

# INTEGRATING DICTATION ACTIVITIES IN THE FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM IN BOTSWANA

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## Abstract

*Research has shown that learners of foreign languages can improve their language competences through dictation activities. However, due to its close association with the grammar-translation approach of teaching foreign languages, dictation is ignored in language classes since the abandonment of this approach. The paper argues that, despite being characterised as going against communicative and action-based approaches of teaching foreign languages, dictation activities have an important role to play in these approaches and can effectively help improve learners' proficiency in all the language activities: reception, production, interaction and mediation in oral and written form. The paper also explores some practical ways of integrating these activities in foreign language classes and will give some examples of dictation activities.*

**Keywords:** dictation, French as a foreign language, learning and teaching, action-oriented approach, language activities, CEFRL.

## Introduction

Learners of French as a foreign language (from now on FFL) in Botswana are usually puzzled by rules and exceptions of spelling and pronunciation of the French language. Although Setswana and French are both alphabetic languages, French poses some difficulties to its learners both at the production (speaking and writing) and the reception levels (listening and reading) due to its orthographic depth. Van den Bosch et al. (1994) consider two separate components to orthographic depth: a graphemic component which consists of converting written words into spoken ones and a phonemic component which consists of converting spoken words into written ones. As such, a language's orthographic depth is measured through the degree of consistency in grapheme-phoneme correspondence and has been hypothesized to affect proficiency in reading and writing. The orthographic depth of a language can be either shallow or deep (Frost, Katz and Bentin 1987).

Setswana has a shallow orthographic depth in that, for example, the phoneme /k/ is always represented by the grapheme <k> and this grapheme will always represent the phoneme /k/ and no other phoneme. French on the other hand has a deep or opaque orthography with 37 phonemes and at least 130 graphemes. Hence, theoretically, there is at least one phoneme for every three graphemes. For example, the phoneme /k/ can be represented by the grapheme <c> as in *café*, <k> as in *képi*, <qu> as in *quatre*, or <cc> as in *occasion*. Moreover, the grapheme <c>, in addition to corresponding to the phoneme /k/ above, can also correspond to the phoneme /s/ as in *cinéma*. Research suggest that shallow or transparent orthographies

with highly regular grapheme-phoneme correspondences are easier to acquire than complex and opaque orthographies with a high proportion of examples of irregular and inconsistent spelling (Aro and Wimmer 2003, Seymour et al. 2003). In other words, in shallow orthographies, it is easy to predict the pronunciation of a word based on its written form, or to predict the written form of a word based on its pronunciation. In contrast, in deep orthographies, it is not easy to predict the pronunciation of words based on their written form, or vice versa. As a result, learners have much more difficulty in learning to decode deep orthographies than shallow ones. When learning a language with deep orthography, the learner must therefore be accompanied in learning the arbitrary or unusual pronunciations and orthographies of words. We hypothesise that dictation can play a major role in achieving that objective.

### **Dictation and the French orthography**

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the verb dictate, meaning "to practice dictation, say aloud for another to write down," can be traced as far back as the 1590s. Stansfield (1985) traces the use of dictation as a means of transmitting course content from master to pupil in the first language class to the Middle-Ages. Dictation was then used as how our modern-day lectures are used. The author indicates that dictation found its way into the foreign language classes in the sixteenth century. Titone (1968) believes that because of the frequent unavailability of foreign language textbooks, dictation was instrumental for students to access foreign language materials. As such, dictation came to be strongly associated with the grammar-translation approach of language teaching and learning, which was dominant at that time. Dictation as it is practiced today is specific to France and, through colonisation, to certain Francophone countries. It is strongly associated with the standardisation of the French language and more specifically with the compilation of French language dictionaries.

According to Mireille Huchon (2006), until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the domain of the French orthography remained rather unclear. It was not until 1634, with the establishment of *l'Académie française* under the initiative of Louis XIII XIII's chief minister Cardinal Richelieu, that reflexion on what was then considered the "*State Orthography*" emerged. This gave birth to the project of the orthography homogenisation and publication of dictionaries which were revised almost every year from then onwards. However, it was not until around 1850 that what is considered standard French orthography was achieved. And with standard orthography the notion of spelling errors was born. In turn, the notion of spelling errors gave birth to the activity of dictation. Dictation use was then, and is still today, limited to the assessment of the knowledge of the French orthography, both at lexical (spelling of words as they appear in the dictionaries) and grammatical levels (declensions – variations of nouns, adjectives, verbs, pronouns depending on the tense, number, gender, etc.).

