

Teaching English using dictation

Some of you may remember dictation from your school days with pleasure. To some it may have felt boring, while some may have found it an encouraging exercise.

In most cases, the teacher probably read you the passage, dictated it and then read it a third time so that you could check through it.

To many people this and nothing else is dictation.

However, there are many different, useful and engaging exercises which can be done with dictation.

In general, we can say that dictation can be good for the following reasons:

- 1) The students are never passive during the exercise, since they actively produce language writing it down;
- 2) The students are active after the exercise, especially if the activity includes self-correction or collaborative correction;
- 3) Dictation can lead to oral communicative activities (see some of the examples below);
- 4) Dictation fosters unconscious thinking: the higher their level is, the less their mind is occupied with the dictation and is freed up to think of other things (triggered by the dictation);
- 5) Dictation copes with mixed-ability groups if it includes some group activities (see again the examples below);
- 6) Dictation deals with large groups: actually there are no limits to the number of students that can be involved in it;
- 7) Dictation often calms groups: during the dictation everybody is silent and concentrated;
- 8) Dictation can be easily controlled by the teacher, as regards the speed, the text to choose, etc.;
- 9) It is a technically useful exercise, since English is not phonetic and students get used to spelling vs pronunciation;
- 10) Dictation obviously develops the listening skill;
- 11) Dictation can give access to interesting texts, which can be also used for other activities.

In the following pages you will find some interesting examples:

- Dictogloss
- Correcting mistakes
- Picture dictation
- Passing the buck
- Build up a story

Dictogloss

Dictogloss is a dictation activity in which **students are asked to reconstruct a text** (usually not very long) by listening to it and noting down key words, which will then be used as a base for reconstructing the original text.

Example

The teacher starts with a brainwashing activity, giving the student a topic (e.g. modern cities).

After some time, the teacher explains the task and reads them a short text on modern cities at normal speed. The students just listen.

Then the teacher reads the text again at the same speed as before, and the students take notes, trying to write down key words.

Now the teacher divides the class in groups and in each group the students reconstruct the text, which they finally read to the class, comparing it with the original one.

Dictogloss is clearly a multiple skills activity, as students practise listening, writing and speaking (by working in groups). Besides, they need to use vocabulary, grammar and discourse in order to complete their task.

Correcting mistakes

This is a very different kind of dictation. Here the teacher reads a **passage which contains mistakes**, and the students' task is to write down the text correcting the mistakes.

This can be done while writing or immediately after.

Example of a text containing mistakes:

Last summer I travelled at England for to learn English.

I was there since three week and I stayed with a host families, which lift in a small town next to the beach.

The family was a very sympathetic and the host mother cooked extremely good.

Every morning I went to school by feet, and there met many other students in school canteen.

My lessons were much interesting and the teacher told about the history of the England.

I have had a great time and I'll visit England again soon.

This is also a multiple skills activity, since the students practice listening and grammar at the same time. However, some teachers criticize this kind of activity because they say that some mistakes may be assimilated by the students.

Picture dictation

Picture dictation can be a very funny activity, especially with younger students.

The idea is that the teacher describes a picture and the students draw what the teacher is describing. At the end of the activity it can be extremely fun for the students to show what they have drawn.

Example

This is just a skeleton description, you can make it more descriptive by adding lots of adjectives such as colours, etc., or you can simplify it even more for very low-level students if necessary:



In the middle of the picture there is a small house.

The house has a door and two windows.

On the roof of the house there is a chimney.

In the top right hand side of the picture there is a very big sun.

Beside the house and under the sun there is a little hill.

On top of the hill there is an apple tree.

In front of the hill there are a little girl and a little boy skipping.

In front of the house there is a garden path.

In the left hand side of the picture there is a big pond.

There is a small toy boat in the pond.

There is long grass all around the pond.

In the top left hand side of the picture there are two clouds.

Below the clouds there are two big birds flying.

Passing the buck

This is another exercise you can use with any text to **encourage self-correction**. It is particularly interesting in the way it avoids the impression that one student is being “marked” by another.

Have all the students sit in a circle (or a similar arrangement to this that your classroom allows). Each student should have a blank sheet of paper and a pencil and a rubber. Dictate the first sentence or phrase of the text to the class. All the students will write it down.

Once the students have finished writing, tell them to pass their paper to the student on their right. They underline any mistakes they think they can see on the sheet they have just received. They do NOT correct them.

Dictate the second sentence. The students again pass on their paper to their right when they have finished. This time they underline any mistakes in the second sentence AND correct any mistakes in the first.

After giving them enough time to finish their task, dictate the third sentence. Make it clear that each time the students finish taking down a sentence they should pass the paper on and underline mistakes in the last sentence and try to correct all the mistakes in the previous sentence, avoiding hold-ups.

Finally the students can work alone or in small groups correcting the text they have ended up with until they are satisfied that they have a correct text.

Since the text written by each student is distributed over many sheets of paper, this exercise is cooperative and non-judgemental.

Build up a story

This is not exactly a dictation activity, but since it involves some dictation we have put it here. Besides, this is an activity for high-level students.

The teacher dictates some words in a specific order, like for example the following ones:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. <i>Advertised</i> | 7. <i>Shouted</i> | 13. <i>Fired</i> |
| 2. <i>Interviewed</i> | 8. <i>Ran away</i> | 14. <i>Couldn't manage</i> |
| 3. <i>Invoiced</i> | 9. <i>Went</i> | 15. <i>Reported</i> |
| 4. <i>Cheated</i> | 10. <i>Tried</i> | 16. <i>Sued</i> |
| 5. <i>Delivered</i> | 11. <i>Returned</i> | 17. <i>Felt</i> |
| 6. <i>Searched</i> | 12. <i>Looked for</i> | 18. <i>Had</i> |

Once you have finished dictating the words to the students, ask them to check in pairs if they have the right words.

Next, in small groups, ask them to compose a story. Explain that there are some rules they have to follow when composing their story:

1. They have to use all the verbs in order and in the past (as shown above)
2. They have to form one single story and can only use the verbs given

Allow 15 to 20 minutes for students to come up with their story. After, take feedback from the groups.

This activity encourages students to use only what is given to them and to work as a team to form a story.