

**Dictado-vieja herramienta,
nuevas aplicaciones**

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Resumen

El tan vilipendiado y olvidado “dictado tradicional” retorna a las aulas, al amparo de las nuevas tendencias que imperan en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en cuanto a integrar las cuatro destrezas. El presente trabajo pasará revista a los objetivos originales de los dictados tal cual han sido determinados por los docentes del inglés y del francés. Veremos cómo las metas difieren según sea la destreza que se desee medir y si ello ha de ocurrir en idioma materno o en la segunda lengua. En conclusión, analizaremos algunas de las variantes más utilizadas por los profesores entrevistados o cuyos trabajos han sido consultados, y sea en persona o vía Internet.

Palabras clave: dictado, cloze, competencia, dictagloss, dictacomp.

Abstract

The much-maligned and practically neglected traditional French “dictée” has been making a comeback, due mainly to the new tendencies in foreign language teaching of integrating the four skills. The most variations, the interactive dictations, are student-centered, often collaborative, and communicative. This paper will re-examine the original aims and objectives of dictations as determined by both French and English –language educators and how the objectives differ according to what competence is to be measured, and whether it is to be in the maternal or second language. In conclusion we will review some of the most popular variations used by professors whose works have been consulted or interviewed, both in person and via internet.

Key words: dictation, competence, cloze, interactive, dictagloss, dictacomp.

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The much-maligned and practically neglected traditional French “dictée” (dictation) has been making a comeback, due mainly to the new tendencies in foreign language teaching of integrating the four skills. The majority of the variations are the interactive dictations, are student-centered, often collaborative, and communicative, such as suggested by Brown in his essay on interactive dictations(1). This paper will re-examine the original aims and objectives of dictations as determined by both French and English language educators. We will see that the objectives differ according to what competence is to be measured, and whether it is to be in the maternal or second language. In conclusion we will review some of the most popular variations used by professors whose works have been consulted or interviewed, both in person and via Internet. This research has been done in order to update all available material concerning the dictation in the hopes of encouraging further research and wider use of the classic dictation and its variations.

In Francophone countries, the dictation is once again popular. Bernard Pivot, who organized the first world championship dictations, now even has a website. In May 2001, the Flemish radio station Donna broadcast a dictation in which listeners participated online. As a matter of fact, Belgian television shows often include dictations as part of their programs. In French schools, the dictation is still used for testing the spelling and grammar of native French speakers. A series of “dictées” published in 1993, for example, contains 300-350 dictations aimed solely at listing spelling, and differs only slightly from a 1961 series, which also included grammar points. In defense of this system, some French educators insist that spelling is an exercise in mental concentration, for it draws on the accumulated competence of the student who must recall previous acquisitions, and spelling must be repeated often enough for it to become a reflex. If applied to native English, Spanish or German students, of course, the same arguments might be used. Yet spelling is not all, and even native speakers in English would have to understand the dictation sufficiently to decide, once the sound is perceived, whether to write “meet” or “meat” or, in the case of French, whether to write “parler”, “parlez” or “parlé”. The tendency to rely on older, more conservative formats, the stress students felt when faced with weekly dictations taken from literary sources, the discussions as to whether one must obligatorily use authentic texts or invent one’s own- all had led to a decline in the use of the dictation. Even the more conservative French have occasionally rebuked the lack of variety of materials, and Moirand called them sentences which “float in complete unreality”(2), and instead of insistence on literary texts, she recommends the use of advertisements, short news articles and even billboards. In a series of interviews held with French teachers at the Université de Caen in 1998, many expressed concern with the current level of spelling aptitude and although no one could pinpoint the precise cause of the deterioration of students’ and adults’ spelling, and no scientific study has been officially announced, many of the teachers put a good deal of the blame of those who even in France had discredited and neglected the dictation, calling it an artificial and useless exercise, despite the new popularity of Pivot’s highly publicized yearly dictation championships. The success of a dictation in any form

will depend on why it is going to be given, what skills the professor wishes to examine, and the type of dictation itself. Damning dictations per se would be, as they say, throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Dictation is not a new technique. It was first used in the early middle ages when, due to the unavailability of books, teaching was done by dictation, and students had to check their spelling and listening abilities. This lasted probably until the 16th century in Europe.

