Task Transcription as Part of a Syllabus

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シラバスの一部としてのタスク・トランスクリプション活動

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Abstract

The following paper is an exploration into the possible role(s) that transcription can play in a Japanese university English communication class of non-English majors. The impetus for this exploration was a speech given by Peter Skehan at the 2014 Task-Based Learning in Asia conference in Osaka. A part of that speech focused on research in the area of post-task transcription by students. After reviewing this talk, an overview of other related studies is given, and finally findings from both are applied to the potential for transcription activities in the author's current context.

Introduction

At the 2014 Task-Based Learning in Asia conference in Osaka noted TBLT proponent and researcher Peter Skehan of St. Mary's University, Twikenham was one of the plenary speakers. His presentation was focused on linking recent research into task-based performance to task-based instruction. Although various issues related to TBLT were touched upon, the majority of the presentation was concerned with first and last of the three stages of task implementation, pre-task and post-task, with on-task being the second stage. In regards to the pre-task phase, Skehan discussed at length issues concerned with planning; the advantages of pre-task planning combined

with online planning, the need for more qualitative research, and the need for learner training in how to plan correctly. In regards to the last point, Skehan, based on prior research, suggests five precepts for effective planning that students should follow:

1. Build your own structure
2. Avoid trouble, and be realistic
3. Handle trouble when it occurs
4. Plan small or specific
5. Avoid a focus on grammar, and concentrate on ideas

It is this final precept that many critics of TBLT might point to when arguing against its use. Teachers who are apprehensive about the TBLT approach might contend that it is possible, and likely probable, that learners, preoccupied with completing the task, will not further develop or extend their language ability in any meaningful way. Skehan argues that a focus on form should be done in a post-task phase. In fact, he contends that it might be the key phase in a task-based approach. This leads to two questions. Why is it key and how should we proceed to focus on form?

Skehan sees the post task phase as serving two purposes. One is for improving on-task performance and the other is for creating a starting point for pedagogic instruction. The first point relates to anticipation. Using Willis' 1996 model of task methodology, Skehan and Foster (1997) hypothesized that prior knowledge of a public performance, in front of the class and teacher, would lead to greater accuracy in the task when first performed in pairs. The results were positive for only one of three kinds of tasks performed. In a later study (Foster and Skehan 2013), they altered the conditions so that instead of having to perform the task publicly, subjects had prior knowledge that they would be required to transcribe the task they were performing. They found that the transcription group outperformed the control group in terms of accuracy on all three tasks. One of Skehan's graduate students, Li (2014), took this idea further and, in addition to confirming his results, found that transcribing in pairs and producing a revised version of the original transcription both had additional positive impacts.

Skehan's second point relates to salience, or creating conditions under which noticing is more likely to take place. Noticing is concerned with the intake of grammar as a result of students paying attention to input, or in this case, their output

(Schmitt 1991). He sees the recordings and transcriptions as products from which a more relevant focus on form can take place. As opposed to imposing an external structural syllabus on the students, a look at the learners' language will reveal possible points for focus, allow for the focus to be learner led, and produce a focus more relevant to the learner. Doughty and Williams (1998) refer to this kind of focus as reactive as opposed to proactive, where the teacher chooses a form in advance to focus on based on the task or any observed language problems that are common to the classroom.

This paper is a preliminary and, an admittedly, rudimentary, exploration into the potential of using transcription in the context of the author's classes. Questions for consideration include, but are not limited to:

- Will students find it useful? beneficial?
- Is it practical in the author's context? Will students be capable of doing transcriptions? If so, how long will it take them?
- How can it be implemented? What are the options available?
- If used, what priority could it have and should it have in the syllabus?
- What, if any, other potential does it have for the students and teacher?

Introducing transcription into the classroom is an idea that requires consideration of a number of factors and in the rest of the paper a brief look at each of these questions will be taken. First, a brief overview of some previous studies done on transcription will be reviewed. This will then be followed by a description of the author's own class and the possible effects a transcription component could have on the syllabus.

Previous Related Studies

In Table 1 the studies listed on tasks and transcription in EFL and ESL settings were of an intermediate or high-intermediate level. Participants in Lynch's studies (2001 and 2007) were adult learners and postgraduate students from various countries in an ESL setting preparing to enter a British university. The other three studies consisted of 1st and 2nd year Japanese university students majoring in English. From their test scores and the classes they are enrolled in it is probable, though not necessarily, the case that these students are most likely highly motivated and focused on their English studies.

