

The Role of Dictations in the Detection of Students' Errors

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ABSTRACT

In this article we concentrate on the use of dictations in the classroom as a means of detecting and classifying students' errors. This will enable teachers of English to concentrate on those aspects of the language which their students have greater difficulty to assimilate. Dictations obviously show the learners' phonetic deficiencies, but they can also be a good method to list syntactic or semantic mistakes. The article includes a detailed analysis of four different texts, two of them used with third year philology students and two of them with fourth year students.

KEY WORDS: Errors, Dictation, Foreign language, Needs analysis.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo se analiza un ejercicio tradicional en la enseñanza de lenguas segundas, el dictado, que a raíz de la implantación del enfoque comunicativo en los años 1970 y 1980 había sido desterrado del aula. Sin embargo, el dictado puede ser fuente de información valiosa para llevar a cabo un análisis de las necesidades del alumno, ya que los errores cometidos en la realización de dictados reflejan deficiencias fonéticas, morfológicas, sintácticas y semánticas que los alumnos deben subsanar en el futuro para alcanzar un dominio global de la lengua. A ello hay que añadir el hecho de que este ejercicio nos permite comprobar fehacientemente la diferencia entre las expectativas del docente en la selección de textos y los errores que realmente cometen sus alumnos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Errores, Dictado. Lengua extranjera, Análisis de necesidades

I. THE USE OF DICTATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM: MISTAKES AND CLASSIFICATION.

There is a tendency among students to disparage dictations and it must be acknowledged that their teachers do not always agree on the validity of this exercise. as Savignon points out (1983: 264). In our university, dictations are a traditional part of our teaching programme and they count for 10% of the final mark that students obtain at the end of their course. This article will analyse the important role that the dictation exercise can play in the teaching of English and in the learning process, even if the modern communicative trend does not usually include it as part of their programme.' For our purpose we have chosen four texts which have been used in the classroom with advanced students of English. that is, students who have completed their first and second years and, consequently, should be able to reach a Proficiency Level in their third year and a post-Proficiency in their fourth year. Each text will be followed by a grid listing the main mistakes made by the students, and by a classification of these mistakes. We will include three types of mistakes: spelling mistakes, semantic mistakes and other grammatical mistakes, which are, from our experience, the main types of errors made by our students. No grid with their phonetic mistakes will be included since we assume that all the mistakes in a dictation, that is an intensive listening exercise, are inherently phonetic. Therefore, apart from phonetic, their mistakes will also be grammatical of one or various types. mainly spelling, semantic and syntactic mistakes:

a. Spelling problems («spanish» instead of «Spanish») might be regarded as minor mistakes and assimilated to what Chomsky described as "performance errors".²

b. However, these so-called «minor» mistakes might change the meaning of the sentence when the addition of a character turns a word like «lose» into «loose». In this case the mistake is basically of a semantic nature.

c. The last group of mistakes is formed by those errors which include the

¹ Although some writers have started to include dictations in their methods again, such as J. Harmer, who in his recent edition of *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (1991: 121) says: «Like many teaching techniques that go completely out of fashion for a time, dictation is making a comeback»

See: N. Chomsky. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1965.

confusion between tenses, the use of comparatives instead of superlatives and vice versa, the omission of subjects, etc. These mistakes, which we might call structural mistakes, deviate from the standard accepted form, which our students should be familiar with.

We have also included another group of mistakes difficult to catalogue and which, in most cases, do not imply a change in meaning or a structural problem. Let us now analyse the four texts.

II. ANALYSIS OF THE FOIJR TEXTS

Our first text for third year students is a long one. It has 214 words in all. We collected 44 versions and the reading procedure was as described by Savignon (1983: 260) and especially Rivers & Temperley (1978: 269) (that is, it includes three readings of the text):

TEXT 1

He had slightly inisrepresented the matter in saying that Catherine had consented to take the great step. We left her just iioow declaring that she would burn her ships behind her: but Morris, after haviig elicited this declaration, had become conscious of good reasons for not taking it up. He avoided, gracefully enough, fixing a day, though he left her under the impression that he had his eye on one. Catherine may have had her difficulties; but those of her suitor are also worthy of consideration. The prize was certainly great: but it was was only to be woiï by striking the happy nieran between precipitaiicy and caution. It would be all very well to take one's jump and trust to Provideiice; Providence was more especially on the side of clever people. and clever people were known by an indisposition to risk their bones.

