

English Club

Teaching Tips*

These helpful Teaching Tips are written in plain, jargon-free English. They will be of particular use to new teachers and experienced teachers may find them useful as well.

Dictation

Dictation is sometimes frowned upon as an outmoded, teacher-centred writing activity with no real input from the student. The following disadvantages are mooted:

- It is time-consuming.
- It does not really develop writing skills.
- It is an unrealistic activity; listening is “word by word” and at an artificial pace.
- It can be accomplished purely mechanically, without any real comprehension.

Actually, dictation is not really a writing activity, but it is a language activity, and, if done with sensitivity, an extremely useful one. Let’s look at these apparent disadvantages more closely.

Time-consuming? Yes, it can be time-consuming, especially if correction is done word by word. But the text does not have to be long to be valid. And correction does not have to be word by word (or even done at all if you let the students see the text afterwards).

Does not develop writing skills? It’s true that dictation does not develop creative writing skills. But it does help develop spelling and punctuation, which are a part of writing. And the exposure to and mechanical practice of writing can help to develop the skill in general.

Unrealistic? Yes and no. In fact, in real life we often have to write down what someone says, although admittedly not necessarily verbatim. And the listening is not really “word by word” but “phrase by phrase”. As for the pace, if the teacher has to speak too slowly, the text is too difficult for the level.

Purely mechanical? If that were true, we should be able to reproduce a text in any language, a highly implausible proposition. Even in our own language, recreating a text accurately from the spoken word requires concentration and thought. For a language learner, it

exercises those parts of the brain that other activities cannot reach. In many ways, dictation is an all-round activity. It involves:

- listening
- some writing (spelling, punctuation)
- grammar
- vocabulary
- pronunciation

It can also involve:

- reading, if students read the text afterwards for correction
- speaking, if students discuss the corrections or the subject matter itself

What to dictate?

Choosing the right level is clearly critical. Dictating a leader from “The Times” to a group of intermediate students would be a rather fruitless exercise. Do not underestimate the difficulty of accurately reproducing a text from dictation. As for the material itself, the range is limitless, from written for ELT to authentic:

- texts (from course books, newspaper articles, user guides, etc)
- songs
- poetry
- short compiled lists (numbers, names, appointments, etc)
- cornflakes packets, etc

Procedure

There is no fixed rule on the procedure to adopt and it can be modified according to level, class size, actual subject matter. As a guide, a common procedure for texts is:

1. Read the whole text once at slightly reduced speed.
2. Read the text again clearly and phrase by phrase (saying each phrase twice and ending with “comma”, “full stop”, etc as appropriate). Allow students reasonable time to finish one phrase before starting another.
3. Allow time for students to review what they have written and to try to apply grammar to correct any logical errors.
4. Read the whole text again.
5. Allow some more time for student’s review and fine-tuning.

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Allowing thinking time for self-correction is particularly valuable. Often students will think they have heard one thing but their knowledge of grammar can tell them you must have said another thing.

Students often appreciate dictation as it really puts them to the test. Just be careful that you don't demoralise them by choosing a text that is too difficult or by reading at a speed that is unrealistic for them.

Dictation Fillers

Here are some ideas for quick dictations to fill in an odd five minutes. You can certainly invent more of your own: shopping lists, football results, etc. Adjust the speed to the level.

Appointments

Read the times and dates any way you like. 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").

- 2.15 p.m. Thursday 25 June
- 4.40 p.m. 12th January
- 12 noon Wednesday 27 April
- 2.05 a.m. Saturday 19 August
- 5.50 p.m. 1/5/03

Flight Schedule

The flight times should be read in the 24-hour format (for example "oh-seven-forty", "thirteen-thirty").

- Depart Paris Terminal 2a 12:25 3 May, flight AF157
- Arrive Hanoi 07:40 4 May
- Wait in Transit Lounge C
- Depart Hanoi 11:45 4 May, flight TH263
- Arrive Bangkok 13:30 4 May

Money

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

- 97 pence
- 367 Swiss Francs
- \$200.50
- 5,630,000
- 250 Euro

Names

You will need to spell these names. You may want to invent your own, depending on the language of your students.

- Mr George Jeffrey Jnr
- Miss I. E. Weider
- Mrs S. R. Haney-Gaspari
- Sir Athie Houghy
- Judge J. G. Haamer

Numbers & Symbols

Read each question as a calculation (for example, for (c) you would say "Sixty times two all divided by ten"). Ask students to calculate the answer. If they've heard you correctly, the calculation is very simple. Don't read out the answers which are shown in square brackets.

