

An Experiment with Dictogloss

Why dictogloss?

The first time that I read about dictogloss was during an online teacher training course. It was an article from MET (Modern English Teacher). The topic came up again during one of our regular staff meetings at my work place (where a teacher talked about different kinds of dictation), and, recently, I have watched a recording of lesson in which a teacher used dictogloss¹. I was intrigued by the idea that a dictation activity could be communicative and yet focus on grammar, accuracy and meaning. Grammar has traditionally often been taught on a sentence level, separated from its context as if it were a subject on itself. And, unfortunately, this is what many students have come to believe. And this is why students often have a good “knowledge” of grammar rules and forms but cannot transfer this into active use. As a learner of languages myself, I have had the same experience over and over again and I was, therefore, looking for new ways of making grammar an integrative part of learning a language. I have tried dictogloss once with one student for raising her awareness of weak pronunciation of grammar words. Her response to the technique was very positive. Now, I would like to try it out with a group of students to make use of its communicative and collaborative power.

What is dictogloss?

The origins of dictogloss, which is also called *grammar dictation* or *dictocomp*, are not known but it seems to have been developed in Australia. It is a relatively new technique² and its classic version seems to have developed in the early 1960s³.

Dictogloss is a task-based procedure helping students to use their grammar resources to reconstruct a text and become aware of their shortcomings and needs. It can be a fairly short, controlled activity or a more extended discovery activity.

It has not much in common with traditional dictation. Its procedure and its objectives are very distinct. It is hearing and then reconstructing a text rather than writing down the exact words that are dictated. As the text is read at a natural speed, students cannot write down every word but only key words and have to understand the meaning and use their knowledge of grammar in order to reconstruct it. A dictogloss is an excellent way of practising grammar and vocabulary as learners work on a combination of meaning and form, which makes grammar learning more purpose and meaningful.

The text used is often a single sentence, with length and complexity tuned to the learners' level. For example⁴:

¹ A DVD included in Harmer (2006)

² Wajnryb (1990)

³ MET Vol 10 No 3, July 2001

⁴ Taken from MET Vol 10 No 3, July 2001

'It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen.' (opening line of George Orwell's 1984)

'I'm sorry I'm late, but my wife took my car keys to work with her by mistake and I had to get a taxi to go to her office, and when I got back the cat was stuck up a tree and I had to call the fire brigade to get her down, and then I ran out of petrol half way here and had to get the bus - sorry.'

In the extended version, longer texts (short, dense paragraphs) are dictated and the text can be repeated up to three times - making sure that its read in a natural speed and the same intonation / style each time as much as possible. Texts can come from any source but they should, if possible, be linked to previous or upcoming lessons.

- The beginning of a story, a poem or a song
- Idioms, proverbs, sentences with mnemonic power
- Newspapers, magazines (headline, first sentence)
- Short film or comedy scenes
- A text that has been read before (in a reading lesson) - to draw attention to structures (prepositions, gerund, tense, etc. or to reinforces the learning that took place in the reading lesson.

Wajnryb (1990) uses more or less graded authentic texts from the news.

Dictogloss activities are easily gradable. Visual cues (sketch, flow chart, photo, mind map) can be provided that represents some elements of the story. Teachers can also prepare and provides a set of questions (similar to comprehension check questions) about the text which would give students clues about the text (Is he married? What does he do? Is he successful? Why / Why not?).

Adaptations of dictogloss⁵

- Offer students part of the text to help them reconstruct ('Cloze Dictogloss' - they can choose to have the verbs or the nouns)⁶.
- Do not give the option of writing down key words (sometimes this trains the learners to listen better).
- Use competitive, as well as collaborative, options.
- Students prepare the input - around a specific discussion topic or language point. For example, small groups summarise their opinion about something, and work simultaneously on each other's input. Or each small group prepares a long sentence with as many compound nouns as possible, or a one-paragraph story in the past around a picture.

⁵ MET Journal. Volume 10 No 3, July 2001

⁶ See Rinvolucris 1984

The four stages in the dictogloss procedure⁷

1. Preparation, 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.
The text is normally read twice at natural speed making short pauses between the sentences. The first time, students do not take any notes. The second time, they note down key words to help them remember the content and reconstruct the text.
3. Reconstruction, when the learner reconstructs the text on the basis of the fragments recorded in stage 2.
This is the collaborative stage in which students work together to reconstruct the text with correct grammar and content pooling their information and discussing the best options.
4. Analysis and correction, when learners analyse and correct their texts.
This is done with the help of the teacher by comparing their versions to the other group's and then with the original.

Many variations⁸ and adaptations of dictogloss have developed but the main stages are usually the same.

What are the aims of dictogloss?⁹

The aim for the students is not to create an exact copy of the original but a text which has the same content as the original and is grammatically and lexically accurate. Other aims are:

- to provide an opportunity for learners to use their productive grammar in the task of text creation
- to encourage learners to find out what they do and do not know about English, namely their weaknesses and strengths¹⁰.
- to upgrade and refine the learners' use of the language through a comprehensive analysis of language options in the correction of the learners' approximate texts.

Sub-aims:

If done regularly, students will gradually refine their ...