Research has highlighted that learners of foreign languages can progress in their writing, listening, reading and speaking skills through dictation activities. As a matter of fact, dictation is a technique that combines practice in both receptive fluency and productive accuracy (Norris 1993). Stansfield (1985) believes that dictation helps students internalise the language, since learners employ more than one faculty. Morris (1983) observed that dictation alerts learners to context clues and key words and also develop accuracy in both listening and writing. In a study by Kiany and Shiramiry (2002), the authors found evidence that spelling (dictation) not only improved the learner's listening comprehension ability but also their depth of comprehension. In her study, Kazazoğlu (2013) concluded that dictation can be used to detect word errors. Despite this evidence, this learning activity occupies a marginal place

in foreign language classrooms and no importance is attached to it in. Undoubtedly, the reason is that the ability to use the foreign language as an instrument of action in a variety of communicative contexts is seen as the best way to enhance the foreign language learning process as stated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages : Learning, Teaching, Assessment – CEFRL in short – (Council of Europe 2001). Then any “old fashioned” activities of teaching and learning foreign language cannot be accommodated.

### **Dictation and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages**

Generally speaking, dictation is considered by language teachers and learners as an out-dated class activity practiced primarily in Francophone countries. Indeed, dictation was regarded as one of the most common class and orthography assessment activities in French-speaking countries for a very long time-and still is considered so in some of these countries. Nonetheless, the benefits of dictation have never been proven by the researchers who looked into it as a means to acquire a solid orthographic competence (Cogis, Fisher and Nadeau 2015). The only proven benefit of compelling learners to practice dictation is actually discipline. Indeed, what better way to keep the learners concentrated, still and silent than through dictation?

The CEFRL was conceived as a guide for foreign language teachers, assessors and programme designers to ensure quality inclusive education and the development of plurilingual, pluricultural and intercultural competences. Its Companion Volume published in 2018 is a follow-up to the initial project, involving almost sixty countries in its conception, thus proving that the CEFRL’s scope has reached far beyond the European countries from which it originated. Its global success is owed to the fact that it is descriptive and not prescriptive as the CEFRL does not prescribe a particular learning pathway, teaching aids, assessment method, but on the contrary encourages the contextualisation of teaching and learning. Furthermore, it broadens the field of foreign language teaching and learning by describing the linguistic and non-linguistic competences needed to develop the ability to communicate in a foreign language and offers a very practical and clear worldwide shared scale of proficiency.

In the CEFRL, dictation is mentioned four times only. It is quoted on page 61 (and again in Table 6 p. 100) as one of the written production activities a learner should be able to perform (e.g. writing down a shopping list dictated by someone). Despite listing dictation as one of the real-life communicative activities a learner should be trained to do, the document clearly takes position against this activity when discussing text-to-text activities : “*The more mechanical meaning-preserving activities (repetition, dictation, reading aloud, phonetic transcription) are currently out of favour in communication-oriented language teaching and learning owing to their artificiality and what are seen as undesirable backwash effects*” (ibid.: 99). However, the CEFRL does neither discuss nor identify these backwash effects and it is hard to envisage dictation as an artificial activity as it is a real-life task that anyone performs in everyday life (e.g. writing down a message given on the phone). Nevertheless, on page 53, another reference is made to dictation, where it is described as a means to develop the learner’s ability to pronounce a language. The 2018 Companion Volume to the CEFRL does not mention dictation at all throughout its 235 pages.

It may then be concluded that the CEFRL’s position is quite succinct and ambiguous when referring to dictation. On the one hand, it recognises dictation as a real-life communication activity and lists it as a pronunciation learning activity. On the other hand, it clearly advises

against integrating this activity in the foreign language classroom without giving valid reasons. By so doing, the CEFRL leaves aside the pedagogical neutrality on which the document is based. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, despite being ignored by the CEFRL, dictation is compatible with the communicative and the action-oriented approaches of teaching and learning foreign languages and can bring about positive results for both teacher and learner, more especially if it is implemented as a learning rather than an evaluation tool.

