Beyond Grammar Teaching: Dictogloss Strategies for Improving Literacy

by AIDA KOÇI McLEOD

This article describes a teaching technique that can be useful in many classrooms and with a variety of learner contexts. The technique is my adaptation of the original dictogloss technique, as explained below.

When Ruth Wajnryb three decades ago developed the teaching technique of dictogloss (or “grammar dictation,” as she sometimes preferred to call it), the main focus was to improve grammar learning but in a collaborative–communicative mode. The guiding principle was always to sidestep or bypass the conventional “deductive grammar instruction” approach, current at that time, whereby grammar rules and structures were directly stated and explained by the teacher, occupying most of the lesson time, after which the students would apply the rules, as knowledge given and received, by doing drills and exercises. This conventional pedagogy meant that students were most likely to be passive learners. As Wajnryb (1990, 16) states,

Dictogloss is a task-based procedure designed to help language-learning students towards a better understanding of how grammar works on a text basis. It is designed to expose where their language-learner shortcomings (and needs) are, so that teaching can be directed more precisely towards these areas. In this sense it is eminently learner-needs based.

Since then, though, the method has been adapted to serve many other learning objectives: vocabulary building, developing listening-comprehension and speaking skills, enhancing written language composition, and in general the improvement of literacy. Dictogloss is such a flexible and adaptable procedure that it has been applied to all kinds of different ends, yet without losing its essential nature in a wild welter of derivations and deviations. For example, dictogloss has even been shown to improve the emotional intelligence of learners (see Mehdiabadi 2014). Another likable, popular, and fun reinvention of the original method is Kevin Stein’s pictogloss, “an image-based variation on the dictogloss activity” (Stein 2012, 24). Stein is rightly proud that pictogloss was actually invented by his learners, emphasizing the collaborative and learner-focused heart of the procedure.

To clarify the difference: pictogloss is essentially about getting students to transcribe each spoken sentence of a target text into picture form. In a pictogloss activity, students are given a worksheet with an exact number of small empty boxes printed on it, one box for each word of the target text, with an empty space representing the period at the end of each sentence. The teacher reads out a text, slowly, a number of times, and students draw a little picture in each box to represent
Dictogloss is such a flexible and adaptable procedure that it has been applied to all kinds of different ends, yet without losing its essential nature in a wild welter of derivations and deviations.

each content word. The pictures they draw are like a visual encoding of what they have understood. Of course, each student’s completed sheet will contain boxes left empty, where the student could not grasp or depict a particular word; however, in Stein’s group collaboration phase, students swap papers and help each other complete the “pictorialization” of the entire text, whereupon they decode their final agreed picture-script into language again: a recount of the original target text. Stein (2012, 25) was impressed with how “the pictogloss activity resulted in highly idiosyncratic function word images,” as his students—a group of 16 Japanese high-schoolers—found creative ways to depict words like and, with, and the.

From Dictation to Dictogloss
There has been a historic aversion to dictation, perhaps stemming from the belief that the main purpose of dictation is to provide practice in listening comprehension and that, even as a testing device, it is uneconomical and imprecise (Morris 1983, 121; Kidd 1992, 49). However, as Wajnryb (1990) explains, dictogloss is in fact quite distinct from old-school dictation, both in its procedure and in its objectives, because it involves a sequence of learner-to-learner collaboration moves and aims to get learners to progressively form their own understanding of their learning needs. Here is how she defines her original concept of dictogloss:

The original dictogloss procedure consists of four basic steps:

a. Preparation: Learners find out about the topic and do preparatory vocabulary work.

b. Dictation: Learners listen to the text read at a normal speed by the teacher and take fragmentary notes. The learners will typically hear the text twice. The first time the teacher reads the text, the learners just listen but do not write. The second time, they take notes.

c. Reconstruction: Learners work together in small groups to reconstruct a version of the text from their shared resources.

d. Analysis and correction: Learners analyse and compare their text with the reconstructions of other students and the original text and make the necessary corrections. (Wajnryb 1990, 7–9)

Here is what I have recently done, in my English classes, with an adapted dictogloss method, using it not so much in pursuit of grammar-improvement goals, but rather as an autonomous/collaborative framework to guide student written text composition. My project had the secondary goal of creating a space for student critical thinking about media texts to arise.
Figure 2 … illustrates how messy the students’ initial word-jottings can be, and this is fine because all the jottings feed into the cooperative process of progressive refinement through student-to-student discussion.

