

DICTATIONS: OLD METHODS, NEW POSSIBILITIES?

Kristýna Dufková, Žaneta Göbelová

University of Hradec Kralove

Abstrakt: Diktáty jsou nedílnou součástí jazykové výuky češtiny a jsou vhodné k procvičování např. českého pravopisu a interpunkce v rámci slov i větých celků. Cílem tohoto článku je popsat užívání diktátů během výuky českého jazyka jako mateřského na základních a středních školách. Autorky představují dílčí výsledky dotazníkového šetření, kterým bylo testováno více než 200 studentů Pedagogické fakulty Univerzity Hradec Králové. Dotazník obsahoval otázky týkající se např. četnosti diktátů, metodiky, oprav a známkování. Závěrem autorky poukazují na nutnost zdokonalování tradičního přístupu a upozorňují na některé méně známé metody diktování a jejich možné uplatnění v praxi.

Klíčová slova: diktáty, čeština jako mateřský jazyk, tradiční metody, základní škola, střední škola

Abstract: Dictation provides a chance to model many writing types of behaviour including handwriting, matching sounds to letters to spell words, punctuation, and sentence formation. The aim of the article is to describe the usage of the dictations during the lessons in Czech language as a mother tongue at primary schools and high schools. The authors will present the results of a questionnaire survey covering more than 200 students of the Faculty of Education. The questionnaire included questions concerning, for example, the frequency of dictations, methodology, corrections and markings, etc. By way of conclusion, the authors will point out the necessity of improvement in the traditional approach and bring attention to some less known dictation methods and their possible implementation in the practice.

Keywords: dictations, Czech language as a mother tongue, traditional dictation methodology, Czech primary schools, Czech high schools

1. Introduction

Dictation is a very important method not only for teachers to check students' correct spelling, punctuation, and sentence formation but also for pupils/students to practise and test their knowledge. Traditionally, a teacher reads some text aloud and pupils/students write down what is being said, word for word. Later on, the teacher checks the text and corrects any errors made. Such dictations have been very a popular and effective method at Czech schools when teaching Czech as a mother tongue for decades. However, in past the importance of correct spelling in lessons of Czech was exaggerated and the focus on communicative abilities was not allowed to come to the fore. The form of a word became more significant than its function. Teachers stressed mainly the spelling of words instead of their usage in communication. This fact was

strongly criticised in Czech didactics (mainly Čechová, Styblík, 1989). As a result, the authors of Czech didactic textbooks have been trying to innovate traditional methods and bring some alternative approaches (Hauser: 2007, Pastyřík: 2001, Svobodová: 2003). All of a sudden, the traditional dictation seems to have become outdated, uncommunicative, and too teacher-centred. Language teachers in the UK call for some innovative dictation methodology. In 1988, Davis and Rinvoluceri published an inspiring book *Dictations: New Methods, New Possibilities*, in which they show teachers how they can transform the traditional dictation into a less teacher-centred and more attractive activity for the students.

2. Problem Statement

Dictations, which are fully in the hands of the teacher, have a long tradition in lessons of Czech language as a mother tongue at primary schools and high schools. Despite all innovative sources published in various articles and books, students still consider dictations as very stressful, difficult, boring, unnecessary, or even scary. This is why we have decided to carry out our research and to describe how dictations are used at Czech schools nowadays.

3. Research Question

Our basic research questions were:

Q1: Are dictations still used at primary schools and high schools? If yes, how and how often?

Q2: Do pupils/students like dictations? Why so/not?

Q3: Have any innovative changes occurred in dictation methodology at schools, or is the traditional approach still dominant?

4. Research Method

We applied a structured questionnaire to 229 students (38 males, 191 females) of the Pedagogic Faculty, University of Education in Hradec Kralove. There were students reading Primary and Secondary Education as well as students working on a non-pedagogical major, Language and Literature Culture. The average age of the students was 20. We will express our hypotheses. then, we will go on to verify these.

