is to understand what you're doing rather than to get the right answer. 21) _____ 22) _____ they do it now.

You can't take three from two,
Two is 23) _____ than three,
So you look at the four in the tens 24) _____.