Dictation

by Mario Rinvolucri, Pilgrims, Canterbury

Dictation would seem to have been and still to be a popular area of work with Italian teachers. At my plenary about half the 900 colleagues raised their hands when asked if they remembered taking down dictations at university. About the same number 400 to 500, made clear by a show of hands that they give their own students dictations.

This technique is one rich in memories from school experience. To tap these memories I asked people to take down this dictation, but writing with the hand they do not normally use:

"When I first went to school writing was very hard. I remember how clumsy and difficult it used to feel and still does now."

The exciting thing about this two sentence dictation is that people were writing about the process they were experiencing and some will also have been time-travelling back to childhood. During the short time the dictation took to get down I was aware of intense mental activity in the hall. (To find out more about 'loop input' in which process and intellectual content are parallel/synonymous, see Tessa Woodward's Loop-Input with Pilgrims Publications.)

Delayed dictation is one of the most normal, everyday versions of the technique; it's what you often do when taking down a phone message: you listen, check on anything that's unclear, put the phone down and write out a synopsis of the message. In Milan I told the group a sad story about how war shattered the peace of a peasant family. After the telling people noted down the most striking words or phrases in the story and then compared what they had put down with their neightbours' lists. Here are lists produced by two participants:

A	B
the trick	the mother
the child	the child
bedtime	the father
river	candle
suicide	shadow
came back	'come back'
shadow	pointed at the wall
	"he only comes at night"

The delayed dictation technique was here being used to get people to start an exchange on their different experiences of the story.

Since many teachers use dictation to help the students with their mastery of spelling in English the next technique shown dealt with 'sibling' correction . I dictated the first line of an African version of Exodus:

> "An de Lawd, He done go work hard for make all ting dey call um Earth....."

Each person took the sentence down and passed her paper to her neighbour. The person receiving the neighbour's text underlined any mistakes. I dictated the next bit. Each person wrote it down and passed her paper on in the same direction. Each person now corrected any mistakes in the first sentence and underlined any in the second ..... etc.....

At the end of the exercise I showed them a correct version on the OHP. It was amazing to watch 900 people who really wanted to check their own and their neighbours' spelling against the original. The earlier 'sibling' correction had simply whetted appetites for the real thing. It is not always easy to create a thirst after technical correctness - this exercise of Paul Davis's does so triumphally.

The last exercise suggests there is no reason why a student should take down

just what the 'dictator' says. In Contradiction Dictation the student takes down verbatim only things she agrees with. If she hears things that she is uncomfortable with she twists them round so that she can agree with what she has written. This may entail changing a modal verb or adding a negation. The changes may be more complex. The dictation I gave opened this way:

"Language teachers in Italy, mostly women, are immensely over-paid....."

The kernel of this idea (invented by Jim Wingate, John Morgan and Satish Patel) lies in it being a motivated form of guided composition done at high speed. People really want to change what they disapprove of and yet they do it within the language matrix presented by the teacher.

If you would like to find more ideas like those above for use with your students, have a look at Dictation by Paul Davis, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Breaking Rules in the Language Classroom

by Mario Rinvolucri, Pilgrims, Canterbury

I have a colleague who eats a pizza by starting at the side nearest to her and moving inexorably across the circle of pastry until, with her last mouthfuls, she demolishes the side furthest from her. My wife cuts her way into the heart of the pizza from the side nearest to her and eats all the good central bits first. She will often leave the outer, crusty edge uneaten. My strategy is different again: I eat all the way round the outside and leave the good, juicy centre of the pizza to the end.

All our behaviour is rule-governed and most of the time we do not notice the rules involved. They are powerful precisely because they are unnoticed. In my second session on rule-breaking the group looked at when they used Italian in the classoom and when English. It became clear that many different sets of

rules were involved. One participant reported that she uses Italian to:

set homework
give instructions
to correct mistakes
to explain grammar

Another person reported that she used English first and then says the same thing again in Italian (this with small kids) so that her lesson is like an English-Italian many layered cake.

A third colleague said that he used the mother tongue (this with adults) to show that it could also occasionally be used in his classroom and was part of the complex negotiation between him and the students. (He as a native speaker of English).

The interesting thing for you, gentle reader, to establish is what <u>your</u> rules for use of English and Italian in the classroom are and then to think of ways in which

a) you have modified them over time
b) you might be tempted to break them
c) you would <u>not</u> want to break them.

In the course of the two workshops we explored the rules governing teacher behaviour in a variety of areas, including:

- teacher use of territory in the room
- teacher use of voice in the classroom
- teacher-student discourse patterns etc.....

Let's take the use of voices: One colleague reckoned she used at least these voices:

a dictation 'cantilena'
a harsh voice for quelling riots
a soft understanding voice for talking to students in trouble
a clear, clipped voice for explaining language points

Why doesn't she have a go at breaking all the above rules and seeing what the results are:

- she could break the dictation 'chant' by denying herself a text to read from, composing as she goes along
- she could quell riots with a little bell, or a recording of Beethoven's 5th
- she could talk to pained students in a neutral voice
- she might try explaining grammar in a deep, seductive voice....

You may think the above suggestions are out of place. Avoid value judgements - try and think about breaking rules as a kind of scientific experiment. By breaking a rule you will find out a lot both about the thing you habitually do and the new rule you are trying to put in its place. Rule-breaking in the classroom is an attempt to shake us out of our ruts and routines.

I learnt this key idea from John Fanselow's brilliant, confusing book: Breaking Rules, Longman, New York, 1987. Let him have the last word:

"Ultimately I break rules, and invite you to join me, to see more clearly what we each are capable of and how our preconceived ideas sometimes limit this capability. If we realise how much is within us it is more likely we will be able to aid our students in coming to same realisation. Such conscious realisation, paradoxically, leads in my experience to more freedom, for as we become aware of a greater range of rules on a conscious level, we are able to use a greater range unconsciously....."