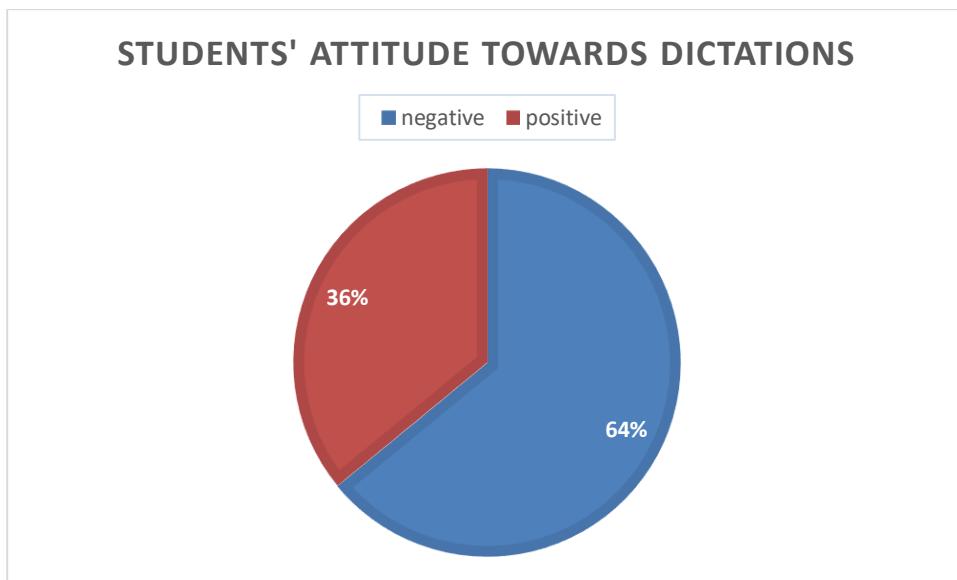
Hypothesis n. 1: Dictations are used very often because they are very quick, simple and not demanding in terms of preparation.

Hypothesis n. 2: Pupils/students do not generally like dictations because Czech spelling is supposed to be difficult.

Hypothesis n. 3: While traditional dictations predominate, some innovative approaches do occur occasionally.

4. Findings

First of all, we were interested in students' attitude towards dictations. Our assumption was confirmed. 64 % of students showed a negative attitude and 36 % a positive attitude.



Graph No. 1: Students' attitude towards dictations

Secondly, we were interested, how dictations were used, mainly who dictated what for how long, who corrected and evaluated the results. All findings mirror the didactic literature for pre-service students (Hauser: 1994, 2007, Čechová: 1998), which reflects only the traditional dictation. All dictations were dictated only by the teacher, who prepared the dictating text by themselves depending on the language phenomenon to be practised. Time devoted to the dictation varied from 5 up to 30 minutes depending on the text type and length and pupils'/students' age.

Thirdly, we inquired about the form of evaluation. The evaluation was done only by the following range of marks: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (corresponding to A, B, C, D, E – A excellent, B well done, C good, D satisfactory, E unsatisfactory). Mark 1 was awarded when the whole dictation was without any mistakes, mark 2 for one/two mistake/s, mark 3 for two/three mistakes, etc. but the character of the mistake was not taken into account. Thus, for example, a mistake in spelling was considered the same as a mistake in punctuation.

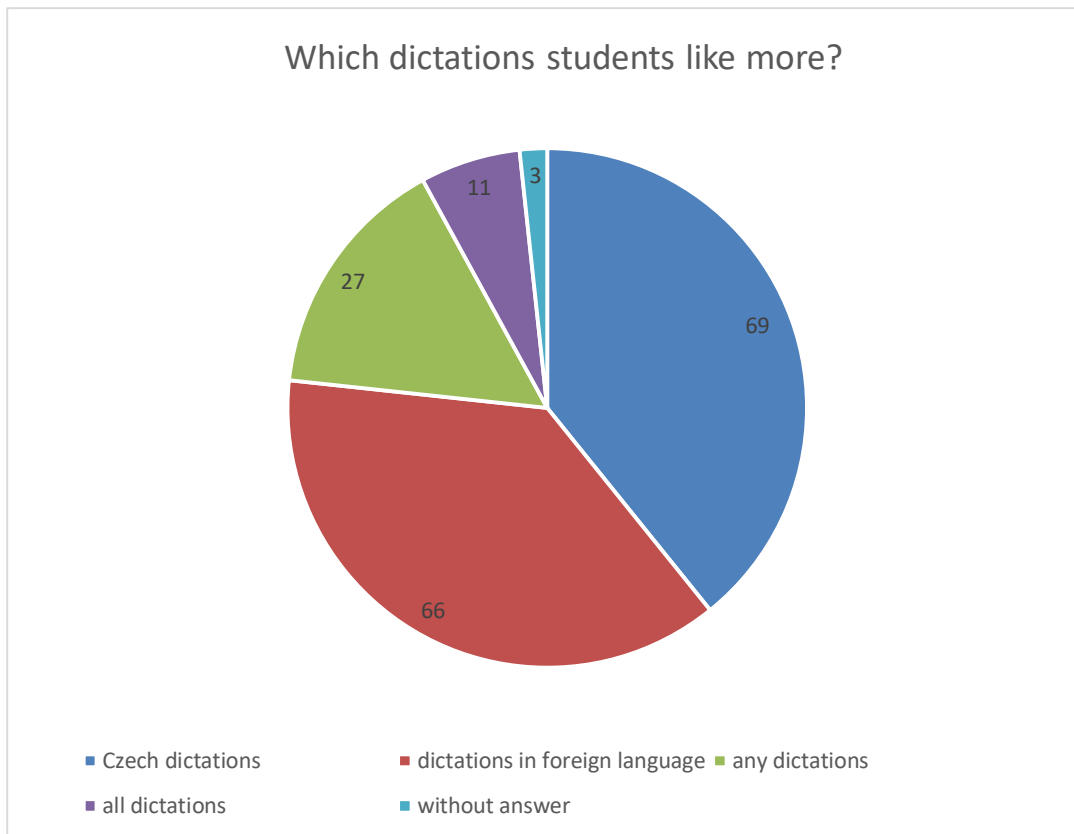
When a dictation had been marked and students' mistakes had been underlined by the teacher, students made their corrections by rewriting the words correctly below the original dictation