- $(17 \times 2) + 6$ [= 40]
- $1,000,601 + 901,000$ [= 1,901,601]
- $(60 \times 2) / 10$ [= 12]
- $£724,510 @$ (at) 10% per annum*** [= £72,451]
- $1,050 + 100.50$ [= 1,150.50]

Telephone Numbers

Students should be able to reproduce the groups, not just the numbers. In other words, if you read "01-234-5678", the students should not just give you "012345678". When you repeat them, you can vary them. For example, you could say "three, three, three", "three double three" and "triple three", if you wanted to be particularly awkward.

- 44-30-699-7310
- 212-973-0065
- 0480-940-3336
- 19-66-2-221-4024
- 08-0369-1229

Improvisations

Improvisations are not role-plays or simulations (although many of them can be adapted as such). The objective here is total spontaneity and improvisation. Students have no time to prepare. Their roles and situations are given to them on the spot and they have to react immediately. Generally, the less details that are given to students, the better. This allows their own imaginations to construct situations and ensures richer dynamics.

Teachers are sometimes afraid that students may not be able to cope with improvisation. In reality, it is surprising just how imaginative students will be (subject to level, of course). They can usually be relied on to give more than they are asked for. But if, on the odd occasion, an improvisation does not work, flogging a dead horse**** is a surefire way to prolong the agony.

It is often helpful to give students conflicting objectives to ensure a more difficult resolution. For example, in the case of The Hypochondriac, the Doctor should not know his patient is a hypochondriac and the patient should not know that he / she is consulting a particularly tight-fisted doctor. (Whether the other students themselves know of this is a decision for the teacher.)

The following ideas are just that – ideas. They can be modified, adapted, changed, rethought, distorted, simplified, made more difficult etc.

In general, begin classes with pairs to warm up and finish with groups.

* CHF – швейцарский франк (прим. редакции)

** JPY (¥) – японская йена (прим. редакции)

*** per annum ['ænəm] – for each year

**** to flog a dead horse – waste one's efforts

Pair Improvisations

The Small Ad. For sale / To rent / Friendship. Student A has seen a classified ad in the paper. Student A decides for herself / himself the subject of the ad. He / She then chooses any other student (Student B, who has placed the ad) and calls him / her about it. "I'm calling about your ad for a live-in nanny..."

The Hypochondriac. Student A is a hypochondriac determined to have as many pills as possible. He / She consults Student B who is a doctor strongly averse to giving out pills willy-nilly.

The Career Counselor. Student A has lost his / her job. He / She consults a career counselor about a suitable new profession. Lots of questions and advice (modals).

The Journalist and the Famous Actress.
1. Journalist tries to get interview. 2. Interview.
3 Actress is not at all happy with what is printed and complains (to journalist or editor, etc).

The Answering Machine. Student A calls B and gets answering machine (B's voice). Leaves message.

Telephone Chain. Student A calls any student (Student B) about anything. When conversation finished, Student B calls any student (Student C) about anything. Keep the chain going. Must be fast. Good for warm-up. The answering student must make the next call (to maintain the dynamic).

Directions. A young girl stops passers-by in the street and asks for help / directions in finding an address.

The Tourist. Student A goes to another country (or planet) and calls home to tell Student B all about it.

The Chance Meeting. Two people who have not met for 5 years meet in a café / at a cocktail party, etc. Ex-girlfriend, ex-boss, etc.

The Loan. Asking to borrow. Then asking for repayment.

Parent(s) and Child. Child returns home late / doesn't want to go to bed / doesn't want to get up, etc.

Group Improvisations



The Fire. Detective or journalist interviews witnesses (one of whom may be a suspect) about what they saw / heard / did. (The Fire can be changed to a Bizarre Noise, Disappearance, Murder, Theft, etc). Lots of questions and past simple.

The Amnesiac. Student A is in bed in hospital, having lost his / her memory. The other students are medical staff, police officers, visitors (family, friends, etc) who try to bring memory back. They must be careful. A shock could be fatal.

The Hold-up. Group of gangsters planning a hold-up. "Stop. Now it's two days after the hold-up and you're all in prison. Now discuss what actually happened, whose fault, etc." Could be a Hi-jacking.

Press Conference. Group of journalists interview a politician (or sportsperson, filmstar, etc).

The Putsch. 1. Why: Guerrilla chief explains to followers. 2. Commitment: one or two outsiders want to join – therefore interview to test suitability. 3. Preparation: planning meeting. 4. Afterwards (in prison): interview with journalist about what went wrong.

Teachers' Meeting. Teachers discuss imaginary students to decide who should continue next year. One teacher is the "chairman" and has a list of students ("Now we'll discuss Erika...")

Television Interview. Filmstar, politician, sportsperson, etc.

Television Program. Presenter interviews group of presidential candidates (or writers, film-makers, etc).

The Neighbour. A neighbour who needs to sleep or revise, etc. knocks on door and complains about the noise from a party.