

DICTATIONS.

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RESUMEN

"The first part of the session will look at why teachers and students have reservations about dictations. we'll be doing and discussing a dictation "format" which may help to make dictations a more popular teaching/learning device.

During the second part of the session, we'll go on to look at how dictations can be adapted according to different aims such as practising aspects of phonology and developing the writing skill".

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Giving dictations is rather out of fashion. Perhaps some of us remember how our own hearts sank when our French or English teacher marched into class and announced "dictation class"! For whatever reason, dictations are something many of us tend to avoid or to use primarily as a means to ensure instant silence!.

What I'd like to argue here is that dictations can be fun and can be used in class as a valuable vehicle for learning.

I'd like to start off by describing a "traditional" dictation format and by listing some common reservations which students and teachers have about it. Then I'd like to outline an alternative format and to see how this may help to counter some of these reservations. Finally I'd like to describe a variety of different types of dictations which can be used with different aims such as practising aspects of phonology or developing the writing skill.

The "traditional" dictation usually follows these stages. The teacher reads the whole text through. The teacher then reads the text broken up into sentences clauses slowly, making punctuation explicit eg. "slowly comma he walked into the room full stop". Finally the teacher reads the

whole text again.

Students tend to see this type of dictation primarily as a test of what they already know rather than a learning activity. Although some enjoy this, the majority don't and most teachers are familiar with the students who panic if they don't "catch" or understand every word. At the same time dictations can seem isolated rather than integrated into the rest of the lesson and class work in general. Also, especially if dictations are given often, students may well feel that they are boring activities.

From the point of view of the teacher, perhaps we aren't always very clear about our aims -why we're doing a dictation, or these are rather limited (eg. maintaining discipline!). Some teachers are also put off by the thought of the work involved in writing and much more in marking dictations (especially with large classes!). Phonology is a problematic area as well. On one hand the traditionally "slowed down" dictation plays havoc with English stress and rhythm. On the other, teachers are sometimes perhaps uncertain about the exact pronunciation of an individual word.

In conclusion then, both from the point of view of the teacher and the students, the traditional dictation entails a number of disadvantages or limitations.

I'd like now to outline an alternative "format" and to see how it helps to make dictations a more positive learning activity. This example dictation is for early intermediate students who have been working on language to describe people, including work on qualifiers (eg. a bit, very, quite, rather etc.)

Stage 1. In pairs students describe a relative, friend or colleague.

Stage 2. Students are told that they're going to hear someone's description of his/her aunt and are asked to listen out for the answers to the following comprehension questions.

1. Where does she live?. Has she always lived there?

2. Has she got beautiful hair?

3. Do you think the author likes her aunt?

The teacher then reads/plays the following text on a tape.

"My favourite aunt is my aunt Anne. She lives in London now though she used to live in India. She's in her early fifties but she looks older. She's got lots of wrinkles, especially when she smiles and she's also going a bit bald!. She tries to hide this by wearing a variety of large and rather peculiar hats."

Stage 3. Having checked the answers to the questions, the teacher tells the students that she is going to read the text again and this time wants the students to write down the words which they hear (it's important to stress at this point that, ofcourse, they won't be able to write down every word!). The teacher then reads/plays the tape again at normal speed.

Stage 4. The students on their own then in pairs and then in groups compare their dictations and discuss missing or different words. In the groups they make one final version. The final copies can be stuck up on the wall so that they can read each

others versions (the teacher's version can be stuck up as well if you like).

Stage 5. The students are asked their opinion of the text (eg. good-because of the descriptive words and qualifiers, bad-because we need to know more about the aunt's personality and the author's opinion). As an extension, or for homework, students are asked to write a similar improved description, perhaps of the person they described in Stage 1.

Looking back to the reservations described earlier, I'd like to take them one by one and see how this format may have advantages over the traditional one.

First and foremost it is a learning activity rather than a test. The words the students "catch" are the stressed ones i.e. usually nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, etc. The words they need to fill in are "grammatical" ones i.e. articles, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs etc. In helping each other to fill in the missing words the students are involved in a valuable grammatical exercise.