text and by giving explanations either in writing or just orally within the next lesson. In some cases, no corrections and explanations were done.

Another area of interest for us was how often dictation was used in the lessons in Czech language. The frequency of dictations in lessons varied. In the majority of cases, it was once a week at primary schools and once every 3 months at secondary schools. A very interesting finding of our research is that teachers at primary schools use dictations regularly and they use them not only to mark pupils but also just for practising a certain language phenomenon. Quite shocking data appear in case of secondary schools, where frequency is extremely low and the only purpose of a dictation appeared to be checking knowledge and awarding a mark. Dictations served only as a tool for testing. Dictations just for practice or for self-evaluation seem to have disappeared from secondary schools.

Then, we asked how students were incentivised to write dictations. We found out that the only incentive was a good mark. In one response, it was written that the dictation was used by the teacher as a form of punishment for the whole class. And one of the students wrote: *"I missed more dictations just for practice without marking. Any dictation would be very stressful for me because it took just a short time and I could not remember how to spell something correctly. My final bad marks were really disappointing."*

Our next question concerned dictations in lessons of foreign languages (English, German, French and Russian). 141 (out of 229) respondents wrote dictations during lessons in foreign languages, too. The question as to which dictations they liked more and why respondents answered as follows: 69 liked Czech dictations more because they considered them easier and did not have to prepare for them in advance, 66 liked dictations in a foreign language more because they were shorter and without any strict evaluation of mistakes, 27 did not like any dictations and only 11 liked all dictations.



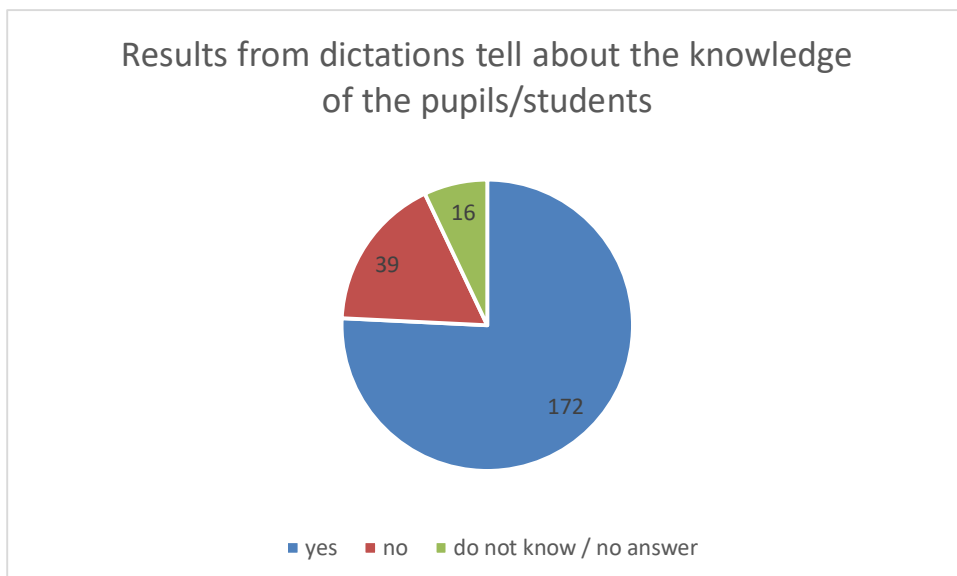
Graph No. 2: Which dictations students like more?

