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Dictation Techniques

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If, at the start of my teaching career, you had told me that two guys would seriously sit down and write a whole book about *dictation*, I would have thought you were out to lunch, a bit mad. And yet this is what Paul Davis and I did in the late 80's, and Cambridge University Press brought out **Dictation** in 1989. A whole book on different ways you can give a dictation. The book is still around, so to write an article about the ideas that sit on its pages would be a waste of space. What follow are practical techniques that we have either learnt or come up with ourselves since 1989 and which are not in **Dictation**.

Do you sometimes want to boost your students' confidence in their ability to write English? Do you want to help them to produce a text that surprises them with the comparative excellence of its language? In that case why not try a **Sandwich Dictation** in which you tell half a story and the students tell the other half. Here's how it goes:

You dictate the first line: *It had not rained in the village for many, many months
The ground was parched and cracking open.*

Ask the students to write two sentences describing the village.

You dictate again: *All the men in the village went to the house of God to pray for rain. And the rain did not come. And the little girl watched all this happening.*

Ask the students to write two sentences about the little girl.

You dictate: *Three days later all the women in the village went to the house of God to pray for the heavens to open. And the rain did not come.*

Ask the students to write about two things the little girl loved doing.

You dictate: *Three days later all the old people in the village shuffled to the house of God wailing and crying out. They beseeched God to send them water. And the sun burnt in the sky and no water came.*

Ask the students to write one sentence about what the little girl felt about the drought.

You dictate: *The next day the little girl went to the house of God. She had*

her grandfather's umbrella with her. She prayed for rain.

Tell the students to finish the story.

Group the students in threes and ask them read each other their texts, reading your bits and theirs.

Students are often amazed at the excellence of what they had written. Their part of the text is naturally and unconsciously influenced by the correct language the teacher has given them, yet in many real ways the story they write is theirs.

Should you want more examples of this technique have a look at John Morgan's **Once Upon a Time**, where he has organised James Thurber's story, **The Unicorn**, for dictation this way.

Ideas to use with beginners

Maybe you teach beginners and want to give them basic writing and spelling practice?

Have you ever tried an **Air Dictation?**

Ask the students to stand up. Give them a five sentence dictation that they write *on the air* in front of them. Give them the dictation three times.

Go to the board and ask them to dictate the sentences back to you. In this way they confirm or disconfirm the hypotheses they may have formed while air-writing about the shape and spelling of certain words.

Have you ever tried a **Last Three Letter Dictation?**

Tell the students to only take down the last three letters of the words you are going to dictate and to leave the appropriate amount of space to the left of the letters they write. What they write will look like this:

...ptypty sat on a ..all,

...ptypty had a ... eat ..all

When the dictation is over, pair the students and ask them to fill in the missing letters:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

The point of this bizarre technique is to help the students to visualise the letters they do not write. Internal visualisation is the only sure way out of the irrational jungle of English spelling.

Have you ever tried the **First Letter + Number Dictation?**

Tell the students to only take down the first letter of each word and to write the number of letters in the whole word, so for example:

H 6 D 6 s 3 o 2 a 1 w 4

You need to dictate long words on their own, and short words in small groups.

At the end of the single letter + number dictation, get the students to pair up and re-write all the sentences.

Have you ever wanted to use intellectually full target language texts with adult beginners? To want to do this makes good psychological, motivational sense, but how can it be done technically? One answer is the **Bilingual Dictation**. To show you how this works we will pretend your mother tongue is English and your target language is Spanish.

So please take this dictation as best you can:

Claire Marsh, 18 años, was among a grupo of up to 12 jovenes who attacked a mujer de 37 años as she walked along a canal tow-path in July last año. Marsh was condenada to seven años in prison for her part in the ataque

(año= year grupo= group jovenes= youths mujer= woman de=of
condenada= sentenced ataque= attack.)

If you use this technique you will dictate a passage mostly in the students' MT with only some important words in English. Pair the students to see how many of them can correctly infer the English words from context. Give them time to check with you.

You may want to give the same dictation a week later, but this time with many more words in English.

This technique has a curious, geometric beauty if your students have a mother tongue like Arabic, that runs on the page from right to left. In reading the mixed language script the eye has to constantly change direction.

Is dictation only useful with low level classes? Paul Davis and I felt that this was not the case. A variant of dictation that works neatly at intermediate and advanced level is the **Democratic Dictation**. In this technique you invite the students to only write down that part of your dictated text that they agree with, which they can do by changing what you give them to fit their way of seeing things. Here is text I have used many times with upper intermediate people.

Women are the more fortunate of the two sexes. Men appear to have more power than women, but this is rarely the case. We were all female in the womb before some of us deviated and became male. Girls have easier childhoods than boys. They model on their mother, who is naturally close to them. Boys have to try and model on their father, who is much more remote from them. Women can choose to work or devote themselves entirely to their families. Women are allowed to show their emotions more than men. Women can retire earlier than men.

Women live longer than men. Which is the more fortunate of the two sexes?

In dictating a text like this you need to read the whole of sentence first and then dictate in sense groups, giving them time to re-structure the text their way.

At the end of the dictation tell them they have five minutes to re-jig or re-write the whole text, so that it properly reflects their views.

Get three or four students to read their texts to the whole class.

This is one of the best composition and editing exercises I know. Though the text comes from outside the students, they have to use hefty amounts of editorial gastric juice to digest it and make it properly their own.

I could offer you loads more techniques to use directly with your students and you will find plenty more ready-made stuff in **Dictation**. But the purpose of this article has been served if you now have a window open on the varied landscape of dictation, if you can now relax and realise that new forms of this basic exercise will pop into your head without you making any conscious effort. This is the marvellous way that language teaching methodology develops: it is rarely a scientific, step-by-step rational process. More often it is a female, intuitive, leaping and bonding way forward!

You may mis-understand the activities described above and so come up with a new activity.

You may wake up tomorrow morning with a dictation idea far better than those proposed here.

Irrespective of how you create new ideas it would be good to share them with colleagues, via the magazine, so send them in to the editor for publication.