There are, however, noticeable differences among the tasks employed and the

Table 1　Previous Studies on Transcription: Setting and Process

Study	Setting	Participants	Task
Lynch (2001)	EAP oral communicati on skills class	8 adult learners from various countries: TOEFL 520, IELTS 5.5	Video and Audio Recorded Conflict of Interest Roleplay (e.g. Teacher – Student) Class: Prep, Roleplay, Debriefings (student and teacher led) After class session (video recorded) : In pairs, students make individual transcriptions, then check, edit and agree upon one final transcript (Transcript 1) Students then revise and hand in a second transcription (Transcript 2) Next Day: Transcript 2 is reformulated by teacher (Transcript 3) and is given to students for comparison.
Mennim (2003)	Japanese university Presentation class	3 1st year Japanese students: TOEFL 500+	One on one with teacher: 20 minute presentation rehearsal without a script recorded Students transcribe 5 minute segment, including errors. Transcript is typed with corrections marked in red and given to teacher for reformulation Final presentation recorded and 5 minute segments checked for differences
Lynch (2007)	13 week EAP program for entry into British Universities	16 postgraduate students from various countries: IELTS Listening: 4.5-7.5	90 Minute Lessons Class 1: Bank role play (prep, practice, perform and record) Recording reviewed in pairs and prepare Transcription 1 in class Class 2: Transcript 1 agreed upon and completed and edited. Revised Transcript 2 word-processed and handed in to teacher for reformulation Class 3: Teacher hands back Transcript 3. Pairs discuss and repeat roleplay once with transcript and once without.
Stillwell, et. al (2009)	Kanda University English Program	20 1st year Japanese students: second highest tier on university placement test	Poster Presentation on challenging text about film genres (Q and A) 3 minute improvised presentations in response to questions from a classmate Two recordings are transcribed and checked for errors by both students. Homework: Students type up original transcriptions with revisions under the original and email it to the teacher for reformulation. Students use feedback and the next 3 days to prep for a 2nd performance
Cooke (2013)	Private University in Japan	28 2nd year Japanese double language majors	In groups of 5 or 6 a 6 minute discussion on a set of contentious questions or topic was recorded 5 times over the semester. Students accessed recordings on Moodle and were required to transcribe them for homework Students given practice in transcription and provided with intro to transcribing worksheet.

transcription protocols in each study. In his first study, Lynch audio and video recorded a roleplay task done twice in one class session. In a post-class session a portion of the recording was then transcribed (handwritten) in pairs using a single cassette recorder. This transcription was then edited by students and handed in to the teacher for editing and reformulation. The transcription process was also video-taped. In his second study, Lynch used a similar procedure with a similar task (roleplay), but this time he used subsequent classes for transcription. In this study he split the subjects into two groups. One used student-initiated (SI) corrections while the other relied solely on teacher-initiated (TI) corrections. In the SI group the roleplays were recorded on cassettes at a recording table which were then transcribed individually by hand and later word processed. In the TI group recordings were given to the teacher for transcription and editing.

Stillwell used mp3 recorders to record pairs taking turns making three minute question and answer poster presentations that were then transcribed individually by hand and checked for errors in pairs. For homework students had to type up the original transcriptions with any revisions written under the errors and then email it to their teacher. Cooke had groups of five or six students transcribe mp3 recordings of classroom discussions five times over one semester for homework. His study was the most recent of the five and had students access the recordings outside the classroom using Moodle. Students were also given a basic introduction sheet on transcription skills. A significant difference in this study was related to student evaluation. Students were not asked to locate errors per se, but instead were asked to take a more global approach and point out positives in both their performance and the performance of their partners and to also look for and note any weak points. Mennim's study, unlike the others, mostly took place outside of class time and involved an activity that did not require interaction among students. Students were only asked to transcribe a five-minute segment of the tape-recorded speech rehearsal and to then make any corrections in red pen.

