
Why Use Dictation? A Rationale and Some Variations

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In their interesting and highly useful book Dictation, Paul Davis and Mario Rinvolucri discuss audience response to a question they ask at teacher training workshops: “How many of you use dictation in your classes?” A few participants raise their hands, seemingly reluctantly, at first. When the question is repeated more hands go up until perhaps half or more of those present have indicated they make use of dictation in some fashion as a classroom activity. Davis and Rinvolucri use the anecdote as a jumping off point for making the case for a “new methodology” in dictation. But their story also seems a tidy way to summarize changing perceptions of the value of dictation as an English language learning tool over the last 50 years or so. After a period of general disfavor during the heyday of the audiolingual era of the 1950’s and 60’s, a number of articles have appeared touting dictation as a helpful language teaching technique (Brown and Barnard, 1975; Ong, 1977; Speer, 1980; Morris, 1983; Keh, 1989, to name several). Since the appearance of these and other writings, and similar to the gradually rising number of hands at the Davis/Rinvolucri workshops, dictation has slowly regained a measure of its prior popularity. To give an idea of some of the purported benefits of dictation as seen by methodologists in the field, the five articles from above will first be briefly summarized. This section will be followed by a presentation of some specific variations on dictation, with several examples of materials I have developed and used in the classroom. The point is simply to use the summaries and my own experience with dictation (and its variations) to support the idea that it remains an underappreciated and perhaps underused classroom activity.

A Brief Overview of Dictation - Some Benefits

The traditional dictation, for which a passage is read out three times (the first time for listening only, the second in short chunks with pauses during which students write, the final time for checking), has been the subject of a great deal of controversy over the years. Commentators have argued such basic questions as whether dictations are teaching or testing devices, and what, if anything, they teach or test. Morris (1983) has some relevant ideas concerning these issues. Her article is worth focusing on as it seems a good snapshot of the kinds of points made by those who see dictation as a useful practice.

Morris begins her article with four quotations which serve to point up some commonly held beliefs about dictation: (1) dictation is a test of spelling; (2) dictation is a testing, not a teaching device; (3) dictation does not measure listening comprehension skills; and (4) as a testing device, dictation is uneconomical and imprecise.

Using an error analysis procedure, based on traditional dictations administered to three groups of EFL learners, Morris draws some conclusions about the types of errors made (comprehension, meaning, structural, spelling). Her analysis suggests that dictation as a testing tool has a fair bit of value well beyond that of spelling, and that, overall, much has been revealed “about the language proficiency of the learners, and in a most economical way, as the dictations took a short time to administer and mark” (page 122).

Based on the kinds of errors made in her study, Morris goes on to comment on the usefulness of dictation as a teaching tool. She concludes dictation can help train students in essential listening skills:

- (1) picking out main points for overall comprehension
- (2) developing intensive listening by listening to words in sense groups
- (3) developing short-term memory through processing at speed
- (4) using context clues to eliminate structural and grammatical errors resulting from mishearing
- (5) spelling

Speer (1980) reiterates several of the points made by Morris and stresses that dictation is not a passive activity but one that requires active listening on the part of students. He also believes the value of dictation can be increased through a variety of presentation techniques. In addition to standard dictations, he suggests preassigned dictations (students are given a passage ahead of time to study), dictations based on timed readings, listening clozes, and transformations (“I’ll read some sentences. Write them down, change the verbs from the present to the past tense.”).

Brown and Barnard (1975) offer a framework for dictation as a lesson focal point. They advocate three stages to obtain maximum learning value out of dictation: (1) exercises to prepare for dictation, (2) the dictation itself, and (3) checking. Brown and Barnard like the fact that dictation makes students work under a time constraint and that dictation correction can be done in a way to give students immediate feedback on errors.

A useful variant on dictation, the dicto-comp, is discussed by Keh (1989). As she points out, the activity is not a new one, and can be utilized in different ways for different purposes. Citing Gorman (1979) and Riley (1972), Keh defines a dicto-comp as an activity that “combines text dictation and text reconstruction.” Students hear a passage all the way through several times and must write down as accurate a version as possible. Where they cannot reproduce exact words or phrases, they must attempt to supply substitutes that fit in context. As Riley (1972) states:

To the extent that they reproduce the original passage, the students are writing a dictation. To the extent that they must use their own words to fill in memory gaps, they are writing something akin to a composition (page 22).