The ultimate reward of a union with a young woman who was both unattractive and impoverished ought to be connected with immediate disadvantages by some very palpable chain. Between the fear of losing Catherine and her possible fortune altogether, and the fear of taking her too soon and finding this possible fortune as void of actuality as a collection ofemptied bottles, it was not comfortable for Morris to choose.'

As can be seen, the vocabulary of the text is not particularly complex. There are four or five difficult words, but the majority of the words included in these two paragraphs should be easily recognized by the students. They should be

¹ It has been adapted from Henry James' *Washington Square*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 142.

familiar with them, either because they are commonly used in everyday English or else they should be able to spell them correctly, since they have already done a compulsory Phonetics course in their second year.

Our selection of words is based both on these two factors: either the words and phrases are known to the students (through our speaking activities or through their reading or written tasks) or they should not find it specially difficult to reconstruct the words from the pronunciation. We always include four or five *tricky* words so that advanced students can obtain full marks. The main mistakes are listed below:

TABLE TO TEXT 1⁴

would burn > liad burnt	32	taking it up > taking a tap / taken it up	1215	to be won > to be one	36
immediate > inmediate	25	emptied > eniptied	18	losing > loosing	14
prize > price	31	He avoided > He avoid it	3	comfortable > confortable	4
of taking > of taken	4	one's > once	3	actuality > actuallity/ actually	18

The number of difficult or possibly unknown words is limited: «elicit», «precipitancy», «palpable» ... Spanish students should be able to recognize and spell some, for example the word «palpable». Others are of Latin origin and they have similar equivalents in their mother tongue. Mistakes of this type were made, but not as many as expected (perhaps the most notorious one is «palpable», which some were unable to identify, even though the Spanish equivalent is spelt in exactly the same way). The main errors, as shown in the table, are not only phonetic but also grammatical and/or semantic. A classification of the mistakes

⁴In each box the first word or phrase is the original one. The > symbol means «becomes in the students' text» and the second word is the mistake. When one word gives way to two or more different versions, we indicate it with /. The figure below represents the number of times that the mistake has been repeated and, whenever relevant, two figures show the number of times that the first and second mistake have appeared.

made in this second text is not as simple as in the previous one. We might attempt the following:

II TABLE TO TEXT 1

Spelling Mistakes: comfortable. immediate. actuality	Semantic Mistakes: prize, to be won, one's, taking it up (> taking a tap), losing(?)
Structural Mistakes: taking it up (> taken it up), of taking, he avoided	Outlier Mistakes: would burn, empty

Our classification is not definite, but it helps us establish some kind of gradation in the mistakes made by the students, as indicated in the introduction. However, questions are bound to arise: Is «loosing» more a semantic mistake than a structural mistake? On what basis? We decided to include «losing», or rather «loosing» as a semantic mistake, considering that students should, at least, be aware of the difference in meaning between «lose» and «loose», if not of the fact that they are different word categories and that, in consequence, they do not function in the same way (we will take «lose» as a verb and «loose» as an adjective, as students are less familiar with the verb «loose» = «set free, release»).

Of the remaining mistakes included in the same box, one of them is a truly semantic one: «to be won», which can be easily and understandably confused and rendered as «to be one», as 36 mistakes out of 44 versions prove. This mistake, of course, would be more understandable in isolation, but it was read in a clear context: «a prize...to be won». However, in this same sentence, we are faced with another very extended mistake for a Spanish speaker: the confusion between the sounds /s/ and /z/, which gave way, in our case, to 21 «price» for «prize» mistakes. In this case, students have overlooked the phonetic and semantic differences between the two words, in a context which leaves no room for doubt. The same can be applied to a less common error in the text: «one's» rendered as «once».

