

# Introduction

## What is dictation?

Some of you may remember dictation from your schooldays with pleasure, some may have felt it boring, while some may have found it an encouraging exercise. In many cases the teacher probably read you the text, dictated it, and then read it a third time so you could check through. To many people this, and nothing else, *is* dictation.

The picture begins to change if you ask yourself a series of questions:

Who gives the dictation, and who to?

Who controls the pace of the dictation?

Who chooses or creates the text?

Who corrects it?

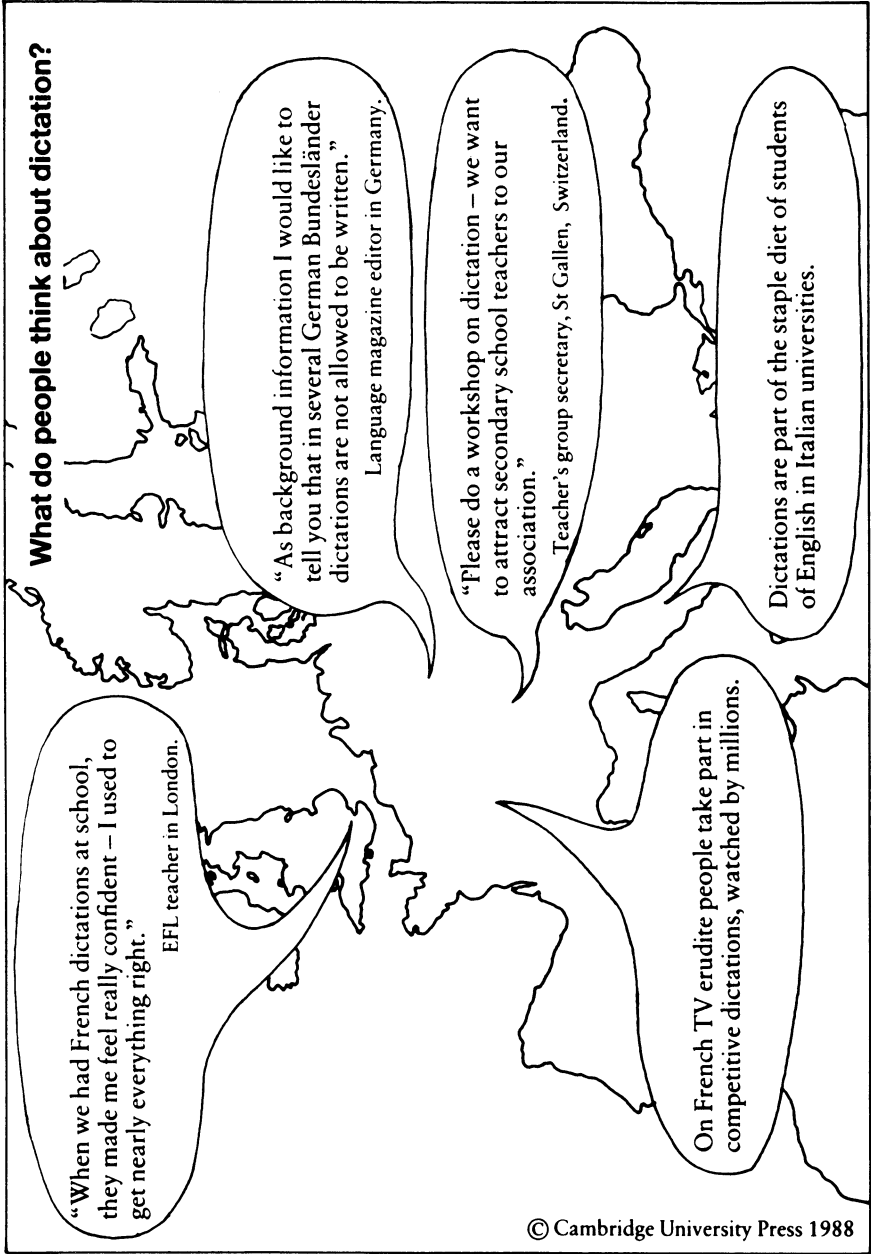
If all power remains in the hands of the teacher, then we have a bleak, traditional landscape. But dictation can be otherwise.

