

**Speaker:** Joanna Herbert

**Talk:** *Dictation is back!*

*Dictation has been around for a long time but it's not the most seductive of classroom activities. This session aims to give dictation a face-lift in an attempt to make it more attractive to both teachers and their learners. With little preparation, dictation can be a versatile and effective tool for working on accuracy and fluency in all four skills.*

**Speaker's Biodata:**

Joanna Herbert has been working in EFL since 1993, having taught children, teenagers and adults of all nationalities in the UK, Japan and Spain. After many years at International House in Madrid, Joanna now teaches at the Liceo Francés in Alicante. Joanna is actively involved in teacher training, is a regular speaker at ELT events and a published author (ByME).

INTRODUCTION

Dictation is a language teaching activity and testing device that dates back to at least the 16th century, so it has been around for a long, long time. It is not surprising, therefore, that the word *dictation* is synonymous with 'old-fashioned' and 'boring'. Many teachers consider it a relic of the Grammar-Translation method that dominated English language teaching up until the 1980s, before the appearance of the Communicative Approach. And for many learners, dictation brings back unhappy memories of dull, difficult and uncommunicative language lessons, where the focus was purely on accuracy.

However, if we reflect for a moment on what dictation actually does, then we will see that it can be an extremely versatile activity. First and foremost, dictation practises listening and writing skills. It also gives practice in the sub-skills of writing, from letter formation to spelling, punctuation and lay-out. In addition, it practises vocabulary, syntax and grammar. Where the writer reviews his written work, dictation also practises reading. And if the dictation is approached in a slightly different way, the speaking skill can be practised, too. **With a bit of imagination, dictation can be an effective classroom tool for working on both accuracy and fluency in all four skills.**

*"For the English learner, dictation is a technically useful exercise. Decoding the sounds of English and recoding them in writing is a major learning task. In teaching other languages to non-native speakers, Spanish, for example, dictation is relatively less useful because the relationship between the sound system and the spelling is not particularly problematic."*

Davis & Rinvolucri (1988)

- **'Silent Letter' dictation**

Prepare a list of 10-20 words that all contain at least one silent letter. Dictate the words to your class. Students do not write the words, just the silent letter(s) in each word. For example, dictate the word *sandwich* and students write the letter 'd', dictate the word *knee* and students write the letter 'k', etc.

- **Homophone dictation**

Homophones are words pronounced in the same way but are different in meaning, and may or may not be spelled the same. Homophones are one of the main reasons why people make spelling mistakes because they confuse words that sound the same but mean something different.

This activity can be used to highlight: *to / too / two, there / their / they'e, it's / its*

Dictate a number of sentences containing the chosen homophones. Depending on your students' level, they can either just write the correct homophone or the complete sentence.

1. *I don't have anything to do.*
2. *We get two 20-minute breaks at school.*
3. *You should go to the doctor if you don't feel well.*
4. *Can I come too?*
5. *I've got two exams tomorrow.*
6. *I hope the maths exam won't be too difficult.*

- **'Beep!' dictation**

This activity is particularly good for reviewing prepositions, and even phrasal verbs with higher levels. Prepare ten sentences that each contain a preposition that you are going to 'beep'. Get your class to work in pairs and give each student ten small slips of paper. Dictate the first sentence and beep the preposition instead of saying it. Each student has to guess the beeped word and write it down on their slip of paper, without conferring or showing it to their partner. When everyone has written down their guesses, on the count of three, students have to show their slip to their partner. If both Student A and Student B have written down the correct word, they keep their own slip of paper (1 point each). If Student A was correct but Student B was incorrect, Student A keeps both slips of paper (2 points for Student A). If neither Student A nor B were correct, neither of them keep their slip of paper. Instead a reserve pile is set up – the next person to beat their opponent wins all the slips on the reserve pile! The winner is the person who has the most slips of paper once all the sentences have been dictated.

- **List dictation**

Find an interesting short story and underline 10-15 key words. Dictate these words to your class but do not read them the original story yet. Using all the words, in their original order and in their original form, the students must now write their own stories. Finally, the students read and share their stories. You can also read them the original story. Will anyone have a story similar to the original one?!