- global aural comprehension and
- note-taking skills.

⁷ Wajnryb (1990)

⁸ For variations of dictogloss see: Jacobs & Small (2003) and Muray (2001) - available on the Internet

⁹ Wajnryb (1990)

¹⁰ Research into second language acquisition says that the first stage of improving accuracy is awareness-raising. Namely, raising students' awareness of gaps in their inter-language. It is also good for alerting students to features of language that they might normally not notice. Source: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk>

What is the value of dictogloss?

Dictogloss has been the subject of numerous studies and commentaries, which have largely supported use of the technique¹¹. One reason for this is that it is integrative. Students are encouraged to focus their attention on form and meaning and all four language skills are practised:

- listening (to the teacher during dictation, to peers when discussing the reconstruction),
- speaking (to peers during the reconstruction)
- reading (notes taken while listening to the teacher, the group's reconstruction, and the original text), and
- writing (writing the reconstruction).

Further potential benefits

- Dictogloss creates a genuine need for communication (to pool information, negotiate and complete the task) as there is an information gap.
- It fosters group responsibility and takes pressure away from individual students.
- It helps learners monitor and adjust their interlanguage¹² to come closer to the target language.
- Helps find a compromise between what students think they need (which might not be grammar at all but maybe text organisation or lexis) and what teachers think. The needs become obvious when analysing the texts.
- As it is communicative and addresses the needs of students directly it is motivational. Students also generally want to be corrected, here it is done in a sensible way.
- Research and experience shows that learning takes place when students actually try out language and are actively engaged in the task. Here they are also engaged in the correction stage, which is more learner centred (peer correction¹³).
- The reconstructed texts allows students to discuss their interpretation of which grammar is most appropriate so that the text they produce is as close as possible in meaning, content and function to the original version. If it is a review of a structure, it is interesting to see whether students can identify it when listening and then reapply in the reconstruction.

How can it be used to evaluate students' language learning?

Teachers and students might be able to collect information about each student's ability to:

- recognise key words in a piece of extended prose
- retell word meanings and definitions

¹¹ Jacobs & Small (2003)

¹² Corder (1981)

¹³ Peer correction seems to have many advantages. It is good for group cohesion, helps students become better at self-monitoring (as a result of monitoring others) and is more likely to provoke thinking than by being corrected by the teacher. - See Harmer 2006

- use effective speaking and listening skills
- work co-operatively
- share information with a group or the whole class
- create a written retelling and compare it with the original
- extend proof reading and editing skills

My objectives for this experiment

My objective for the experiment with dictogloss is

1. to provide a learner-centred approach with opportunities for meaningful communication and co-operation.

More specifically, I want ...

2. to introduce dictogloss as a tool for improving grammar and writing and listening skills.
3. to experiment with dictogloss and learn about its effectiveness as a technique for practising language.
4. to provide an opportunity for reflection through writing, peer evaluation and self-evaluation as a means to foster learner autonomy.
5. to find out how students react to the technique and whether they think it is beneficial.
6. to find out whether dictogloss really helps students to work collaboratively.

Evaluation

There will be three different ways of evaluating the experiment. I have devised a questionnaire¹⁴ for a colleague who will be observing the lesson to complete during the lessons and another questionnaire¹⁵ for my students, which they will fill in immediately after the lesson. The questions in the questionnaires reflect my objectives and aims for the lesson and the experiment. In addition to this, I will monitor students during the various stages to see how they are coping and whether they seem to be engaged. Analysing students' reconstructed texts will also help me to evaluate how successful students attempts were. After the lesson, I will go through the questionnaire with my colleague in more detail. If I have a chance, I will also talk to my students and try to get more details of their answers in the questionnaire. What I hope to find out is whether dictogloss lives up to the many aims and values that are stated in favour of it and which I am expecting to bring about in this lesson. For my personal development as a teacher, I want to know whether I have implemented this technique well and taught an engaging lesson in which my students feel they have accomplished and learned something.

¹⁴ Appendix 2

¹⁵ Appendix 3

Post-Lesson evaluation

The lesson plan

The stages of my lesson are logically structured and include all relevant points. I had no problem in following it and it helped me to focus on the relevant points at each step. The only thing, I would change is the procedure in the analysis stage. It turned out, that the sentence-by-sentence approach suggested as a possible way by Wajnryb (1990) was not a good decision (see below for details). I was also a bit too ambitious regarding the follow-up tasks and had to shorten the reading part and the practice stage.

The experiment and my objectives

Objective 1

Students: —

Assessor:

The reconstruction stage was learner-centred but the analysis stage, which took the longest time, was teacher-centred because students did not know much about the present perfect and teacher had to explain. However, students collaborated in group work and this also made the activities enjoyable.

Teacher:

The reconstruction stage, where students pool their information, discuss and come up with one version of the reconstructed text per group, did, unfortunately, not take long. The reason was that there were only two groups one with three students and the other with two. There was some discussion going on but they usually agreed quickly on one students suggestions. Maybe this was due to the fact that they do not have the language to agree or disagree.