More revealing is the students' version of «taking it up»: 12 wrote «taking a tap» instead. Not only do students devoid the sentence of any meaning, they are also unable to identify the linking of three words in normal speech as opposed to the isolated pronunciation of the same words («taking», «it» and «up» as opposed

to «taking it up»). We can also infer that if they cannot recognize the linking, they might not be able to pronounce it either.

Also phonetic are the mistakes that we have included under the label «other mistakes»: «she'd burn» as «she'd burnt» and «emptied» as «empty». The number of wrong versions is also considerable: 32 of the former and 18 of the latter. Paradoxically enough, a final /t/ seems to have been heard in the case of «she'd burn», which turns a conditional into a past perfect, but no /d/ sound was heard as the last consonantal sound of «emptied». Students have obviously relied more on their self-confidence, on their assumed theoretical knowledge of the language than on their ear to identify or discard sounds. Nevertheless, we must also add that we are grossly generalizing, since a good number of the students identified the /d/ sound after the second or third reading and, consequently, corrected their versions.

The spelling mistakes listed above show that the students have been clearly influenced by their mother tongue to the extent that an English loan such as «comfortable», which has become *comfortable* in Spanish, is rendered by some with its Spanish spelling. As for «immediate», Spanish students seem to be reluctant to assimilate the variation in spelling for Latin words starting «imm-» in English and «inm-» in Spanish, however strongly the teacher might insist about it in class. Over 50 % of the students made the mistake.

Our second text was used in a recent resit examination (and here it is necessary to underline the word resit); our dictation paper provided us with an excellent example of how the reading of a text and its forty written versions do show that the students' knowledge of the language is not as consistent as they might claim. It also confirmed to what an extent, syntactic, spelling and phonetic mistakes show a superficial rather than a built-in knowledge of the structures and other aspects of the language they should be familiar with as third year university students. The text proposed was:

TEXT 2

The chapel in the blue light is as squarely shaped and unhaunted as it would be at high noon. We reach the front, and I collapse on the hard mourners' bench where the family is meant to sit. Church funerals are going out because they are too harrowing, Hector says sitting beside me. They tend to bring up all kinds of things - heaven, hell, stuff like that. If you believe, it's great strain, and if you don't believe, it's even worse. However you look at it, it's a real ordeal.

Hector says that he's got an organ. He points, and now I see the giant out-fanned music pipes, extending in a vast screen along the front wall. Each pipe is a different height, and at the top they are painted to resemble Greek

columns. With that, he's off, searching for lovers to press, magical buttons to touch. He darts back, stations himself again, and slides an arm around my shoulder. I don't protest or move away. I don't care.⁵

Although, we must bear in mind that these were resit students (however strange it might sound, our university allows its students as many as five resits!), the results of the paper were rather disappointing, much worse than we had bargained for. The following table shows a list of the main errors:

TABLE TO TEXT 2

chapel > chappel	6	height > high/high	13	stuff > staff	4	it > 0	19
they are > their / there	6	Greek > greek	12	columns > columms	4	resemble > ressemble	2
to sit > to seat	6	worse > worst	6	scream > screen	7	levers > levels	14
buttons > bottoms	7	meant > ment	4	reach, collapse > reached, collapsed	12	too harrowing > two/to harrowing	4

The total number of students who sat the exam was 43. Most of the mistakes in the table show that some students have not been able to identify the sounds when the text was read aloud to them. And, although our main concern in this essay is not the detection of the phonetic errors of the students, the difference between the words «level» and «lever» should have been obvious, while the final /t/ at the end of the word «worst» was not pronounced but six students thought they had heard it and they did not correct the mistake, even after the second or third reading. Conversely, the difference between the two vocalic sounds in «stuff-staff» can be hardly audible for some Spanish students, since their mother tongue only has five distinct vowels: /a/ /e/ /i/ /o/ and /u/. Besides, there would

⁵ We have been unable to trace the source of this text. It has been repeatedly used in our classes, but the original text from which it is extracted is now unknown. The same happens with Text 3. In spite of this, we believe they are excellent texts to teach English and to detect students' errors and, for that reason, we have included them. We would be very thankful if anyone could enlighten us on their origin.

be not any difference between the pronunciation of «meant» (/ment/) and «ment», if the latter existed at all.

