Running Dictation

Chris Milne

Dictation as a tool for language learning has been around for a very long time. I’m sure that many of you remember doing traditional dictations in class. Running dictation, however, is a well-established ESL/EFL activity which is somewhat different from the teacher-fronted model that you may have in mind, and far more engaging. Before going on to describe the basic procedure and some variations on it let’s look briefly at reasons for adding it to your teaching repertoire.

Why use it?

Good reasons to use this type of dictation in your class are:

• It can easily be transferred from the ESL to the literacy classroom where its student-centred nature, and appeal to students with a variety of learning styles means it is often very successful.

• It is a time-tested activity with proven value

• It is a multi-skill activity which integrates the macro-skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

• It can be a very low preparation activity. Once you are comfortable with the basic concept, the dictations become very quick and easy to prepare.

• It is cheap. You don’t need a lot of or expensive resources. A pen, a piece of paper and some sticky tape or blutak will do in a pinch.

• It can easily be made engaging, meaningful, and relevant to the students.

• Numerous variations allow the teacher to focus on different skills within the activity.

• It is very easy to adjust the level of difficulty up or down

• It’s inclusive; in mixed ability classes, students can take part in the same activity at the same time if the teacher prepares easier and harder versions of the same text.

‘Selling’ the Activity

With adult students, I find that clearly outlining why you are asking them to do the activity is a good idea. It shows that you have thought about the purpose of what you are asking them do, and positions them as adult collaborators.
General Considerations

Length and complexity of the text

It is quite important to consider the length and complexity of the text. A common mistake when first using this activity is to underestimate the time required to complete a text in this way. What may appear to the teacher to be a text of ‘reasonable’ length may turn out to be far too long. If it is, the activity turns from an engaging and energizing one to a tedious and demotivating one.

Much the same applies to texts which are too complex for the students’ level.

Relevance

The more relevant a text is the better as students will more easily see the value in it. Relevance can be established by linking the text to a topic or theme that is being covered in class or by including in it things that the students see value in. For example, you could incorporate spelling and pronunciation items that you have identified as needing practice.

As a general rule, I have always found it a good idea to let students know that they are doing something worthwhile and that it’s not just a ‘fun’ activity; “Now watch out when you’re doing this because I’ve put in some of those tricky spelling words from last week.”

Safety

Over the more than twenty years I have been using this activity, I have had few safety problems but they can occur. As running may not always be safe you might like to call it something else such as ‘walking’ dictation.

Some things to consider are;

- Your classroom setup. Is it is a good place to do this or you should move to another area.
- The general environment. It is a good idea to check for obstacles and trip hazards such as power cords and uneven surfaces, and other dangers like sharp corners of desks.
- Hyper-competitive students. It is quite surprising how a mild-mannered student can turn into someone resembling Attila the Hun during this activity. Taking on the role of traffic controller can help reduce overly-enthusiastic movement.
- Making sure that all the students clearly understand the activity and are aware of their, and other students’, safety.

The Dictation Phase

In a ‘standard’ running dictation, a text is placed on suitable surface; most often a convenient nearby wall.

The students are then grouped in pairs. One of them is the ‘writer’ or ‘scribe’ and the other the ‘runner’. The ‘runner’ goes to the dictation, reads and remembers as much as possible, and then returns to the ‘writer’ who listens and writes down what is said. This cycle continues until the dictation is complete.

The Correction Phase

Correction can be handled in a variety of ways but my ‘standard’ procedure is to have the students check the text together and try to identify any errors. I will then read the whole text to them at a natural speed while they check and correct. Finally, they are given a copy of the complete text to check against.

Variations to the text

Variation 1: Structure-based running dictation

A dictation can be chosen, or designed, to introduce or reinforce specific grammatical structures in a contextualized passage. The students will encounter the embedded grammar as they do the activity.