As a teaching/testing device of the second or target language in the 20th century it was first associated with the traditional or grammar translation method, and was used to teach the structure- the morphology- of the new language. Gouin, one of the first to publish his theories of teaching and studying languages, rejected dictations in 1894 because of that association. He advocated instead the natural method, and actually discouraged the teaching of reading and writing in the target language. The Modern Language Association report of 1899 granted that dictations might help first-year German students, but that they were rarely worth the effort in French because of the time it took to write the sentences in French. Yet the dictation still had its defenders such as Edmond Joynes, who in 1900 wrote that dictation is “the blending of the accurate tongue speaking to the listening and discriminating ear and ...the reproductive hand, bringing back to the intelligent and critical eye that which the mind has heard by the ear”(3).

When, at the end of the 19th century, the direct method became popular, dictations were used to teach sounds and spelling. Daily phonetic dictation became common and the MLA standardized tests in Spanish, German and French in certain states included a ten- minute dictation, a written summary of a passage read aloud and answers to questions posed by the examiners. Prestigious North American universities such as Princeton, Cornell and Columbia used these tests, but not the College Entrance Examination Board, which proclaimed them too difficult to administer and evaluate. Of course this criticism is still used; contemporary users of the new dictations, though, have proposed several alternatives to evaluating dictations, from just underlining any kinds of mistakes, to student-centered correcting.

Until World War II, dictations were used in U.S. classrooms. Many educators had read the 1915 book *How the French Boy Learns to Write*, in which Rollo Brown praised the French tradition of including daily dictations in literature classes, starting with elementary school. Brown noted the proficiency of the French students in their ability to write prose accurately. The comparison is not quite equitable, since the aims were different. The French students were, and still are, to be made to reflect upon the subtleties of their language, not only its spelling and grammar; these students are being evaluated in their maternal, not target, language. As a matter of fact, in a recent interview, which appeared in *Le Francais dans le monde*, Pivot (4) defended the use of dictées not just for spelling, which he

declared was secondary, but also for the practice of improving one's style. Secondly, teachers of L2 are trying to avoid the devastating psychological effects of the weekly or even daily "dictée de contrôle"; particularly those administered by adherents of the grammar-translation school, as a test of whether the students have prepared their daily lessons. Algernon Coleman, the MLA President in 1929 went so far as to say that dictations should be one of the fourteen activities to which students should be limited (5).

The use of classical dictation began to decline in the 1960s with the popularity of the audio-lingual method, whose proponents usually just ignored dictations. Robert Lado was dictation's most damning critic. In 1961, he wrote that dictation is not a testing device, that it does not assess listening/comprehension skills and that as a testing device it is both uneconomical and imprecise. Furthermore, he claimed, it doesn't measure word order because the word order is given, nor does it measure pronunciation because the words sometimes may be guessed by context, or not recognizing them because of the slowness and therefore non-authentic character of the reading(6). Of course there have been since then several arguments against Lado's generalizations. For example, in dictating in French in particular, no amount of slowing down will help a student determine blindly the correct spelling of "clairment" (clèrment, clairmand, clairment, etc.) Only by processing the sounds heard could the student arrive at the correct graphic form being dictated.