Keh lists a number of benefits in using the dicto-comp. Grammar structures, vocabulary, and organizational concepts for writing can be presented in context. And besides overall listening practice, the activity, as part of a process approach to writing, requires summarizing and paraphrasing skills.

Ong (1977), like Speer, advocates variety in presentation of dictation. One of his suggestions is the “following-discourse technique,” which trains learners in ordering of ideas. This particular exercise is played on a tape recorder. A sentence from a passage is heard on the tape and listeners must choose from three possible continuations. After the possible continuations are heard, the teacher can stop the tape and discuss with students what the best answer is. Students can hear the continuations several times if they are unsure about meaning. The students (perhaps working in groups) decide on an answer and write it down. The teacher continues the tape and students hear the correct continuation. Students mark and correct their own sentences. The process is repeated, with students choosing continuations until the passage is finished. (An example of the following-discourse technique appears in Appendix A).

Even the surface examination of dictation presented here must make it clear that a number of practitioners consider it to be a flexible and worthwhile language learning technique that can be used in a variety of ways for differing teaching aims. By themselves, the five articles discussed above offer a nice selection of reasons supporting the use of dictation. A list of these reasons might look something like what follows.

- 1 Students are active in both the listening and correction phases of dictation.
- 2 The opportunity for multi-skill practice is provided by dictation.
- 3 Dictation is useful as a review of old material, or an introduction to new material.
- 4 Students can get quick feedback on errors and can make their own corrections.
- 5 Students work under a time limit.
- 6 Dictation helps develop short-term memory skills.
- 7 Students, through exposure to grammatically correct sentences and quick correction feedback, are “acquiring” grammar.
- 8 Training in basic listening skills, including intensive listening, is offered.
- 9 Dictations do not have to be difficult to prepare or correct.
- 10 Dictation offers variety in presentation and thus, perhaps, has a decent chance to maintain student interest.
- 11 Dictation offers training in the sound/symbol relationship of English.
- 12 Dictation can be used to focus attention and interest in a following skill or text-based activity.

The next section, with its dictation variation examples, should further illustrate how much variety and flexibility use of dictation can offer.

Variations in Dictation

The examples of dictation activities to this point place most of the control in the hands (voice?) of the teacher. This isn't necessarily bad, but if one can look beyond the idea of teacher-centered dictation only, the possibilities for variety expand greatly. "Who dictates?" is one of the basic questions asked by Davis and Rinvoluceri (1988) as a way of looking at dictation in a new light. Some other questions they pose:

- Where do the texts for dictation come from?
- How long should the text be?
- Should the listener write down everything?
- Who corrects?

The following "new" variation dictation techniques and the materials provided as examples answer these questions in a number of ways. In keeping with more current methodological trends in ELT, the techniques and materials tend to be integrative. They were used with Japanese college students between 1996 and 1998.

1) *Pair dictation*. This is an activity done in groups of three, with two students acting as readers/repeaters and one as an observer. To begin, two students in the group each get a sheet of paper with alternating sentences from the same contextualized passage. The first sentences on each sheet are read aloud and the students decide who has the proper first sentence of the passage. The student with the first sentence reads it aloud. Student B listens, repeats exactly first, then writes out the sentence as a dictation. Once Student B is finished writing, he then reads out his first sentence to Student A. Student A listens, repeats perfectly, then writes. A and B alternate back and forth until finished. They then exchange their handouts and self-correct their dictations.

The third student in the group acts as an observer, making sure of three things: (1) that the person doing the reading looks up while reading, (2) that the repeated utterances are perfectly correct (this is important—if the student doing the repeating cannot get it right, both he and the reader have to devise strategies to make the repetition more manageable), and (3) that sentences, for purposes of repetition, are divided into no more than three chunks. Once the students get the format down, the observer can be eliminated and students can do the exercise in twos.

A pair dictation seems a good activity for a number of reasons. A passage at the appropriate level of difficulty can be worked up without much trouble. In relation to reading texts,

pair dictations can be used in several ways. They can be used as an introduction to a particular reading passage; sentences can be taken verbatim from the text or simplified/paraphrased (especially if the material is too difficult) and can be chosen on the basis of grammar points or vocabulary the teacher wishes to stress. Pair dictations can also be used for review purposes. Having students do a pair dictation based on a passage they have covered previously will hopefully serve as a reinforcement for the material covered in the earlier lesson.

