

To Jane Arnold Sevilla

The Humanistic Exercise

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

Perhaps a good way of starting this chapter is to show you how it is possible to take a traditional language manipulation exercise and change it so that it becomes more person-centred and human. It is often enough to change one detail. The earliest concrete reference I have found to the practice of giving dictations in the L2 classroom is from the mid 19th century, though I suspect the technique is far older. As it stands the traditional dictation may be linguistically useful but is not very personally involving for the students.

One way of usefully transform~~ing~~ing the technique is to hand over the pacing of the dictation to the students. The teacher explains that she will behave exactly like a cassette recorder: she will start reading when ordered to do so and she will read on until a student calls STOP ; she will not start reading again until a student calls START. The third command the students need is GO BACK TO.....AND READ.

This apparently small change has strong interpersonal results as, within the frame of the game, the teacher loses her role of dominant parent which opens the way for the students to control the speed of the reading and the number of repetitions they ask for. Since some students want to press ahead fast and others need to go back over a given set of words several times, a friendly tug-of-war can develop. One change of a procedural detail changes a purely language-focused exercise into one with

interesting psychological content too. The exercise has been mildly and playfully humanised.

Another perhaps more radical way of working with dictation is to remove the teacher's voice from it altogether, leaving the students the task of both giving and writing down the dictation. In this adaptation the students work in teacher-free mode and depend heavily on each other.

This is what happens in the classroom. The teacher puts up several copies of the same short text on a wall outside the classroom a few metres away from the classroom door. The students are asked to work in threes. Person A in each three goes out and reads the text on the wall in the passage and memorises the first sentence or a part of it. He then goes back and meets person B from his team of three and says the sentence to her. A and B meet just inside the classroom door; B is not allowed to go out into the corridor or to read the text on the wall herself. Person B goes to where C is seated in the classroom and dictates what she has heard from A.

One third and ^{then} two thirds of the way through the exercise the three students swap roles so that each takes a turn at reading and transmitting, at hearing and dictating, and at writing down,

You now have some picture of what the exercise looks like in the classroom so let us have a look at some of its features:

a) physical movement: for 15 to 20 minutes two thirds of the students are reading, speaking and listening to the target language while standing, walking and running.

For some students the introduction of movement into the language classroom is a

boon since they only learn efficiently while moving and doing. Such people are easy to spot in a classroom: they twist in their seats, they foot-tap, they fidget and play with things on their desk - it is clear that they are possessed of a suppressed need to move; for them sitting still through a whole school day is a sort of imprisonment.

Such people find this exercise a real freeing-up, an invitation to do things their own way.

One of the amazing things that I remember from my own school days is that I learnt two modern languages without ever moving from a seated position. It was quite a shock to go to Spain at 16 and realise that Spanish people speak their language while climbing ladders, while propping up a bar, while walking across a square or while lying in bed.

b) inter-personal energy : the threesomes find themselves working in a state of considerable inter-dependence which in its turn generates communicational energy. If the reader at the wall reads wrong or pronounces what she has read incomprehensibly, then she may be seen to be letting the other two down. If the "middleman" mishears or twists what he has heard then Number 3 is going to make heavy weather of getting a decent version down on paper. Given the work the other two have done, No 3 usually feels a pressure to try and get the spelling right. The desire to pull together as a team is heightened if the threes suddenly see themselves as being in a speed and accuracy competition with the other teams. All of this generates a good level of inter-personal energy : there can often be a feeling of buzz and go in the room.

While what I have said above is true for a good number of the students I have tried this exercise with, the exercise will naturally high-light interpersonal problems among

the students, as will any technique that requires inter-activity. If the person doing the writing down is a poor speller that may exasperate the middle person. Often the better speller will help the other but sometimes they get pissed off, feeling that the other person's level is just too low. If two of the students in a given triad do not get on well together the exercise will sometimes bring out their mutual intolerance.

This is well worth saying as the humanistic exercise is not a panacea and does not suffuse the classroom with nothing but sweetness and light. It offers people a positive frame in which they will express whatever they feel, including negative stuff.

Multi-sensory work : provided the students play roles A ,B and C they have the chance to work in the three main sensory channels. The middle person works mainly in the world of sound, listening as accurately as she can and then repeating a moment or two later. [of course she may well change the auditory text she receives into a visual linguistic representation, which she then mentally "reads off" as she dictates.] The reader at the wall will retrieve the text visually and then will "carry" it visually or auditorily or both before saying it to the middle person. [I have known students who reported carrying the text as a feeling , rather than as visual or auditory text- some students report carrying a picture of the situation , rather than a picture of the words.]. The scribe student will receive the text auditorily and then set it down kinaesthetically, though often having visualised the words first.

The only senses the exercise does not normally bring into play are smell and taste.