A decade later, in his handbook of foreign language testing, Andrew D. Cohen (7) countered with his idea that the dictation is a pragmatic test since the words are given in contexts, and he defended the dictation as one of the three pragmatic tests shown to be effective in teaching target languages. Pragmatic tests "confront real-life language with real-life situations and the learners' errors reflect those that learners make when they are the same they are faced with when communicating with native speakers"(8). According to Manzi, the majority of errors can thus be traced back to precise gaps in grammatical and phonological proficiency, and that the discovery of these errors can be made part of the learning process. Lado had described dictation as a poor measure of language proficiency because the context may aid in the recognition of words in isolation; Cohen sees this as positive, as the listener must depend on contextual clues for a valid measure of functional language ability. This change in the attitude of language testing specialists towards the role of context in testing reflects the degree to which they had been influenced by the school of discourse analysis linguistics, when an understanding of the context in which language is used is viewed as essential to the understanding of meaning" (9). Another noted educator, Wilga M. Rivers, rejected the validity of using dictations as a testing procedure, because the traditional L2 tests tended to contain so many elements that it was impossible to tell what the result of the test really showed. An obvious disclaimer to this observation would be first to say that the word "traditional" is just what needs to be modified, and secondly, that the teacher giving the test is the one to decide beforehand just what is to be measured. However, Rivers did accept dictation as a teaching device (10).

After perusing several language testing handbooks popular in the 60s and 70s, such as those by Lado, Robert and Lois Wolsch and Rebecca Valette, it becomes clear that one of the reasons for the decline of popularity of dictations was that they became routine and boring. For example, one author advocated reading a passage once, then repeating each phrase, working backwards, and instructing the students to repeat aloud each phrase before writing. For example, the teacher would read “Does Mary want to go to the movies to the beach”, then “go to the movies”, then “or go to the beach”, and then “Does Mary want to go to the movies or the beach” once again. In another handbook first written in 1899 but re-issued in 1974, Henry Sweet assured readers that students find taking down dictations using the phonetic alphabet to be particularly stimulating and challenging. He considered that a knowledge of phonetics was the first essential step in learning another language and that it should be taught before anything else (11). Even John W. Oller, who revived interest in the dictation in the 70s, suggested giving dictations of 150 words, whereas the current suggested amount of words is now from 50 to 60.

If Lado was dictation’s fiercest critic, John W. Oller, Jr. has been its fiercest defender, insisting that “dictations and closely related procedure work well precisely because they are members of the class of language processing tasks that faithfully reflect what people do when they use language for communicative purposes in real life contexts” (12). The dictation, according to Oller and his adherents, is far more complex than had been expected, because “it seems that the perceiver formulates expectancies or hypothesis concerning the sound stream based on his internalized grammar or language” (13). Oller revived interest in the dictation in the 70s due mainly to his research in language proficiency. His conclusions were that dictations are good measures of listening comprehension and overall language proficiency and that they and closely related procedures work because they are members of the class of language processing tasks that faithfully reflect what people do when they use language for communicate purposes in real life contexts”(14). He and his team of researchers also affirmed that contrary to what had been previously announced, these tests are simple to construct, administer and score. They based their conclusions on studies in the field of cognitive psychology, saying that dictation taps the learners’ internalized grammar of expectancies at work during the listening process. The listener then synthesizes speech into what he called “chunks” and formulates hypotheses about what is said in each chunk: this is analysis by synthesis. If the perceived speech matches the hypotheses, the meaning is understood. If not, the internalized grammar of expectancies formulates its own hypothesis about the input heard. The listener who can construct accurate hypotheses that match what the speaker has said is said to be a fluent listener: the inability to do so causes a failure in communication; for example, when the listener hears a chunk of speech and mistakenly thinks it is identical to the language produced by the internalized grammar, we may have deviations such as “brand sales” instead of the dictated “brain cells”. Therefore the ability to write a good dictation necessitates not just transcribing sounds into

letters and words, but indicates the existence of internalized grammar of the language, which is at least as developed as the difficulty of the passage dictated. Thus the dictation is a psycholinguistically valid measure of the learners' overall language proficiency, since it necessitates the application of the learners' internalized expectancy grammar. Oller's research on language proficiency determined that textual dictation could be a good measure of overall proficiency, forcing the learner to process each sentence cognitively and to make use of his competence. He found dictation not only a good indicator of overall proficiency but that it also could yield much information that is diagnostically useful. Textual dictation, he wrote, is a "device, which measures the efficiency of grammar-based experiences. If the learners' grammar of expectancy is incomplete, his response will deviate from the actual sequences, and the kinds of hypotheses that we will accept will deviate substantially from the actual sequence of elements in the dictation" (15).

