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Variations in dicto-comp

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Dicto-Comp is a technique for practicing composition. It is controlled writing that combines text dictation and text reconstruction (Gorman 1979). “A passage is read to a class, and then the students must write out what they understand and remember from the passage, keeping as closely to the original as possible but using their own words where necessary” (Richards et al. 1985). Dicto-Comp not only requires the students to write but demands careful listening and retention of the material read out. It involves the students’ ability to listen carefully, to summarize, to elaborate, and to use English in a particular context, the vocabulary or phrases useful in that particular context, and to organize the material.

In this article I describe how it is used in an English-language course taught at an intermediate level at the College of Home Economics, University of Peshawar. In teaching composition writing to students at this level a number of different ways of teaching Dicto-Comp were used. The Dicto-Comp passages represented four broad categories of language functions: narration, description, instruction, and sequenced description. The exercises provided in each section have been designed to help the students overcome their difficulties.
in the aural comprehension and reproduction of the passages. The exercises follow under the four headings mentioned above.

Narration

1. Split Sentences. The split sentences were written on pieces of cardboard and stuck on the blackboard in a jumbled order, as shown below.

   The students were asked to listen to the recorded story (see Appendix 1) and then to (1) join the split sentences and (2) arrange them in proper sequence. The tape was played several times to help the students listen and put the outline of the story in correct sequence. After they finished, the tape was played again so they could look through the sequencing. After this they were asked to listen and write down the parts of the story that were not given in the outline (split sentences). In this way the rest of the sentences were added and a coherent story was developed.

2. Stories with Questions. Some pre-listening questions were given to the students to look at before the story was told (see Appendix 2). These questions prepared them to listen to the story and to write the answers, thus enabling them to write the story. Some post-listening questions were also used in some of the narrative exercises, which helped the students to reconstruct the story.

Description

The students were asked to listen to a description of Mr. and Mrs. Tom Fred (see Appendix 3) and draw rough sketches of them. Then, on the second listening, they were asked to jot down the exact descriptive words and phrases, such as short little man, with short legs, young still, prematurely bald, etc., that described Mr. Tom Fred and Mrs. Tom Fred. Then these words/phrases were written on the blackboard to draw the attention of the students to vocabulary and structure and the meanings of some of them. Afterwards, they were given one more chance to listen to the tape and were asked to write down the descriptions by using the sketches and descriptive words and phrases they had previously written down. In this way the students were helped to reconstruct the passage. After they had finished writing, they checked their work with each other. Then the passage was read out with some changes in the description at some points; for example, instead of short little man, fat little man was substituted, and the students immediately identified all the changes and made the necessary corrections.

All this not only helped them to correct their version by checking with each other, but it gave the teacher immediate feedback. It made the task interesting and revved them up, as it gave the students an opportunity to participate enthusiastically in the activity.

Instruction

The students were asked to make two columns in their exercise books and write DO at the top of one and DON'T at the top of the other. They then listened to the guidelines for avoiding back trouble (see Appendix 4) and first wrote down all the Dos in the left-hand column. Then they were asked to listen a second time and write down the Don'ts in the other column. They were allowed to work in pairs and compare notes with each other. Then they were asked to listen to the tape once again and put the Dos and Don'ts in the sequence in which they appear on the tape. In this way the students' attention was focused on one aspect at a time, and they were able to glean information for a final writing of the passage. Later, they were provided time to correct their work and then elaborate and write all the information in proper order.

Sequenced description (a process)

First of all, the students were asked to listen to the process of making bread (see Appendix 5) and arrange the verbs in the order in which they appear. Two columns were made on the blackboard, and the verbs were written on the left-hand side in jumbled order before playing the tape. After the students had listened twice to the tape, they were asked to write the verbs on the other side of the blackboard as they appear in the listening passage.