Still, our main is to find out what these mistakes do tell teachers about their students' other errors. We have divided these mistakes into four groups, although the division is, again, merely arbitrary, as Cohen points out:⁶

I TABLE TO TEXT 1

Spelling Mistakes: chapel, Greek, column. resemhle	Semantic Mistakes: high, stuff, seat, scream, bottoms, levels
Structural Mistakes: it, worse, too harrowing, reach/collapse, they are	Other Mistakes: meant

In the group labelled «spelling mistakes», we include the double consonant of three words: «chapel», «column» and «resemble». Students might have been misled by the pronunciation of the first one, but they did not hear a /z/ sound in the last one. which is normally represented by one «s», not by double «s».⁷ The other two mistakes may be due to two different reasons, both connected to the nationality of the students: in Spanish, nouns or adjectives derived from names of countries do not take capitals. On the other hand, students learn that «-nm-» in Spanish words become «-mm-» in English ones because they keep the original Latin spelling (in words such as «inmoral» > «immoral»), as we have indicated above. However, in this case, the students might have overdone the rule. It might be argued that these are venial errors, as Savignon does: «If a dictation is to measure language proficiency more general than spelling ability, it seems unfair to penalize those who understand the passage but happen to be poor spellers» (1983: 261), but, unlike her, we believe that, if we are dealing with advanced students taking

⁶ «The attempt to define 'mere spelling' errors as opposed to lexical and structural errors has led more than one researcher to conclude that in the final analysis the decisions are somewhat arbitrary» (Cohen, 1980: 113).

⁷ Rivers and Teniperley believe that this exercise also helps students realise that there is a clear connection between spelling and pronunciation: «The transcribing of passages back into normal written English draws the students' attention to the relationships between the English sounds and spelling systems».

a course in English Philology, correct spelling should be, and as a matter of fact is, as essential a part of their course as any other aspect of linguistic competence.

In the case of semantic mistakes, students have not really followed the text and have been unable to see the word needed in each sentence. We even had one version which struck us as particularly dubious, and not in the least hilarious: for one student «searching for levers to press, magical buttons to touch» became «searching for lovers to press, magical bottomns to touch».

The structural mistakes are, somehow, more serious, in that they really show that English grammatical structures have not been fully absorbed by these students. The figures were clear: almost fifty per cent of the students had omitted a subject in one, two or three sentences: «it's great strain», «it's even worse» and «it's a real ordeal» thus overlooking the compulsory use of a subject in all English sentences (unlike Spanish, again). In addition, some of them had also used «worst» instead of «worse», written past tenses instead of present tenses (the verbs «reach» and «collapse») in spite of the fact that the whole text was in the present, or used «to» or «two» with an adjective («harrowing»).

The results were disappointing and the percentage of fails was, needless to say, very high.⁸ The dictation paper clearly reflected the weaknesses of the students, and these were later confirmed in their grammar, listening, composition and translation papers. However, the dictation paper helped to classify the mistakes and advise the examinees on how to improve their English, where their mistakes sprang from and the possible solutions for them. A single text had helped us to identify those errors in a way that we had not expected.

The interest of the exercise was such that we decided to use it in an average class with average students. First of all we carried out a poll in a different group so as to see whether the students themselves would be able to identify a priori the tricky words or phrases of the texts. Various small groups made a selection of six words and, as expected, they coincided. They decided that the difficult parts of the text were the words: «mourners», «outfanned», «darts», «unhaunted», «ordeal», «harrowing». That is, they concentrated on those words with which they were not very familiar. Our following step was to dictate the text in our class. We attempted to reproduce the same conditions of the exam, reading at the same speed, pausing at the same places. The only difference was that the students were not under exam conditions and could not use it as an excuse for possible mistakes.

⁸ Once again, this appreciation is arbitrary as evaluation methods vary depending on what we consider primary or secondary mistakes. See: J. C. Richards and T. S. Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (1986: 1955).

