

DICTATION REVIVAL

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Introduction

Surely many of you, as students, have been exposed to dictations while studying a foreign language. Although dictation in itself can be beneficial to students who are trying to coordinate the spoken and written irregularities of a language such as English, it is true that dictations are often performed in a monotonous (and even boring!) way which fails to live up to the expectations of the «communicative» language classroom. It is our purpose to share with you some of the techniques we have collected which allow the student to take a more active part in the dictation process. Many of these ideas, given to us by colleagues or taken from books on methodology, are quite simple to do and offer alternative forms for this age-old and often overworked technique which is dictation.

Why are dictations useful when teaching English?

First of all, dictations improve students' listening abilities and spelling. This is especially important in a language like English where spelling and pronunciation often do not coincide. Secondly, they involve the entire class in a multi-skilled activity. Whenever you do a dictation students are at least listening and writing at the same time. But you can also do follow-up activities to allow student discussions on what has been dictated or you can have them tape-record the sentences that will later be dictated to them. Students' reading abilities can also be improved by doing dictations which require them to memorize segments of texts that they must then write down from memory.

When dictations capture the students' interests, they make them think about the meaning of the text. If they fit in well with lesson plans, they will help to reinforce material previously presented, or to create situations where discussion and opinion giving can be exchanged in the classroom.

Dictations can be prepared and practiced in advance, with pre and post-dictation activities, eliminating in this way the surprises of the open-ended activities.

Dictations occupy and entertain students of mixed abilities. They are good for big and small groups of students.

They have a calming effect on students who are restless. Therefore they can be a good exercise to do at the beginning or at the end of a class period.

Dictation techniques

The following is a «hodgepodge» of different exercises that are designed to stimulate classroom participation. These dictations can be easily adapted to different language levels and are only a sampling of the many techniques that are available to the language teacher.

I. *Mutual dictation*

Students work in pairs, dictating to each other. Student A has half of the text and student B the other half.

Example:

— Text for student A to dictate:

«Britain _____ of four _____: England, _____, _____ and Northern Ireland. _____, the capital, _____ centre of government _____ whole _____».

— Text for student B to dictate:

«_____ consists _____ countries: _____, Scotland, Wales _____, London, _____, is the _____ for the _____ of Britain».

II. *Delayed dictation*

A. Put copies of the text on the walls of the classroom.

B. Students must get up and go to the wall to read the text and then go back to their places to write down what they can remember. (This can also be done in pairs. One student reads the text on the wall and then dictates it to the student who remains sitting).

III. *Picture dictation*

Students draw a picture or diagram described to them by the teacher or another student. Here we have chosen an alien which young students will enjoy drawing. As a follow-up activity, students can describe their own aliens to other students.

«My alien has a very small body with four legs and two arms. His head is very big. He has an eye in the middle of his face and two mouths—one above his eye and one mouth below. What is your alien like?».

IV. *Thinking about meaning*

In the following examples, students cannot complete the dictation successfully unless they understand the meaning of what must be written.

A. Meaningful or meaningless?

1. Make three columns on your paper.
2. Write the sentence you hear in the column you think is correct, according to the meaning (or lack of meaning) of each sentence.

| <u>Meaningful</u> | <u>Maybe</u> | <u>Meaningless</u> |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|
| Tables have legs | Aunts are parents | Green beans eat people |
| I'm in Guadalajara | Trees grow downwards | |
| now | | |

B. Teacher's autobiography

1. Dictate sentences to the students about your life.
2. Students write the sentence in one or three columns, depending on what they think is true or false.

| <u>True</u> | <u>Perhaps</u> | <u>False</u> |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------|
| My husband lives in Pontevedra. | I've taught English for four years now. | I was born in 1907 |

V. Piecing together a scrambled text

1. Read a story twice at a natural speed.
2. Give students a sheet with the scrambled story and allow time for them to study it.
3. Ask them to turn the sheet over. Then read the story a third time.
4. Have them reconstruct the story in their own writing.

Story: «My bank manager had a lot of trouble with his hot water system. Finally he called a plumber who fixed everything in about half an hour and gave him a bill for seventy-five pounds. "But that works out at 150 pounds an hour. I'm a bank manager and I don't make that kind of money". "I'm not surprised. Neither did I when I was a bank manager."»