### **Dictation as a means to develop language competence**

Originally, dictation was believed to develop the ability to spell words correctly. Nevertheless, new research shows that a much wider range of competences can be developed through dictation activities (Norris 1993, Stansfield 1985, Morris 1983, Kiany and Shiramiry 2002). As part of the linguistic competences described in the CEFRL (2001: 13), the following competences can be targeted: phonology and orthoepy (pronunciation of written forms), morphology, syntax, lexicon and semantics. Beyond these linguistic competences and through conceptualisation activities on how the foreign language functions, dictation can also enable teachers and learners to develop and extend their heuristic skills through “observing, grasping the significance of what is observed, analysing, inferencing, memorising, etc.” (*ibid.* 108.) As such, dictation can enable teachers and learners to infuse learning strategies and skills closer to the highest cognitive domains on Bloom’s taxonomy (1958).

However, implementing dictation activities in the classroom will require the teacher to do away with their negative representations of this activity and to stop considering it merely as a means to control the orthographic competence of learners or as the first step towards composition writing. Dictation should be implemented as a teaching and learning tool. Before attempting to show how dictation can be contextualised within a teaching and learning context based on the action-oriented approach, a brief overview of the learning sequence based on this approach is required.

### **A learning sequence based on the action-oriented approach**

Most of the contemporary didactics books and textbooks divide a teaching and learning sequence into five stages: *Anticipation*, *Comprehension*, *Conceptualisation*, *Systematisation* and *Application* (for instance, see Robert et al. 2011). In the *Anticipation* stage, the teacher introduces the topic, the task and the objectives of the lesson. It is also at this stage that the teacher needs to verify how the task at hand fits to the learners’ prerequisites. During the second stage, *Comprehension*, the teachers invites the learners to discover an authentic situation and make hypotheses about the meaning, first through a global comprehension questionnaire targeting the context and the situation of communication (answering the questions such as who, when, where, what, with whom, why, etc.), and then through a detailed comprehension questionnaire that orientates the learners’ attention towards the pragmatic and linguistic competences that they will need to perform the task at hand. In the third stage, *Conceptualisation*, learners are guided through a pathway that encourages them to infer and conceptualise the linguistic functioning of the language. They need to form an idea on how the language is used. In the *Systematisation* stage, the learners are invited to repetitively use the grammatical structure through a variety of exercises and activities ranging from drill and practice exercises to presentation of a memorised role play and interactive games, the objectives of which are to enable them to integrate the linguistic structures and to use them appropriately thereafter. In the fifth and last stage of the learning process, *Application*, the learners demonstrate that they have grasped all necessary pragmatic,

linguistic and sociolinguistic tools to accomplish the targeted task, through an oral or a written production.

### **Integrating dictation in the FFL class**

#### **Phonemic item and text dictations**

Evident use of dictation in FFL in a learning sequence based on the above approach would be during the *Systematisation* stage, when the learners manipulate and reinforce the usage of the linguistic elements discovered in the first three stages. When working on the development of the phonetic competence, for example, both *phonemic items and text dictations* (Sawyer and Silver 1961) can be used to help learners acquire phonological and orthoepic competences. Dictation activities could be used to help learners to recognise, identify, discriminate and reproduce sounds which might be challenging to them. For example, the nasal vowels /ã/, /ɛ̃/ and /õ/ can be very challenging to speakers of Setswana and English. Dictation of words (e.g. *-banc, bain, bon-* or *-franc, frein, front-*) could therefore be used to help target the sounds that learners need to focus on, as illustrated below.

**Table 1: Phonemic and text item dictation activity for the development of phonologic and orthoepic competences**

<b>A2 level – Phonology &amp; orthoepy worksheet – Nasal vowels</b>				
<b>NB:</b> Learners have been introduced to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) prior to this activity.				
1. Observe the following list of words. Each list is composed of three words. Listen to the suit of words and write them down in the IPA in the order that you hear them: firstly, secondly or thirdly.				
	Words with nasal vowel /ã/, /ɛ̃/ and /õ/	1	2	3
a.	<i>Gant, gain, gond</i>			
b.	<i>Temps, teint, ton</i>			
c.	<i>M'attend, matin, mâton</i>			
2. For each of the three nasal vowels, write down the possible spelling of the nasal sound and give a word as an example for each spelling.				
	Spelling of the sound /ã/	Spelling of the sound /ɛ̃/	Spelling of the sound /õ/	
3. Listen to the words and repeat them, insisting on the pronunciation of the nasal vowel.				
4. Listen to the words one more time and write them down.				