Once the reading process had been completed and time allowed for checking, as suggested by Rivers & Temperley (1978: 269), we picked one student. The choice had to be careful: it could be neither a bright student nor a weak one. His/her marks during the course must be average. Our final selection was a devoted, but not particularly gifted, student. She wrote her own version of the text on the blackboard and we asked the remaining students to spot the possible errors.⁹ The results were illuminating: of the sixteen mistakes that we have listed above, she made eight of them, including one of the so-called «serious» ones: the omission of the subject in «it's great ... it's even...» Some of these mistakes clearly undermine the theory which regards the influence of the mother tongue on the second language as negligible (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982: 263).

The following texts were used with fourth year students, that is students who were taking their last English language course to complete their degree. The first one was read to thirty students:

TEXT 3

God knows how often I had lamented that I had not half the time I needed to do half the things I wanted. I could not remember when last I had had a moment to myself. I had often amused my fancy with the prospect of just one week's complete idleness. Most of us when not busy working are busy playing; we ride, play tennis or golf, swim or gamble; but I saw myself doing nothing at all. I would lounge through the morning, dawdle through the afternoon, and loaf through the evening. My mind would be a slate and each passing hour a sponge that wiped out the scribblings written on it by the world of sense. Time, because it is so fleeting, time, because it is beyond recall, is the most precious of human goods and to squander it is the most delicate form of dissipation in which man can indulge. Cleopatra dissolved in wine a priceless pearl, but she gave it to Antony to drink: when you waste the brief golden hours you take the beaker in which the gem is melted and dash its contents to the ground. The gesture is grand and like all grand gestures absurd. That of course is its excuse.

The text has 208 words and the difficulty of the vocabulary has increased by comparison with the previous two texts for third year students. There are a

⁹ Thus allowing students to participate in the making of the class, as suggested by A. Doff, C. Jones & K. Mitchell (1983: 15): «Instead of just presenting the language to the students (e.g. by telling them or writing it on the board), the teacher elicits the relevant information from the students by asking questions».

good number of words which come from Old English, rather than Latin. Thus some of the main mistakes are problems with the spelling of some of these words, as can be seen in the following table:

TABLE TO TEXT 3

ride > write 10	dawdle > dodeldoddle 28	lounge > launch/lunch 14
sponge > spoungel spaunch 14	dissipation > disipation 22	dissolve > disolve 14
wiped out > wipe out 12	because it is > because is 8	I'd lounge > I'd lounge 12
beaker > vicar ... 12	its > his/is 2/4	on it > 0 4

The proposed classification of these errors is as follows:

II TABLE TO TEXT 3

Spelling Mistakes: sponge, dissipation, dissolve	Semantic Mistakes: dawdle, ride, lounge, its
Structural Mistakes: because (it) is, I'd lounge, wiped out	Other Mistakes: beaker, on it

Although some common errors in this text do not correspond with the ones we have examined so far, some of them remain. The subject «it» has been omitted in eight versions, which is still a high percentage among students who should now be paying special attention to differences in register, style and the like. The case is exactly the same as in the previous texts: the pronoun «it» is omitted when read in its contracted form. The other important mistake in this text is also reminiscent of one already dealt with: «I'd lounge» becomes «I'd lounge» in twelve written versions, thus showing lack of concentration on the meaning of the text being dictated as well as an inability to distinguish the pronunciation of an infinitive as opposed to that of a past participle. The error can be considered as serious, not only for those two facts but also because the same structure is repeated three times: «I'd lounge through the morning, dawdle through the afternoon, and loaf through the evening» and, in all cases, the students made the mistake three times.

Together with this, the possessive «its» was mistaken on six occasions. «Its» became «his» twice and, even worse, «is» four times.

Other mistakes are grammatical as well as phonetic: «wiped out» is particularly important. In twelve cases students wrote a present instead of a past tense, thus breaking subject-verb concord. However, we tend to emphasize their phonetic relevance: «on it» and «wiped out». The former was difficult to identify by some students and just left a blank. The latter became «wipe out», as indicated. Both are cases of linking of words in normal speech: some students still find it hard to figure out what *the word* that results from linking «on it» might be, and do not hear the /t/ sound, indicative of a past tense, which links «wipe» and «out» as opposed to the /p/ sound which functions as a link when the verb is in the present tense.