The analysis stage, on the other hand, lasted longer than I had expected. The reason for this was that none of the groups had come up with any sentences in the present perfect tense and I basically had to teach it instead of reviewing it. There were also many other mistakes, and, not being used to the procedure, I started analysing many different mistakes. I somehow felt that students would be disappointed, if I did not deal with them. This was also partly caused by the fact that I went through the text sentence by sentence, first comparing the two groups' versions and than comparing them to the original. Besides taking long, this was also very teacher-centred.

It would have been more effective to first compare students versions with each other accepting all grammatically correct sentences and looking at alternative ways in which they expressed the ideas. Then, to give students the original text and give them some time to look through it and find the difference and discuss them with their partners or in their groups and get some class feedback only on tense usage. This would be followed by language work (highlighting the form, eliciting or explaining meaning, and looking at word order).

Objective 2

Students:

Students mentioned mainly grammar and vocabulary that they learned in this lesson but not listening and writing. This might be because of the way I posed the question in their questionnaire but maybe also due to the fact that this is the most obvious to them.

Assessor:

According to the assessor, dictogloss helps mainly with grammar and listening, and as a sub-aim with writing because the texts are too short to work or improve on writing skills.

Teacher:

I agree that listening skills and grammar are the areas that dictogloss can help most with. With writing, it depends on how we define it. It can certainly help with spelling and with note-taking. If the text is chosen carefully we might use it for a mini discourse analysis (anaphoric reference was one of the points that came up in this lesson).

Objective 3

Students:

Students would like to do a dictogloss again as they say it helped them to understand the language and it helped them to become better in English.

Observer:

Students were motivated, everybody participated in all stages and asked many questions, which shows that they were really interested. However, the present perfect was not reviewed but the teacher had to basically teach it. There was no time for practising the grammar.

Teacher:

The experiment was successful because all students participated actively in all stages, they asked many questions, especially in the analysis stage and seemed to be motivated. Students also noticed the position of the time adverbials and I elicited their meaning by asking questions. On the other hand, students did not notice the use of the present perfect and most of them did not even remember the difference between the past simple and the present perfect (only one of them had been in my lesson where this was the topic). This meant that I had to explain its use in the text (indefinite time, result now) and draw time lines to illustrate it. As I was running out of time, this was relatively teacher-centred, although, I did ask concept check questions.

Objective 4

Students: —

Assessor: Collaborative work helped student to reproduce the text and group work was enjoyable.

Teacher: As I mentioned in *objectives 1*, there was not enough peer- and self-evaluation, for the reason mentioned also in *objective 1*.

Objective 5

Students:

Students liked the experiment and participated fully in it and found it beneficial. They were also relaxed because they understood the reason for the experiment and knew what they had to do. Reasons mentioned were that they understood the grammar and that it was

visual (the texts written on the board - highlighting in colour). They also mentioned that comparing their texts to each other and to the original and having differences highlighted in colour and on the board helped them understand and make the corrections more memorable.

Assessor:

It was beneficial, as students seemed to understand the difference between the tenses and when to use which. Students were neither relaxed nor tense. The analysis stage was challenging so they had to concentrate and did so, but they felt comfortable and free to clarify any questions they had.

Teacher: This objective was reached as students were relaxed, participated in the experiment and seemed to enjoy it. They were motivated and would like to do it again.

Objective 6

Students: —

Assessor:

Yes, dictogloss helps students to collaborate and complete the task.

Teacher:

I believe that dictogloss definitely helps students to collaborate but more so with larger groups and maybe also at higher levels - at least higher pre-intermediate. In larger groups, there will be more discussion in reconstruction stage. It would also be possible to do this stage in pyramid-style, creating the opportunity for more peer-evaluation and -feedback.

Conclusion

After having read extensively about dictogloss and having done a lesson with it, I can say that it can be a powerful technique in helping students with various skills and language use. But, as I suspected, it does not work so well with small groups as there is not enough opportunity for reflection on their own language and for peer evaluation. Another drawback in my lesson was that most students, as I had anticipated, did not know the technique. Thus, I had to explain it first and spent some time on training them how to take notes (by helping them notice the difference between grammar and content words). The difficulty for the teacher, I find, lies mainly in the fact that she has to make decisions on the spot on what problems to deal with when she is confronted with the students' versions of the text. Therefore, as I mentioned in my lesson rationale, and as Wajnryb (1990) also points out, it is probably much more effective and beneficial once students and the teacher are familiar with the procedure. I will definitely try dictogloss again with my classes. However, with elementary or lower pre-intermediate students who do not have the language to discuss their versions, I would adapt it and maybe not use it as a collaborative task. At higher levels, students will be able to discuss the options more. Also, after students get used to reflecting on their own language, dictogloss will be more powerful. Students were very motivated and involved and concentrated in this lesson, therefore, I could imagine using dictogloss when there is unrest in the class or with large classes. I would also use it sometimes to change the pace of a lesson. Looking at students encouraging comments, dictogloss will be part of my teaching repertoire.

(Word count: 3,163)

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Copy of material

Appendix 2 - Questionnaire for observing teacher

Appendix 3 - Questionnaire for students

Appendix 4 - Reconstructed texts produced by students