Dictogloss: A Multi-Skill Task for Accuracy in Writing Through Cooperative Learning
Karen M. Smith
Meisei University

Abstract
This article describes Dictogloss as a collaborative listening and writing task that promotes oral interaction, communicative competence, and written output through the exploration and understanding of both content and organisational structure of text and its language features. It begins with an explanation of the Dictogloss task and provides an overview of its purpose and objectives. It outlines the research that supports the choice of Dictogloss in the L2 classroom. It then offers a step-by-step teacher-friendly guide to “doing” Dictogloss. Finally, it states the benefits to learners and teachers of Dictogloss, and poses several questions for teacher reflection.

Keywords: dictogloss, cooperative learning, active learning, text reconstruction

Introduction
Encouraging my Japanese students over the past three years to share knowledge and pool individual linguistic strengths in the name of task completion has proven a tall order, especially regarding the output of writing. However, I have found that Dictogloss, a dictation-based task, first presented by Ruth Wajnryb in 1990, has triumphed as one of the most effective, fun and non-threatening ways to have learners cooperate in exploring meaning making through language and linguistics at the same time. Dictogloss, in which listening is the input, that is the material, speaking is the communication tool, and writing is both the input and the output, or the product, is a collaborative task that promotes communicative competence through the use of all four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) while primarily shining a light on grammar. Dictogloss also encourages an understanding of both content and organisational structure of a text and its language features. In this paper, I discuss what Dictogloss is, refer the reader to literature on the topic, provide the full procedure for how to enact the task of Dictogloss, and suggest the benefits to foreign language learners and teachers alike.

My purpose in writing this paper is to encourage more teachers to use Dictogloss, and to excite educators to explore variations on or modifications of the standard Dictogloss approach. As an advocate of Dictogloss, in this paper I have taken a more practical perspective hoping to engage the reader in the procedure itself rather than discussing the limited research that surrounds it. Despite reasonable support for Dictogloss over the past 20 years (Wajnryb, 1990; Swain, 1998; Tedick, 2001; Jacobs & Small, 2003; Vasiljevic, 2010; Newman, 2012), much of what is written refers to the procedure itself and its links to listening comprehension (Jacobs & Small, 2003; Vasiljevic, 2010). What I believe is missing from the field’s body of knowledge are empirical studies similar to Nabei’s (1996) use of Critical Language Related Episodes (CLRE) to examine the interactions of learners during the Dictogloss task, and Kowal & Swain’s 1997 post-task testing of learners’ language retention. Such a limitation may be the impetus for further research, but for now I offer my observations and reflections on what I believe to be a valuable teaching method for the study of grammar and written text in partnership with the generation of cooperative learning.
Following my user-friendly step-by-step guide, I hope the reader will trial Dictogloss in their classrooms and, furthermore, adapt this paper into a presentation on Dictogloss for the purposes of collegial professional development so that more teachers may learn of its value. This paper has been inspired by the success of Dictogloss in my own classroom, and also by the many follow-up requests for more information, and positive reactions at workshops I have given at the College of Foreign Languages, Hue, Vietnam (2011), and at LaoTESOL 2012, both events associated with the Japan Association for Language Teaching, Special Interest Group, Teachers Helping Teachers (THT).

What is Dictogloss?

Dictogloss was introduced in 1990 by Ruth Wajnryb as an alternative method to study grammar. It combines dictation, paraphrase and interpretation (Newman, 2012), and engages multiple skills (Nabei, 1996; Jacobs & Small, 2003; Cardoso, 2009). The concept is simple: learners listen to a passage, note down key words and then work together to create a reconstructed version of the text. In a dictogloss task, learners listen, write and speak, relying on their knowledge of semantic, syntactic and discourse systems of the target language to complete the task with the focus remaining on grammatical competence (Vasiljevic, 2010). Adaptations of Dictogloss now exist, but essentially Wajnryb (1990) outlines four phases:

1. Preparation (Warm-up): the topic is introduced and key vocabulary is addressed.

2. Dictation: the teacher reads a passage at normal speed, twice or three times. The first time learners listen. The second time, learners note down anything they can catch. If there is a third reading, which I advocate, learners expand their notes.

