

down?

Do the students only write down what is dictated?

Who corrects?

Should the students take down full sentences?

The dictation techniques I want to share with you come in answer to that last question. It became clear to Paul and ~~me~~^{me} that students might well take down parts of words, single words, chunks of sentence or sentences they decide to change as they are writing them down. In each case there needs to be a firm, clear teaching reason for wanting them to do what is proposed.

1. Taking down word endings

This technique was invented to cope with a Thai speaker who couldn't bring herself to pronounce word endings in English, especially if the word ended in a consonant cluster. She was, asked to write the words she heard in full if they had one, two or three letters. If they were longer than three letters she had to leave a gap and write down the three final letters of the word. At the end of the dictation she was asked to read the passage back. In these readings she inevitably focused on word endings and consonant clusters. Here's what one of her dictations looked like:

The ---tle -irl -ent out -nto the ---est, and --ere
she met a bad -olf.

This particular student wrote English rather well, so getting her to work on pronunciation from writing made a lot of sense.

Dictation can work either way: you can use it to help improve student's spelling or to help with her pronunciation.

~~4~~

Another technique that also works on pronunciation is this one:

- chop a short text into sentences, each sentence or clause on a separate slip of paper
- give the sentence-slips out to people in the class
- ask the student who reckons she has the opening sentence to read it out aloud.

Take it down on the board or the OHP exactly as she says it. Suppose she reads:

"Ze men took is at off." Then you write just that.

- Pause for the student to correct her sentence by producing the right sounds. Don't let the others come in unless she is stuck. When you hear the correct sounds correct the sentence on the board.
- The student who reckons she has the second sentence reads hers - again you take it down and so on.

It's good to choose a text with a strong story line and maybe a problem to be solved once the students have successfully sequenced the text. You'll find plenty of suitable texts for this exercise in the last section of Towards the Creative Teaching of English, by Spaventa L. et. al. Heinemann, 1980.

The teacher's role in the reversed dictation exercise is interesting. She does not 'teach' in the traditional sense, she just gives feedback by transmuting the student's sound problems into the written code, and then leaving the realisation entirely up to the student. The teacher has to be an accurate and quick-thinking technician. The person with the problem works on it. Who else can, usefully? This is a handy example

~~18-~~
2

4

of what Caleb Gattegno terms "the subordination of teaching to learning".

2. Taking down single words

The Connections Dictation is a way of getting students to think of gently unusual word fields and thus quickly introduce them to new vocabulary in the context of a word family where they already know some members.

This is what you do:

- explain to the students that you are going to dictate ten words that are connected to each other in a particular way. If, during the dictation, they suddenly see the connection they are to shout out and explain.

- here are two sets of words:

TEAR-LICK-LINE-LOVE-OPEN-SEND-BOX-YOURS-PEN-PAL-STAMP (Mail)

PICTURE-TURN OVER- BUTTON-INTERFERENCE-CHANNEL-ZIG-ZAG- PRESENT-AERIAL-CABLE-SATELLITE-DALLAS (Television)

The next step is to get the students to prepare their own sets of words and dictate these new ones to each other. A fantastic, free way of enriching vocabulary.

During the task the student's mind is partly focused on the business of getting the words down on paper, but much more of his thought is concentrated on making connections between the words. We have found that the basic decoding and re-encoding work of dictation is done better when the student has to accomplish

a second, higher level task in parallel. Students in language classes commonly only use a tiny bit of their brain-power so double-focus exercises are a way to increase the use of student potential from 5% to 15%.

Single word dictations can serve as a lead-in to other activities. In Once Upon a Time, CUP, John Morgan proposes the very fast dictation of a string of key words. The words should be spoken so fast that no student can possibly get them all down. The students grumble and groan. They then consult each other. Finally someone comes out and builds up as complete a list as possible on the board. The students work in small groups building up a story of their own around the words. Morgan proposes these words:

- village
- emigrate
- marriage
- absence
- pregnant
- shame
- attack
- destruction
- birth
- deep well
- suicide
- incubation

3. Taking down as much as they can

Traditionally the teacher decides how to chunk a dictation passage. In this technique the individual students do their own chunking. Here's how it goes:

- 6
- ~~182~~
- you read the passage through once
 - you then tell the students you will read for them to write - you will go on reading until some one shouts 'Stop'. You will only start reading when some one either says: 'Go on' or 'Go back to ...'

You know how a group taking down a traditional dictation can seem to be in a sort of hibernation? This is certainly not the case when you use this idea of Tessa Woodward's.* Most students love the power reversal of the situation. They turn you on and off joyously like a tape-recorder. Since some people write faster than others there can be competition to wind you forward or wind you back. Fun for the teacher too.

4. Changing what they hear

Why should students take down what is read out to them as it stands? Maybe they don't agree with it. In Fall 1987 I had an entirely female class of students in Cambridge UK. I dictated the following passage to them but asked them to only write down the bits they agreed with. Things they disagreed with they had to edit and change sufficiently for them to find them acceptable.

