

Dictation Format

The classic French dictée format to teach writing and reading is a powerful tool indeed. I think of dictée as the writing version of TPRS, a kind of left hand to the right hand of stories. I can teach all the grammar I need to in a dictée without the use of a book.

We do dictation on T/Th – their subject matter is the stories done on M/W . When this is done, the subject matter for the writing is not random, which is a huge factor in the kids’ confidence, as they are able to connect things to known auditory information in their brains.

The kids like to write in this time-tested way. The dictée provides the kids with a nice break from stories, as they are invited to move primarily back into the analytical hemisphere of the brain for a while.

The kids write their dictées in their composition books. These are the black and white bound kind which are so easy to stack up and grade, and which remain in my classroom always, along with the spoon-pencils, since I don’t allow kids to have pencils, or any objects at all, in their hands during M/W stories.

After the story I go to the LCD projector, and the students write the just completed story as I dictate it. An overhead projector serves well, but it is slower and messier and you have to look at the light bulb. LCD projectors are excellent for dictée.

The key point in dictée, a rule I consider more sacred in my classroom than the rules I have for stories about speaking English, etc., is that there be *no speaking* by the students during dictée. *This must be enforced* 100% of the time, or dictée is completely ineffective. Students speaking during dictation is much more egregious, even, than speaking during stories – it just defeats the neurological purpose.

If you think this is something you cannot do, stop reading, because without this rule dictée *simply does not work*. Neither must *you*, the instructor, speak English during dictée.

As long as English is not involved, dictée creates a wonderful flow of language, and *spectacular learnings occur in the minds of the students about how language is structured*. Dictée really bridges the gap between sound and writing, melding the two, moving across the hemispheres so to speak.

As I said, the dictée text I choose is the previous day’s story. I just recall the story as best as I can, saying parts of each sentence *three times*, no more and no less, with enough pause to allow the students to write comfortably. I always remember to include all punctuation instructions in the target language.

On line one (of three), the students write what they hear. Again, I am sure to read slowly and allow enough time for them to write. I tell the kids that *what they write on that top line will not be graded*, but they are to make their best effort. They obviously don't see the correct version until they have tried to write the sentence correctly themselves.

So I just recreate the story on the LCD projector. *The dictated version of the story doesn't have to be perfectly accurate*. In fact, intentional errors as you recreate the story force deeper thinking by the students, and allow you to introduce new vocabulary.

I show them the correct version of the text at the proper time, phrase by phrase, or chunk by chunk, and not sentence by sentence, which is too complex. The students then bring down any corrections of the text that are needed *onto line 2*. *I grade both lines, whatever is correct from line 1 and any corrections made on line 2*. In this way, the students are graded on how well they can copy from the overhead!

Of course, those who wrote the line perfectly the first time want everybody to know it, but, since *they can't talk*, I ask them to kind of give a wave of their hand up and down in a swooping motion to show that they got it right. I always acknowledge those kids with positive comments in French because nothing motivates like success.

Line three is just a line space to make everything clearer and easier to read.

The benefits of doing this are obvious. The kids participate to a very high degree, because they know that working hard at this task of processing sound into writing will bring them an easy grade, which increases their overall motivation in the class.

I got this the other day from a colleague:

Dictée is so good for my kids! The ones who want to do everything right find their spelling improving by leaps and bounds. The ones who struggle get an easy 100 by doing it. It boosts their confidence and makes them feel successful. It is a non-negotiable activity in my program now.

Joe Neilson and I were recently talking about the dictation format described above. Joe said,

"There are a lot of factors that can contribute to a student not thinking critically about his or her [line 1] errors: physical and/or mental health, intellectual ability, number of errors, time, etc."

Joe then raised the question, "Is it necessary to rewrite the whole sentence? He suggested that entirely rewriting the original sentence [on line 2] might "shut the brain down a bit [due to] no perceived need to correct (because that which was correct to begin with is just being repeated without meaning the second time)."

This is such an interesting question. At what point does a student shut down and just start copying what they see on the overhead? How many students actually make an attempt to understand their mistakes? We want our students to reflect on what they are doing in our classrooms!

So what should we tell our students about correcting line 2? I think we should tell them to only correct their mistakes. This would allow them the time to think critically about their errors, instead of being bogged down with copying the entire line, usually in a hurried way.

Of course, copying the entire line would be the only option for a student who has made a large number of errors, because the quantity of corrections would otherwise require too much time to process and not carry any real meaning to the student. Copying, in that case, is better than nothing.

This policy about line 2 will increase focus on the corrections for the majority of students, who wouldn't have made too many errors. They can actually reflect on their errors.

So perhaps the best statement to make to students about correcting line 2 is a simple, "No, you don't have to rewrite the entire sentence, just the mistakes..."

Two other unrelated points about dictée:

We need to go slowly, just like in stories. There is so much processing going on! We would want our teacher to go slowly in dictation if we were the students. I am learning to put bigger gaps between the three sentences or chunks of sentences, and the kids really appreciate that.

Also, after the grammar piece following the dictation, which usually is short (less than five to seven minutes), I sometimes ask the kids to read chorally, and then individually. They really enjoy reading the correct text off the overhead screen. Their accents are usually pretty good, because, we must remember, they heard over fifty minutes of those same words in mega-circled fashion just the day before.