At the same time the "panic" element is removed as students have a good idea about what to expect (having done the text as a listening exercise before) and the teacher emphasises that they don't have to hear and write down every word.

The activity is clearly integrated and related to other work they have done and are doing i.e. in this case, descriptions of people. Moreover the students are very involved and, as long as the text is not too long or too difficult, they're not likely to get bored.

Turning to the teacher, the aims are clear - to practise language of description, to give the students an opportunity to "play" with / work out the language elements of a text for themselves and to check if they need remedial work (obviously if a whole group doesn't know / remember vocabulary or grammar points, it might be a good idea to re-present in a following class).

The groups making a final version also has the advantage that marking time is cut down and made more efficient i.e. it's easier to isolate common problems.

This particular dictation was made up but some published material lends itself to be adapted or used as it stands (see for example The Cambridge English Course Students Book 1 by Michael Swan and Catherine Walters page 44 Ex.1). Not only does this mean that the teacher doesn't have to rack her/his brain for a suitable text but also, for teachers who'd prefer it, the text can be played straight from a professional tape. Whether the teacher uses a tape or reads the text her/himself the speed of reading is normal so that natural stress and rhythm is not interfered with.

To sum up; Dictations need to be excluded from the modern E.F.L. classroom. Far from it, formats like the one described above can prove to be valuable as well as enjoyable.

I'd like now to go to outline some different types of dictations which can be used for different aims:

AIM- revision of Specific Language Area/Vocabulary

- 1) transformation eg. dictation about every day activities in present, after checking sts. put the verbs in the past.
Can also be used eg. for active→ passive
direct→ indirect speech
and at higher levels to practise differences in style.
- 2) Cloze eg. to revise vocab.
She had been cooking all morning and was feeling bad _____. Suddenly she remembered she had _____
_____ sugar and decided to _____
some from her _____.
etc.
Can also be used eg. for articles, conjunctions, prepositions, etc.
- 3) Half Sentences eg. If I had seen him.....
etc. using different conditionals.
Also at lower levels eg.
I was driving along the road when.....
etc. to practise interrupted past continuous.
- 4) Picture Dictations eg. In the middle of the picture there's a house, above the house there are some birds flying around. Next to the the house there are three big trees etc.
Good for lower levels eg. present continuous, prepositions, have got, there is/are, some/any and for lexical sets eg. furniture, food, sports equipment, etc.
- 5) Connections Dictation eg. horse-riding, polo, horse-jumping, fox-hunting, bull-fighting (sports to do with animals)
line,love,send,open,class,box,yours, stamp (vocabulary to do with letters)
Dictate the words to the students until they guess what the connection is. They can go on to make their own versions.

AIM- As a Stimulus/Integral Part of a Freer Speaking Activity

- 1) Opinions Dictation
1. Get sts. to write an opinion on a piece of paper.
 2. Collect.
 3. Give out "Opinion" sheet.
 4. Select a few opinions and dictate them to sts.
 5. After taking the dictation sts. fill in sheet

eg:

- eg. ✓ agree
 x disagree
 - half agree
 ? don't know

Opinion	Me	My teacher	Rest of the class

The categories can also be famous people, eg. Gonzalez, Butragueño, Miguel Rios etc.

6. After deciding on whether they and the people in the categories would agree, disagree or half agree with the dictated opinion, they compare/discuss this in their groups.

- 2) Dictation of a Poem, short News Broadcast, Opinion as a Stimulus to Discussion.

eg. "This is just to say
 That I've eaten the plums
 That were in the ice-box
 And that you were saving for breakfast.
 Forgive me.
 They were delicious,
 So sweet, so cold."
 (William Carlos Williams)

Sts. decide who is writing to who and make up a story around the poem. Alternatively they can discuss the significance of "the plums" and treat the poem figuratively.