It is obvious from the summary of the above studies that there are of a variety of ways in which transcription as a classroom activity can be implemented into the syllabus. In these studies the transcriptions are performed in class, outside of class, and in post-class research like settings. They are done individually, in pairs, and with varying degrees of participation by the teacher. They are handwritten, word-processed, or both and the length of the transcriptions vary from 90 seconds up to 6 minutes. Various technological devices were used in all the studies including video recorders,

tape recorders, mp3 recorders, and an online software program. Even the common threads that run through all the studies, a focus on form by the students and the effect it has on later performances, vary to certain extents. Before looking at how these factors would influence the implementation of transcription activities in the author's classes, it is necessary to first examine whether or not these kinds of activities would be beneficial to students, and, if so, how. In Table 2 and the section below there is a brief overview and discussion based on the studies above of what, if any, errors students and teachers noticed, the effect it had on subsequent performances, and whether or not students and teachers saw the activity as worthwhile.

Table 2 Previous Studies on Transcription: Errors and Performance

Study	**Number of Errors Noted**	**Types of Errors Noted**	**2nd Performance**
Lynch 2001	Students (S) 112 (81 positive, 20 neutral, and 11 negative) Teacher (T) 86 Total 198	(T) (S) Grammatical 40 34 Lexical 8 28 Editing 22 8 Reformulation 22 16 Mixed 20	N/A
Lynch 2007	Student Initiated (SI) 28 total S = 11, T = 17 Teacher Initiated (TI) 19 total, all by teacher	N/A	64% of SI errors were corrected 47% of TI errors were corrected
Mennim	Students = 49 Teacher = 73 Total = 73	Articles = 42 (T = 37) Prepositions = 10 (T = 10) Passive structure = 4 (T = 2) Pronunciation = numerous mostly with troubled words and noticed by students	20 article changes 9 preposition changes 7 passive A number of pronunciation changes
Stillwell	Students = 301 Teacher = 274 Total = 301	Few lexical changes Grammar = SV agreement and plurals Teacher noticed articles and verb tenses Students made numerous editing and reformulation changes	Students improved ability to notice errors from 1st performance to 2nd performance Saw increase in complexity, though students were unable to notice the differences
Cook	Numerous reported on self-reflection	Pronunciation Grammar Vocabulary Inadequate conversation skills / participation Using Japanese Extending the conversation and being a good conversation partner Mainly focused on good points	N/A

Errors

Before looking at the results it is necessary to recognize that all errors are not equal. Some mistakes are more appropriately categorized as slips, accidental mistakes, while others as errors, systematically incorrect elements of a learners' current interlanguage. The current studies under review do not attempt to differentiate between which mistakes are the results of slips or of the learners' current interlanguage and therefore the following summary will refer to all mistakes, as the authors do, as errors. It should also be noted that there are number of factors that make it difficult to directly compare the results of these studies to each other. These include, among many other variables, learner proficiency levels, amount of talk to be transcribed, task type, and age of the learners. The aim of this section is not to discern the possible effects of these differences, but rather to find commonalities among the research results.

The five studies listed in the table provide evidence that learners are capable of noticing a significant amount of errors in their own speech or that of their classmates, that they can improve upon this capability over time, that they tend to notice certain kinds of errors, and that performing a critical analysis of their own work may lead to a more improved subsequent performance than if the analysis was done by the teacher alone. In all of the studies students made mostly positive changes to their own work. However there were instances where the changes made were neutral or negative. In Lynch's study, he suggests this may be due to proficiency, as the pair that made the most negative changes was also the least proficient. Stillwell's study provides positive evidence that learners can become more adept at noticing their own errors with practice. Although learners in all the studies were able to notice errors, it is also clear that, if a more complete analysis is desired, teacher assistance is necessary and at times complementary.

In regards to the types of errors noted by students the results are both positive and not surprising. Lynch's study (2001) provides a useful rubric for classifying errors. He distinguishes between grammatical, lexical, editing (redundancies and dysfluencies), and reformulations (rephrasing or adding language). In analysis of their own work learners tend to be stronger in areas that Lynch categorizes as editing and reformulation. They also seem to be particularly conscious of pronunciation problems. Teachers tend to notice and focus on grammatical errors, especially verb tenses, prepositions, and article choices, and lexical errors. In this way transcription activities seem to be complementary when assisted and aided by a teacher. Learners focus on those errors, or slips, they are capable of noticing, while teachers concentrate on what

are most likely errors related to the learners current interlanguage. In both cases, it is clear that activity is achieving what Skehan describes as salience.

