



## Ask Chris

This month Chris Turner talks about a technique which is useful for both literacy and English as a Second Language tutors: dictation

*I'm looking for some new ideas to help my student with her spelling and writing. Do you have any suggestions? She is working in Voyager 2.*

### ***Old Dog Wants New Tricks***

Have you tried dictation? Dictation is a valuable, but under-used, technique. Familiar to English as a Second language teachers, dictation is also extremely valuable for literacy tutors. In fact it has been used by teachers since at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Dictation strengthens auditory memory, which is a critical brain function for reading. It is a useful part of multisensory instruction, which is essential for students with learning difficulties.

Many literacy students have problems with their auditory memory and/or processing. Although their hearing is fine, they may have great difficulty distinguishing the individual sounds they hear. This in turn makes their decoding haphazard. Sometimes bits and pieces of the oral message are missing or are remembered incorrectly, which can create confusion and misunderstanding. Dictation is one way to help strengthen listening skills and auditory memory.

A key point to remember in using dictation is that it should be relaxed and even fun for the student. Don't ask students to work on dictation exercises unless you are sure they are familiar with the words you are using. Planning ahead will make dictation more enjoyable for both of you. Remember, dictation is a way to teach and practice, not a test.

### **Dictation and Low Level Literacy Students**

For the lowest level students, dictation can be as simple as writing single letters or words. For beginning students, a helpful sequence to follow is to dictate, have the student repeat out loud, dictate again, and only then to have the student write. Finally dictate the list again to allow the student an opportunity to correct his or her own work.

Once students have mastered the alphabet, dictation provides an excellent way to practice phonics (sound) patterns. For example, if you are working on short vowel sounds, dictate words like *rip, sip, sap, rap, rep*. *Focus on Phonics* includes some dictation exercises and you can model additional practice on those. If your student has difficulty writing, you may want to use sound cards or tiles and have the student pull down the correct letters as you dictate words or you may want to provide them with a short list of words and have them circle the word you say. When they can do this successfully, then you can have them start writing.

To make dictation less like a spelling test--and to help students develop their auditory memory--you should move fairly quickly to dictating short sentences. As you read the sentences, emphasize the phrasing. This helps students to develop a sense of how written English sounds. Learning to think in terms of phrases is a major help in developing comprehension and reading fluency, while extra practice writing sight words and phonics patterns will help decoding skills.

After dictating, the student should correct their work. Re-read the sentences to give them a chance to check what they have written. For students who have difficulty with capitalization and punctuation, you may want to remind them to check each sentence. Finally, give them a copy of what you have dictated and guide them through the final proofreading. Helping students find and fix their errors leads to independent skills.

### **Working with Intermediate Students**

As students progress, they can handle longer sentences or passages. You can also introduce variations on the process. Depending on what your student needs, you can develop dictation exercises that will help your student practice new skills. For example, if your student has trouble with using commas, you can dictate a sentence like *Wendy, the zoo's oldest chimpanzee, enjoyed bananas, carrots, and chocolate*. If your student has difficulty thinking of writing topics, you can dictate sentence starters and have the student complete them. (Example: *On Saturdays I always \_\_\_\_\_*.) You can also use dictation to simulate real life tasks, like dictating phone messages or directions.

### **The Dictation Process**

While there are a number of different ways to do dictation, the following three step process is the most generally useful.

1. Say the sentence. Student listens and repeats out loud.
2. Say the sentence. Student listens and writes.
3. Say the sentence. Student listens and checks work for errors.

I hope this article has whetted your appetite to try dictation for yourself. If you want more information, ask Literacy Council staff. Not only do we have a variety of suitable passages at all levels, but we also have directions for a variety of dictation techniques.