

SWITCHING ON THE LIGHT: DICTOGLOSS

Here's a different kind of dictation technique: you introduce a topic and then you read out a short paragraph (50 words seems to be about the maximum for high-level learners, 30ish for Intermediate, about 15-20 for Elementary) at natural speed – clearly but not artificially slowly - but the students **don't write**. Instead, they listen carefully and only when you've finished reading do they write down whatever they can remember.

Then, they consult with other learners and try to fit pieces of the jigsaw together, swapping bits they've managed to write down. Then you repeat the process: you dictate and they only write when you've finished. Again they compare, and try to fill in a little more.

Then, the class elects a class secretary who then writes what the class tells them on the board – including alternative versions of anything the class doesn't unanimously agree on. When they've finished, read out the original version one more time and/or hand out a copy of the text.

Yes, it's challenging and great fun, and keeps everyone engaged. But what's the theory behind it? What is the teacher trying to do? Well, it's good listening practice for a start, and as they listen learners focus on chunks which they then break down into words as they write. But it's also useful for helping learners to become aware of items of language they've perhaps never consciously noticed before.

Don't you ever get the feeling that explaining grammar seems to just go over the head of some learners? There's a glazed look on their faces, but you plough on regardless because, well, isn't that part of your job – to explain grammar?

Perhaps not. There's an increasing body of research that provides evidence that learners learn new information when they somehow **notice** it for themselves, rather than when it is overtly brought to their attention. It's as if a light goes on somewhere in their brain and they say to themselves "Oh, I've never noticed that before. Isn't that odd? Mmm, let me see now..."

If this is the case, then perhaps rather than illuminating grammar rules we should perhaps be working on ways of switching that mental light on, so that our learners can notice things. The emphasis in our teaching shifts away from 'explanations' to consciousness-raising ('CR' in the terminology).

There are numerous kinds of CR activities, and **dictogloss** –the technique described at the beginning of this article- is one of them. Our learners are exposed to English in different ways: reading texts, TV and DVD, internet, films, songs, our own use of English in class, and several others. They hardly ever focus on language (e.g. grammar, new vocabulary, aspects of pronunciation) when they are exposed to natural language use: they're too busy processing meaning to think of form. Often they'll meet a piece of language which they haven't 'studied' consciously, but they'll understand it anyway because the context will make it clear, or because understanding this particular piece of language is not key to understanding the message it is embedded in. One aim of dictogloss is to get learners to

process meaning and then to notice the difference between what they've written and what was dictated. And it is when they notice the difference that the light bulb comes on.

So when we choose or write a text to use for dictogloss, it's important to include items which are slightly above the level of the class's comprehension – what Stephen Krashen calls CI + 1, or the level of *Comprehensible Input +1*. Learners will struggle to make sense of the new items and will decode them, often writing something else that has the same meaning but uses a different word or structure.

For example, I used the following text with a class of Higher Intermediate and Advanced learners:

When I was a kid I used to enjoy my summers. Every Sunday my dad'd suggest having a beach barbecue. We'd get very excited. After we'd set everything up and eaten our fill we'd go for a swim. After we'd had our swim we'd huddle round the fire and tell each other scary ghost stories.

Adapted from Scott Thornbury's *How to Teach Grammar* 1999 (Longman).

Afterwards I asked my class what they'd found interesting, or surprising, or strange, or difficult. Interestingly, many of them had written *my dad used to suggest, we used to get very excited* and *we used to go for a swim*. So they had understood the use of 'would' meaning 'used to' but because it wasn't part of what Scott Thornbury calls their 'emerging grammar' they hadn't felt confident enough to believe what their ears had heard. They were full of questions then about how and when 'would' is used with this meaning: what more could a teacher ask for?! The light had been switched on.

Incidentally, other things they found interesting or strange were: the use of '*dad'd*' - they were only familiar with this contraction after a pronoun (e.g. *he'd*) and not a noun; the phrase *eaten our fill*; the verb *huddle round*; and when *Dad* is written with a capital D'

Here is a dictogloss I wrote for and dictated to a group of early elementary learners:

Romeo and Juliet wanted to get married. But their families hated each other and in the end Romeo and Juliet killed themselves.

Even though the class hadn't yet 'done' the simple past, several learners were able to write *wanted, hated* and *killed*, or close approximations (e.g. *killd*) – probably because of previous exposure. However, most learners wrote *want* and *hate* (or *wants, hates* or *ate*) even though they of course were aware that the story happened in the past. I was then able to ask them how to form the simple past tense – and this particular grammar point was taken care of, at least in terms of the rule of form.

Interestingly, however, when I asked what they'd found interesting, unusual, or difficult, several learners were eager to know more about reflexive pronouns and the difference between *themselves* and *each other*. So we explored this with *washed themselves/each*

other (smiles), *hurt themselves/each other*, *eat themselves/each other* (which went down well with the more gory-minded!).

Other learners asked about *get married* as opposed to *marry/married* and we were able to explore *get tired*, *get angry*, *get hungry*, *get rich* and so forth. Different learners notice different things, probably because their ‘emerging grammars’ are at different stages of development. Also, it is immensely rewarding to be able to respond to learners’ curiosity about language, rather than always asking them to move along according my agenda (Unit 3 this week, Unit 4 next week ...).

Go on, now write your own Dictogloss Dictation! Remember, keep the lexical load relatively light if you’re introducing grammar, and vice-versa. Remember, the level needs to be Krashen’s Comprehensible Input + 1.

Here’s how we used my *dictogloss* dictation in class:

- 1 Set a quick context (picture/title/ explanation) to ‘tune learners in.
- 2 Give instructions: No writing until you say ‘*Please write now*’.
- 3 First reading: read naturally, but not too fast; stress key words; use body language To emphasis key words and ideas (stressed words); modulate your voice; leave brief pauses between chunks to allow learners to process what they hear.
- 4 Learners write: if it’s from the beginning, at the top of the page; from the middle, in the middle; from the end, at the bottom.
- 5 Compare and consult with a partner or small group
- 6 Second reading: repeat steps 3-5.
- 7 If necessary, add a third reading.
- 8 Ask a learner to be the class scribe/secretary. The class dictates to her/him and s/he includes all options on the board.
- 9 Read out the original version and/or hand out the original. Learners compare.
- 10 Deal with learners’ questions. Ask them what they found strange, new, difficult, interesting etc. and/or use questions to focus their attention on any particular points.

Good luck!

Alan Marsh

Acknowledgements:

The dictogloss technique is explored by Ruth Wajnryb in her book: **Grammar Dictation**. 1990 Oxford: Oxford University Press (Resource Books for Teachers series) and by Mario Rinvolucri and Paul Davis in their exciting book **Dictation: New Methods New Possibilities** 1988 (CUP). I also highly recommend Scott Thornbury’s eye-opening book **Uncovering Grammar** 2001 (Macmillan Heinemann), which explores the concepts of emerging grammars and consciousness-raising activities. Thornbury’s **How To Teach Grammar** 1999 (Longman) discusses Dictogloss in Chapter 5. Paul Davies’ interesting two-part article ‘Towards a Double Syllabus’ in *English Teaching Professional* issues 51 and 52 puts a very convincing case for integrating pro-active syllabuses, which establish which items will be taught and in what sequence, with reactive syllabuses which focus on reacting to learners’ problems, queries and items they notice.