The students were intermediate learners with a varying but generally low level of English. To give them writing practice, as well as practice in critical thinking, I chose a commonplace example of an online news item about a shark attack at an Australian beach. For these learners, given their language level, I reduced the longer original to the following shorter version with seven numbered sentences, which I read out to them. Sentence 1 (S1) is the headline.

**TEXT TO READ**

S1. Headline: Surfer dies after shark attack at Greenmount Beach on Gold Coast near Queensland border

S2. A man has died after being attacked by a shark while he was surfing at Coolangatta on the southern end of the Gold Coast.

S3. Queensland Ambulance Service was called to Greenmount Beach shortly after 5 p.m. on Tuesday evening.

S4. Paramedics said the man, in his 50s, died from critical leg injuries.

S5. Lifeguards and other people on the beach rushed to help the man after the attack.

S6. Chief Lifeguard Warren Young said despite their best efforts the man could not be saved.

S7. Mr. Young said, “It was a pretty severe attack, and the ambulance and paramedics were here and did what they could, but it was to no avail.”

Prior to the reading, as a warm-up, I asked the class to think about the topic of humans’ fears of nature, fear of wild creatures in particular, and how likely it is that they might be attacked by a wild creature in their lifetime. I then divided the class into groups of three and asked them to think about the way animal attacks are reported in the media. To focus the discussion, and to set the stage for some critical thinking, I asked the groups to name three reasons why the media might exaggerate the danger of shark attacks and sensationalize their reports on this. When the groups reported back to me and to the class, I organised a whole-class discussion to compare the various responses and note any differences of opinion. (There were many.)

Dictogloss would not work if the teacher were to spoon-feed the class with the key vocabulary that they are supposed to pick out while listening to the reading; it has to be the student’s job to recognize and jot down the words. But by giving them the words shark and attack, I had given them enough of an initial pathway into the lesson material. I also pre-taught the place names from the dicto-text, as these would otherwise have been a stumbling block for the students. For the purpose of guiding their progress later, when they came to Step (c), the collaborative reconstruction stage, I had previously prepared a list of the key words and phrases from the text, as shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pretty severe</th>
<th>paramedics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to no avail</td>
<td>lifeguards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surfer</td>
<td>ambulance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surfing</td>
<td>critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>southern</td>
<td>saved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Key vocabulary reviewed for the reconstruction stage.
LANGUAGE POINTS

Part of my preparation for the activity was to analyse the most salient features of language use and rhetoric that I felt should be modeled and explained in the feedback stage, after the students had finished the collaboration stage of reconstructing the text.

The main grammar points I highlighted are as follows:

• Verb-tense usage and preposition usage for time and place (important in a news report).

• Sequence of verb-tense constructions (expressions of time) to represent an event: "has died ... after being attacked ... while he was surfing ... ." Use of present perfect + past continuous passive for single action + past continuous for duration (S2).

• Time-references precede place-references (S1 and S2), although there is a reversal, with place before time, in S3.

• Preposition usage for place-reference: "at Greenmount Beach on Gold Coast near Queensland border" and "at Coolangatta on the southern end of the Gold Coast." These examples (at + on + near and at + on + of) indicate moving the place-reference from the specific spot to the general area to the wider region (S1 and S2).

• Preposition usage for time-reference also moves from the smaller to the larger scale: "after 5 p.m. on Tuesday evening" (S3).

• Relative (adverbial) clause of time: "while he was surfing ... ." (S2).

Figure 2. Student notes taken during the second reading of the sample text
• Noun clauses as object of the verb said but with relative pronouns omitted: “Paramedics said the man, in his 50s, died from critical leg injuries” (S4).

• Mix of direct speech and indirect speech (S4, S6, and S7).

TEACHING NOTES

Finally, I prepared in advance the following teaching notes on the grammar and rhetoric points from each of the seven sentences so that I would have a clear plan about what to mention to students at the end. These notes intentionally contained a secondary focus on critical thinking about news-media language use.

S1: Note the interesting use of the present-for-past tense here—“surfer dies”—even though the event is over, all in the past. This usage often appears in headlines. (Why? To create the feeling of immediacy and recency, sometimes called “up-to-dateness.” Note that in the body text, the writer immediately uses the perfect tense instead: “A man has died.”)

S2: Why the passive voice here: “A man has died after being attacked by a shark”? Why not say, “A man has died after a shark attacked him”? What’s the difference? (Possible answer: The passive voice puts the spotlight [the focus] on the man and the attack, not so much on the shark. It means the fact of the attack and the death is more important than the fact of who—or what—did it.)

S3: Factual style puts priority on precision. We are told precisely when and where and who was there: “Queensland Ambulance Service—was called to Greenmount Beach—shortly after 5 p.m.—on Tuesday evening.”