The remaining cases are mainly spelling errors. Still, most of them should have been identified without extreme difficulty. «Lounge», «launch» and «lunch» form part of the English vocabulary, but they differ distinctively in the way they are pronounced. The same is true of the pair «beaker/vicar». Others can be trickier for a Spanish speaker and, therefore, a mistake would be somewhat understandable. But the list would be reduced to a small number, instead of the long list shown above.

Finally, our second text for fourth year students is:

TEXT 4

China's former president once declared war against sparrows, believing they were a pest and a nuisance. In response, millions of Chinese took to the streets, banging on pans to terrify the birds. The idea: force them to stay aloft until they dropped dead of exhaustion. They did just that. The campaign was halted after an infestation of caterpillars devoured the crops, enveloped the trees and rained down upon pedestrians. In that same grand tradition of meddling with nature, Alaska has declared an air war against hundreds of wolves in an effort to boost already abundant populations of deer. And all to impress hunters and tourists. Never mind that when herds swell, starvation is often close by. Even as Alaska prepares to wage its war on wolves, conservationists in the lower 48 states seek to reintroduce them.

It's all the more distressing for what it tells us about ourselves as a species and our estrangement from nature. Alaska's folly is the product of a theme-park mentality in which nature exists for our amusement, to be enhanced by adding one species and subtracting another."

¹⁰ Adapted from *Time*, April 1993.

Thirty-two students took down the text. The table of their mistakes is as follows:

TABLE TO TEXT 4

theme park > thin park (or part) 24	an air war > a neo warl a air war 312	to wage its > wages 3
force > forced 13	abundant > abandoned 22	tourists > turists 4
as a species > as species 13	Chinese > chinese 4	dead > death 2
China's > Chinese 10	wolves > wolfs 6	enhanced > in hands 13

Some of the mistakes listed here are not unknown to us. These recurrent errors could be classified thus:

II TABLE TO TEXT 4

Spelling Mistakes: tourists, Chinese, wolves	Semantic Mistakes: abandoned, an air war, theme park, enhanced
Structural Mistakes: force, to wage, dead, as a species	Other Mistakes: China's

We might have a good deal of overlapping in this classification again, but it serves our purpose. In the group of spelling mistakes, we find the same mistake that we had seen in text 1: no capitals are used for adjectives derived from the names of countries (Greek in our first text, Chinese in text 4). The word «tourist» was misspelt due to the influence of the native language, although the pronunciation should have suggested a difference and some students even made the mistake of *regularizing* the irregular plural of the word «wolf» as «wolfs», a basic mistake in the sense that, by now, they should not even have a doubt as to

how to spell the word correctly: their second year grammar book is clear about it.¹¹

As for the grammatical mistakes, the written versions clearly show that the hearers do not follow the text. Otherwise they would be conscious of the fact that the sentence starting: «The idea...» cannot be followed by a past tense, as they wrote, since there is no subject and we need a subject in English. We also have a confusion between a noun («death») and a past participle («dead»): once again they paid no attention either to the difference in pronunciation between the two words or to the meaning of the sentence they were writing down. Finally in the case of «species» they obviously did not remember that «species» is a singular and is preceded by the article «a»; thus, they omitted the article on thirteen occasions.

In the group of semantic mistakes we have a series of words that turned out to be unfamiliar for the students, although they are in current use. This is the case of the expression «theme park», which appears repeatedly in the media and which is almost a household name, especially with the popularity of places such as Euro Disney. In a surprising number of cases, twenty-four, the expression became the odd «thin park» or even «thin part». The verb «enhance» became «in hands» and the linking of the article and the noun in «an air war» produced the peculiar version «a neo war».

Perhaps the last mistake we should mention is the confusion between «China's» and «Chinese», which is basically a phonetic mistake. The main problem here is that students were unable to identify where the stress was placed and this gave way to ten mistakes.

