

Humanistic Uses of Dictation

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Dictation, to dictate, to get something down, to write under dictation, dictatorial are a set of words which may well bring to mind authoritarian parents, domination and submission. No wonder teachers down the ages have happily used this technique with their students both in Mother Tongue and in foreign languages!

The purpose of this short piece is to turn the word *dictation* on its head, to democratise it and to humanise. Your reading of the article will leave you with a handful of practical techniques that go beyond the Davis-Rinvoluceri book *Dictation*, Cambridge, 1989.

Polyphonic Dictation

The idea of a several -voiced dictation is one I learnt from Herbert Puchta, author of *Creative Grammar Practice*, Longman, 1993.

Step 1: Chop a text with a strong narrative thread into four equal parts.

Step 2: Split your class into four equal groups, each one clustered in one corner of the classroom. Ask for a volunteer from each group.

Step 3: The volunteer from group A goes and stands in the corner of the room diagonally opposite group A and dictates her text from there, across the room.

The other three volunteers also stand in the corner of the room opposite their groups.

All four volunteers dictate their texts simultaneously.

It looks like this:

Step 4: After the four simultaneous dictations, the students re-group in fours with one person from each corner of the room in each foursome. They then put the whole of the narrative text in order.

I can hear some readers objecting to the noise and “chaos” of the technique.

It is precisely this element that makes the technique linguistically valuable- here you have a very normal situation of having to listen to one person’s voice against a noisy, distracting sound background.

Herbert tells me that the four-voice dictation technique has worked a dream with teenagers in the Austrian State school system, and I remember I used it one hot, sticky afternoon to bring a jaded group of 60 freshmen back into a state of energy in a large fixed bench lecture hall in Ehime University, Matsuyama, Japan. Could you use the idea at upper primary level? Try it out and write and tell **its teacher magazine** how it worked.

Have you tried an **Air dictation**?

This is particularly useful with short texts for low level students. Ask the students to stand up and get ready to write large letters in the air in front of them. Here is a possible first text:

*I am writing in the air
I know when I can't spell a word.
Nobody else knows.
My mistakes are private.
Writing in the air is good.*

Give the air dictation twice. Then get a student to write the passage on the board. There are two groups of students for whom this technique is excellent:

- a) those who need to move their bodies in the English class, the very kinaesthetic ones.
- b) those who like to live inside their heads without having to eternally communicate with others and who dread public surgery on their errors.

I guess the technique will naturally appeal most to primary school colleagues but how about tired, sleepy adult evening classes?

Visualisation Dictation

With a well-knit group of upper intermediate students this sort of dictation can be a marvellous guided composition exercise. The following text might work with your group:

Dictate: *The wife died.*

Now ask the students to notice what picture this utterance brings to mind and write two sentences about their picture.

Dictate: *Her husband arranged a grand funeral for her, church bells, music, hymns and the sounds of weeping mourners.*

The students write about what they visualise. Two sentences.

Dictate: *Standing next to the husband was the woman's lover, convulsed with grief.* They write what they see in two sentences.

Dictate: *"Dry your tears," says the husband to his rival, "I'm seriously thinking or re-marrying!"*

Once the composition phase is over, the students get into groups of three and read their full stories to each other.

This is a fully humanistic exercise, as students are often surprised at each other's imaginative brilliance. We are here a long way from the mere technical process of turning oral into written text, which is what we all knew and loved as dictation in the

past.

Have you ever had an advanced class and given them an **Ambiguity Composition**?

Say nothing to the students about the sentences you are going to dictate having double of treble meanings.

Step 1. Dictate the first sentence and ask the students to write a sentence of their own before it and one after it, so that the dictated sentence becomes the middle one of a coherent paragraph. Give them the time they need for this writing. Here are some sentences you could use:

Do I understand you right/write?

I don't think he has any ties/Thais (the word ties has half a dozen meanings)

The teacher told the student she had failed.

She told him where to get off.

She had an excellent kitchen made/maid

He missed her.

Step 2: Group the students in threes and ask them to read each other's six paragraphs.

Step 3: Check that the ambiguities of each dictated sentence have been understood by everyone.

This activity is excellent with literal-minded advanced students who think that everything has a simple, unique answer. Here two students with very different understandings can be equally correct.

If you want more ready-made dictation techniques, then **Dictation**, CUP, 1989 could be the book for you.

I am continually delighted at how creative teachers are in the area of inventing new ways of dictating, so maybe you have some new ways that you might want to share with **it's Teacher Magazine** readers. For example, in a recent issue of the AISLI magazine, published in Italy, I came across the idea of a **Definitions Dictation**. You don't tell the students the word- instead you give them a definition or explanation.

So for egg, you would say: *What a hen lays.*

Isn't this a neat idea?

What joy there is in the bright ideas of others!