3. Reconstruction: Learners work together in small groups to reconstruct a version of the text from their shared notes. The reconstruction may focus on replication or similarity of meaning, depending on the teacher’s objective.

4. Analysis and correction: Learners analyse and compare their text with the reconstructions of other groups. The class may discuss the differences in the texts, then compare their texts with the original and note or make necessary corrections (Wajnryb, 1990). Out of this procedure, the learners or the teacher may identify key grammar points or organisational points for discussion and practice. In my own classroom, I have explored and expanded the potential of Dictogloss by providing extension research, writing and speaking tasks, both individual and group.

It is the interaction, collaboration and empowerment that results from Dictogloss that makes it different from pure dictation. Wajnryb (1990) observed that the collaborative reconstruction of the text furthered both the negotiation of meaning and form and had students reflecting on their output: "Through active learner involvement students come to confront their own strengths and weaknesses in English language use. In so doing, they find out what they do not know, then they find out what they need to know" (Wajnryb, 1990, p. 10). More recently, Vasiljevic (2010) noted that, "the task provides students with a sense of achievement and personal accountability and encourages them to think about the process of language learning and how to approach it more effectively (p. 48)."
To determine the importance of grammar study and, therefore, assess the usefulness of Dictogloss as a language learning task, we must first reflect on whether we, as educators and communicators, consider writing a skill or a tool. I have asked this question of teachers in conference workshops at the University of Foreign Languages in Hue, Vietnam (2011) and LaoTESOL (2012). Naturally, responses were mixed, typically with some participants noting that "writing is a tool that enables us to share our message" while others insisted that "writing is a skill that must be developed for the purposes of competent communication" (Unknown, 2011). One conference delegate noted that in order to write one must be able to read", and suggested that the two skills remained inseparable; he went on to say, however, that "one could read without needing to develop the skill of writing" (Unknown, 2011). What do you think: Is writing a skill or a tool? Perhaps there is room for both perspectives depending on the purpose of the writing with Dictogloss being one procedure for developing that skill or sharpening that tool.

**Dictogloss Procedure**

This section is a "how to" guide for conducting Dictogloss for a class of L2 learners or for a group of teachers undergoing professional development. First, the teacher or presenter must choose a passage to read. For the purposes of a conference workshop or professional development day, it may be novel to use a passage about the local area or a teaching theme, or otherwise relevant to use an extract from a textbook that is known to most of the delegates, if possible. In the usual classroom situation, the text could be taken directly from the class course book equally for diagnostic or review purposes depending on whether the teacher wishes to introduce new material or revise and recycle previously-taught material. The length of the passage is usually determined by logistical matters such as how much time can be devoted to the thoughtful completion of the activity in accordance with the class ability to complete the task in a timely manner. Furthermore, the speed and complexity of the input, that is the passage, will have a significant effect on the learners’ ability to process the text. Indeed any passage is suitable as long as it is comprehensible to the students when read at normal speed. As a general rule, the texts should be at or below the students’ current proficiency level, although they may include new vocabulary. Typically, a passage will be two-minutes long read at natural speed (see Appendix A for a sample text).

In a conference situation where the audience is small enough and the space is adequate, involve everyone in the task in the role of students. If the group is rather large, it may be more effective to set up two or three groups as a demonstration. In this case, I would read the text and the participating groups would follow my instructions while the rest of the delegates observe and later participate in feedback and reflection on what they saw.

**The Four Stages**

*Stage 1: Warm up / Preparation*

The whole procedure can take up to one hour. As with most lessons, it is necessary to set the context. Learners discuss the topic of the text and are prepared for some of the vocabulary. Teach key words to help lower level learners or if vocabulary is difficult or new. You may show the students a picture, and ask them to talk about what they know of the topic, do role play, whatever you think will activate their knowledge about this topic. You may wish to brainstorm words on the board as this will provide support when they are searching for words later. Pre-teach difficult or
key vocabulary (See Appendix A for the passage used at the University of Foreign Languages in Hue, Vietnam, 2011).