Making sure that students can work visually, auditorily and kinaesthetically is an important part of the humanistic teacher's attempt to reach them from all angles.

c) freedom from the teacher : in the “ running dictation “ exercise the students are working within their own resources and they are not structurally dependent on the teacher at every move. The teacher is there to help if called upon to do so by a student and quite often the reading-at-the-wall student will want help with this or that vocabulary item. The teacher becomes an optional resource for the students, not the fountain of all knowledge and not the upward focus of their attention.

To use a family metaphor, the teacher is no longer in role as the ~~omni-present~~ mother, she is more like the mother on the park bench who is freely available if the toddler comes running back to her.

d) freedom for the teacher : since the exercise has the students as the main actors, and only requires the teacher to stay available as a language resource person, it leaves her with ample time to do her main job : observation. It was Caleb Gattegno who said that the students should work on the language and the teacher should work on the students. “Running dictation “ offers a frame in which the teacher can do just that. The exercise is a very rich one for a discerning observer as it allows them to observe the same person playing three different roles.

Here are some questions that an observer might want to ask and answer about the way the student carries out the three role tasks:

1. What do I see her doing as she reads at the wall before transmitting a morcel of text to No 2?
2. How does she walk?
3. What is her voice like as she says the text to No. 2?

4. When she takes the “middle person “ role , how does she seem to be listening/
5. How does she speak to No.3 , the scribe?
6. How , precisely, does she help No 3 with spelling difficulties?
7. When she is the seated scribe, how does she write, physically ?
8. How does she spend the time between the bits of dictation she has to take down ?
9. What questions might I want to ask her to find out more what goes on inside in parallel to the external things I have observed?

The above are offered as a potential reference frame and are not intended as a prescriptive set of “right questions “. A particular teacher may well want to focus her attention on quite different observation points.

In the first section of this chapter we have looked at ways in which language manipulation exercises can be enriched by allowing them to slip away from teacher domination and become a trigger for vigorous group life. This principle is a central one for the humanistic teacher who is required to work with the pre-set exercises of a typical coursebook : many of the drier activities can be humanised in just the kind of way proposed above for diversifying dictation.

(for more exercises of this sort see Davis and Rinvoluceri , DICTATION, CUP, 1989.

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FACILITATING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

For the past thirty years (point of writing: 1997) teachers from the humanistic movement in EFL have drawn widely on the different therapies and on other communication fields like drama and business training. In so doing they have become increasingly aware that possessing interpersonal communication skills is a considerable advantage when a learner is grappling with a language not yet his own. A person who has disciplined , whole-person listening skills has a clear advantage when approaching listening comprehension in a foreign language. A person who , unconsciously or consciously , gets good rapport with most of his interlocutors has a clear head start in getting his meaning across even at an elementary level in the target language. In the late nineties the EFL teacher had available a large number of exercises that help sharpen people's communications skills.

The best way of giving you an idea of what I mean is to give you a brief look at two such exercises.

1. Empathetic listening

- The students group in threes.
- The teacher asks one person in each three to volunteer to be interviewed
- The teacher asks each interviewee to offer ~~the~~ the two interviewers in each triad a couple of topics she is happy to be interviewed on.
- The teacher explains that the interviewers will fire questions at the interviewee for 90 seconds while she will concentrate on remembering all the questions asked, and this without writing. and without answering- The 90 seconds questioning goes ahead and then the interviewee has as she wants to answer all the questions previously asked.

- In the second and third rounds of the exercise each person takes the interviewee hotseat, using the procedure outlined above.

Central to humanistic work is the willingness and ability to listen to the other person as closely and loyally as possible. This does not come naturally to most learners or to most teachers. When a teacher first introduces an exercise like the one above there are people in the group who complain that their freedom is being restricted, that the exercise shape makes it difficult for them to fantasise and free associate and project as they would normally do when listening. The point of the deferred answers activity is to get the hot seat students to focus on the questioners' texts, as they are in themselves, without there being time for them to elaborate internal dialogue answers.

If the teacher can persuade some of her students that learning to listen to what the person is actually saying is worth doing, then she has marvellously improved their acuity as foreign language listeners. She has also put them into a more useful category of social being.

2. Voice pacing

A group mirror activity

Imagine a classroom with the furniture pushed to the side. The learners are standing in a circle and the teacher asks them to imitate as closely as they can her gestures and

movements.

When they have got into the rhythm of this she asks them to also echo the words she is about to say. "To echo" means to speak the words not much more than a syllable behind her. She then tells a simple story with ample use of movement and gesture and the whole group mirrors and echoes her. When this is done well you get an extraordinary impression of the group's power and unity, and the sounds and rhythms the learners produce, even at beginner level, are remarkably near-native.

This exercise is one that Bernard Dufeu uses in *Language Psychodramaturgy* (see *TEACHING MYSELF*, OUP, 1996) and is one of several that foster a strong sense of group belonging and intra-group communication.