The activity is a truly integrative one, providing practice in speaking, reading, writing and listening. Starting off with shorter sentences (with easier words), my students began by handling pair dictations of 80-100 words (40-50 words each) in a 60-minute class period. By the end of the term, they were up to about 70 words each, with many of the words and structures much more difficult. The fact that the longer sentences have to be broken into chunks for students to successfully repeat them is good for training readers and writers to look at words in groups and find where natural break points in sentences are. The activity also encourages accuracy in speaking due to the fact that sentences have to be repeated exactly before being written down.

When putting together a pair dictation, it is important to remember that the alternate sentences from the passage be balanced, that is, about the same length and same level of difficulty, so students will be working equally hard. Once the students know the techniques, all the teacher has to do is monitor; a good break from excessive teacher intensive lessons.

This activity was introduced to me by a lecturer from the British Council. I have not seen any literature on this precise technique. (An example of a pair dictation appears in Appendix B).

2) *Repetition/Clarification dictation.* This activity combines dictation and practice with classroom language for repetition and clarification. To start things off, the teacher can write some sentences on the board used to ask for repetitions or to make things clearer:

- Could you repeat that please?
- Sorry, I don't understand. Could you say that again?
- Can you speak a little more slowly? I didn't get what you said.

- I don't understand the word _____.
- What does _____ mean?
- How do you spell _____?

The sentences above can be practiced in whatever fashion seems appropriate. Student pairs are then given handouts that review the classroom language from the board and with 4 different sentences each. The sentences have one underlined new word along with a meaning for the new word. Students must listen to their partner's sentences, use language for repetition and clarification when they don't understand, and write down the 4 new words and their meanings as dictation. As an example, a decent student conversation might go something like this:

Student A: Here's my first sentence. "Short-term profit is not the most important thing for most Japanese businesses."

Student B: Can you speak a little more slowly? I didn't get what you said.

Student A: Okay. "Short-term profit is not the most important thing for most Japanese businesses."

Student B: I don't understand the word "profit." How do you spell "profit?"

Student A: P - R - O - F - I - T

Student B: (writes down the word profit) What does "profit" mean?

Student A: It means "gain" or "advantage."

Student B: Could you repeat that please?

Student A: "Gain" or "advantage."

Student B: (writes down the meanings) Thanks. I understand.

At the end of the activity, each student should have 4 new words and their meanings written down. To check what the students have written, the whole class can come together and the teacher or students can ask questions about the words and their meanings. This activity offers speaking practice in useful classroom language, reinforces or introduces new vocabulary (the words can be vocabulary that has been studied earlier or is completely new), and includes a dictation component. (An example of the activity appears in AppendixC).

3) *Vocabulary Matching dictation.* This activity serves as a vocabulary review, gives practice in useful classroom language and has both a teacher and student-centered dictation component. The teacher first reads out a list of previously studied words. The students write the words. After spelling is checked, students try and match words with meanings. The task is tricky because they are only given half the meanings. When they have matched what they can, they find a partner who has the other meanings. In pairs, students ask for the meanings they don't have and write the meanings on their papers. They then finish the matching together. To ask for and give the meanings, students are given a short dialogue:

A: What meaning do you have next to blank # _____?

B: The meaning I have is _____.

(Student A writes in the meaning; note that if Student A doesn't understand, he/she can ask for repetitions, spellings, etc.).

(See Appendix D for an example of this activity).

4) *Group dictation.* This is an activity students seem to enjoy quite a bit. The teacher puts the students in groups of 4 or more. Students first listen to the dictation all the way through without writing and try to understand what they hear. Then the dictation is read in parts, with students writing. After writing each part, students pass their papers around a circle to others in their group. The pattern of listen, write, pass your paper, is repeated until the dictation is finished. Students then work together to correct the papers they end up with. Students seem much more animated in dictation correction of this type because each dictation has been written by all the members of the group. In particular, weaker students are not put on the spot if the dictation has been difficult for them. Students are correcting each other but in a completely unthreatening way. Fairly routine exercises taken straight from the course textbook can be spiced up a little bit using this technique. For example, true/false sentences from the book could first be used for group dictation. Troublesome vocabulary could be discussed after correction, and then the students could stay in their groups and do the book exercise. The group dictation lead-in might focus student attention on the true/false exercise a little more than usual.