Sometimes, when introducing teacher training techniques in teacher training workshops, we have asked ‘How many of you do dictation in your classes?’ At first only a few hands go up. There is inhibition in the air – can one admit to doing something as reprehensible and old-fashioned as dictation in what is meant to be a progressive, ‘communicative’ workshop? What might colleagues think? But if we repeat the question more hands go up. It normally turns out that in any average group of European teachers more than half *do* use dictation either regularly or from time to time in their teaching. And with good reason.

## A new methodology for an age-old exercise

This book is an attempt to put a useful but now undervalued area of work back on the language-teaching map, and to endow it with a methodology that makes it attractive to a broad range of teachers and students within current approaches to language learning and teaching.

To brainstorm a new methodology for dictation we asked ourselves a number of basic questions. The full answers to these questions constitute the body of this book. What follows is a peep at some questions and answers.



*Who dictates?*

- the teacher
- three voices on a tape; the student chooses the one she wants to take dictation from
- two students dictate to each other
- in the language lab the student takes dictation from her own voice on her own tape

*Who chooses the texts?*

- the coursebook writer
- the teacher
- the students
- the teacher offers several texts and the students choose
- the students offer texts and the teacher chooses

*How long should the text be?*

- a single word
- a sense group
- a whole passage
- a passage read in a continuous loop

*How should the voice dictating sound?*

- a whisper
- a shout
- the voice dictating is speaking, not reading
- the voice sings
- the voice reads to a background of music
- the person dictating has just done a relaxation exercise (and so have those listening)

*Must the listener write down everything?*

- yes, the whole text
- yes, the whole text plus the listener's own reaction
- no, selected bits of the text
- no, only the parts of the text the listener agrees with
- no, change the text to what the listener wants it to say



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### *Who corrects the dictation?*

- the student corrects herself
- the student corrects another listener's script
- the computer corrects
- the teacher corrects
- nobody does

### **Why use dictation?**

Ten good reasons:

#### *The students are active during the exercise*

This apparently obvious point first came home to us forcefully when one of us started learning German at our local evening institute. To begin with, the teacher was talking 90 per cent of the time and never used pair or group work. The average student in a group of 15 people produced no more than eight or ten utterances in a 90 minute session. And the group met only once a week. Not much activity there. Then the teacher began to give the group dictations. This was marvellous for the students because they could be actively engaged in producing German on the page while the teacher retained full 'magisterial' control of the group. Suddenly, in this old-fashioned exercise, the student was allowed to become a *subject* again, instead of being only the *object* of the teacher's language flood. The students became subjects in the sense that they were actively engaged in creating visual German across the page in front of them.

Dictation is one of those exercises in which, if it is well done, the teacher's planned activity prompts reactions, simultaneously and immediately subsequently, by *all* the students in the group.

#### *The students are active after the exercise*

There is no call for the teacher to take on responsibility for correcting dictation scripts. Such work requires care, of course, but it does not require the kind of linguistic judgement that only the teacher can make. Correcting a dictation is a straightforward task which students are quite capable of doing for themselves, extending their activity from the dictation into the correction phase and providing them with opportunities to 'over-learn' the language as well as to collaborate with each other in the learning process. Such work is a good introduction to the habit of student self-correction, and in particular collaborative correction,

approaches. The teacher can usefully introduce these in more difficult areas, such as working on written compositions.

*Dictation leads to oral communicative activities*

Many of the exercises in this book show how dictation can be used as a lead-in to thoughtful communication by and between students. For example, the teacher can decide to dictate an interactive text – one in which the students not only write down what they hear, but also react to it in writing. An example\* would be a set of simple questions to set down and answer: ‘If I came to your home as a guest //† what would you show me first? // what would you offer me to eat? // where would you let me sleep?’ etc. Following the dictation, the students work in small groups comparing their answers; the ‘inside self’ thinking that has taken place during the dictation phase leads naturally into comparing experiences with other members of the group.

*Dictation fosters unconscious thinking*

With intermediate and advanced groups – any group in fact where it is possible to select a text that the students find quite easy to simply reproduce – dictation tends to occupy only a part of the students’ minds. But important things can be brewing underneath, triggered by the language of the dictation. Perhaps an example is needed:

In *Once Upon a Time*, John Morgan offers an exercise in which he reads these words to the group at very high speed:

village  
emigrate  
marriage  
absence  
pregnant  
shame  
attack  
destruction  
birth  
deep well  
suicide

\* This exercise was created in a brainstorming session by a group of colleagues at the Brighton IATEFL convention in 1985.