S4: Precision again: The man’s age and the exact cause of his death are quoted from a reliable source (paramedics).

S5: This is a simple declarative statement.

S6: Here is an indirect quote from another authoritative source (the chief lifeguard). The use of the passive voice in “could not be saved” makes it a general statement, omitting any reference to an agent (in this case, a person) doing the saving, or failing to save. This shifts the emphasis away from the would-be helpers—“lifeguards and other people”—and places it back on to the action—the failing to save.

S7: Note the calm, matter-of-fact, and nonsensational vocabulary and phrasing here: “pretty severe” and “it was to no avail.”

From the above, the reader can see how much grammar knowledge and how much composition skill can be conveyed by this method, even based on the type of short and simple text that a dictogloss activity uses.

Figure 2 is an example of the words noted by one student, jotted down during the second reading of the text. The sample illustrates how messy the students’ initial word-jottings can

![Figure 3. A handwritten collaborative recount of the news story](image-url)
be, and this is fine because all the jottings feed into the cooperative process of progressive refinement through student-to-student discussion in Step (c). Most readers will have some difficulty deciphering this student’s writing, but the example is given here to show how “battered” the initial notes can be, yet still usefully contribute to the group reconstruction stage.

Most important of all, to me, is the student collaboration phase, for which I gave students the following instructions:

1. You will make a group of three, around your table, to discuss your reconstructed “surfer dies” texts.

2. You will have ten minutes to look at each other’s work and discuss what’s good in each one and what can be discarded or improved.

3. Then you will hear a third reading of the original version.

4. In each group, you will pool all your texts with the best bits of captured words and phrases, and pick a scribe to write down a “consensus edition.” This should take about ten minutes. [Note that the scribe has an important job and must have pretty solid English skills.]

5. You will then get a copy of the original to compare with your group’s consensus edition. You will still be in your groups for this step.

6. Next will be the feedback stage. Together, we will all discuss our work and reflect on the experience, and explain together any mistakes or misunderstandings.

   Important reminder: You don’t have to create an exact copy of the original. The goal is to include the essential information from the original, in a coherent and grammatically correct text.

Figure 3 shows an example of the final recount produced collaboratively by a group of three students, prior to being given the original text for comparison. In case some readers may find this sample hard to read, a transcript of it is given in Figure 4.

Notice how these three students have succeeded in capturing the essential information from the seven sentences, in a clear and grammatically correct form. Notice also that although there was a scribe, three different hands have worked together on the recount text to add or correct some words. The collaborative recount gives evidence of grammar competence beyond mere “correct” transcription of a dictated text; dictogloss is about reconstructing the meanings that have been understood and remembered, and as such it both exercises and reveals the learner’s level of knowledge of grammar structures and patterns (i.e., “rules”). Furthermore, the process gives the students targeted and mission-focused speaking practice, as they negotiate meaning with each other.

Surfer dies after shark attack at Greenmount beach on the Gold coast near Queensland border. A man has died after being attacked by a shark while he was surfing at coolangatta on the southern end of the Gold coast. The Paramedics said the man, in his 50s, died from critical injuries. The lifeguards and other people on the beach rushed to his side to help after he got attacked. The Chief Lifeguard Warren Young said despite their best efforts the man could not be saved.

Figure 4. Transcript of a typical final group recount
FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

There are many useful articles describing and explaining various ways of including a dictogloss in a lesson or a series of lessons. For instance, an article from a scholar in Indonesia (Myartawan 2014) describes ways to use dictogloss at the college level to improve students’ listening ability in understanding news texts. This focus on listening skills does not entail a reversion to old-school dictation; the element of collaborative reconstruction is paramount here.

Teachers can find other suitable texts to use in a dictogloss activity in Wajnryb’s original 1990 book, which contains 60 complete lesson plans, each with a dicto-text and a set of implementation steps. The lessons are grouped according to learner level—pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced—and are indexed for the specific grammar points addressed in each. Of course, her texts are more than 30 years old, and naturally some are out of date, but many of them remain engaging and relevant for present-day learners. To obtain new texts adapted for your context and for your learners, you can make your own relatively easily—as I have shown in this article—by shortening and simplifying an appropriate news report or a short story chosen from the vast repositories of the internet. Figure 5 gives an example of a short text—again, an adapted news report—that would be suitable to use with the dictogloss technique.

REFERENCES


Aida Koçi McLeod taught at the South East European University (Tetovë, Macedonia) for 14 years and moved to Australia a few years ago. She is an independent researcher and curriculum adviser.