

Dictogloss

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Dictogloss aims

Dictogloss has a number of aims:

- a. Learners use their productive grammar to produce a text together. They pool their understanding of a text that is read to them.
- b. Learners identify what they do and do not know about English as they reconstruct the text and analyse any problems .
- c. Learners integrate their listening, speaking, writing and reading skills in the production of the text, and the identification of problems. They mobilise their collective understanding of vocabulary and grammar in their approximate texts.
- d. Dictogloss can be used with texts appropriate for any group of learners.
- e. Regular dictogloss activities will, in addition to the primary aim of giving learners a meaningful text-production task, improve learners' global aural comprehension and note-taking skills.

What happens in the dictogloss procedure?

- There are four stages in the procedure:
 1. **Preparation and prelistening** activities, when the learner finds out about the topic of the text and is prepared for some of the vocabulary.
 2. **Dictation**, when the learner hears the text and takes fragmentary notes.
 3. **Reconstruction**, when the learner reconstructs the text on the basis of the fragments recorded in stage 2.
 4. **Analysis and correction**, when learners analyse and correct their texts.

Stage 1 Preparation

1. Prepare learners for the text they will be hearing with some kind of prereading activity. This could involve a picture, a song or a short discussion about the topic. If the text is about movies, for example, getting the learners thinking about movies and their own cinema experiences will aid their understanding of the text they are to hear. People listen more effectively when they are able to anticipate what they will hear and when their interest in the topic has been aroused, and when it is relevant to their own experiences.
2. Prepare learners by helping them to mobilise the vocabulary they already have that relates to the topic, and maybe giving them some key vocabulary from the text if it is new and difficult for them to infer.
3. Ensure that learners know what they are expected to do.
4. Organize learners into groups before the dictation begins.

Stage 2 Dictation

- Learners hear the dictation twice. The first time, they should not write, but allow the words to 'wash over them'. This way they get a global understanding of the passage. The second time, they should take individual notes, not trying to write down every word, but jotting down main words as memory-cues or triggers.. The grammar or function words, for example, *the*, *his*, *and*, will be provided by the learners themselves as part of the productive process of reconstructing the text.
- The text should be dictated at normal spoken speed. The general pace is comparable to that of a news broadcast on radio or TV. The dictation should not be conducted in the traditional way where the sentence is broken up into isolated units. The semantic grouping here is the sentence. Between sentences, the pauses should be slightly longer than usual. As far as is possible the two readings should be identical.

Stage 3 Reconstruction

- As soon as the dictation is finished, the learners, working in their groups, proceed to pool their notes and work on their version of the text. It helps if each group has a 'scribe' through whom all suggestions are channeled. The scribe writes the group's text as it emerges from group discussion. When it is complete, the group checks the text for grammar, textual cohesion and logical sense.
- The teacher's role during reconstruction is to monitor the activity but not to provide any actual language input. However, to facilitate the error analysis/correction stage to follow, it sometimes helps to pre-empt the problem of 'error clutter'. If a group's text is too cluttered with grammatical errors, it is difficult in stage 4 to focus attention on the areas of primary need. To prevent this, the teacher in the reconstruction stage should point out minor errors to learners while they are still drafting their texts. In other words, the teacher may unobtrusively contribute to the group's 'conferencing'. If a text has been chosen for its structural language point (for example past tenses) then the errors to be eliminated in the drafting stage would be in areas other than this, for example, articles or prepositions. This helps to clear the path so that the final error analysis can focus clearly on the main formal point of the lesson.
- Expressed another way, the learners should not be stopped from making errors in the chosen structural area, and other errors should be cleared up, so that learning in the final stage of analysis and correction can be more concentrated and effective.

Stage 4 Analysis and correction

The last stage of the dictogloss procedure is the analysis and correction of the learners' texts. There are various ways of conducting this.

1. Have each group read out their version of the text. The teacher makes notes of any issues and the other learners notice differences between each reconstruction and their own text.
2. Project the original text on the screen and go through it sentence by sentence, comparing the original with each reconstruction. If possible, the reconstructions can be projected on the board for comparison.
3. Students compare the various versions and discuss the language choices made. In this way errors are exposed and discussed so that learners understand the hypotheses, false and otherwise that underlie their choices.

There are two immediate goals or objectives:

- a. To maintain as much information as possible from the original text.
- b. To produce a sound English text.

Maintaining informational content

In the reconstruction stage learners pool their fragments. These are not really notes in the note-taking sense of information that has been decoded and processed; they are merely fragments of language written down as heard during the dictation. Groups should aim to maintain the informational content of the original.

For example, take the sentence:

The man in the grey suit carrying the black umbrella walked into the shop.

Students do not have to replicate the original, but if this sentence were reconstructed by students to read

The man walked into the shop.

then it is clear that it omits some of the original information, unlike:

The man who was wearing a grey suit and carrying a black umbrella walked into the shop.

There are, of course, other versions that would be equally acceptable.

Producing a sound English text

The text produced should be sound in three senses:

- Firstly, it should be grammatically accurate. abiding by syntactic and structural rules of English usage.
- Secondly, it should be textually cohesive. This means it should hold together as a unit or chunk of language that is meaningful as an integral whole. A sentence text has a tight logical sequence; it is not a loose random collection of individual sentence-units. The use of connectives is crucial here.
- Thirdly, the text produced should make logical sense in terms of our knowledge of the real world. An example will clarify this. The sentence: **Sydney is the largest city in Austria** is grammatical, but out of line with our knowledge of the world.

Interaction

The key to the dictogloss approach to grammar is interaction. The method requires learners in the classroom to interact with each other in small groups so as to reconstruct the text together. Working in this way, learners are actively engaged in the learning process.

Teaching with dictogloss

In teaching with dictogloss, the aim is to develop learners' grammatical competence in using the language.

The procedure is a very specific one, although teachers can introduce variations that suit their own teaching styles and situations.

With experience, students become familiar with the procedure and the phases become predictable parts of a familiar process.

As students realize that they are learning and that their English is developing, their confidence in both learning and using the language increases.

What is the value of dictogloss?

As they learn, students make many and varied and constantly changing hypotheses about language. These involve the learner in active decision-making about the target language.

Some of these decisions are conscious, some subconscious. Some relate to learning, some to communication strategies. The hypotheses are tested out and the results of each test - the feedback - are processed by the learner who then adjusts a current hypothesis to accommodate the new data received.

As a consequence, learning means constant flux: the learner's language is constantly changing and this very instability is a sign of progress.

Reference

This presentation is based on *RBT: Grammar Dictation (Resource Books for Teachers)* by Ruth Wajnryb. Oxford University Press.