Native speakers, on the other hand, can fill gaps from contexts, since the dictation helps show up the disparity between our ability to fill in gaps in our mother tongue and in a second language.

Since dictation activates the learners' internalized grammar of expectancy, which we assume is the central component of his language competence, it is not surprising that dictation test results yield substantial information concerning the overall proficiency in the language. As a testing device, it yields useful information on errors at all levels. Furthermore, he emphasized the fact that in the case of speech perception the listener first formulates a kind of synthesis; the second stage of perception is a "deliberate, attentive, detailed and sequential analysis in order to write down what he or she has heard"(16). This process of analysis by synthesis is the process underlying the learners' learning behavior and is only made more obvious in the case of creative errors, such as the previously mentioned transformation of "brain cells" into "brand sales". In other words, authentic language use always involves a linking of elements of text with the ongoing stream of experience. This process, pragmatic mapping, is the "intelligent and articulate connecting of facts with text, or of experience with language. If the dictated text is given at a conversational rate in bursts of chunks of three, seven or more words, so as to challenge the short-term memory, the dictation turns out to be a highly effective way of testing a person's ability to follow the spoken version of a given text with comprehension. If the text is not correctly understood, the sounds will be incorrectly heard, consonants may be distorted or omitted, as well as plurals, possessives, and so on. Syntactic structures may be altered in highly creative ways, and that is how a passage about brain cells could actually be converted by the listener into a text about brand sales. If taking dictation were merely a mechanical procedure, he contends, these distorted interpretations would not occur. Therefore, far from being a passive recording, a dictation is a task which requires the exercise of complex integrated skills in an active manner (17).

Before continuing with dictation itself, mention must be made of the work of D. Stephen Krashen, who worked at solving the problem of language acquisition and teaching. According to Krashen's "input hypothesis", students have two different ways of developing skills in a second language: learning and acquisition. Learning is the conscious process that focuses the student on the structure or form, whereas acquisition represents the subconscious activity by which we acquired our maternal language and which represents the subconscious activity by which we internalize the new language, and emphasizes the message and meaning rather than the form. What he calls the Monitor, where learning is stored, will eventually correct the statement generated by acquisition. Acquisition is therefore unconscious and learning is conscious. Krashen placed great stress on the importance of listening, saying that listening provides the learner with information from which to build up the knowledge necessary for using the language (18). Since the 1980s, the tendency in L2 teaching has been to delay oral practice and to target language listening. As a matter of fact, in 1979 the first professional society was founded for the advancement of listening/learning, the International Listening Association, where experts in the fields of communication, psychology, education, political science, philosophy, business, law and counseling exchange ideas, basing their theories on the fact that 45% of our total communication time is spent listening, as compared to 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing (19).

This last decade has seen controversies as to what kinds of syntactic modifications would improve listening comprehension. How and when do learners rely on what is known as "top down factors" such as prior or declarative knowledge, semantics, and the understanding of the gist, and on "bottom up factors" such as stress, rhythm, syntax, and focus on grammatical structure? Educators try to ascertain just what factors affects listening comprehension, such as the type of text, speech rate, pauses and background noise. Their research includes studies of whether listeners use their knowledge of the world and situations to focus on meaning (top down) and then use their knowledge of words, syntax and grammar to work on form (bottom up), or vice versa, and when and how these two interact; that is to say, when and how does parallel processing take place (20).

At some point, there seems to be a delicate interaction between the top down and bottom up processing, and effective listeners seem to listen for larger chunks, shifting their attention to individual words only when there is a breakdown in communication. Rubin states that current views of listening comprehension propose that listeners actively process language input using cognitive strategies involving solving, learning problems by considering how to store and retrieve information, recognizing cognates, relying on semantic clues such as the type of text, guessing and application of rules. The metacognitive strategies involving planning, and evaluating, seem to be used by more successful learners. These theories are still subjects of discussions. Some educators wonder whether Krashen really means that teachers can do away with grammar, drills and exercises and "just provide the learner with comprehensible input, lower his anxiety, raise his self-confidence"- and acquisition will then proceed of its own accord (21). This may

seem facetious, perhaps, but the pro and contra Krashen debate continues; as recent as May 2, 2002, news of another debate was transmitted via the Foreign Language Teach Internet exchange.