5) *Wall dictation.* This type of dictation is quite simple and, as the name implies, involves putting a dictation on paper on the wall. Students get out of their seats, come to the wall, read, remember as much as they can, then go back to their seats and write. They can go back and forth as often as they like but must write at their desks (no writing allowed at the wall). Experience suggests that, if possible, it's best to put the dictation on a wall outside

the classroom. This makes the activity a little more of a challenge as a short-term memory exercise. As a variation on the above, students can do this dictation in pairs. One student acts as a reader/reporter, while the other stays at the desk and writes. A line can be drawn at the halfway point on the dictation paper, and the students can then switch roles. When the pairs finish, the teacher can give them a copy of the dictation to use for self-correction. As a final check, the teacher can tell the students to read out from their corrected papers. This variation adds an information transfer step to the activity and allows for some speaking practice as well.

For wall dictation text, among other things, classroom communication messages seem to work well. For example, information about homework assignments or tests is the kind of thing students really need to know and pay attention to. As a first day activity, a shortened version of the course syllabus used as a wall dictation might sink in a little more than a teacher-fronted speech.

6) *Dictation quizzes.* I have used dictation as parts of, or as whole vocabulary quizzes after completing reading units. An involved discussion of vocabulary acquisition is beyond the scope of this article, but dictation would seem to be of use in this area, at least as a checking mechanism. Before the quiz students are given a list of 20 words or so to study. Because the words come from the same reading unit, many may be part of a word network. (For example, a chapter on acupuncture might contain a number of words connected to medicine: “treatment,” “diagnose,” “therapy,” “cure,” etc.). In any case, students will have already encountered a fair number of these words in 3 or 4 different situations, perhaps, for example, in a teacher-fronted pre-reading chalk talk, as part of a meaning-from-context book exercise, as a synonym matching item in a class handout, or an end-of-unit game. For the actual dictation, I use sentences (with a generous number of list words) that are similar to but not exactly the same as sentences from the main reading in the unit. In traditional fashion, sentences are each read out three times: first at regular speed, second with pauses so students can write, a third time for checking. For error correction, one half a point is taken away for up to any two errors, excluding sound-similar spelling, punctuation, and capitalization mistakes. There is a maximum of three points for each sentence. This may seem a less than rigorous grading system, but it appears to work for my students, many with working vocabularies of under 1,000 words, TOEFL scores below 400, and no opportunity to take even a basic course in writing. What convinces me that the system has some merit is that most classes come through with a nice range of scores from the 90's on down, with even most of the weaker students able to pass. In this instance, with these particular students, dictation offers flexibility as a grading tool.

Conclusion

In doing some of the research for this article, it struck me that there is a relatively small amount of recent literature in the field of EFL devoted to dictation. The Davis/Rivoluceri book, Dictation, cited several times earlier, an occasional journal article, and EAP books in particular give the technique some primacy. But despite some acknowledgement of what it has to offer, dictation is currently not a “hot topic” in ELT. If dictation is as useful and adaptable a language learning tool as has been suggested here, then it continues to be a teaching/learning activity that has not received its due.

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Appendix A: Following-Discourse Dictation

(**Note - For this activity students would hear the possible continuations on tape, then write down the best answer; they *would not* have the continuations to read and choose from, although these are written for the sample exercise below).

(Toronto, Saturday) Lazlo Marks and his dog Toto went down to the lake yesterday for a short sail.

a) Marks left Toto on the pier at 10, and before 11, a storm blew in.

- I. It was a clear sunny day.
- II. The boat overturned and Marks, a poor swimmer, was in trouble.
- III. Marks dove into the lake.

(II = logical continuation)

b) The boat overturned and Marks, a poor swimmer, was in trouble.

- I. He swam quickly to shore.
- II. He stood up in the boat and shouted to Toto for help.
- III. He caught hold of the boat, but it quickly sank.

(III = logical continuation)

c) He caught hold of the boat, but it quickly sank.

- I. Toto jumped into the water and swam out to his master.
- II. Marks continued to hang on to the boat.
- III. Toto saw what had happened and sat calmly on the beach.

(I = logical continuation)

d) Toto jumped into the water and swam out to his master.

- I. They were glad to see each other.
- II. The two fought their way back to shore.
- III. They swam further out into the lake

(II = logical continuation)

e) The two fought their way back to shore.

- I. Marks was worried because he had lost his keys.
- II. Marks was unconscious by the time they reached the beach.
- III. Marks felt stronger as they swam closer to the beach.

(II = logical continuation)

f) Marks was unconscious by the time they reached the beach.

- I. The dog ran to the nearest house and brought help.
- II. Toto lay down and rested.
- III. Marks called home to tell his parents he was okay.

(I = logical continuation)

g) The dog ran to the nearest house and brought help.

- I. Some children on the beach looked at Marks and Toto.
- II. But the people who lived at the nearest house weren't home.
- III. At Toronto hospital, Marks said, "I thought I was finished...."