The most promising finding, and ultimately the most important one, of the studies is that the transcription and correction processes are producing improvements on subsequent performances, whether that performance took place the next day, the next week, or over the course of a semester. That this would be the result of this kind of activity, perform – transcribe –edit – perform again, is obvious, but when student perceptions are included it becomes more significant. In all of the studies, students overwhelmingly recognized the value of the activity and had positive reactions to the overall process.

Current Course

In the author's current course, English communication, all classes are with mostly 1st year Japanese non-English majors at a Japanese national university. The class takes place in a traditional classroom setting, though the desks and chairs can be moved around to facilitate group work. Class sizes range from 35 to 50 students and it is clear that within each class there are varying levels of proficiency and orientations towards their English studies, specifically in regards to the amount of focus and importance they place on their English studies and therefore, the level and kind of motivation they do or don't maintain. The textbook, Scraps, is based around students creating their own materials and notes on varying topics and preparing them in the form of a scrap book. Though the course is designed around the textbook, it is also supplemented with various other activities and tasks created or chosen by the teacher. Units in the textbook are covered over two 90 minute class sessions and a typical cycle proceeds in the following fashion:

Class 1	Class 2
1. Topic Introduction / Vocabulary Brainstorming 2. Listening for content: Native Speaker Model 3. Content Brainstorming / Pre-task activity 4. Group discussions 5. Homework – make a scrap page on the topic and write notes on the back of the page to help plan	1. Review of notes and conversation / task planning 2. Task / Conversation with partner 1 3. Task / Conversation with partner 2 4. Listening for language: Native Speaker Model 5. Review of key related vocabulary 6. Task / Conversation in small groups 7. Focus on Form

In the context of Skehan`s task cycle, class 1 can be seen as the pre-task stage. Here students are introduced to the topic through a native speaker example and other activities. There is no planned focus on form in this class. Related lexical items are introduced. Students are responsible for preparing their own content for the scrap page. For most units, students are given very general guidelines to follow, mainly that their scrap page should be related, in some way, to the topic of the unit. For example, in past classes scrap pages prepared in the travel unit have include pages related to trips taken in the past, trips they are planning on taking in the near future, and dream vacations. One student prepared a page on the advantages and disadvantages of the various modes of transportation one can choose. For other units students are given a more specific set of guidelines in order to facilitate a specific genre of conversation or task. Students are also required to prepare a certain amount of notes in the form of sentences on the back of their scrap pages. It is stressed in class that these notes are for gathering thoughts and planning, and not as a script to be memorized.

In class 2, students are given a short amount of preparation time for conversations with a partner, during which reference to their notes is not allowed. These conversations are timed and usually 2 – 3 minutes are spent on each conversation partner's page. This is followed immediately by another timed conversation session with a new partner. Following the second conversation, a second listen of the native speaker example is given for a focus on form and specific language items. Students are then given time to review their notes and prepare for a third timed conversation, this time in randomly chosen groups of three or four. It is hoped that the repetition of the task with a number of different partners will not only enhance the accuracy and fluency of the students' speech, but also expose them to a variety of different language choices that one can make while speaking on the same topic. It is after the third conversation when a focus on form takes place, usually in a prepared activity focused on recognizing a grammar pattern that can be found in examples of native speakers talking about the same topic. Students are then asked to review their own notes and locate any opportunities where they could apply that grammatical pattern.

Appropriateness

There are a number of issues that have to be considered before attempting to implement a transcription and editing component into a syllabus. The foremost of which is will the students stand to gain anything from the process? In addition to that, are they capable of transcribing a segment of spoken English, and, if so, how long? If

they are capable, how skilled will they be at locating and correcting errors? To gain some insight into these questions, a short recording of one student performing a task in class was transcribed by the teacher and then another version was typed with some basic edits. The transcription below is the result of an assignment in which students were to prepare a scrap page and notes on Japanese food to be used in a conversation with a classmate. The recording was just over 2 minutes in length and is the first of three by the same student done in preparation for another ongoing study concerning task repetition. Of the many recordings collected in that process, one from a learner with a seemingly lower speaking proficiency level was purposefully chosen to serve as a test case to see if less proficient learners might be able to transcribe, notice errors, and make minor corrections.