At any rate, it would seem that recent research in testing may have expanded the views of what constitutes communicative language testing, very few changes are to be seen in the actual language testing practices. Actually, there is even little agreement as to what makes a test communicative. Language testing research has begun to grow as a specialty, concentrating on the validity of inferences we make on the basis of test scores and the fairness of the uses teachers make of these scores. After perusing several editions of *Language Testing*, a British publication, one gets the impression that in the next few years, it will not really be a question of judging whether one type of test is superior to another, but how to choose which test will measure that which the educator wishes to measure.

While the number of language test researchers increase, teachers around the world will look to update and vary old means of evaluation, which is where dictation comes in once again. There seem to be as many differences of opinion as to the use, form and validity of dictations as there are dictations. What exactly is the function of a dictation? Is it a valid testing procedure and or a valid teaching technique? What are some of the variations? What do they measure? Morrow suggests that both the cloze (a test first introduced in 1953 as a test of reading comprehension) and the dictation are fundamentally tests of language competence and that both are valid tests of the basic level of language proficiency of a student (22) and compares their results positively with those of students taking the a test of grammatical competence, which, according to Canale and Swann, (23) includes some knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence, grammar, semantics and phonology. We must, therefore, decide whether what we want is to measure a learner's performance on a particular task and a then design a test to elicit a performance from the student; then we must find a way of measuring that performance. If we wish to test performance, we must not discard the traditional dictation but adapt, revise and modify it in accordance with our own personal objectives as teachers. To give a simplified example, even dictating a list of isolated spelling words serves a purpose, for it tests competence. But by going one step further and having the learner write complete sentences using those same words, or going even one step further, and having them write a short paragraph, one could test performance and oblige the student to apply knowledge of rules of conjugation, agreement of adjectives in some cases, etc; this would mean moving from competence to performance by using the language to write and read. Thus the student has translated competence, or the lack of competence, into performance. In any case, there is no need to denigrate even the most passive of dictations or cloze tests, since we can always call on them to test for learner competence.

As previously mentioned, come critics question whether the dictation is not only a viable testing device, but a teaching technique as well. Based upon findings by

researchers such as Paul Nation, (24) who found dictations make learners focus on phrase and clause level construction, and Yoshida, who decided that dictation is a useful pedagogical device, Osami Takeuchi made an experiment in 1997 to determine for herself whether dictation is in fact effective for language teaching. She devised three different types of dictations and gave each of three groups of students one type of dictation for thirteen weeks. The first was a traditional dictation, the second was identical but included a translation and the third was in the form of a written cloze with slots. She and her colleagues concluded that all 207 students had shown significant improvement in L2 listening comprehension and that dictations are not only good predictors of learners' listening abilities, but could be an effective pedagogical device to stimulate awareness of the written language in the student. According to Takeuchi, therefore, testing will ultimately teach. This one example of course is neither conclusive nor comprehensive, but is an instance of what kind of experimentation is currently being undertaken in all parts of the world (25).