Stage 2: Three Readings
It is important that learners are clear about what they can and cannot do, and what will ultimately be expected of them in terms of writing production. In this phase, learners hear the text and take fragmentary notes. The text is normally read twice or three times at natural speed making short pauses between the sentences. The first time, learners do not take any notes. The second time, they note down key words to help them remember the content. The third time is conducted in the same manner as the second. It is important to forewarn learners that they will reconstruct the text, aiming for either meaning or replication. If you feel your learners need more support, you could have them draw up a table prior to the first reading, see Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keywords to listen for</th>
<th>Facts</th>
<th>Other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Dictogloss Notes

First Reading
- Teacher: “Put your pencils down. I am going to read a text three times. This is the first time. It is NOT dictation, so you do not need to write. I will read at a normal speaking speed. You will not be able to remember everything, so don’t worry.”

- “Concentrate, listen, and understand. Remember, NO writing.”

- “At the end of this FIRST reading, you will have five minutes to write down what you remember, but for now NO PENCILS, only listening.”

At the end of the first reading, partners or groups write any words or phrases they can recall for five minutes on one large shared piece of paper rather than their own paper. This promotes interaction and sharing of ideas. Ss discuss, remember, negotiate discrepancies, decide key facts to listen for, for example, dates, places, numbers, or time order. There is no need to tell students WHAT to listen for unless you wish to.

Second reading
- Teacher: “I am going to read the text again. This is the second reading. This time, you may note down keywords and important information AS YOU LISTEN. Write on your own paper.”

- “I will not speak slowly or repeat anything, so you will NOT have time to copy every word. Try to listen and understand.”

- “At the end of this (second) reading, you will have five minutes to talk to your partner / group, and try to write sentences using your notes. You can compare notes with other students, negotiate what is correct and edit
your notes. At this stage, your goal is to have the same MEANING as my passage even if your words are different."

Third Reading
- Teacher: "I am going to read the text for the third and last time. This is your last chance to listen, and take notes. At the end of this reading, I am going to ask you to work with your partner / group to write a paragraph using all the words and sentences you have and anything else you can remember. EVERYONE must write a copy of the paragraph. We will check to see what each group has written." (Students need to know that they will have to DO something, or they won’t try hard.)

- "I will not speak slowly or repeat anything, so you will NOT have time to copy every word. It is most important that your text MEANS the same as mine. However, this time, your goal is to try to write exactly the same words as in my passage."

At the end of this (third) reading, pairs or groups think, talk, and write for 20-30 minutes or longer if you think they require extra time.

Stage 3: Reconstruction
In this reading, learners reconstruct the text on the basis of the fragments recorded in stage 2 and 3. This is the most collaborative stage in which students work together to reconstruct the text with correct grammar and content, pooling their information and discussing the best options. Their goal should be to reproduce a text as close as possible to the original. You could join groups together or rearrange groups since all students should have a copy of the paragraph. They negotiate the language and finalise a reconstruction of the text. Your objective in doing a Dictogloss will determine how strict you wish to be on the evaluating the final output. For example, I am more interested in the learners being able to show that they comprehended their passage than to provide an exact replication of the words. Furthermore, I would be happy for higher level learners to substitute or enhance the text through use of synonyms or alternative language structures thus showing their ability to synthesise what they heard and understood rather than just reproduce the passage down verbatim. The results will reflect how well you chose the text and how competent your students are at this level.

- "Now, work together in your group to write a paragraph as close as possible to the original text."

Here is it incumbent upon the teacher to make clear to learners whether exact replication of the original text is required, or whether paraphrasing is acceptable, placing more emphasis on meaning.

Stage 4: Analysis and correction
Finally, learners analyse and correct their texts. One way of guiding learners in the self-evaluation of the accuracy of their work is to provide a checklist of the individual sentences in the passage (see Appendix B for a sample checklist based on the text in Appendix A).