Here's the passage I spoke to them (I had carefully avoided preparing the text ahead of time, so as to give it the spontaneity and spring of oral text):

"The most privileged group in West Europe are women. They earn as much as men and yet happily demand long periods off work to have babies. Men do more than half the housework nowadays. Women get their pensions sooner than men and live longer. Women are lucky to have many

* Tessa is editor of The Teacher Trainer, Pilgrims, Canterbury, UK.

part time jobs open to them. Since these pay badly, women don't get greedy. I wish I were a woman."

At the end of the 'dictation' I told them they might want a few minutes to edit their new text into coherence (they had not had an overview of the whole text dictated and so had had to react to my nonsense at sentence level). People then compared texts, and with considerable interest.

This is a creative exercise in guided composition and editing. The dictation is merely a mechanism to this end. The work was guided particularly by the syntax I offered in my original piece. Most of the students opted to work within that syntactic framework.

I think my own pleasure in this exercise stems from its provocative nature and from the power to reject it offers the student. Of course the same frame could be used in a non-provocative way. You could dictate a description of how you get up in the morning - the students modify your words to be real about themselves. A more peaceful version of the same frame. ~~To my mind less exciting.~~

This contradiction dictation idea came up at a brainstorming meeting on dictation at Pilgrims in Canterbury^{UK} in summer '86.

A second exercise in which students change what they see before they put it down is Ambiguity Transcription:

- Tell the students you are going to flash up single sentences on the OHP. They are to take them down as fast as possible in their mother tongue. Do not

~~8~~ 8

mention that some of the sentences may have more than one translation and that all of them have more than one meaning.

- Here are some sentences you might use:

We met him leaving the room

Mary thinks of John with nothing on

She saw the man in the park with the telescope

It's a dangerous medicine cupboard

The architect drew her a bath

He seemed nice to her

He taught African literature in English at Lagos University

I love children but I can't bear them

Poor people like us

Have you heard what the French Government is going to do with Andorra?

- Ask the students to up and mill about the room, comparing their translations to several of their classmates. In a multi-lingual class they compare their reading of the original sentences.
- Go through the sentences making sure that everybody has realised some of the ambiguities. One way is to ask questions like:

"In the first sentence, who left the room?"

"Who was naked?"

"Who was using the telescope?" etc....

I particularly like this exercise because it helps people to get into the habit of playing with language and weans them off feelings of poker-faced certainty they may have about language.

The

Ambiguity ~~transcription~~ ^{exercise} can also be done as a dictation providing you have sentences that are ambiguous when spoken:

"she made her dress" has three meanings whichever way you say it or write it, but

"Poor people like us" has to be read one way if like is a preposition and another way if like is a verb.

~~"Manu ist was er issi" can only be used in the dictation format.~~

Finding new ways of using age-old activities

can joyfully accept the request for dictation and offer my students a rich variety of ways of doing them.

Dictation is not the only 'ancient' idea in language learning and teaching that is crying out for a new methodology. How about translation? There is no denying that translation is an inevitable and necessary mental stepping stone in the learning of a second language, certainly in a school setting. It was never more so than in the days in which it was officially banished from the classroom by teachers who had discovered how inefficient and dysfunctional it was. While I leapt about miming a word like although to a multi-national class, bi-lingual dictionaries were surreptitiously searched and the word was understood. Translation worked and still works. The sad thing is that it has no reasonable, person-centred methodology to usefully integrate it into language learning. An exception to this generalisation is the way that translation is used naturally and smoothly in both Suggestopedia and Community Language Learning.

~~Alan Duff, who has co-authored several brilliant methodology books with Alan Maley, is hoping to bring a book out on the methodology of translation in 1989 with Oxford University Press. As far as I know, though, his book will focus on the teaching of the skills of technical and literary translation to students who already have fair mastery of two languages. It will not be mainly about the use of translation in the process of learning a second language.~~ Some one urgently needs to devise exercises that make use of the natural urge to translate in the early stages of language learning.

Another area that urgently needs to be endowed with a viable methodology is rote-learning. All over the world teachers and students of language regard this as the core task in learning a language.

All over the world obstinate Westerners try to convince colleagues and students that language must be learnt "communicatively". The way to reach the Arab colleague who is sure that his students must learn vast chunks of language by heart is to join him, not oppose him, and the joining must be powerful. What techniques could we draw from the work of Neurolinguistic Programming (Bandler and Grinder) to improve Koranic-style learning, learning by rote? How could we help with the visual memorisation that is needed by anybody learning Kanji or the characters of Chinese? Can we draw on the tricks of the trade used by traditional story-tellers to carry a vast repertoire of stories in their heads? How do actors lap up and retain acres of written text they then produce orally?

What other strong, basic areas of language learning behaviour need to be enhanced by new, well thought out methodologies? Over to you, fellow readers of FORUM.

Note : If you would like to try out more dictation techniques, have a look at Dictation, Davis and Rinvoluceri, Cambridge Univ Press, 1988.