† The double oblique // is used in this book to mark pauses in dictation.

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The students invariably groan and grumble because none of them has managed to catch all the words. They are asked to pool what they have managed to get down, and so between them recreate the full list. The teacher then asks them to write down the story that the words imply.

What is important here is that the dictation phase – taking down the words – is simply the incubation phase for the story-making. On the surface of it the students are working on the reconstruction of the list, and complaining about the teacher's unreasonable behaviour as they do so. But all the time their minds are unconsciously working around the implications of the words in the set, building up a powerful base for the story creation. Two tasks are in motion at the same time at different mental levels. Dictation is ideal for occupying the conscious mind while stimulating the unconscious into action.

### *Dictation copes with mixed-ability groups*

Here is a familiar problem: an Italian teacher faces a first-year group of 15-year-olds who have just come up from middle school. The majority of them have done three years of English (with varying results), but a minority studied French in middle school and are virtual beginners in English. In this extreme instance of a mixed-ability group, dictation remains a feasible exercise; indeed, properly conducted, it can capitalise on the range of abilities.

For example, the teacher chooses a text which is relatively easy for the most advanced students. She asks these students to do the dictation with no help at all. To the beginners, on the other hand, she gives out the text with only 10 to 15 words left out. Their task, while the others are writing away continuously, is to listen carefully, to try to understand the whole, and to fill in their missing words. At the end of the dictation, the more advanced students explain the text to the beginners and check the words they have inserted. The level of the text used, and the number of gaps left, can be varied to meet particular needs. Many dictation exercises help the teacher not only to cope with, but also to actually exploit positively, the range of abilities in the group.

### *Dictation deals with large groups*

A teacher can give a dictation to a student one-to-one; yet, unlike most techniques, dictation is equally feasible with groups of 20 or 60 or 200, and there are plenty of groups of this size around the world. Indeed, dictation is one of the few approaches to teaching and learning in the large group context that has a reasonable chance of engaging the students in active language use. If the teacher does use dictation with large groups, she needs to be specially sure that her voice is capable of

reaching all of the students clearly and expressively (see ‘Tips for reading aloud’ on page 9).

*Dictation will often calm groups*

If the teacher is working with a group with discipline problems, or simply one that is feeling skittish, it is useful to have an exercise which calms everyone down. In dictation, apart from the implicit control of topic and activity and pace, there is often a rhythmical, semi-hypnotic aspect to the exercise that puts everybody, including the teacher, into a slight trance (see Bandler & Grinder, 1981).

*Dictation is safe for the non-native teacher*

Recent trends in methodology have encouraged many exercises that are very open-ended; they depend heavily for their full success on the teacher’s command of the target language, and thus impose a heavy burden on the teacher. This is all very well for the native speaker, but many teachers, through no fault of their own, have not achieved a level of English – accuracy of grammar, breadth of vocabulary, or sensitivity to stylistic variation, for example – that leaves them feeling comfortable with such exercises. Dictation, however, is something that teachers can prepare fully in advance. The language it generates is known; it is not an exercise that will take teachers by surprise in the class by exposing them to unexpected language.

*For English, it is a technically useful exercise*

Decoding the sounds of this particular language and recoding them in writing is a major learning task. In teaching other languages to non-native speakers, Spanish, for example, dictation is relatively less useful because the relationship between the sound system and the spelling is not especially problematic. Think, however, of what can face the learner of English. For example:

I went to *Slough*. (rhymes with *cow*, not *off*)  
She has a bad *cough*. (rhymes with *off*, not *cuff*)  
You’re looking *rough*. (rhymes with *cuff*, not *too*)  
It’s coming *through*. (rhymes with *too*, not *four*)  
That’s what I *thought*. (rhymes with *four*)

This kind of complexity – the regularities of sound/spelling as well as the oddities – in itself amply justifies dictation as an exercise.

For a divergent nineteenth-century view see page 122.

