Using Dictations

by Philip Kerr

Introduction

Old-fashioned, boring, time-consuming, teacher-centred, artificial and unrelated to real-world tasks.

Non-communicative, uncreative, ineffective as both a teaching and as a testing tool, a pointless waste of time.

Such have been the criticisms levelled against the use of dictation in language classrooms. Why on earth would any informed, self-respecting teacher use them?

Like so much of what we do in the classroom, it's not so much a question of *what* we do as *how* we do it. Dictations, in their most traditional mode, are essentially ways of *testing*. Despite the reservations that have been expressed about their validity as a test instrument, research does seem to indicate that there is a pretty good correlation between learners' performance in dictations and their overall language proficiency. However, there is only so much classroom time that can be devoted to proficiency testing, and there are other testing tools that are more accurate. If dictation is to have any regular place in the classroom, it must be justified in terms of its usefulness to language *learning*.

Dictation is, without doubt, a handy technique for teachers who need to exert a little crowd control, and there are few teachers who do not need to impose a little discipline from time to time. But there are many ways in which the basic idea of dictation can be adapted to provide opportunities for more learner-centred, motivating and communicative class work. Dictation obviously involves - first and foremost - listening and writing, but it is not difficult to integrate all four skills in lessons based around dictations, and the texts of dictations can provide a rich source of material for language-focused tasks. An additional practical advantage is that, by using dictated texts, we can minimize the amount of lesson preparation required.

The dictations here are designed to offer a wide choice of methodological possibilities. Each forms the centre of a complete (approximately one hour) lesson for higher level students. All the suggested lesson plans offer plenty of scope for student-student interaction and for language development. In addition, one or more activities in each lesson will also focus students' attention on features of the *Macmillan English Dictionary*. Successful learners know how to make best use of the learning tools they have at their disposal. For this reason, an element of learner-training is also included alongside the focus on particular features of language.

Preparing students for dictations

In whatever form dictations take, more effective students will use contextual clues in order to help them recognise and identify the words they hear. This skill does not come naturally to all and many students will benefit from some sort of training. This kind of training is provided in almost all contemporary coursebooks, but it makes sense to do it systematically when using dictations in class.

As with any text, students will benefit from being primed in some way beforehand. Some kind of introduction to the topic is necessary and this can take the form of brainstorming ideas, predicting what they are going to hear, responding to statements in a personal way, and so on. This is also an opportunity to kick off the lesson in a relatively student-centred manner.

Dictations, like other classroom activities, need to be 'fair', and this preliminary stage is also an opportunity to present any items, such as certain proper nouns, that the students cannot be expected to know.

Before getting students to 'do' the dictation (i.e. to transcribe what they hear), it is also advisable to have them listen to the text in its entirety, so they can process its meaning as a whole before focusing on individual parts.

'Doing' the dictation

We have provided recordings of each of the dictations for you to download. Most of these have been made by native speakers and a range of different accents have been used; it is important, especially for higher level students, to get used to such variety. However, there is no reason for you not to read the texts aloud yourself.

An important question to be resolved is the length of each section of text that students hear before the pause, during which they transcribe. Clearly, the shorter the section, the less challenging the task, but there are a number of issues to consider. Firstly, there is a value in encouraging students to develop their short-term memories in the foreign language. There is therefore a lot to be said for longer sections, which will require a degree of short-term memorization (rather than simply copying down individual words). Secondly, the process of doing a dictation effectively requires students to group individual sounds and words into cohesive, meaningful chunks. This, then, is another reason for having longer sections. However, depending on the level of the class and the extent to which they are familiar with this kind of task, you may want to reduce the length of each section, or repeat the sections more than once.

There is no reason why it should always be the teacher that determines the length of each chunk, nor why it should be the teacher's voice or the recording that the students hear. In the dictations here, you will find suggestions for a variety of alternatives, ranging from pair / group work dictations to wall (running) dictations. In addition, dictation does not necessarily entail the students transcribing every word. Instead, they can simply note down key words and reconstruct the text themselves ('dictogloss') before comparing their version with the original. Students (and teachers) will often take some time to get used to such procedures and we must be prepared to be patient. The lessons have been designed to provide a wide range of such alternatives, but feel free to use a particular technique with a text, even if it has not been suggested for that one.

The follow-up

Once the students have a text of some sort in front of them, it would be a terrible shame not to exploit it further. In more traditional approaches, the students' work is collected in and corrected by the teacher. However, in terms of the development of *learning*, our target is presumably to nudge the students towards the point where they are capable of self-correcting. For this reason, it may not always be desirable to correct the students' work in a formal way.

The follow-up activities that are suggested here are of two types. The first focuses students' attention on particular linguistic features of the text (e.g. sound-spelling relationships, collocations) whilst encouraging them to use their dictionaries more productively. It is extraordinary how many people are unaware of the breadth and depth of the information that cutting-edge dictionaries like the *Macmillan English Dictionary* provide. The second type of activity is a follow-up to the topic or the content of the text that has been dictated. In my own experience, it is preferable to round lessons off with some sort of communicative, personalised work, rather than on a 'drier' language point. The table below summarises the range of task types and language focus within the dictations.

Title	Topic	Dictation tasks	Language & other follow up
Explore	Climbing Everest (news item)	• Give students control • Key word dictation / dictogloss	• Homophones • US / UK spelling
Beauty	Child pageants (parent talking)	• Gist listening • Give students control • Wall dictation	• Collocations • Metaphor
Joke	Pretending to be busy at work (joke)	• Give students control • Gapped dictation	• Punctuation • Expand your vocabulary • Spelling
E-learning	Language learning with technology (advert)	• Jigsaw dictation	• Spelling & sound search (-able / -ence) • Compounding • Technological language
Success	Harold Pinter (bio & anecdote)	• Listen for specific information	• Phrases • Improve your writing (concession)
Cooperation	Extreme sports (description)	• Gapped text reconstruction	• Affixation • Exemplification
Imagination	Controversial British Artist Tracey Emin	• key words and image dictation	• Expand your vocabulary • Pronunciation word stress • Weblinks (Turner Prize)
Ability	Oscar Pistorius: fastest man on no legs	• student control • group dictation	• Get it right – ability • Expand your vocabulary • Avoiding offence
Vote	The political brain	• reconstructed dictation • translation dictation	• Language of politics • Word knowledge (vote) • Weblinks (US politics)
Nature	Greenwashing	• gapped dictation • reinsert key sentences	• collocations • pronunciation word stress • new words in English
Technology	File-sharing technology	• group tasks • dictogloss	• Improve your writing (connectors) • Get it right (issue vs problem) • Language awareness (technology)
Tradition	Australia and the Queen of England	• running dictation	• Expand your vocabulary • Dictionary quiz (Australia) • Grammar (the)

Further reading

If you would like to explore the area of dictation a little more, further practical suggestions can be found in *Learning Teaching* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan, new edition, 2005, pp.357-9), and in an article by Tim Bowen at the One Stop English website, www.onsestopenglish.com.