

The Joys of Dictation!

By Sarah Sahr

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Call me old fashioned, but I love using a good dictation lesson with my adult learners. (I think the students love it, too.) I would argue that dictation is one of the greatest activities to encompass all four language skills: Students listen to the words. Students speak for clarification. Students write the words. Students read to self-check. Dictation can be used as a quick check on student progress. The instructor can “gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of each student,” (Alkire, 2002) and plan subsequent lessons accordingly.

Some benefits of dictation

- Dictation has *real world* applications: phone messages, bus schedules, etc.
- Dictation utilizes higher levels of thinking.
- Dictation can be viewed as developing note taking skills for university classes.
- Dictation exercises student’s short-term memory.
- Dictation can be used at any language level.
- Small classes or large classes, dictation can be an incredibly engaging activity.
- Students can self correct. (adapted from Alkire, 2002)

Dictation as filler

A filler is a short activity that has educational value but is quick to set up and execute. Every teacher should have several fillers in their bag of tricks. Dictations are excellent fillers. Have students keep a small notebook for these types of activities. Here are some real life examples you can use:

Filler Activities

1. Appointments

Read the times and dates. If you repeat them (as you should) you can vary the format (for example “two fifteen p.m.” and “quarter past two in the afternoon” or “Monday, May 7” and “Monday, 7 May”)

- a. 2:15 pm, Thursday, 25 June
- b. 4:40 pm, 12th January
- c. 12 noon, Wednesday 27 April
- d. Saturday, the 19th of August, 2:05 am
- e. 5:50 pm, 01/05/08

2. Flight Schedules

I find it’s best to read flight times in the 24-hour format (for example “oh-seven-forty,” “thirteen-thirty...”) because most tickets are actually printed that way.

- a. departs Paris terminal 2A 12:25, 3 May, flight AF 157
- b. Arrive Quito, 07:40 4 May
- c. Wait in Transit Lounge C

- d. Depart Jakarta, 11:45, 4 May, flight TH263
- e. Arrive Sydney 13:30 4 May

3. Money

Change the currencies as you wish. You could also introduce the international currency abbreviations (GBP, CHF, USD, JPY, EUR, etc) if appropriate.

- a. 97 ¢ (cents)
- b. ¥5,630,000 (yen)
- c. 367Fr (Swiss Francs)
- d. £200.50 (pounds)
- e. €250.00 (euro)

4. Names

You'll need to spell the names out... especially names from non-Latin script language into English.

- a. Mohamoud Yousif Kafood
- b. Sir Athie Houghey
- c. Tigist Abebe
- d. Miss I. E. Pastel
- e. Edger Allen Poe
- f. Thao Xuan Linh Nguyen

5. Numbers & Symbols

Obviously, this is great for math classes. Read each question as a calculation. There are suggested dictations for you, but feel free to read the equations as you wish. Please be sure that students are familiar with the order of operations: Parenthesis, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, Addition, Subtraction (PEMDAS). Ask students to calculate the answer. If they've heard you correctly, the calculation is very simple. Don't read out the answer (which are shown in brackets []).

- a. $(17 \times 2) + 6 [=40]$
Seventeen times two plus six
- b. $1,000,602 \text{ ft} + 901,000 \text{ ft} [=1,901,602 \text{ ft}]$
One million six hundred two feet plus nine hundred one thousand feet
- c. $(60 \times 2) / 10 [=12]$
Sixty times two divided by ten
- d. $10\% \text{ of } \$724,510 [=\$72,451]$
Ten percent of seven hundred twenty four thousand five hundred ten dollars
- e. $1,050 + 100.5 [=1,150.5]$
One thousand fifty plus one hundred point five

6. Telephone Numbers

Students should be able to reproduce the groups, not just the numbers. In other words, if you read "00-1-23-45-67-89," the students should not just give you "00123456789" as the answer. When you repeat then, you can vary the delivery. For example, you could say "three, three, three" or "triple three" or "three double three" if you wanted to be particularly awkward.

- a. 44-30-699-7310

- b. 212-973-0065
- c. 0480-940-3336
- d. 19-66-2-221-4024
- e. 08-0369-1229

Substantive Activities

These activities take a bit more time to explain and produce. Where fillers can take as few as 5 minutes, these activities are designed to take 15–30 minutes. The trick with using dictation correctly is to get the students to multitask or use higher levels of thinking: synthesize, evaluate, analyze (Blooms, 1956).

