

The Dictoquiz: a New Twist on an Old Tradition

Joshua Cohen

Summary: The aim of this article is to introduce readers to a new type of dictation activity called the dictoquiz and to share some of the benefits and challenges associated with using it.

Keywords: dictation, assessment, communicative language teaching, professional development

Introduction

Do you sympathize with students who struggle to make progress? Do you have learners who move laboriously through tasks seemingly spinning their wheels? Would you like something you can do with your students that will stimulate them mentally and physically? Well, look no further because dictation may be just the kind of activity they respond to.

I know what you're thinking: most people recall dictation as that boring old task they did back in the day in Latin or French class. The teacher spoke too fast or maybe too slowly and no one could ever understand what they said anyway. Luckily, it doesn't have to be that way! That's because when used imaginatively, dictation can be fun, active, and communicative, not to mention powerfully educational.

What is dictation?

Dictation is simply the process of writing down what someone else has said. However, for language learners it's slightly more complicated than that. Successful dictation requires the unravelling and interpreting and then bundling and transcribing of messages perceived aurally into written form. According to Nation and Newton (2009), dictations are thought to help facilitate language learning because they encourage learners to focus on phrase- and clause-level constructions while providing feedback on the accuracy of their judgments. Engaging in frequent dictations can build learners' overall skill and strengthen their short-term memory capacity (Nation, 1991).

Despite the technique's relative unpopularity throughout history, the literature supporting dictation as a teaching and testing device continues to expand every year. A

recent study by Kimura (2016) demonstrated that dictation can be a reliable form of assessment and a trustworthy method of checking language learners' overall proficiency levels. Ammar and Hassan (2018) used the technique to develop their students' morphological awareness. And one of the most well-known SLA researchers of the modern era, Paul Nation, devoted a book chapter to the use of dictation in association with language teaching (2009).

It's not hard to understand why. Dictations are easy to organize and produce, cheap to carry out, and can be done with students at every level. Whether you have one or one hundred students, dictations can be deployed in a variety of ways, from highlighting a specific grammar point to conducting a spelling check to more meaning-based communicative tasks. (For brilliant dictation ideas, see Davis and Rinvulcri, 1988, or Wajnryb, 1990.) They can also serve as excellent classroom management tools because taking a dictation has a calming effect on participants who must listen carefully to complete the task successfully, which is why many teachers use them coming out of or going into breaks.

The dictoquiz

Over the past several years, I have been developing a dictation activity based loosely on Nation's (2007) four strands: meaning-focused input, meaning focused output, focus on form, and fluency training—combining them all into one progressive package. Typically I use it toward the end of a unit as a quiz, but it is probably more suitable as a classroom activity. My students seem to have a good time interacting with it. I call it the dictoquiz and it doesn't take much time or effort to put together.

To give a dictoquiz, start by selecting five words, phrases, or sentences you have covered in class or wish to cover in future lessons. (For more advanced students you may wish to choose something longer and work at the discourse level). Consider adding in vocabulary, grammar points, phrasal verbs, or idioms if you feel your students could benefit from it. Explain to your students that the activity begins with them taking a dictation and ends with them checking and correcting it. Ensure that they each have a piece of paper. Tell them to divide the paper in half vertically, and to write the words “first answers” at the top of the left side, and “final answers” at the top of the right side (see Figure 1). Then have them write the numbers one through five on each side. Explain to them you are going to read five sentences (or words, phrases, or paragraphs) three times each and that they should listen intently and try to write exactly what they hear on the “first answer” side of the page. I try to encourage my students to take notes in English, although I tell them using their first language, an emoji, a pictogram, or anything else that helps them get the answer down quickly and correctly is okay, too.

Name: _____	Score: _____
first answers	final answers
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Figure 1: A sample dictoquiz

Next, tell your students that once the dictation is over you'll give them 12 minutes to edit and correct their work. Explain to them that they should use the final answer column to write their revised sentences. Be sure they understand you're only going to check the final answer side of the page, regardless of whether their work in the first answers column is correct or not. (You may need to repeat this several times for clarity.)

Now comes the best part: tell your students that to edit and correct their answers they may use anything they like to check their work. That means, yes, they may use their phones; yes, they may check their textbooks; yes, they may consult their shoulder partners; and yes, of course, they may get up out of their seats and go ask a friend sitting on the other side of the room. In short, they may

use any method they like to get the right answers. Getting a perfect score on an assignment was never so easy... or was it?

To make the activity more challenging, I tell students that they must remain in the target language if they wish to consult a classmate. That means if a student wants to ask for the answer to number one, they should say something like, “Hey, what’s the answer to number one?” Or, if they need help spelling they might say something like, “How do you spell the word ‘cereal’ in English?” Not only does this give them an opportunity to use English in a natural way, it also gives them a chance to practice language functions, like clarifying meaning, confirming, and asking for repetition.

At the end of 12 minutes, I announce that the quiz is over and tell students to stop writing regardless of whether or not they are finished. This can be frustrating for them, especially if they have not yet finished transferring their answers into the final answer column. It’s tempting to allow students more time, but don’t give in. The time limit is an important element of the activity and can create excitement for the next time you do it. Finally, collect their papers and continue to the next stage of your lesson.

Grading a dictoquiz takes very little time, assuming that you have not assigned long sentences or full paragraphs. I can usually mark a class of 30 students’ quizzes in less than 15 minutes. To keep things simple, I set my quizzes at 10 points each. I deduct one point per mistake (e.g., misspelled word, missing word, missing punctuation mark, etc.) and allow up to two mistakes per sentence. After that, the item is disqualified. Provided you are consistent, you can effectively grade them any way you see fit.

Pro tips

You may wish to create your own material depending on the needs of your students, but I usually source content directly from my students’ textbooks. I don’t reveal this to them as I want them to discover it for themselves. My hope is that doing so increases the likelihood of them picking up their books again later and potentially reinforces the contents of the chapter.

When it comes to collaborating, my students tend to show rather than tell each other the answers. I don’t allow this as it lessens the opportunity to speak. Instead, I remind them they are welcome to share the

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answers with one another provided they do so verbally. Using a timer with an audible alarm helps to build tension and lets students know exactly how much time remains. I strongly urge readers of this article to use one as it will help to end the task once the time elapses. Of course, you can always use the black or white board to keep time.

Pro twists

- Dictate 5 questions to students. After the dictoquiz is over, have them ask and answer the questions with one another.
- Dictate a 5-sentence paragraph to your students, but mix the sentence order. After they have worked with a partner to correct the sentences, ask them to reorder the sentences into a coherent paragraph.

- Dictate the beginning of a narrative and ask students to finish the story in class in groups of three or four or as a homework assignment.
- Ask a student (or group of students) to select a text and read it for the class. This can give them an incentive to practice their pronunciation and provides a share in the leadership of the class.

Conclusion

Busy teachers know that the best activities for students are the ones that offer the most bang for their pedagogical buck. Dictation tasks are a proven method of developing students' language skills. And when used imaginatively, they can also be fun and exciting for students to participate in while improving their accuracy and fluency, too.

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Joshua Cohen teaches English in the Intensive International Program at Kinki University in Osaka, Japan. He received his bachelor's degree in journalism from San Diego State University and his master's degree in TESOL from Temple University. In his free time Joshua enjoys playing golf, gardening, and giggling with his wife and three children. You can contact Joshua at jcohen@bus.kindai.ac.jp.