The following brief extract demonstrates how irregular past verbs were embedded in a lower level text connected to a recent class excursion.
Last week we went to Southbank saw an exhibition. Some of us took a bus there and some of us caught a train. My friend and I got there a little early so we sat down and drank coffee. We met our other friends at 9am and went to the exhibition.

Variation 2: Lexically-based running dictation

The basic process is identical to Variation 1 except that the content focus moves to lexis. This works particularly well as a vocabulary review activity, but can also be used to introduce new vocabulary as part of a wider, integrated teaching plan.

Topic or field-related vocabulary is well suited to this variation. The first example extract is based around a simple lexical set – rooms of the house. The second is a significantly more complex one with a medical focus.

1. My house has ten rooms. There are three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room and a kitchen. It also has two bathrooms, a laundry, and a rumpus room.

2. A coronary angiogram is a special x-ray of your heart using an injected contrast dye. The angiogram looks for heart muscle or heart valve abnormalities. It can also see if the coronary arteries are narrowed or blocked. An angiogram can also diagnose heart problems including aneurysm (abnormal ballooning of the heart wall), heart arrhythmias (irregular heart beat) or birth defects, such as a hole in the heart.

Variation 3: Cloze running dictation

In this variation, words are deleted from the text. As in any cloze activity, the words can be deleted at random or by deliberate choice. If you want to focus on their ability to construct meaning, delete content words such as nouns, and main verbs. The deletion of words such as prepositions, conjunctions, and articles focuses more on words which have a grammatical function. Be careful not to delete too many words.

The ‘runner’ retells the text to the ‘scribe’ but replaces each deleted word with a pre-agreed substitute word such as ‘blank’, ‘space’, or ‘something’. The scribe leaves a space, draws a line, or uses a symbol to mark the space in their transcription.

The scribe can try to fill in the blanks as the activity progresses or wait until the correction phase where the students can discuss with each other what the missing words might be and make final decisions before the answers are revealed.

This variation differs from others in that suitable alternative words should be accepted. For example any of the following student choices would be fine.

Australia is a big/huge/vast country.

If you are worried that this variation is too difficult, instead of blanks you can give word choices in the text as in the example below, or, as in the second example, provide a list of the missing words, in random order, at the bottom of the dictation.

Example 1.

John cut his foot on a piece of glass/metal from a broken bottle.

Example 2

The ‘runners’ can either choose the one they think is best, relay both to the ‘scribes’ and let them choose, or discuss them together before deciding.
**Variation 4: Jigsaw Running Dictation**

The twist on this variation is that the text has been scrambled. The relayed scrambled text is unscrambled by the students at the end of the transcription stage or actively negotiated during the activity.

The simplest way to present this activity is to take a standard text, making sure to keep a copy of the original for reference, and move sentences around. This is where word processing programs come into their own: being able to select and drag text around is a great time saver.

A variation on this variation is to put the sentences in a table, then cut them into strips and place them at different spots around the classroom.

### Variation 5: Deliberate Mistakes Running Dictation

This variation requires you to create or modify a text and include deliberate mistakes in it. These mistakes could include any of the following.

- Tenses (He was *sit* on the chair when the bus came.)
- Collocations (He is a *vast* man.)
- Word form (The patient did not *response* to the medicine.)
- Spelling (skool)
- Prepositions (The cat sat *at* the corner.)
- Articles (*An* man put *pen* on the paper.)
- Homonyms (bear/bare)

As in variation 3, students can try to correct these 'on the hop' or at the end of the dictation. Teacher follow-up and class discussion about the text and the answers can be very fruitful.

### A final word

The variations here are only some of many, so don't be afraid to experiment. Also, valuable addition to your teaching repertoire that this may be, be careful not to overuse it. Part of its success is its ability to provide some relief from the usual class routine.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>However, if you can't, you need more practice.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The first thing to do is work with a partner to put this reading in the correct order.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If you can put it together quickly you are clever.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Here are some instructions.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>