These activities are meant to be a bit more challenging. If they aren't, step it up a bit: read faster, use a different accent, or only give the information once or twice.

1. A two day in four

This exercise is for listening and vocabulary building. It can be adapted depending on level or subject. The example below uses general vocabulary and is in the past simple and past continuous.

Write a list, such as the example below, on the board or create a transparency for the overhead projector:

- | | | |
|----------|------------------|----------|
| 1. blue | 3. Elvis Presley | 5. in |
| 2. snowy | 4. August | 6. horse |

Once completed, explain that you are going to dictate a story and when a number is read out, the students must write the word from the list on the board that corresponds to that number.

It was a 2 day in 4. I was 5 the cinema and I was drinking some Coca-Cola. Suddenly the phone rang. It was 3...

The students should have written something like:

It was a snowy day in August. I was in the cinema and I was drinking some Coca-Cola. Suddenly the phone rang. It was Elvis Presley...

The exercise does not work when the students read the piece as they have time to change the word to fit the sentence. Enjoyment is in discovering how the story can be ridiculous but still respect the rules of grammar and punctuation (think Mad Libs).

Another alternative could be for students to list the following words at the top of their papers:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. your favorite color | 4. your favorite girl's name |
| 2. adjective for the weather | 5. your favorite month |
| 3. your favorite singer/actor | 6. your favorite transport |

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 7. your favorite animal | 12. your favorite action (-ing form) |
| 8. your favorite food | 13. your favorite object |
| 9. your favorite place | 14. your favorite drink |
| 10. your favorite article of clothing | 15. an emotion |
| 11. your favorite shop | |

Once completed, dictate the story like the one below, but when a number is read out, the students must write the word from their list.

It was a 2 day in 5. I was at 9 and I was drinking some 14. Suddenly, the phone rang. It was 3 and friends. They were 15 because I was late. So, I put on my 1 10 and picked up my 13. I made sure that 4 the 7 had some 8 and left. I quickly travelled by 6 and went to 11. When I arrived, I was surprised to see my friends were 12 there!

Make it a bit more challenging... don't allow student to write down their favorites first. When you call a number, challenge students to look at the board (or overhead projector), find the right category, decide their word and write it down. This will force students to think more "on their feet."

2. Running Dictation

Adapted from Ewing & Huguélet, 2009.

This can be very motivating if used correctly and not very often. Take a short text that is appropriate to the level, rich in vocabulary and or illustrative of a grammar point you are working on. You could use the opening paragraph of a text you want the students to work on, using this technique as a means of introducing the topic.

Divide the class into groups of three or four students. Hang a photocopy of the text outside the classroom or more than one copy at various places along the interior classroom walls. Taking turns, each student goes to the story and reads/memorizes a sentence (or two, if they can). The student goes back to their group and tells their sentence(s). A different student should write down what is being said (students dictating to students). Groups reconstruct the story, sentence by sentence.

This activity can be used as a game: the group that is first to complete the dictation or the group who has the least errors wins. Groups can also trade papers to check for errors.

3. Dictogloss

This dictation tests students' memorizing and summarizing skills. Start by asking the students not to write anything as you read the dictation (normally a single sentence but varying in length and complexity according to the level of the group). Read the sentences twice, maybe even three times, but no more than that. Once you think they are ready, ask them to summarize what they heard.

In this activity it is important not that they replicate the original sentence word for word but that they produce a piece of English that closely reflects the sense of the original sentence and that is in line with the structure used in the original.

One way to follow up is to ask them to pool their ideas in groups until they come up with a composite answer that they are all happy with.

Mix it up a bit... the teacher can read the first sentences. Have students dictate sentences as well. This could help them with their own pronunciation.

4. Dictation of first or last consonants

Search for a piece of text that is high in words with difficult-to-pronounce first or final consonants. Read the dictation to the students and have students only write the last two or three letters/sounds of each word down.

For example, you could read the start of [Hansel and Gretel](#):

Once upon a time a very poor woodcutter lived in a tiny cottage in the forest with his two children, Hansel and Gretel. His second wife often ill-treated the children and was forever nagging the woodcutter.

Students would write:

oo / ah / a / t / a / v / p / ... (or something similar)

or

nc / n / a / m / a / ee / r / ... (or something similar)

After you have finished you get the students to compare their work and make any corrections. Then, you can put them into groups to try and recreate the piece.

References

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