Tedick (2001) noted that in the analysis, learners focused on more than just the grammatical aspects; they also discussed orthographic and semantic issues. The analysis should be done with the help of the teacher by comparing different group versions and finally referring to the original. There are various ways of doing this,
such as changing groupings, using a data projector, an older style overhead projector, or writing text in large print and sticking the papers on the wall. If you have an overhead projector (OHP) or data projector, groups could share their writing one by one with the class and discuss what they have produced. Differences or recurring errors regarding language use, organisation and content could be listed on the whiteboard / blackboard or computer for subsequent discussion regarding form and meaning. This information could form the basis of homework or your next lesson. As an extension, students could do further research on the topic, write their own piece in a similar fashion, that is in the same verb tense, for example, share it, peer edit, peer assess, then hand it in to you for feedback.

The Benefits of Dictogloss
In this section, some terms may not be familiar to the reader (see Appendix C for a Glossary of Terms). For learners, Dictogloss offers them a way to demonstrate their comprehension of the content of text, organisational structure, and language features. It is a form of discovery learning that provides practice in interpersonal skills and communicative competency, and highlights individual linguistic strengths through a shared learning environment:

- It allows L2 learners to process and activate language in a collaborative writing task.
- It promotes writing to learn (meaning making), rather than learning to write (skill).
- It encourages learners to reflect on form.
- It encourages learners to think critically and take risks in their language use.
- It results in synchronous interaction which means that more students speak more often.

Furthermore, Dictogloss allows the teacher to:

- Observe learners in real-time.
- Evaluate real-time thinking skills rather than just a product out of context.
- Diagnose linguistic needs for remediation, or extension.
- Recycle and review texts.
- Gain an insight into learners’ needs for the purposes of lesson planning.
- Use Dictogloss as alternative assessment, including peer-assessment, and self-assessment.

For example, in my four skills class, I have experimented using Dictogloss as the final test. The stakes of the test were not high; the test being more for summative purposes than to determine rankings in the class. This meant that I could afford to be less stringent in grading each individual student and could report anecdotally on students’ participation and achievement. Also since students had 30 minutes to complete the final writing phase, it gave me time to monitor and record my observations regarding student interactions. My own observations were reflected in the students’ post-test comments. They reported that they were not as nervous as when they were tested individually, and shared their knowledge more than usual. They reflected that they thought more about the structure of the text than in a typical listening comprehension test. Compared with a typical dictation task where the teacher reads and the students’ write verbatim what is said, they said that the
Dictogloss task made them think and speak in English. They also said that they tried hard to "get it right" so as not to get a lower grade than other groups. They said they liked that they knew exactly what to do in each phase, and so felt more in control. Finally, students remarked that it was the "most fun" test they had ever had even though they felt it was somewhat unorthodox.

Tedick (2001) noted that in a study done by Kowal and Swain (1997) on 8th grade French immersion learners, students tended to “stick with” the knowledge they had co-constructed collaboratively with students performing well on a post-Dictogloss test, one week later. Swain (1998) suggests that when students reflect consciously on the language they are producing, that is "focus on form", then this may be a source of language learning, and lead to greater retention; an opinion resonated by Tedick’s 2001 research.

In addition to the suggestions made in this paper, teachers wishing to experiment with Dictogloss may seek ideas, inspiration and encouragement in several blogs and YouTube videos by other teachers on the internet as initial resources. I recommend the following three as a cross-section for commencing your explorations of Dictogloss:

- Jason Renshaw (2002). English Raven Blog: Renshaw values Dictogloss as a way of raising a deep awareness of grammar whilst integrating all skills. He provides templates for note-taking and reconstructing text.


- Ceri Jones (2010). Ceri Jones Blog: Jones explores critical thinking with high level learners studying news stories, scientific research in health, reporting verbs, modals, passive, intensive listening, and persuasive writing.

If readers have doubts about the practicalities of using Dictogloss with their learners, may I suggest that teachers step into their learners’ shoes, as it were, and conduct their own workshop amongst themselves, stepping through the procedure as detailed in this paper to determine for themselves whether Dictogloss would suit their teaching / learning context. Having presented such an in-service workshop with teachers in Vietnam and Laos, I can report mostly positive feedback; the primary concern being the amount of time needed to conduct a Dictogloss session. This is one challenge of the Dictogloss task that teachers will have to weigh up against the benefits. Should teachers decide to conduct their own professional development workshop, I have included a teacher reflection / discussion handout which can be freely used or adapted (see Appendix D).