There are several teacher-training workshops on line, including one designed by Ruth Montalvan for the U.S Department of State. She offers several reasons for using dictations, and there are many others (26). The dictation is an integrative proficiency test of auditory memory span, spelling, recognition and sound segments, familiarity with the grammatical and lexical patterns of the language and overall textual comprehension, prediction, vocabulary and usage, phonology, sound discrimination, punctuation skills and can prove to be good predictors of global language ability. Dictation forces students to discriminate, amongst a flow of sounds, the meaningful words and word order. It can help enlarge vocabulary, particularly when, following the French example, the text chosen is a literary one, chosen not only to highlight a particular grammar or spelling point, but also to highlight good writing and style. The dictation will test short-term memory and how that student listens as well. The French language test researcher Jean Claude Moth would have us remember that dictations also test the speed of writing and the learners' capacity to re-read and correct his/her own errors. (27) Dictation can provide comprehensive assessment of linguistic ability both for the teacher and the student. For example: did the learners' mistakes come from failure to use the context to help arrive at a meaning? Did they make structural errors in tenses? Did they not hear correctly and write "a lait "instead of au lait, or "asked it" instead of "asked"? Did they misuse their grammar expectancy and write " I scream" instead of " ice cream." This applies to students of Spanish as a L2 as well, some of whom might not at the beginning distinguish between "no me gusta comer pescado congelado" and "no me gusta comer pescado con helado".

Dictations can be as varied, flexible, valuable and interesting as the teachers' time and imagination allow. Some English as well as French professors, for example, first give practice dictations, during which they stop at some particular point and warn their students of possible pitfalls, thus reassuring them that the prepared dictation is neither a trap nor a punishment. For example, they might remind their students that the word for fish is 'poisson', emphasizing the

pronunciation, and not ‘poison”, and an English teacher would not just dictate “He walked to school” but “He walked to school yesterday”, thus testing linguistic ability. The dictation might be a text they have seen during the week or that same day, and therefore are not taken by surprise, and are aware of the difficulties they may be about to encounter. The problem arises with the third type, called by the French the “control”, and that is the one that is the most cruised, as it creates the much publicized fear and anxiety associated with the word “dictation”, especially if the text is a literary one. The teachers’ responsibility in this case to is reassure fearful students that the control is no longer the teachers’ way to trap students who have not prepared their lessons, but something designed to mutually assess their progress.

Two pioneers in the field of inventiveness are Davis and Rinvolucrí, who emphasize in their book (28) that dictations can be interactive group activities and that they can be creative and even fun. Dictated texts could be about something amusing or about something with which they are familiar, or have previously discussed. They could be as simple as listening to the teacher’s daily agenda, which the students are then asked to modify with their own information, or listening to the words of a song and then trying to summarize that song. No matter what text is chosen, the authors recommend never including more than one or two new words which could be guessed at by their context, and stressing only one grammatical point. Another way a teacher may vary a simple dictation, is by reading the selected passage without the prepositions: for example, “one Saturday afternoon-Easter vacation-I went-airport-my friend), or without any punctuation, or with just infinitives and no verb forms.

The oral cloze (from the Gestalt “closure” of the mind, the natural human psychological tendency to fill in gaps in patterns) (29), has been written about extensively. Formerly used only as a measure of reading comprehension, it has been recommended as an indicator of general language proficiency, for it depends on what Oller called the grammar of expectancy, permitting the learner to use clues from the text to form hypotheses and educated guesses about the missing words. Since Oller’s work on the value of cloze scores, researchers have found that cloze performance can be affected not only by expectancy grammar, but by text difficulty, text topic, student familiarity with the topic, deletion ratio, method of student response, whether it is a classic fixed interval cloze, or a multiple choice one, and the rationale the tester uses to decide which words to omit (30). The cloze test has been found to be a good one for use in teaching both French and English as target languages, according to Lapkin & Swain, (31) who tested Canadian students in English and French immersion classes. The biggest difference was the in French the answer might be graphic rather than phonetic, as in deciding whether “fatigué” should be written with a second “e”, or the difference between “sais” and “sait”. In French, the teacher would accept an incorrect graphic, unless it could be considered part of a larger speech error, as in writing the word for summer, “été”, instead of the imperfect of “être”, “était”, a different part of speech. If the test were in English, the teacher would have to determine by error analysis why the student

wrote “I live in the morning” instead of “I leave in the morning”; it is of course doubtful that this is a spelling error, but in all likelihood one of comprehension, or grammar expectancy.

