

Song Dictation

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Introduction

Dictation has always been a useful technique for language teachers. Modern listening exercises usually focus on helping students to extract the overall meaning of a listening passage, but most language teachers will agree that an occasional dictation with a focus on individual words can be very useful in developing listening comprehension.

Listening comprehension is a complicated operation and we still do not understand it very well, but it has been shown that there are two important processes involved (Richards 1990). The first is bottom-up processing where the listener builds up the sounds into words, sentences and meaning. The second is top-down processing where the listener uses background knowledge to understand the meaning of a message. Practicing both of these processes is essential for developing listening comprehension. Dictation focuses on bottom-up processing. As the sounds enter the ear, the listener uses his knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to decode the message. This linking of sounds to internal knowledge can lead to an improvement in listening ability.

Why Do Song Dictation?

Why should we use songs for dictation? There are several reasons why songs can be useful.

- First, one of the main reasons that teachers do not use more dictation is that it is so unpopular with students. Students get bored very quickly. I remember in my own high school days letting out a groan with the rest of the class every time our French teacher decided to do a dictation. Songs are a way of disguising dictation behind something that students enjoy listening to.
- The second reason is that the melody and rhythm of songs help to maintain the natural rhythm and stress of speech which can be easily lost by dictating sentences at a slow pace.
- Finally, dictation is a great way of presenting a song and a good start for all the other activities which use songs such as discussion, vocabulary work, or just singing.

Ways to Do Song Dictation

There are several ways that song dictations can be carried out.

- The most effective way is to play the song yourself. If you can play an instrument such as guitar and sing in tune, students will usually be most enthusiastic. In this way, it is easy for you to adjust the speed of the song and to stop, start and repeat to suit the speed of the students' writing. You may be shy at first, but remember that your students will be far too busy writing the song down to laugh at you!
- Another way to do the dictation is to use a recording on CD, video or cassette with your finger on the pause button. Music videos can be especially useful as they allow the students to get more hints from the visual images or the movements of the singer's lips. One problem with using recordings is that the accompanying instrumental music can often make the words more difficult to distinguish. Songs from the 1950s and '60s usually made the voice louder than modern recordings, so these may be more suitable for some students. On the other hand, students tend to like music of their own era the most.
- A third way of doing song dictation is to combine it with spoken dictation. You can speak the parts of the song that are too difficult for the students to catch.

As with all teaching techniques, it is best to experiment to find out the ways of song dictation that work best for you and your students. Of course, song dictations do not have to be carried out in class. You can assign a song as homework, preferably one which the student enjoys and chooses himself. If the student already has the lyrics sheet, then you can ask them to only check it after the dictation has been done.

Choosing the Material

How much of the song should students be required to take down as dictation? This depends on the goals of the class and the time available. For dictation of a full song, short, slow songs are usually best. One song that I have found to be very successful even with low-level unmotivated students is the classic 'Can't Help Falling in Love'. Including the refrain, there are only 11 lines in the whole song, most of which are very short, making it a simple, but very memorable song for dictation purposes. Other short, slow songs or nursery rhymes such as 'Three Blind Mice' are also suitable for dictation.

Partial Dictation

Song dictations do not always require that the students write down all of the words of the song. Instead a partial song dictation can be carried out. The most common use of this is the cloze where certain words of the song are blanked out, and the students have to listen and fill them in. If desired, these words can be of a particular lexical or grammatical type. In the example below, the verbs are blanked out. If you ask students to predict the words before listening, top-down processes will be involved in addition to the usual focus of dictation on bottom-up processes.

She'll be _____ round the mountains when she _____

An alternative way of doing partial song dictation is to require students to listen for particular kinds of vocabulary or structures in the song without specifying where they occur. One type of song which is very suitable is the "list song". In these songs, there is a long list of names or objects. For example, Billy Joel's song 'We Didn't Start the Fire' has a list of American cultural icons. I find the old children's song below useful in a lesson on parts of the body. Students listen and write down all the body parts that they hear, but ignore the other words.

The toe bone is connected to the foot bone
The foot bone is connected to the ankle bone
The ankle bone is connected to the leg bone
The leg bone is connected to the knee bone
The knee bone is connected to the thigh bone
The thigh bone is connected to the hip bone

Partial song dictation can also require students to write down phrases from songs. For example, in the old Buddy Holly song 'Early in the Morning', there are 3 proverbs (including one which is a little altered) in the middle of the song, so I use this partial song dictation to lead into a lesson on proverbs.

Finding the Lyrics

Song lyrics are supplied with many CDs. If you don't have the lyrics, the Internet is a wonderful resource for finding them. Because of copyright reasons, WWW sites for lyrics often close down without warning, so it may not be useful to give URLs for lyric sites. However, it's usually possible to find any lyrics using a search engine. For example, the Alta Vista search engine at <http://www.altavista.com/>, just enter any exact words of the song that you are looking for (in quotation marks) and the search engine will almost invariably find the whole song.

Conclusion

Song dictation can be a fun way of bringing dictation to life. Songs are one of the language resources that almost all students love, and you may find that song dictation becomes a hobby for some of your students as they realize that they can now figure out the words of their favourite songs.

References

Richards, J.C. (1990). *The Language Teaching Matrix*. Cambridge University Press.

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Cullen-SongDictation.html>