Conclusion
Dictogloss promotes active learners, learning actively (see Appendix C). Students are the resource and the teacher provides the material. Students think about language and linguistics. In most cases, students are so preoccupied reconstructing text and negotiating meaning through cooperative learning that they may overcome their reluctance to speak and interact. They naturally move between using L1 (in homogenous groups) for explanation and L2 for the purpose of task completion. In
addition, Dictogloss situates teachers as co-learners, promotes learner autonomy, group autonomy, cooperation / collaboration / discussion among learners, and fosters curricula integration (all four skills plus grammar, vocabulary, focus on meaning, and focus on message – all in the one task!).

Dictogloss also supports different learning styles, thinking skills, mixed groups, simultaneous interaction, and can be used for alternative assessment. It works for students of varying competency as knowledge is shared; students cannot do the activity without thinking about language structure and meaning. They cannot complete the task if they don’t interact in English. The amount of time required can be shortened if you reduce the amount of text, so it is also good as a review activity or a group testing tool. Dictogloss presents as a dictation task with a bit more, the bit more is the element of collaboration. However, that "bit more" is "so much more" and the benefits are exponential. Finally, teachers should consider why they have chosen to use Dictogloss, how they and their learners can benefit from this task, and consider how Dictogloss can be used as a tool for observing, evaluating, and progressing language competency.

Questions for reflection:
1. How can Dictogloss benefit me as a teacher?
2. How can Dictogloss benefit my learners? (Is it the right choice for them?)
3. Why and when would Dictogloss be useful in my language classroom?
4. What is the relevance and usefulness of Dictogloss in my teaching context?
5. If relevant, how could Dictogloss be applied to different content areas?

Biographical Statement
Karen M. Smith has worked across media and education for 30 years. She has recently completed three years as Guest Lecturer at Meisei University, Japan. She has delivered in-service EFL teacher education in China, Vietnam, and Laos. A reflexive practitioner, Karen empowers her students through autonomy and creativity.

References


**Appendix A - Sample Passage**

Bicycles, motor scooters and motorcycles remain the most popular forms of road transport in Vietnam’s cities, towns, and villages although the number of privately-owned automobiles is also on the rise, especially in the larger cities. Public bus operated by private companies is the main long distance travel means for many people. Traffic congestion is a serious problem in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City as the cities’ roads struggle to cope with the booming numbers of automobiles (Source: Wikipedia)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text (100 points)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bicycles, motor scooters and motorcycles . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . (are) remain the most popular forms of road transport . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . in Vietnam's cities, towns, and villages . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . (although) the number of privately-owned automobiles is also on the rise, . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . especially in the larger cities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public bus operated by private companies . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . is the main long distance travel means for many people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic congestion is a serious problem in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . as the cities' roads struggle to cope . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>. . . with the booming numbers of automobiles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C - Glossary of Terms

real-time: as the time of the action, process or task; not at a later date

real-time thinking: a cognitive skill that enables the learner to simultaneously process the task while performing it; this includes responding to stimuli, attention management, multi-tasking, and responding

process: the phases that learners go through to complete a task

product: the end result of a task

remediation: instruction designed to bring under-developed learners to an expected or desired level of competency

extension: instruction designed to challenge competent learners and guide them to a new level of competency

resource: the means by which a task is completed, in this case, the students are the resource

input: explicit or intentional teaching or materials offered to learners

diagnose: to recognize (as a disease) by signs and symptoms

material: anything a teacher uses to conduct a class

reconstruction: replication of an original material, in this case, a written text

active learning: when students pay attention, look, listen, and question

© Karen M. Smith, 2012
## Appendix D - Teacher Reflection Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Reflection Sheet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement/Motivation:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did we feel safe?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did we have fun?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did we have control?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did we understand what to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the task objectives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the steps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practise:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What skills/forms/functions did we use?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What language point did we learn about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did we output/achieve?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did we learn?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pros?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cons?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Teacher Reflection:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When would I use this activity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How could I adapt it for my students' age, level, content area, language focus?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© Karen M. Smith, 2012