Scrambled text: «Neither did I in about half an hour for 75 pounds and I don't make at 150 pounds an hour Finally he called a plumber had a lot of trouble I'm a bank manaher with his hot water system My bank manager "I'm not surprised. when I was a bank manager "But that works out who fixed everything that kind of money." and gave him a bill

VI. *Connections*

1. Dictate some connected words/phrases for the students to write down.
2. They shout out and explain when they see the connection.
3. Check meaning and spelling afterwards.
4. Have them create their own lists individually and ask them to dictate to the group.

Examples:

students, desk, chalk, notebook, pencil (CLASSROOM)

clip, duplicate, safe, ribbon, cabinet, punch, enquiry, file (OFFICE)

byte, bit, bug, drive, ram, run, boot, load, screen, escape, DISK (COMPUTERS)

appearance, spoon, hot, clean, disgusting, throw up, decoration, art, taste (COOKING)

VII. *Tap gaps*

Dictate a text leaving gaps which the students have to fill in, considering not only the spelling but the meaning as well.

«Caroline has (HER) fortune told in Delhi, in India. // It cost her (ABOUT) 200 rupees// which (SHE) thought was very cheap.// She was told (THAT) she would go back to India // and that she (WOULD) be married soon. // She was also told that she would (WIN) 400.000 pounds in a lottery.// None of (THIS) came true, // and Caroline realised that the (FORTUNE) teller was a rogue // when she met a friend (IN) New Zealand // (WHO) had been to Delhi // and had (BEEN) told exactly the same (THINGS).»

VIII. *Saying it right*

1. Give out strips of paper with one sentence to each student.
2. Answer any vocabulary questions your students want to ask.
3. Tell them that the bits of paper make a story.
4. Ask the person/group who thinks to have the first sentence in the story to dictate it to you at the board.
5. Take down exactly what you hear and correct the story according to the right opinion of the person/group.

— Mme. Wawanda tapped her crystal ball nervously.

— Then she began to speak.

— «You soon will meet a tall, handsome man who looks something like Mayor John Lindsay».

— She told the young woman.

— «He owns 94 producing oil wells, two square blocks in downtown Minneapolis, and a yacht with a crew of 34.

— He will marry you and you'll be happy forever after.»

— «Sensational!» breathed her ecstatic customer.

— «But tell me just one more thing:

— *What do I do about my husband and my three kids?»*

IX. *Self-assessment dictations*

A. Error analysis: students listen to a text and then try to determine how many errors they think they will have. This «error estimate» is then written at the top of the page before doing the actual dictation. When finished, students can correct work in pairs.

Text: «The year is 1992. Gorbachev has been overthrown and the Soviet Empire has fallen apart. Tanks patrol the streets of Moscow and fearful starving people take revenge on former Communist Party members.»

B. How much help would you like?: Students listen to a text and decide if they need no help, some help, or a lot of help! The teacher then distributes three different copies of the same dictation that have been graded according to difficulty. Thus, the most confident students will receive a sheet with very little of the dictation written on it, while weaker students will only have to fill in gaps.

Grade A: difficult words: Archie Macfarlane - parachuting -parachutist's

Grade B: Archie Macfarlane _____ parachuting _____ 75, _____ 18
parachute jumps over _____. Recently _____ the place of honour _____
_____. When _____ parachuting, _____ about his age. His wife and
_____ about him.

Grade C: Archie Macfarlane _____ parachuting _____ 75, and _____ 18
parachute jumps _____ six years. Recently _____ given the place
honour _____ a parachutists' meeting. When he _____ parachuting, _____ a lie
about his _____ wife and daughter _____ worried _____ him.

A touch of difference in dictation activities

The traditional manner of doing dictations (teacher dictates/students correct) is probably the least creative, more liable to put students to sleep than to stimulate language learning. Other techniques that can be used to motivate students as well as teachers could be:

1. Texts can be recorded by students so that they hear their own voices on the tape.
2. Students can dictate to each other, instead of the teacher always being the one who dictates. To do this kind of exercise you can ask a good student to dictate to a slower student and to help him/her.
3. Students can choose the text they want to be given as a dictation, the teacher does not always have to be the «main character of the movie».
4. You don't need to dictate long texts, even single words can serve the purpose of a dictation.
5. Songs can also be dictated through the recorder, playing them as many times as the students need.
6. The teacher must not always correct the dictation himself. He might ask the student to do so, or a partner, or may even leave it uncorrected.

These are only some of the ideas we have put into practice in our classes. You may have many other good thoughts about dictations which will serve your particular circumstances.

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