III. CONCLUSION

As a recap of the four texts and the preceding tables, we could conclude with a general view of the mistakes made by third and fourth year students in the four texts proposed. We propose a similar table to those already provided in the analysis of each text:

¹¹ «Twelve nouns ending in *f* or *fe* drop the *f* or *fe* and add *ves*. These nouns are *wife, life, knife, wolf ...*» (Thomson & Martinet, 1982: 9).

SUMMARY TABLE TO TEXTS 1, 2, 3 & 4

<p>Spelling Mistakes: chapel, Greek, column, resemble, comfortable, iminediate, actuality. tourists, Chinese, wolves. dissipation, dissolve</p>	<p>Semantic Mistakes: high, stuff, seat, scream. bottoms, levels, prize, to be won, one's, taking it up (> taking a tap), losing(?), abandoned, an air war, thenie park, enhanced, ride, dawdle, lounge</p>
<p>Structural Mistakes: it, worse. too harrowing, reach/collapse, they are, taking it up (> taken it up), of taking, he avoided force. to wage, dead, as a spesies, half, wiped out, because it is, its</p>	<p>Other Mistakes: rneant, would burn, empty, China's, beaker</p>

This classification is, in no way, the only one possible. We must insist that most of the mistakes included in the four boxes overlap one another. To write «wipe out» instead of «wiped out» indicates that the students have not heard a clearly distinct sound, which carries a semantic distinction as well as a different grammatical function. However, this division does help us to identify students' errors and, consequently, tackle those problems and find solutions for them. It is obvious that the first need of the students in all cases is merely phonetic. Our own language still hampers our students to produce reasonable versions of dictated texts. They have not rid themselves of the limited range of Spanish consonantal and vocalic sounds to be able to identify English distinct sounds. Therefore the confusion between /s/ and /z/ (prizelprice; loosellose), /b/ and /v/ (beakerlvicar), /f/ and /v/ (half/have) or between vowels is still a constant feature in their written versions. But this phonetic deficiency only adds to their other deficiencies. Their grammatical notions are not fully comprehended and, consequently, their mistakes range from the venial to the serious. If we regard language as a means and not as an end, as Wright does,¹² we might be tempted to label sentences such as «if you don't believe is even worst» as acceptable since a message is conveyed and a native speaker would receive it without difficulties. However, as students taking advanced courses of the target language, their mistake is again two-fold: firstly phonetic, because they heard a /t/ sound where there was not one, but did not

¹² He argues that «there are no rules as to the form of the language that is produced, it is the message that counts» (Wright, 1987: 85).

hear it where it was pronounced; and then, of course, grammatical, omitting a subject and confusing comparatives and superlatives. The fact that both mistakes might stem from the fact that their mother tongue would not require a subject in this sentence and that «peor» would be the Spanish equivalent of both the superlative and the comparative English forms is irrelevant. The message can be conveyed, but their proficiency as good speakers of the target language would not reach the expected standards.

In other cases, the mistake can also affect the message, and semantic deviation is added to those phonetic and grammatical errors. Therefore, students do not attain what advocates of the communicative method describe as their main goal: «to have one's students become communicatively competent» (Larsen-Freeman 1986: 131). The obvious example comes from text 2, in which «taking it up» becomes «taking a tap». Another important lesson to be learnt from the results of these four exercises is that our students do not really pay much attention when we advise them not to worry about unknown words and to concentrate on those words, phrases and sentences which do not usually present any difficulties, but which form the main core of errors. As Morgan & Rinvolucri say in their book on *Vocabulary*: «Human nature being what it is, however, it is often precisely the crossed-out words that are learnt and remembered» (1986: 41).¹³ In the cases of dictations, the fact that students put so much emphasis on unfamiliar words indicates that they are still too concerned about guessing words rather than understanding the text as a whole. We, as teachers, must make them realise that overlooking the part of the text that they consider easy might lead to more serious errors than they expect. Their communicative competence does not depend on those isolated words, but on the whole text, and the dictation exercise should make them aware that their performance as speakers and writers of English relies on all the aspects of the learning process.¹⁴

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¹³ But they insist that teachers should urge students to aim at «getting the gist»

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