> ‘Hello, I’m (name)I’d like to tell … talk to you about my favorite food. This is a picture of ramen. Ramen HanaHana. HanaHana HanaHana is a ramen shop in sumiyoshi…sumiyoshi town. This is pork pork bowl pork bowl soup. Ramen very very delicious. You should go there at least once. This is a picture of chanpon…in kozanru…I often I often go to…kozanru with my family. My family is sometimes rich…so this very great rank(u) chanpon very great…great…..chanpon. Very very very delicious. I like this. Go at least once. This is a picture of mixed grill, mixed grill in joyful. Very very cheap…expensive. Not…not expensive but very delicious. You should..you can eat hamburg and suasuage and chicken at once….and the sauce of each is very good. You like it. I know. This is a picture of tenpin hamburg in…land..land. Is located in hamano machi. The volume…the volume is not big for it for its price but very delicious. The sauce of the hamburg….very good.’

The recording, 2:20, took about 5 minutes for a native English speaking teacher to record using only one basic transcription notation (… = long pauses). For a lower level foreign language student with no previous experience in transcribing, this would no doubt be challenging. However, it would probably be possible to do within a reasonable amount of time and if done numerous times over a semester students would most likely become more efficient over time. Transcribing in class, followed by a revised word-processed version for homework would probably be most efficient. The next question is what errors, if any, the learner will notice and be able to correct.

At the very least, in a typed or written revision the student would be able to edit out the pauses, fillers, repetition, and any use of Japanese. Some learners may notice an overreliance on set phrases or the same vocabulary and would see fit to reformulate. As noted in the studies above, it is probable that the student would not notice many grammatical or lexical errors. However, here pair, group, and class work on revisions could play a key role. Lynch (2007) refers to the key role these language related episodes and negotiation of meaning might be able to play in transcription activities. A finished revised product, after consultation with a teacher or helpful classmate, might look as follows:

> 'Hello, I'm (name). I'd like to tell you about my favorite foods. This is a picture of ramen from my favorite restaurant, Hana Hana. This restaurant is located in Sumiyoshi in Nagasaki City. The ramen pictured here is tonkotsu ramen. Tonkotsu ramen is a soup made with pork bones. It is milky white in color and oily. It is very delicious. You should go there and try the tonkotsu ramen at least once. This is a picture of chanpon from a restaurant called Kozanro. I often go there with my family when we have money. This restaurant's chanpon is amazing. I love it. I highly recommend this restaurant. Here, you can see a picture of a dish called mixed grill from a family style restaurant called Joyful. It is really cheap, but very delicious. As you can see, it includes hamburger, sausage, and chicken all on one dish. The sauce for each meat is very good. I know you will like it. In the last picture you can see a picture of a delicious hamburger from (inaudiblerestaurant name). It is located in Hamano Machi. For the price, the size of the hamburger is not big, but it tastes amazing. The sauce is also very good. '

Although, it is not likely that a student would have a revised version with 100% accuracy, it is likely that they will notice and correct some errors. At the very least, the student would gain some insight into the differences between written and spoken English just by looking at the transcription and revised version side by side. In addition with access to both recordings and transcription a teacher could consult with the student at any time during the semester to go over possible further corrections.

Other Considerations

There are number of other considerations and choices to make when introducing this kind of activity into a syllabus that all have a varying degree of effect on the outcome of the activity. However, due to space considerations they will only be briefly introduced and talked about in this section. What technology will be used to record the tasks and how will students and the teacher access them? The original idea of this author was to have students use their cell phones to record their conversation and have them email the recordings to the teacher or post them on a class forum. If students are going to bring them into class, it seems like one more positive role, in addition to use as a dictionary and research tool, they could play in the classroom. Some research has already shown positive results from using cell phones as a recording device in the classroom (Khajehei and Hajhashemi 2014). This may be troublesome though, as students will first have to own a phone with a recording device or app already on it, and then make sure the phone is properly charged before class begins. While this is possible, it is probable that for many students this will not be the case. Instead, this could be one of two options, the other being the use of a recording device brought by the teacher.