- **'Jumbled words' dictation**

This activity can be used for presenting new vocabulary. Students have to use their knowledge of the 'shape' of English words and spelling patterns.

Write the new words (which you hope to pre-teach later) on the board but jumble the spelling. Dictate the words and children have to find the word, 'unjumble' it and write it down. When correct forms have been seen, these words can be taught.

- **'Jumbled text questions' dictation**

Choose a text, write 5–8 questions on it and jumble up the word order. Dictate the questions to your students and they find the correct question (jumbled) and reconstruct it. Once they have all the questions, check that they are correct before reading the text and answering them.

- **Graded dictation**

Many teachers complain that they have problems dealing with classes that are mixed ability. In order to give all students the chance to benefit from their lessons, it is vital to take into account their differences and plan lessons or activities within the lesson accordingly. A graded dictation is one way of doing this because everyone works on the same text at a level they find comfortable. Students who are stronger get a blank (or almost blank) sheet of paper to write the dictation on. Students who need some help get a blanked copy of the text, and students who need a lot of support get a copy of the text but with various possible options. They listen to you dictate the text and circle the correct options.

- **Collocation dictation**

This activity works well with adjective + noun collocations. Prepare different groups of 3-5 adjectives which collocate with a particular noun. Dictate the groups of adjectives and ask your students to write down the first noun they can think of which fits with each of the adjectives in the set.

*easy, pocket, prize (money)*

*frizzy, greasy, grey, wavy (hair)*

*derelict, haunted, dream, semi-detached (house)*

*bad, cheerful, foul, good, optimistic (mood)*

- **Mutual dictation**

Choose a text and prepare it so that both Student A and Student B have the continuous text but only half of it each. Students face each other in pairs. Student A has the version A text and Student B has the version B text. Student A starts dictating while Student B writes and completes his text, then Student B continues dictating while Student A writes. They continue like this until the text is complete. Finally, students compare their written work and check for accuracy.

- **Opinion dictation**

This activity is an appropriate pre-debate warmer. Ask your students to prepare three columns in their notebooks. They label the first column 'I agree', the second column 'I disagree' and the third column 'It depends'. Dictate a number of statements on different debate topics.

*Football players earn too much money.*

*You can't have a happy family life and a successful career at the same time.*

*Girls are better students than boys.*

*Television is the leading cause of violence in today's society.*

*Motorbikes are more dangerous than cars.*

*Everybody should speak English in today's world.*

*Life without my mobile phone would be awful.*

Once you have dictated the statements, get students to discuss in pairs/small groups what they have written down and why. Rather than forcing your teenage students to start speaking immediately on a particular topic, this activity gives them time to think and then more time to rehearse their opinions in private before going 'public'.

- **Student-controlled dictation**

In most dictation activities, it is the reader who usually controls the speed of the dictation. In this activity, it is the writers who control the speed of the dictation. Tell your students that you are a living CD player with all the normal buttons: *pause, rewind, forward, stop, play*. Tell the class that they can control your reading. Start reading the dictation text until someone asks you to pause or stop. Stay silent until someone asks you to rewind or play. The students must take control of the speed of the dictation. This takes a bit of getting used to but it is a fun activity to do with secondary students. Finally, hand out copies of the dictation text so that students can compare what they have written with the original text.

- **Picture dictation**

A picture dictation is a fun activity which requires minimal preparation. All the teacher needs is a simple easy-to-draw picture and all the students need is a blank piece of paper. Describe your picture to the class while students just listen and try to 'see' it visually in their minds. Then describe your picture again, this time slowly, one object at a time, and repeat each description two or three times. It is important to give students enough time to finish drawing one object before moving on to the next description. If possible, walk around the classroom, looking at the students' pictures to see how well they are understanding your descriptions.

