

The following is a description of one of my favorite presentations at the New York City TESOL conference in April 2008. The title of the talk was "How to Be a Benevolent Dictator" and the large room was filled to capacity with fellow teachers eager to hear the presentation. Dr. Natalie Hess of Northern Arizona University in Yuma seemed to be a seasoned teacher and presenter. She didn't run out of handouts, despite the crowd and it did provide brief details of her talk

. Back to the title of her talk, it was witty and captivated my attention right away. Of course, her talk was about different ways to use dictation in class. As any good presenter would, we became the "students" and she had us try out the dictations.

One of her first dictations was the "Mutual Story Dictation." Students would choose a picture (from a magazine, or book) and take turns writing about it. She suggested that one student write a sentence or two, and then dictate it on a shared piece of paper. Then the other student would do the same. I think it could be done by simply telling the partner your sentence and have the partner write it as best as she can. The idea here is that one student might go one way with the story, and the other take the story in a completely different direction. It actually reminded me of a joke

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about a man and woman doing the same exercise, one writing in a cloying, sentimental fashion and the other in a violent, destructive vein. Sound familiar?

As a follow-up, I think the two students should try and correct any errors with another student's or the teacher's help.

The "Opinion Dictation" has the teacher center stage. She dictates simple sentences, often about one subject, such as New York City, or restaurants. The students place the sentence in one of the three columns on the page which reflects their own opinion-Agree, Disagree, or Not Sure. For instance, the teacher says, New Yorkers are mean people. "You place that sentence under the heading under which you think it belongs. After the dictation, Hess suggests the students share their opinions and spelling with several different people.

Hess demonstrated an "Opposite Dictation" where the teacher says one thing and the students try to write the opposite of what the teacher has said. For instance, the teacher dictates, "It was a beautiful sunny day." The students write, "It was a terrible gloomy night." Hess dictated several sentences and had some students read the results of their work. Several were very inventive, and changed not only the individual words, but the

meaning of the "story". In a higher level class, this exercise would be an interesting challenge. Conversely, I think a lower level class would be lost! As a participant, I got hung up on trying to do it "right", but after listening to some of the examples of other student work. I think another dictation of this sort would have been more fun. With higher level students, a activity like this would really make them stretch, grammar and vocabulary-wise. I can imagine doing a dictation where you change only the nouns, the adjectives, or the verbs.

Hess demonstrated a "Picture Dictation." The teacher describes, step by step, a picture, as the students draw it. For instance, "Draw a small house. Draw a tree next to the house. Draw a cat close to the house..."In other words, students show listening comprehension graphically. But Hess took it even further, dictating a story which related to the picture they had just drawn.

Hess didn't have us do the "Messenger Dictation", as space wouldn't have permitted, but it was basically what a former colleague Christina Theuerling called a "Running Dictation." Great fun for all and good for any level as well. The teacher posts a passage, its length and complexity suitable for the level of the class, in the class. No one is allowed to see it ahead of

time. Students are divided into pairs, one having a notebook and pencil. That person stands out in a hall, perhaps, away from the written passage. That person stays in the hall the entire time, while the other partner runs back and forth between her partner and the passage, reading and trying to commit to memory, part of the passage. She races to her partner and tells her the part of the passage she can remember, and the partner writes it down. The first pair to correctly record the entire passage is the winner.

I have always used dictations as reviews, for the students, but then again, I've often had lower level students. Hess's suggestions would be difficult for my level of students, except for the "Running Dictation." Her suggestions do make you think of other ways dictations could be used in a class.