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### *Dictation gives access to interesting text*

Most teachers come across bits of text which interest them and would be of interest to their students – newspaper articles, magazines, bits of books, even bits of textbooks. Often such texts have a topicality or curiosity that will attract students in spite of potential linguistic difficulties. The teacher who has a range of dictation strategies at her disposal will be able to exploit these texts as they arise, employing techniques that will increase or decrease the difficulty of the text to match the needs and abilities of the group. And students will respond to the effort and opportunism of their teacher – perhaps adding their own finds to the collection.

## How to find your way around this book

The contents list shows you the sequence of sections and exercises.

The introduction to each section sets out the special features of the exercises in each section. A good way of skimming through the book is to hop from one of these introductions to the next.

The exercises give detailed explanations for the teacher, and usually include a sample text. In addition, each exercise carries a diagram showing the level for which the sample text is particularly appropriate, and the levels at which, with modification, the activity can be useful, like this:



This box appears at the beginning of every exercise to show the general level of the exercise. The different levels are:

Beginner/Elementary  
Lower intermediate  
Mid-intermediate  
Upper intermediate  
Advanced  
Proficiency

with Beginner/Elementary on the left, and Proficiency on the right. The example above is from an exercise presented here for beginners, but the teacher can easily adapt it for lower and mid-intermediate students.

The solutions to the problems set in some of the exercises are given in the Answers section on page 115.



The Bibliography on pages 117 and 118 gives some suggestions for further reading and details of the books referred to in the text.

If you are particularly interested in Community Language Learning look at section 11 on pages 106 to 111.

If you are involved in training teachers, then you should find section 12 on pages 112 to 114 of interest.

The Index on pages 119 to 121 is designed to help you to quickly find an exercise that is appropriate to your class.

Remember that all of these exercises are offered as starting points for your own invention. Read our suggestions *carelessly*, and thus create your own new ideas. Invite your students to come in on the act. This book will be most useful when you have forgotten all about it and dictation has become a part of your own personal repertoire.

The authors would be interested to hear of your experiences, triumphs and disasters. We would enjoy hearing about: dictations we have never dreamt of; exercises you have misread creatively; student reactions and inventions; staffroom reactions; text created by students; group dynamic developments; changes in attitudes – your students' and your own.

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## Tips for reading aloud

- 1 Whether sitting or standing, make sure your voice carries and does not disappear into the floor or table.
- 2 To stop you looking down at the table/floor, hold the book or paper up in front of you but not blocking your face. If you have squashed ribs because you're sitting or standing badly, you'll run out of breath: so make yourself comfortable.
- 3 If you have to turn a page during the reading, it can help to have the page you are going to turn ready before you start.
- 4 The correct volume to use depends on the size and shape of the room, the number of people in it and what you are reading. Rooms with lots of curtains or rooms full of people will absorb more sound. You'll need to compensate.
- 5 You should be easy to listen to and your listeners should not have to strain to hear. It's worth remembering though that reading in too

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- loud a voice can put people off. Your listeners should be drawn to you.
- 6 It's easy to read too fast. The listeners need time to absorb what is being read to them before they can make sense of the next bit, especially if they do not have a copy of the text.
  - 7 It's important to pause: between changes in ideas; for dramatic effect; to make sense of dialogue, etc.
  - 8 It helps to raise and lower your voice, again to show that a different character is speaking if there is dialogue in the text, or to indicate a change of mood, or when a new idea is being introduced. It's important to avoid monotony.
  - 9 You can stress important words by increasing the power of your voice, or by lowering it so that students have to crane to hear. This can really help the listeners to make sense of what is being read.
  - 10 If you can, make eye contact. This means looking up from what you are reading and looking at your listeners. The activity will become more personal as a result, it will give you the chance to put across the meaning of the text with the help of facial expressions, and it will mean that you will be able to gauge the listeners' reactions. If you are a beginner at this, practise the habit by looking up at the end of the last sentence of a paragraph. You will then have time to find your place in the text again as this is a natural place to pause.
  - 11 Look interested in what you are reading. Enthusiasm and boredom are infectious.
  - 12 It may be necessary to introduce briefly what you are going to read so that the listeners can place it in context.
  - 13 If you make a mistake, don't stop or repeat yourself unless the mistake alters the meaning of the text. If you have to repeat it take your time, and make sure you get it right.
  - 14 Of course, mistakes are less likely if you have made yourself familiar with the text before you use it in class.

## *Acknowledgement*

Maggie Melville provided this section.