### **Orthographic item and text dictation**

*Orthographic item and text dictation* (Sawyer and Silver 1961) activities can also help develop the learner's linguistic competences by focusing on the acquisition of vocabulary as well as grammatical spelling (noun-verb agreement, noun-adjective agreement, for example) and lexical spelling (the way words are spelt in the dictionary). It should be noted that *orthographic item and text dictation* activities are learning activities and not assessment tools and therefore should not be assimilated to the *assessment dictation or control dictation* that used to be employed in all French classes in Francophone countries and which are strongly associated with out-dated methods of teaching foreign languages. Table 2 below presents an example of an activity on lexical and morphologic dictation that develops the learners' ability to infer and conceptualise the linguistic rules of the foreign language.

### **Table 2: Orthographic item dictation activity applied to lexical and morphologic competences**

### A1 level – Vocabulary worksheet – Professions en -er /-ère

1. Listen to the following words and complete them with **-er** or **-ère**.
 

a. BIJOUTI__	b. CHARPENTI__
c. CUISINI__	d. ÉPICI__
e. POISSONNI__	f. BOUCH__
g. CRÉMI__	h. POSTI__
  
2. The letters of the following words have been mixed up. Only the first letter of each word is correctly placed. Listen to the words and write them correctly.
 

a. BURHEOC	b. CAEPERNHTIR
c. CUESNIIIRÈ	d. EIIECRP
e. PNOEISOSNIR	f. BJOTIREIUÈ
g. PESTIORÈ	h. CÈRIÉMRE
  
3. Observe the word endings on this worksheet. What is the difference between the words ending in **-er** and **-ère**?
  
4. Put all the words that appear in this worksheet in the Table below. If the word is masculine, find the corresponding feminine. If the word is feminine, find the corresponding masculine. An example is provided.

	Noms masculins	Noms féminins
	<i>Cuisinier</i>	<i>Cuisinière</i>
a.		
b.		
c.		
d.		
e.		

5. Listen to the words and write them down.

When integrated into an oral interaction language activity, as presented in Table 3 below, dictation can help the learner to progressively develop the pragmatic competence to communicate. This type of learning activities for beginners is based on the communicative approach and prepares the learner to interact in a real-life situation. In this activity, learners are provided with a variety of dialogue patterns that they need to familiarise themselves with and can modify and adapt according to the context of the communication situation.

**Table 3: Orthographic item and text dictation activity applied to the pragmatic competence**

### A1 level – Communication worksheet – Greeting & leave-taking

1. The sentences of the two dialogues below have been mixed up. Listen to the dialogues and put the sentences in the order that you hear them.

#### Dialogue 1: Saluer

- Merci, très bien. Et vous ?
- Bonsoir Madame Habib.
- Salut Rose, tu vas bien ?

#### Dialogue 2: Prendre congé

- Passe une bonne soirée !
- Bon, j'y vais, salut !
- Toi aussi.

2. The two dialogues below are not complete. Some words are missing. Listen to the dialogues and complete the sentences with the following words:

*soirée, salut, demain, super, merci, bonne soirée, ça va, et toi*

#### Dialogue 1: Saluer

- ..... Cécilia, comment ..... ?
- Très bien, ..... ?
- ..... !

#### Dialogue 2: Prendre congé

- À ..... Sophie.
- ..... à toi !
- ....., passe une bonne .....

3. Listen to both dialogues that are very similar to the dialogues in exercise 1 and 2 and write them down.
4. Play the dialogues you listened to in exercise 2 with a fellow student.
5. With a fellow student, write a short dialogue with expressions of greeting and leave-taking and play it.
6. In groups of 6, improvise a dialogue on the following situations. One student plays the teacher.
  - a. *It is your first day in your French class. Greet your fellow students and your teacher in French and ask how they are.*
  - b. *At the end of your French class, take leave of your fellow students and your teachers.*

### Innovative dictations for a change in educative representations

In the three Tables above, we have demonstrated that various aspects of learning a foreign language can be developed through dictation activities. Nevertheless, the rehabilitation or introduction of dictation within the action-oriented approach will not make sense if the dictation activities could not help in the development of cognitive competences, problem-solving competences, autonomy, self-assessment, cooperation and assertiveness. In the context of Botswana, where education is largely based on the traditional method of the listening, memorising and repeating what the teacher says, the implementation of the action-oriented approach faces several major hindrances. The main one is the ability of learners to

develop a broad range of learning strategies and cognitive competences such as analysis, evaluation and creativity. We believe that dictation can be an asset in the evolution of the educative representations of teachers and learners initiated by the government of Botswana which states that:

Action will be put in place to address the problems of low quality and especially low learning outcomes. In this regard, a number of key interventions are foreseen in the ETSSP: the professionalism of all teachers including teacher trainers is recognised through changing the way teachers are trained *from teacher-oriented to more learner-oriented* [our emphasis] to achieve a properly managed, better performing and more motivated teachers as key to attaining improved quality and learner outcomes. (Ministry of Education and Skills Development 2015: 39)

Dictations could be one of the classroom activities that actually place the learner at the centre of the learning process and that helps them take an active and responsible part in their learning. With that objective in mind, the Franco-Canadian team of researchers working on dictation and language learning proposes innovative dictations (Cogis, Fisher and Nadeau 2015, Fisher and Nadeau 2014). Innovative dictations are metacognitive and interactive activities, of which the most notable are *dictation phrase of the day* and *zero-error dictation*. These dictations are problem-solving activities and aim at giving learners an opportunity to orally explain their understanding of how the foreign language grammar functions and the strategies they employ when, for example, making noun-adjective agreements. The objective of these dictations is not only the co-assessment of errors and improvement of linguistic competences but also the development of the ability to understand the functioning of the foreign language and to conceptualise its linguistic rules. As such, these dictations provide both the teacher and the learners with a precious source of information. On the one hand, the teacher will be able to identify both problem and non-problem areas and re-orientate learners accordingly. On the other hand, learners will be able to learn from each other. Learning strategies that work for advanced learners could be adopted by weak learners.

For example, the *dictation phrase of the day*, developed and described by Cogis and Brissaud (2003), consists of dictating a single sentence based on the vocabulary already known to the learners. Each learner's production is displayed on the board. Then, the teacher invites the learners to comment on the productions that should be kept, or, on the contrary, discarded until only the correct production remains on the board. This is a real problem-solving activity because learners need to support their decision to keep or discard a sentence with good arguments. This activity is entirely learner-centred because the phrases that constitute the subject of discussion are written by learners and the speech turns favour the learners. The teacher's role is limited to the management of speech turns (to ensure that all learners are given a fair chance to express themselves) and the orientation of the debate by encouraging or dismissing a reasoning, using a tone of voice as neutral as possible. It is also the learners who eventually validate the correct form that corresponds to the grammatical norm of the language under consideration.

### **Consideration on the requirements for a smooth implementation**

It is however imperative to point out that, for these innovative dictation activities to be successful and fruitful, the teacher needs to endow the learners with much more than linguistic competences. These activities cannot be done in a learning environment where learners fear their teacher. A convivial and secure learning atmosphere will make the learner

feel comfortable. Moreover, the learners need to be equipped with interpersonal skills, self-esteem and self-confidence so that they are “able to gamble a bit, to be willing to try out hunches about the foreign language and take the risk of being wrong” (Brown 1994: 40). These attitudes are not inborn but should be infused through a long-term learning process. Furthermore, if learners are expected to speak about the functioning of the language, teachers will need to teach them the necessary vocabulary – the metalinguistic terminology – to enable them to conceptualise this in their first language or in the foreign language. They should also learn how to reflect on the language rules, identify grammatical nature and function of words, understand the relationship between words (e.g. adjective or verb agreement), etc. In such a context, linguistic errors are not considered as punishable mistakes but as the starting point of a journey towards understanding how the foreign language functions (Jaffré and Bessonnat 1993). As such, dictation activities require the teacher to dedicate time, to trust the learners’ intuitive perception of the language, as well as their ability to participate and enrich the discussion. It necessitates flexibility as the teachers have to accept that everything cannot be anticipated and that their teaching should be negotiated and reoriented continuously, depending on the learners needs. All this cannot be taken for granted and requires solid training.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to demonstrate that, despite being qualified as an old-fashioned language learning activity, dictation can find its well-deserved place within the action-oriented approach if planned well. We strongly believe that dictation activities are adapted to the educative context of Botswana and can help in shifting the focus of instruction from the teacher to the learner. Dictations also encourage teachers to explore, experiment and trust their learner’s ability to co-construct their learning. What makes dictation activities even more precious is the fact that they require the teacher to create a conducive learning environment. Nevertheless, despite the demonstrations provided in this article on how dictations could be practically used to enhance the teaching and learning of FFL, the activities are yet to be experimented in a real teaching and learning context. Therefore, the next stage of our research will involve collaborating on a long-term basis with trained secondary and tertiary teachers who have integrated dictation activities in their FFL classroom to experiment and gather data. The data will then be analysed and evaluated to confirm or refute our hypothesis.

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