For the transcription, a choice between or a combination of hand-written and word-processed will have to be made. Word-processed, at some point in the process would seem to be the most beneficial, as it could be emailed to the teacher or posted on a class forum of some kind along with a recording. Critically, students would have to be instructed to type the transcript on a computer, and not their phone. The level of detail the transcriptions should contain and what, if any, training in transcribing students should be given also needs to be considered. Other issues that come to mind are should students be given any time to transcribe in class or should it be strictly a homework assignment? Should it be done individually, in pairs, or as a group? To some extent, could it work as a whole class activity? It could be done as a mandatory assignment or on a voluntary basis for extra credit. If it is mandatory, a decision has to be made on how large a part it would play in their grade. It is clear that there are a number of options when it comes to introducing transcription into a course, but as evidenced from the studies cited above it also has the potential to play a vital role in a learner's language development.

A Pedagogical Anchor

Research (Foster and Skehan 1997, Li 2014) shows that students with knowledge of

a post-task transcription activity tend to perform better than those who don't. Students may feel more accountable for and aware of their on-task performance. The task is no longer stand-alone and has a stronger connection, focus, and purpose within the context of the entire lesson. In the context of the communication class described above, there would be a stronger thread running through the pre-task, on-task, and post-task phases.

As currently constituted, the form focus in the author's class is predetermined, proactive, and sometimes not appropriate for some students. It is clear that at times it is too difficult for some, while only serving as a simple review for others. Transcribing and editing would allow for an appropriate focus on form on an individual learner basis. A recording and transcribed text would make grammatical and lexical issues more accessible and apparent to both the learner and teacher. At the very least, these recordings and texts could serve as a concrete reference point the teacher could use to create and prepare more appropriate form-focused activities to be done in class, akin to a composition class. One can see a proactive and reactive focus on form complementing each other in a syllabus.

A critical difference between the author's current course and most of those described in the studies above is in repeat performances. Unlike those courses, the repeat performances in this course all take place within one lesson and the focus on form completes the lesson. This could easily be altered to allow for another repeat performance in a following class, whether it be the next one or several lessons later. However, even without altering the lessons, transcription and editing could be seen as a useful pedagogical activity that can be transferred into other tasks they will perform in later lessons.

A possible danger in introducing a transcription component to the syllabus is the possibility that it may detract from the original focus of the course, communication, mainly in an oral sense. The risk is that students may become preoccupied with speaking grammatically correct during the task so as to lessen the burden of the editing component. Lynch (2001, 2007), however, attributes his results to transcription having the opposite effect. In his view, knowing they are going to transcribe and correct their performances later gave them the freedom to speak freely with the knowledge they would be able to edit it later. Another positive perspective is that if the post-task transcription activity is highlighted as just that, post-task, then this could be used as an opportunity to discuss the differences between spoken and written English. The original transcription and edited texts could be used to highlight

differences between the two modes of communication. It's quite possible, maybe even likely, that a majority of their English communication in the future will take place through email or other internet-based communication modes. Educating learners on the differences between conversational English and written correspondence would certainly be beneficial to them. In addition, if the transcriptions, or at least the edited versions, were assigned to be word-processed this would also give them an opportunity to develop their English typing skills.

Before concluding, it should be noted that the current course is a recent departure for the teacher from using what could be considered as more traditional English communication textbooks to a more learner centered approach. Learners in this class are expected to play a more central role in the classroom. They have more responsibility and more control over the materials used and the language produced. This change produced a variety of unexpected positive changes to the classroom. It seemed clear from the beginning, from the teacher's own observations, that students were more enthusiastic, invested, and motivated in their participation levels. Students were using more English in class and appeared to be more interested in the materials and language they and their classmates were producing. End of class questionnaires on various aspects of the course showed that these observations were, in fact, real. The overwhelmingly positive reaction and results observed from this change lead this author to believe that adding a transcription component to the syllabus, though certainly challenging to both students and the teacher, will ultimately be beneficial, positive, and well received.

Even More Potential

Amassing a bank of recordings and texts made by students performing various tasks has numerous possibilities for use in the future. For the teacher it could serve as a reference point for evaluating current classes, preparing syllabuses, and for creating materials. If the recordings and texts are made available to students through some kind of forum or corpus, it could serve as a reference point for assignments and research. For the researcher it could provide a wealth of data that could be used in a wide variety of studies too numerous to list here. Because of this potential, it is the author's belief that careful consideration and attention should be given to how transcription is introduced into the classroom, and subsequently, closely monitored and adjusted. If it is done in an appropriate way, it could prove to be a very sustainable and productive resource for students, teachers, and researchers.

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