Possible variations on this picture dictation :

Student A/B picture dictations (allowing for the teacher to step back)

Jigsaw picture dictation

Students draw their own pictures, based on a list of objects given to them by the teacher

Students write a description of their pictures

- **'Correct, write and pass it on' dictation**

Choose a text to dictate to your students but do not read out the first sentence. Instead, write it up on the board and make sure there is at least one mistake in it. Ask your students to work in pairs. They copy the sentence as it is on a sheet of paper. If they think it is a correct sentence they should tick it, but if they think it is incorrect, they should correct it in a different coloured pen. Dictate the second sentence. Students write it down and then pass the sheet of paper to the pair of students next to them. Now students have a sentence in front of them that they did not write. They tick it if they think it is correct, or correct it if they think it needs correcting, once again in a different coloured pen. Repeat this process of correcting, writing and passing on the sheet of paper until the end of the dictation. Finally, students get together with another pair in order to work in groups of four. They end up with two corrected, written texts which they read and discuss. They then have to rewrite the text on a clean sheet of paper and hand it in when they are satisfied that they have produced a correct text. This activity is both co-operative and non-judgemental because the writing has been shared.

- **TPR dictation**

Have a copy of a text which lends itself to mime (eg a recipe). Tell the class that you are going to read them a text which they will later mime. This is usually enough to get their attention to listen! Read the text at normal speed and students listen. Get your students to stand up and read the text a second time, line by line. After each line pause and elicit an appropriate 'action' from the students. By suggesting possible mimes, students are showing that they have understood you. If they get stuck, help them out. When you have finished reading the text, you should have mimes for each line. Read through a third time with all the students miming. The fourth time, do the mimes yourself and the students say the text from memory. Repeat. Finally, put students into pairs and give them a copy of the blanked text. Together they have to reconstruct and write the text.

- **Dictogloss**

Tell the class that you are going to read them a short text. The first time you read it, they just listen and try to get the general meaning of the text. The second time, read the text at near-native speed and include punctuation. Students take notes, writing down the key words and as much as possible. Read the text a third time, a bit faster, and students improve on what they have already written. The fourth time, students put down their pens. They can read what they have written but cannot write until you have finished. Organise students into groups of 3-4, and nominate a secretary for each group. Students now reconstruct the text and the secretary writes it on a new sheet of paper. It does not have to be identical to the original but it needs to:

- i) be grammatically correct
- ii) contain correct spellings
- iii) be coherent ie. make sense
- iv) be as similar as possible to the original text

Dictogloss activities are very complete in that they integrate the four language skills of listening, writing, reading and speaking. This type of activity also gives students the opportunity to talk about both content and form.

Successful completion of a challenging task is motivating for students. By working together, using grammatical and context clues to complete the dictation, students engage in learning by problem solving.

- **Running dictation**

This fun dictation activity practises reading, speaking, listening, writing and memory! It can get quite lively if you have too many students running at the same time so it is better to have them working in groups of about four, so that there are no more than six or seven students out of their seats at any given moment. Prepare a short text and make several copies which you put up on the walls around the classroom, or in the corridor even! In each team, one person is the 'runner', another person is the secretary, and the other two are 'editors' who are responsible for checking the secretary's work. These roles are not fixed because the students constantly swap roles. The runner goes to the text on the wall, reads it and tries to memorise as much of it as possible. He returns to his team and quietly dictates what he remembers to the secretary, who writes it down. If necessary, he may return to the text on the wall. On completing each sentence, students change roles. The winning team is the one that finishes first.

- **'Putting it all together' dictation**

Read a short story, at a natural pace, a couple of times. Then hand out the story on a piece of paper, but the story is jumbled and sentences have been divided. Tell your students to study the story for a minute and then turn the sheet over. Read the story a third time. Students turn over the sheet of paper, cut up the jumbled phrases and re-organise the whole story.

### Reference

*Dictation: New Methods, New Possibilities* by Paul Davis & Mario Rinvoluceri (Cambridge, 1988)

*LTP Dictionary of Collocations* by Jimmie Hill & Michael Lewis (LTP, 1997)

Teacher's Corner at [www.macmillanelt.es](http://www.macmillanelt.es)

British Council teaching resources/activities at [www.teachingenglish.org.uk](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk)