

Practical Dictation

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Dictation is a simple teaching technique that can provide much-needed structure and reinforcement for language learners. In addition, it can provide the focus to quiet a restless class or to pull together a distracted one. The dictation-based activities below are easy to prepare and correct and, because they have specific language objectives, are useful when it seems that you will never get through the syllabus and also get in the review and repetition that students need.

A pedagogical justification for dictation is found in *Dictation* by Paul Davis and Mario Rinvolutri (Cambridge University Press, 1988). The activities in this teacher resource book generally lead to pair and group work. A source of dictoglosses, as well as pedagogical justification for their use, is found in *Grammar Dictation* by Ruth Wajnryb (Oxford University Press, 1990).

Recall and Repeat (Davis and Rinvolutri)

In this exercise, the students themselves do the dictating.

Preparation:

1. Select a short passage (5-8 sentences) from reading materials which students have studied or will study. There should not be too many unknown words.
2. Make enough copies of the passage so that you have about one for every ten students.
3. Post the copies on the walls around the room. Students should have to walk in order to reach the copies.

Procedure:

1. Divide the students into pairs. Choose (or have students choose) one to be the messenger and the other to be the writer.
2. Make sure all writers are prepared to take dictation and that all messengers can move freely in the classroom.
3. Explain that the messengers will go up to the passage posted on the wall, remember as much of it as possible, and return to the writer to dictate it. The messenger repeats this as often as it is necessary to complete the dictation. The teacher only observes during this stage.
4. Ask the pairs to raise their hands when they finish. At this point, the teacher can examine the completed passages for errors while other students continue to work.
5. When the pairs are mostly done, refer students to the passage in the book, have some quick students write it on the board, give them copies, or show the passage on the overhead.
6. If it is a known passage, ask students what parts they found most difficult. If it is a new passage, discuss words or structures they had trouble with.

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Objectives:

1. Review structures and vocabulary from a previous lesson or introduce topic or vocabulary for a reading to be coming up.
2. Encourage students to pay attention to their pronunciation.
3. Have fun.

Observations:

1. Students may feel frustrated with their partners. Each role has its difficulties. They can change roles midway if they seem to want to.
2. Remind students that the ability to concentrate while others are making noise around them is an important skill.
3. Moving about the classroom in a purposeful way can give students a sense of responsibility.

Suggestions:

You might use this technique with the second stanza of a poem, with an interesting news story, or even with instructions or notices from you or the administration.

Dictation for Writing Practice

This exercise combines dictation and free writing to give structure to writing practice which will make it more satisfying for students and easier for teachers to correct.

Preparation:

Prepare a short dictation which introduces a situation such as in the examples below.

Procedure:

1. Read the first section through first to give students a chance to think about the dictation.
2. Re-read it (the first section only) one or more times at dictation speed.
3. Give students the instructions about what to write next.
4. When about half of the students have finished, interrupt. Tell the others there will be time to finish later. (You need to walk the fine line between some students losing interest and others feeling rushed.)
5. Dictate the second and then the third section giving time between them for students to write.
6. Have students exchange and read each other's papers.
7. If students are willing, have them share the best or most interesting responses.
8. Allow students to take the work home to finish and/or improve their first efforts or give them time to do it in class.

Example 1 (Intermediate):

My best friend smokes marijuana. I think that taking drugs is dangerous. I want her/him to stop. I told him/her that it is not a smart thing to do.

(Write the first few sentences of what you said to him/her.)

He / She was angry with me.

(Describe your friend's response.)

I felt sad. I went home and put on some music.

(Describe the music.)

Example 2 (Beginning):

I like to eat in restaurants. Sometimes, I go with my family.

There are many things I like.

(Write your favorite foods to eat in a restaurant.)

There are many things to drink, too.

(Describe what you like to drink.)

I don't like everything. For example, I don't like ...

(Describe something you don't like to eat.)

Objectives:

1. Give a specific focus to student writing.
2. Allow students of varying abilities to complete the assignment.

Note: While I am in favor of using English in the classroom even when giving instructions, it might reduce the frustration if the instructions are given in Spanish the first time that this technique is used.

Suggestion: You can set up situations in which the students have to write all future tenses, imperatives, etc.

Dictogloss (Grammar Dictation)

Students do not write the dictation word for word in this exercise. The content is given through the dictation and they provide the grammatical structures. Many passages for dictoglosses are found in Ruth Wajnryb's book, but I think you will find it more useful to create your own.

Preparation:

Prepare a short paragraph (4-6 sentences). Factual information is the easiest to begin with.

Procedure:

1. Divide class into pairs or small groups.
2. Briefly introduce the topic of the passage.
3. Have students just listen (pencils down) while you read the passage.

4. The second time through, students TAKE NOTES. Tell them they will NOT have time to write every word in the dictation.
5. Have the pairs/groups pool their notes and work together to write a paragraph that contains the same information as the original dictation. Emphasize that they do not need to use your exact words.
6. You can collect the passages to correct them for content and grammar, but you also can do it in class. Emphasize first the content, and then the grammar - not both at the same time.
7. To correct for content, you might have one group write up its first sentence. Ask if students see omissions in or changes from the original information.
8. After content has been dealt with, have students question sentences they feel might be grammatically incorrect and discuss. For more elementary students, you can walk around and identify incorrect sentences to be put on the board and discussed so that the grammar does not get too complex.
9. If you have students rewrite the passages, you should see improvements in structure inspired by other students' work.

Objectives:

1. Practice the use of the structural words, such as articles, prepositions, and auxiliaries.
2. Practice paraphrasing.
3. Focus on close reading (comparing exact meanings).

Example (Intermediate):

The Panama Canal

During the 19th century, settlers often traveled by ship from the east coast of the US to San Francisco. The ships sailed around South America, a distance of about 13,000 miles. The fastest ship took more than 120 days to make the trip. By the 1840s, the United States was interested in developing a shorter sea route. A canal was built across the narrow isthmus which connects Central America and South America. The 44-mile Panama Canal, completed in 1914, reduced the length of the trip to 5300 miles.

Dictation for Coherency (Davis and Rinvolucri)

This kind of dictation requires students to reassemble a story or other text which has a sequence. This develops a critical skill for reading –the ability to recognize the logical order of a reading, that is, its coherency.

Preparation:

1. Prepare a passage that has an internal order. For example, a story, a recipe for preparing scrambled eggs, an historical account or the directions to get from A to B. The first text you try with this exercise should have clear sequence signals. Number the sentences in a random order.
2. Prepare blank slips of paper. Each student should have one strip for each sentence in the dictation. If you can tolerate it, have students tearsheets of paper.

Procedure:

1. Distribute the slips of paper.
2. Randomly dictate the sentences of the passage WITH their numbers.

3. Have students reassemble the passage. You might have them work in pairs or even begin individually and check with a partner later.
4. As they finish, check their work. For good students who have made a mistake, simply shake your head. For students who have more difficulty, you can indicate specifically where they have made errors.
5. Early finishers can write the passage in their notebooks or search for alternative orders.
6. Try to get them to talk about why they made the decisions they did. This metalinguistic analysis helps them read better. If they can justify another order, all the better. Don't be inflexible.

Example 1 (Intermediate or introductory activity): A Bad Day

1. The afternoon was hot.
 2. The teacher was angry.
 3. I was late for school because there was an accident on the highway.
 4. My mother turned it off and made me do my homework.
 5. I was too tired to do my homework, so I started to watch a movie on TV.
 6. After school, I played soccer, but we lost.
 7. At lunch, I argued with my friend.
 8. Because of that, I fell asleep in history class.
- Suggested order - 3, 2, 7, 1, 8, 6, 5, 4*
Note: Placement of sentence 2 may be after either 3 or 8.

Example 2 (Advanced): The Long Arm of the Law

1. After that, Mr. Robinson stopped using drugs.
 2. The Los Angeles police took him back to California.
 3. In 1990 the Los Angeles police department started to use a computer to identify fingerprints.
 4. He moved to another city and worked hard.
 5. The police found the fingerprints of the killer, but they weren't able to identify him.
 6. He was tried for the murder and was sentenced, to life in prison.
 7. When the police found him, he was a successful businessman.
 8. They searched for Mrs. Rose's killer.
 9. They found the fingerprints belonged to Mr. Robinson.
 10. In 1963 Mr. Robinson was using drugs and was later sent to jail.
 11. In 1963 Mrs. Rose, a 43-year-old woman, was killed in her home in Los Angeles, California.
- (Suggested order: 11, 5, 3, 8, 9, 10, 1, 4, 7, 2, 6)

This is a real case and can lead to a discussion of justice. What should have been Mr. Robinson's punishment? Would it matter if we knew that Mrs. Rose had five small children? Or that she was an alcoholic with no family? or if Mr. Robinson had turned out to be a homeless bum instead of a successful businessman?

Suggestion:

This type of exercise can also be used at the sentence level. Individual words are dictated and students reconstruct sentences - maybe something for the beginning of class on Monday morning. Be prepared, however, for some students to finish while others are still spreading out the words.

The following are general recommendations for dictation activities:

- * Become familiar with the procedure before trying it out. Rehearse mentally what you will do and try to anticipate questions or problems.
- * Read the text aloud before doing it in class. Mark any problems you might have. I like to read the punctuation marks.
- * Be interested in the text. Let the students hear your interest. Make eye contact.
- * Walk around the room while dictating. Give the students in the back some attention for a change.
- * Plan ahead about what you will do with unfamiliar vocabulary. I write difficult proper nouns on the board as I dictate them. For common nouns, I sometimes use a “hangman” approach, that is, I put a dash for each letter of the difficult word and let the students guess.
- * Try to limit the scope of the correction to specific points. It is easy to spend too much time on correcting dictations in class and this can become boring.
- * Have a second activity to occupy the students who finish first.
- * Remember - try to find some way to use the dictation again now that students are familiar with it.

Conclusion

These dictation exercises are designed to give you a tool to present the language that students need to learn in yet another form. Students should be able to see the connection between the exercises and what they need to know. I hope you will enjoy using these activities in your classroom.

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References

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