- 3) True/False Dictations. Dictate four or five sentences of which one is not true. Students discuss in pairs/groups which one they think is false and why. After telling them which one is false students can go on to do the same activity in groups, writing and dictating sentences about their own lives.

eg. I've been around the world.
 I was born in London.
 I've slept on a roof.
 *I've eaten tripe
 I haven't got a Mercedes Benz.
 *(not true. I don't fancy it at all!!)

AIM -Pronunciation

- 1) Dictate stressed words and "hum" unstressed syllables. (It's an idea to tape it before the class as it's difficult to do it on your feet)
- eg. Richard: Oh! _____ this?
 Jane: _____ Cadillac.
 Richard: Hmm _____ your _____?
 Jane: Well _____ isn't _____?
 Richard: Whose _____?
 Jane: _____ Orson's
 Richard: _____ Orson! _____ he?
 Jane: _____ boss. _____ millionai

re!.

(Steamline Departures)

After taking down the dictation sts. fill in the unstressed words and practise saying the dialogue. (N.B. make a point of linking and intonation).


- 2) Dictations including specific problems with pronunciation that sts. have eg. past endings /t/ /d/ /Id/, intrusive /w/ /r/, minimal pairs eg. /kxp//kʌp/ and spelling---> pronunciation problems eg. boat, ought, should etc.
- 3) Jigsaw Dictations. eg. Baby, I see this world has made you sad some people can be bad, the things they do the things they say. But baby, I'll wipe away those bitter tears. I'll chase away those restless fears torn in half, they That turn your blue skies into grey. don't have. T. lis (from "Why Worry", Dire Straits) tens for mistakes. Fredback work on rhythm, sentences stress, intonation and individual sounds.

St.1-The parts which are underlined

St.2-has the parts which aren't.

Stick copies of a poem/song/short newspaper article on the walls of the classroom. Sts. work in pairs, one sitting, the other going to the poem, memorising one or two lines and going back to dictate them to his/her partner. Sts. enjoy this activity, especially if an element of competition is introduced. Again T. listens for mistakes and work on pronunciation can be done in a feedback activity.

5) Word Stress

put two columns on the blackboard  to record, happy, mistake, etc. dictate some two syllable words and get students to put them in the correct column. You can do the same activity with three columns for three syllable words.

AIM - Writing Skills

Controlled Practice

- 1) model text (as in demonstration dictation)
- 2) Jumbled sentences dictate sentences out of order. Sts. Have to sequence them afterwards. eg.-Perhaps the people who live opposite could clarify the point.
-From when they leave until their next visit, The house is completely empty.

-But no one that I know can
-Or is it?
(From Writing Skills, C.U.P.)

- 3) "cloze" dictation with linkers/
connectors missing.

Semi-controlled/Freer Practice

- 1) Dictation/Composition
Dictate one part eg. The husband woke up and looked out
of a story, give of the window.
the sts. instruc- (Described the husband)
tions to continue He saw a unicorn eating a lily in
it in a particular the garden.
direction. Give (Describe the garden)
another part, get etc.
the sts. to conti- (From Once Upon A Time C.U.P.)
nue it etc.
- 2) Dictogloss.
Dictate the eg. Two women had quarrelled over possession
"bare bones" of a baby girl and brought their
of a story. case to the king's court.
Sts. go on to The king heard their two stories
amplify it. out before ordering his servants
to saw the baby in two, which prompted
the true mother to cry out: "No, no.
Give her to the other woman!"
(Solomon's Judgement from Once Upon
A Time O.U.P.)
- 3) Words into a Story
Dictate a list eg. countryside, chat, dimples, below
of words. Sts. use zero, half board.
them to make a
story.
- 4) Phone Messages
Sts. prepare phone messages which
they can then dictate to each other.

SOURCE MATERIAL

- P.E.T. article by Terry Tomscha, June 1983.
- Once Upon A Time by John Morgan and Mario Rinvoluceri (C.U.P.)
- Writing Skills by Norman Coe and Robin Rycroft (C.U.P.)
- Grammar Games by Mario Rinvoluceri (C.U.P.)
- International House Central Department Seminar Pack prepared
by Bill Bowler.