

SWAPSHOP

Send in your teaching suggestions, ideas or anything you would like to share with your fellow teachers. However simple they may seem to you they could be new to someone else. We shall publish your ideas here.

Dictation activities

Dictation is a natural part of classroom administration, involving such common place activities as the correction of exercises, checking to see if something has been correctly copied, giving homework, messages for home, etc. It is also provides fairly 'authentic' contexts for listening exercises of the answer phone/message leaving variety.

Try dictating the first few sentences of a text the students are about to read/hear to give them a chance to predict its content.

After the class has processed a text, sentences which tell the main events can be dictated in random order for the students to then put in order.

You can also try dictating a passage at normal speed. To avoid varying stress, rhythm, etc., you could tape it or use something already on tape. The students try to write down as much as they can, leaving blanks for what they miss. You can repeat the dictation several times. Then put them in groups or pairs to compare their versions. Repeat the dictation, then get the students to come out and write the text, sentence by sentence, on the board. With a final play through it should be possible to complete the text.

This concentrates on teamwork and co-operation, reduces stress and gives students time to think and make their own changes. It focuses in the first place on the main elements of the text (those carrying primary stress) and allows students to fill in the gaps later (finishing with the important building blocks of language - the unstressed elements such as pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, endings and other weak forms). It also provides good practice in editing skills which are necessary in advanced writing.

Haiku

Japanese Haiku (Senryu) provides an easy but very powerful way to describe simple aspects of our daily life. For this reason they are very suitable for elementary writing exercises and the results can be very beautiful.

For our purpose (not classical haiku !) the format could be three lines and the number of words can be from ten to fifteen, no longer.

Two simple examples:

<i>On his birthday</i>	<i>In the garden</i>
<i>He watched the sea</i>	<i>A large black bird</i>
<i>Alone</i>	<i>Sings to his friend</i>

The beauty of the haiku is that it can be adapted for all levels of language proficiency and is a great aid in teaching creative writing.

Revising a set book

If you've finished reading a classroom set book or reader and want a new revision exercise then here's an idea. Go through the book and extract two key sentences per chapter or suitable size unit. Type these up on a sheet, duplicate it and then cut up all the snippets corresponding to each chapter and give them to the students in pairs.

The students are obliged to pay close attention to the text - both re-reading and scanning/skimming - and motivation levels are high. A welcome bonus is the cooperation between different pairs (not to be discouraged in this case !) and obviously all the time key elements in the story are being reinforced. The teacher is on hand for any points arising. It's a good way for less demonstrative students to participate too, as these are often studious and here will be much in demand.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud is a difficult skill in your first language, let alone in the second. Still, it is sometimes necessary (as in the Cambridge CEELT exams) and the following tip from RADA may be of use.

RADA is the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, a prestigious London drama school for would-be actors. One of their techniques when approaching a text may be of help. It goes as follows.

Read the text aloud at least once until the first punctuation mark. Stop, and go back to the beginning. Now read until the second punctuation mark. Go back, and read until the third punctuation mark. That's all.

Simple, but effective. As you come to understand the text you begin to give it appropriate stress and, perhaps a neglected skill among teachers, you learn when to take a breath. It is particularly effective with poetry.

'Should' and 'should have'

A simple skit can be set up with two teachers or good students in which two friends meet in the street. One, looking dirty and unkempt, tells the other he's off for a job interviews. His friend gives advice: 'You should put on a clean shirt, clean your shoes, etc.'. (Students can help with suitable suggestions). "No", "it'll be OK", says the first friend and shambles off.

Unsurprisingly he doesn't get the job and act two is the day after. Here we build in the reasons, using the same points as before: "you should have listened to me", "you should have cleaned your shoes", etc.

Using skits is quite a good way of fixing some idiomatic or irrational language use, as it is likely to stick in the students' minds.

Contextualisation is also useful in teaching language items. For another contextualised drill like this (reinforcing the 'third conditional' see *A Lighter Touch* on page 73).

Cut down on photocopying

If you are ecologically minded then why not think a little about saving resources when you prepare your classes. Is all the photocopying you do really necessary? Maybe, instead of copying half a dozen exercises, you can copy one and think of half a dozen different things to do with it! For short texts dictations may provide a useful alternative.

Sid the snake

Most English teachers despair of their students ever remembering to use the 3rd person singular "s" at the end of verbs. A fun and inoffensive way is to mount a large and colourful snake on a stick. Keep this handy and produce it each time you want to draw student's attention. Alternatively have Sid on the wall in a convenient position and point to him when necessary. Hissing may be an additional aid with younger kids.

Advanced writing exercise

A difficult but rewarding writing exercise for advanced students is to take a series of multiple choice questions for reading comprehension (CPE would be fine here) without reference to the text. Students have to study the questions carefully and then write a text capable of generating the questions. (Afterwards they can see the original questions).

This is not an easy activity, but very good for learning about the logical relationships within language. By choosing different discourse types it also concentrates on register.