When asked about innovative or alternative forms of dictations, only 7 respondents (out of 229) used "running dictation" when the text is cut into pieces and stuck on the walls in the classroom and the pupils have to run to the text, remember it and then write it in their notebooks.

Finally, all respondents stated that they would use dictations in their future lessons of Czech, because they all considered dictation as a very good tool for practising and testing. Generally, 170 considered Czech spelling and punctuation complicated and 33 – simple. Additionally, 172 correspondents thought that results from dictations reflected the knowledge of their pupils and/or students and only 39 indicated that pupils and/or students made mistakes which they would not normally make because of the great stress, time limit, the quicker pace of delivery, or dyslexia.



Graph No. 3: Czech spelling and punctuation is complicated/simply



Graph No. 4: Results from dictations tell about the knowledge of the pupils/students

5. Conclusion

Our research confirmed that dictation is a method that is used not only during lessons in Czech, but also in foreign language teaching. Dictations at primary schools function as a testing tool but also a self-evaluating exercise for pupils. Alarming data were found in case of secondary schools, where the average frequency of dictations was about once every three months and dictations served only for teachers to test students' knowledge. This fact might also be one of the reasons why around 2/3 of respondents have a negative attitude towards dictations. Other explanations may be the complicated Czech spelling and punctuation, or a very teacher-centred

method lacking in innovative and alternative approaches. On one hand we can find many types of dictations described in didactic literature that would better suit the communicative approach but on the other hand almost nothing is applied in the practice. All teachers should try their best and look for new possibilities to transform stressful, boring, unpleasant, exhausting, unnecessary and scary dictations into amusing, educative, motivating and inspirational language activities.

6. Suggestions to school practitioners

In our introductory part, we mentioned inspiring book by Davis & Rinvoluceri (1988), *Dictations: New Methods, New Possibilities*. In their book, the authors some variations on the traditional approach and successfully combine something that is familiar with some little innovations.

For example, a 'dictogloss' when students only write down key words by listening and later on reconstructing the text, which should keep the same meaning as the original dictated text. Such a technique supports understanding of the text and concentrates on the communicative aspect rather than on producing a grammatically perfect text.

Traditional dictations are usually labelled as very teacher-centred. Yet, there are a number of ways of shifting focus onto students themselves. For example, students can be used as the 'dictating individuals'. In such activities, students will also benefit from focusing on their pronunciation and fluency.

Another variation suitable for a group activity is to cut the text up and distribute parts to each of the students. They may take turns and dictate their parts to the group. Afterwards they may correct the whole text together.

The only innovative method which we encountered in our questionnaire was the 'running dictation', where one student is the 'writer' and another – the 'runner'. Runners have to go to the text stuck around the classroom and return to their partners, having memorised the first line of the text, which they are dictate. They keep returning to the text until they have dictated the full text.

Additionally, the teacher can pretend to be a human tape recorder. S/he may dictate but let the students control the speed and the number of repetitions. While s/he reads the text, they shout 'Stop', 'Rewind', 'Play', 'Decrease speed', etc.

Basically, we can arrive at countless variations if we use our creativity and thoroughly examine the answers to the basic questions Davis & Rinvoluceri (1988) pose:

1) Who dictates?

- teacher
- various voices and the students choose one
- students in group work
- recorded own student's voice

2) Who chooses the text?

- teacher
- students
- teacher brings various texts and the students choose one
- students bring some texts and the teacher chooses one

3) Is it important to write down all the words?

- yes, everything
- yes, everything dictated plus add their own ideas
- no, only selected parts
- no, only the parts the listeners agree with
- no, the listeners change the text according to what they like to express by themselves

4) Who correct dictations?

- students their own
- students their partners'
- teacher
- no-one

To sum up there will always be some students who will like dictations and those who will dislike them. But for teachers it is important to vary forms and encourage students to focus both on meaning and on accuracy.

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