(III = logical continuation)

h) At Toronto hospital, Marks said, "I thought I was finished...."

- I. "I learned something important: the weather can change very suddenly."
- II. "I know now that I'll never go swimming without bringing my dog."
- III. "This has taught me a lesson: never go out in a boat without a lifejacket."

(III = logical continuation)

(i) "This has taught me a lesson: never go out in a boat without a lifejacket."

And Toto? He got his reward. Marks brought him the biggest steak in town.

(Adapted from M. Walker: Step Ahead 3: An English Course (Addison Wesley, 1984)
The main text is taken directly from the book, Page 58. The distractors and the exercise format are my own.))

Appendix B: Sample Pair Dictation

(**Note that Student A has sentences 1, 3, 5, and 7, while Student B has 2, 4, 6, and 8).

Student A

Stamps, books and coins are common kinds of things that people often collect.

There are clocks in every room of his house, including the living room, which is surrounded by shelves filled with clocks.

His wife complains every day about the work she has to do, for it is not easy to dust several hundred clocks.

In her opinion, however, there is something even worse than dust and noise.

Student B

But the strangest collection I have ever seen belongs to a man who owns 1,555 clocks.

As there is not enough room for so many clocks, the man has filled several trunks and stores them in the basement.

Noise is also a problem, as each clock keeps its own time and chimes can be heard throughout the day and night.

Even with so many clocks around, she never knows what time it is.

(Adapted from Frankel, M.A. and K. Thamongkol (Eds.) : Foundation Reading I, Book 2 Chulalongkorn University Press, 1980-1984)

Appendix C: Sample Repetition/Clarification Dictation

Below is some language you can use if you want something repeated or made clearer because you don't understand.

Repetition (when you want something repeated)

- Could you repeat that please?
- Sorry, I don't understand. Could you say that again?
- Can you speak a little more slowly? I didn't get what you said.

Clarification (when you want something made clearer)

- I don't understand the word _____.
- What does _____ mean?
- How do you spell _____?

*** Look at the sentences below. Make sure you can pronounce the underlined words. Find a partner and take turns reading your sentences. Ask for clarification and/or repetition if you don't understand. *Write down the words and the meanings of the words you don't understand.*

Student A

- 1 In Japan, self-service gasoline has not yet appeared in any *significant* way.
(major, important)
 - 2 The Japanese see service as what holds *commercial* connections together.
(business)
 - 3 The service *mentality* is strong in Japan.
(way of thinking)
 - 4 If customers are not happy with a company and its products, they may *abandon* the company.
(leave behind, forget, desert)
-

Student B

(**NOTE: Student B gets the same paper as student A but has four different sentences with underlined words, as below).

- 1 Short-term *profit* is not the most important thing for most Japanese businesses.
(gain, advantage)
- 2 Service in Japan is *plugged* as free.
(advertised, promoted, said to be)
- 3 When you try to use a new computer, you will probably need to check an owner's *manual*.
(book of directions)
- 4 Japan *clings* to the idea that personal service is important.
(holds on strongly)

Appendix D: Sample Vocabulary Matching Dictation

Student A

Directions: First, write the words you hear. Then match the words with their meanings by writing a number in the blanks. Be very careful; you only have half of the meanings. (Don't worry, you'll get the other meanings later).

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------------|-----|---------------------------------|
| 1 | ___(peripheral)_____ | ___ | outer space, among the stars |
| 2 | ___(autobiography)_____ | ___ | |
| 3 | ___(interstellar)_____ | ___ | a symbol that looks like a star |
| 4 | ___(biography)_____ | ___ | |
| 5 | ___(autograph)_____ | ___ | your life story written by you |
| 6 | ___(astronaut)_____ | ___ | |
| 7 | ___(perimeter)_____ | ___ | away from the center |
| 8 | ___(biography)_____ | ___ | |
-

Student B

(**NOTE - Student B gets the same directions as Student A and would also get the same words).

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------------|-----|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | ___(peripheral)_____ | ___ | |
| 2 | ___(autobiography)_____ | ___ | a person who travels to the stars |
| 3 | ___(interstellar)_____ | ___ | |
| 4 | ___(biography)_____ | ___ | the area around |
| 5 | ___(autograph)_____ | ___ | |
| 6 | ___(astronaut)_____ | ___ | signature |
| 7 | ___(perimeter)_____ | ___ | |
| 8 | ___(biography)_____ | ___ | story about a person's life |

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