Then the students were asked to jot down the sequence markers such as first, second, the next, etc., as they are the key words in writing about a process. They were
APPENDIX 2
Narration: Stories with Questions

Pre-listening questions
What was Ali doing? What was Nasiruddin doing?
Where was he? What did Ali say to Nasiruddin?
What did he want to do? How did Nasiruddin feel when Ali spoke to him?
Why couldn’t he write the letter himself? What did Nasiruddin then ask Ali?
When did he look for somebody to write his letter? What did Ali reply?
Whom did he find? What did Nasiruddin say then?
What did Ali do then?

The Story
Ali, who was working a long way from home, wanted to send a letter to his wife, but he could neither read nor write, and he had to work all day, so he could only look for somebody to write his letter late at night. At last he found the house of a letter-writer whose name was Nasiruddin.

Nasiruddin was already in bed. “It is late,” he said, “What do you want?” “I want you to write a letter to my wife,” said Ali. Nasiruddin was not pleased. He thought for a few seconds and then said, “Has the letter got to go far?” “What does that matter?” answered Ali.

“Well, my writing is so strange that only I can read it, and if I have to travel a long way to read your letter to your wife, it will cost you a lot of money.”

Ali went away quickly. (taken from Hill 1976)

then asked to listen again and fill in any words that they had missed in the previous listening. After listening they were asked to work in groups of four and write the process with the help of the verbs and sequence markers. At the end a student from one of the groups was asked to read out the reproduced passage, and the most notable mistakes were written on the blackboard and later discussed.

Conclusion
The Dicto-Comp technique described here was an attempt to meet the needs of the students at the intermediate level. At this level they are required to write paragraphs and short compositions as an integral part of their writing course. This was piloted for the first time, as the course was launched this year. The material may be used as it stands, or it may be supplemented and exploited in a number of different ways. Also, teachers can further develop this portion of the course to make paragraph writing interesting and helpful to the students.

The students found Dicto-Comp activities very interesting, and it was a good way for them to take off and later write free paragraphs and compositions. They found this approach stimulating, as they were sick and tired of paragraph writing and essay writing done in the conventional way—being given a topic and asked to write a paragraph/essay without preliminary instructions.

REFERENCES

APPENDIX 4
Instruction
Back Care

Four out of five people suffer severe back pain at some time in their lives. These guidelines may help you avoid the onset of back trouble. Do look after your back by developing good posture.

Keep weight evenly distributed to prevent distortion in the spine’s shape. Don’t bend over using just your spine and back muscles. Bending awkwardly can damage the spine and the muscles surrounding it. Always bend the knees and hips rather than just the spine when bending down, and especially when lifting heavy items and children.

Do measure kitchen units and work tables before buying them, and check that they are the correct height for your back whether standing or sitting.

Do take time to choose the right bed: the ideal bed should be firm and supportive, but not hard, so that pressure on the spine is evenly distributed.

Don’t delay in consulting your doctor if back pain is persistent. He may be able to identify a specific cause and alleviate it.

Do choose a straight-backed chair if you spend a lot of time at a desk, or place a folded towel or small cushion in the small of your back, to support your spine.

Do exercise your abdominal muscles regularly so that they give extra support to the back. Keep shoulders back, down, and released to relieve tension at the neck.

(taken from Probert 1986)
APPENDIX 5
SEQUENCED DESCRIPTION (PROCESS)

Bread

In Britain today, though the industry has generally become highly mechanised, the principle of bread-making has not changed for hundreds of years. First, the dough is mixed. In this process water, flour, and yeast are kneaded in a mixer. Second, the dough is fermented. In this process a large mass of dough rests in a dough bowl.

Then the dough is mixed again. In this process the dough is knocked back in a mixer.

Following the second mixing, the dough is shaped. In this process a mass of dough is scaled off in a divider. Then the dough is shaped again. In this process pieces of dough are rounded up in a hander-up.

After this the dough is fermented. In this process rounded-off pieces of dough are proved in a prover.

Next, the dough is shaped again. In this process two pieces of dough are moulded in a moulder.

Then the dough is fermented again. In this process shaped pieces of dough are ripened in a prover.

Just before baking, the dough is shaped again. In this process loaf-shaped dough is decorated.

Finally, the dough is baked. In this process ripe dough is baked in a pre-heated oven.

(adapted from McEldowney 1982)