In traditional dictations, learners have to remember a phrase of several words as accurately as possible, and they are told not to take notes during the first reading of the dictation. A variation called the “dictocomp” is a wonderful relief from both the traditional dictation and the traditional composition. A paragraph of approximately 100 words is read at normal speed, and may be repeated again and again, but always at normal speed. The students have to try to remember as accurately as possible what they have heard. If the level of the class is elementary, some key words, or even a brief outline may be written on the board. Students may be encouraged to work in groups or individually. The object is to reproduce the text as closely as possible to the original: this is the “dicto” part: the students can add their own words whenever necessary: this is the “comp” part. The object is not to write a resumé or just to state the most important ideas; this is actually an exercise in note taking without the notes and provides practice in spelling, writing, short-term memory and oral comprehension. Students are told not to take notes so that they can concentrate on key words or phrases of the text, on pauses and emphasis that might give clues to the meaning. They focus on the mental process of listening, without interference from the process of writing. Not only does an exercise like this provide a welcome change of pace; it provides a way of grouping the more advanced or fluent students in a separate group to avoid their becoming the ones who write for the group and instead encourages them to be creative. The dictocomp is “an experience technique (which) reduces the cognitive load of a task by preparing the learners well before they do the task... The preparation provides the learners with ideas, language items and text organization so that they can focus on the skill aspect, which in the case of the dictocomp, is writing” (32).

The pioneer of the variation known as the “dictogloss” is Ruth Wajnryb, who has written extensively on this subject, which has been adapted by teachers all over the world. This, in contrast to the dictocomp, does entail note taking. The teacher reads a short text of three to five sentences at normal speed. The students should take notes, and then, working in groups, they should try to reconstruct the text following the model, but not necessarily reproducing it exactly. By working together, they indicate to each other the words or phrases some of them may be stuck on, they negotiate and reformulate. Each group then presents its version for discussion. For beginning students, some words may be written on the board beforehand, and some explanation given; for more advanced students, no words are provided and so the dictogloss becomes an exercise in authentic note taking (33).

There seem to be as many versions of the interactive dictation as there are definitions. In French there are several websites called “interactive” and involve filling in blanks on the screen, and not being able to continue if one answer is wrong, until it is corrected. Brown suggests dictating the sentences in random

order, and having the students then put them in order to reconstruct the text. He also suggests variations such as having the students read a text, put it aside, and then trying to produce their own version of that text with the book closed—or the transparency removed, for example.

Actually, almost anything can be turned into a variation of a dictation exercise—one can dictate song or movie titles, ask comprehension questions about the dictated words, have the students change dictated questions into answers and vice-versa, although some educators feel there should be contextuality of the test items and that the dictation should not consist of unconnected sentences. If the text is a literary one, the teacher may take advantage of the opportunity as they do in native French courses, and point out an image, a metaphor, or any other literary device. For beginners, the teacher can dictate phone numbers, easy mathematical equations or grocery lists.

Two problems must be briefly mentioned: the creation and/or search for material and the correction process. Of course, ideally one should create one's own texts, but there are more and more available sources on the Internet, either through education websites or through teacher exchanges to help teachers accumulate their own collection of recyclable texts.

As for correcting dictations, one suggestion for willing, creative, imaginative, but occasionally stressed and continually time-starved teachers is to modify traditional correction procedures. The correction of dictations has often been criticized for its lack of objectivity. How can educators simplify the process and be fairer as well? Texts should be short, correcting may be self- or peer-corrected and discussed the same day, mistakes may be underlined, and the text self-corrected by the student during the following class. Credit may be given only to fully correct sentences; that is to say, credit could be given for what is right, not wrong. For example, one professor recommends giving three points for a perfect sentence, two if there is one error or one word left out, one point for two errors, and zero for three or more grammatical errors (34). Since dictation is now being used more and more as a teaching tool rather than a testing tool, traditional marking or grading is not always necessary.

Whether we accept the idea or not that dictation, and in particular, the traditional dictation, is a viable teaching method, more and more teachers have already transformed and are transforming this activity which had almost become extinct into a communicative, collaborative, activity in keeping with the fundamental principles expressed in the literature of language teaching and learning.

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