



Dictation is one of the oldest language teaching activities. It is perhaps for this reason that it has been neglected recently by teachers, claiming that it is too teacher centered, uncommunicative, boring and old-fashioned. But is dictation without any merit? Is it really old-fashioned and uncommunicative?

What is dictation?

Dictation is a decoding-recoding activity. It is the act or process of dictating material to another for transcription. Oller (1979) defines it as a "psychologically real system that sequentially orders linguistic elements in time and in relation to extralinguistic context in meaningful ways." Three elements are involved in dictation:

- **Filter:** it has the task of screening out unnecessary information.
- **Organizer:** it subconsciously processes information although some errors may remain.
- **Monitor:** it is responsible for conscious editing. The insecure learner may use

the monitor more.

- The merit of dictation has been underestimated for a long time. Here are some of the common objections to this activity.

Objections to dictation

It might cause high affective filter especially for "frightened", "insecure" learners.

It doesn't require any talent nor information on the part of the teacher.

It's only the aural skills that are developed in dictations.

It is old-fashioned, boring, uncommunicative and teacher centered.

Although some of these objections may be true, dictation is an activity that has been both misunderstood and misused.

The value of dictation

Most of the criticism towards dictation is not valid. One can easily detect many advantages in carrying out this activity.

Dictations can be fun if the passages are chosen carefully in a way that causes laughter and amusement.

It is an integrative activity that involves all the skills.

- Listening: as the passage is dictated for students to transcribe.
- Writing: when students write down the dictated material.
- Reading: as a follow-up students may read the passage first silently to check for mistakes, then loudly to practice pronunciation.
- Speaking: when the passage is used as a starting point for a discussion activity.

Dictation activity can be used as a basis for error analysis to spot areas of

What is dictation? And, why we take dictation?

weakness and strength as well as build on the errors detected to prepare future lesson plans. This yields interesting conclusions about students level of proficiency although this may demand extra effort on the part of teachers.

Teachers can vary the way dictation is delivered to involve learners.

Variations of dictation

The imagination of the teacher may give free vent to the way dictation is carried out. Instead of having the teacher dictating the passage for students to write down, teachers can find alternative ways to implement the activity.

Students may work in pairs with a short passage for each. They first read it silently (teachers assistance is possible at this stage) and then taking turns to dictate the passages for each other.

Before students see the original passage, students work in groups to check for mistakes.

Teachers need not prepare long passages. Separated sentences or words can be also used to carry out a dictation.

Teachers may prepare a short paragraph and dictate the sentences in disorder. Next, students check for mistakes in pair work or group work. Later they are told to put the sentence in the correct order to form a paragraph.

Students may work in pairs. One student is assigned the role of the writer and the other the role of the 'runner'. The short passage is put on the wall. The runners have to go to the text and return to their partners having memorized the first line of the text, which they dictate. They keep returning to the text until they have dictated the full text to their partner. The role can be swapped halfway through. Their text is then compared to a correct version and corrected.

Teacher can play the role of a human tape recorder. As s/he reads the text, students call out instructions such as 'Stop', 'Rewind', 'Play', 'Decrease speed' etc. This gives the students the opportunity to control the speed of the dictation

What is dictation? And, why we take dictation?

and the amount of repetition.

Dictations can be carried out in the form of a “dictogloss”. It requires the students to only take notes of the key words used as they listen and then later reconstruct the text so that it has the same meaning as the original text although perhaps not exactly the same form.

These are variations of dictation, you may think of other forms of this activity. Only your imagination is the limit!

Giving and scoring of dictation

When I choose to test students in the form of a dictation activity, I follow these steps:

The first reading is at normal speed. The testee just listens.

The second reading is divided into thought groups or phrases. The testee writes the text. Sufficient pauses are allowed between phrases.

The testee checks the passage while 3rd reading is done with short pauses at the end of each sentence.

Last reading is at normal speed allowing students to gain confidence.

When I score the dictation I sequence the passage into phrases (usually 10.) where each phrase is considered a single item worth a point. Phrases must be totally correct to deserve a point.

Conclusion

What is dictation? And, why we take dictation?

Dictation is one of the oldest activities. Nevertheless, its merits are invaluable. Teachers gain a lot by depicting language areas that should be addressed and learners actively build their language proficiency.