

English in 3-D A fresh look at traditional techniques - Drills, dictations & dialogs: some options.

Marc Helgesen

march@mgu.ac.jp

Miyagi Gakuin Women's University
Sendai, Japan

<http://mgu.ac.jp/~ic/helgesen/Helgesen.front.htm>

Work in groups of three or four.

Read each option. Before you look at the ideas, **discuss** the option.

-How do you usually do it. **Why?**

-What reasons for doing it the other way can you think of?

Then read the ideas.

Do you agree or disagree? Can you think of other reasons?

List your ideas.

• Drills

What (if anything) do you like about drills? What do you dislike?

likes:	-	dislikes:	-
-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-

Option one : Do the students respond (•) immediately or (◊) after a pause or (Δ) some other option?

Option two: In substitution drills, where do the substitution items come from, (•) the book/teacher or (◊) the students themselves.

Option three: Do you precede more open activities like pairwork and groupwork with a drill of the structures the learners may need? Yes (•) or (◊) no?

• Dictation

What (if anything) do you like about dictation? What do you dislike?

likes:	-	dislikes:	-
-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-

Option one: Who "gives the dictation" (i.e., Who speaks?), (•) the teacher or (◊) the students?

Option two: Do the students write (•) exactly what they heard or (◊) do they change it?

Option three: If it is a cloze (fill in the blanks) dictation, do the students write (•) while they are hearing the dictation, (◊) after they hear it or (Δ) before they hear it?

• Dialogs

(conversations)

What (if anything) do you like about textbook dialogs? What do you dislike?

likes:	-	dislikes:	-
-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-

Option one: Do the students (•) sit down or (◊) stand and/or move when they practice .

What physical things could they do? (e.g., just face each other, gesture, etc.)

Option two: Do the students practice the dialog using (•) their regular voices (pitch, loudness, etc.) or (◊) do they change their voices?

What changes could they make? (e.g., high/low, angry/happy, etc.)

Option three: What happens after dialog practice (i.e., what is the goal of dialog work)? Students (•) memorize it or (◊) close their book and have their own conversation or (Δ) go on to something else.

Option four: Do students focus on (•) what the characters are saying or (◊) something else?

3-D Some reasons for the options.

There are, of course, no “correct” answers. What follows are simply some reasons some people choose each option. If there were some items where you didn’t see any reason to bother with the “other options”, see if these reasons make sense to you

• Drills

Option one : Do the students respond (•) immediately or (◊) after a pause or (Δ) some other option?

- quicker and keeps the class moving. No one gets bored (if you believe “no one gets bored” during a standard drill).

- real language is fast
- keeps students from worrying about every word
- ◊ gives all students time to think
- ◊ weaker students are not at a disadvantage

Δ If you have the repeat silently, it allows them to try focus on the correct pronunciation/phrasing mentally before actually producing it.

Δ Do it silently, then aloud means they are dealing with each item three times (hear it, say it silently, say it aloud).

Option two: In substitution drills, where do the substitution items come from, (•) the book/teacher or (◊) the students themselves.

- quicker
- students expect it
- fewer mistakes (is this good or bad?)
- ◊ more interesting and challenging
- ◊ more like real life (we make our own choices about the content of what we say)

? Follow up questions: - More mistakes happen when students are moving away from the “given script” and are trying to use language on their own. Teachers often point out that mistakes are good and are actually “learning steps.” Does our testing reflect this? How do we get students to believe it?

Option three: Do you precede more open activities like pairwork and groupwork with a drill of the structures the learners may need? Yes (•) or (◊) no?

- means the drill work encourages FonF (Focus on Form) awareness before the task.
- lets learners know where in the target sentences/grammar box/language map the forms they need are. They can refer back during the task.
- can be a chance for pronunciation work on something the learners will need to say
- ◊ I think it is better to let the need for a form come up, then supply it.
- ◊ feels “too traditional” for me

? Follow up question: Think of your own experience as a language learner. Did drills help in learning or not. Did you ever find yourself doing “mental rehearsal” before going into a communicative situation. Was it a kind of drill or not?

• Dictation

Option one: Who “gives the dictation” (i.e., Who speaks?), (•) the teacher or (◊) the students?

- normal and expected
- the teacher's pronunciation is better
- ◊ give more speaking practice
- ◊ individualizes speed
- ◊ gives learners more responsibility and autonomy
- ◊ students more likely to ask for repetition/clarification (if done in pairs/small groups)

Option two: Do the students write (•) exactly what they heard or (◊) do they change it?

- you have more control
- normal and expected
- ◊ students have to think and understand more deeply
- ◊ traditional dictation is mostly “bottom-up”. This adds a “top-down” element.
- ◊ more interesting, encourages (releases) learner creativity.

Option three: If it is a cloze (fill in the blanks) dictation, do the students write (•) while they are hearing the dictation, (◊) after they hear it or (Δ) before they hear it?

- they have to listen and write quickly
- ◊ it can exercise memory
- ◊ they may use the context to figure out words they didn't catch
- Δ they will use the context to figure out what words go in the blanks
- Δ they will have already made a guess when they listen so they are interested in finding out if they are correct
- Δ predictions come from “life knowledge”, a “top-down” element so this has a better “top-down/bottom-up” processing balance.

• Dialogs (conversations)

Option one: Do the students (•) sit down or (◊) stand and/or move when they practice .

- easiest, normal and what they expect
- may assume learners are focusing more on language forms, grammar, etc.
- if students stand and move, classroom control is harder (?)
- ◊ eye contact (and short-term memory practice) is easier
- ◊ full-body learning (like TPR) – includes kinesthetic aspect which helps many learners
- ◊ may assume learners are practicing real communication
- ◊ more interesting
- if students stand and move, classroom control is easier (?)

What physical things could they do? (e.g., just face each other, gesture – think of all the things we do in real life while we are talking, etc.)

Option two: Do the students practice the dialog using (•) their regular voices (pitch, loudness, etc.) or (◊) do they change their voices?

- normal and what they expect
- if they really use English, they will use their natural voices
- ◊ changing voices can be playful and that relaxes the students
- ◊ it teaches them to experiment
- ◊ in class, “regular voices” often means boring, non-emotional monotone. This can get them more involved.

What changes could they make? (e.g., high/low, angry/happy, etc.)

Option three: What happens after dialog practice (i.e., what is the goal of dialog work)? Students (•) memorize it or (◊) close their book and have their own conversation or (Δ) go on to something else.

- Some bits of language (e.g., telephone) are memorized routines.
- Although there is much more to language learning than memorization, memory work certainly helps.
- ◊ Provides a supported “practice step” between controlled practice and totally free conversation.
- ◊ Means the textbook practice provided a rehearsal period before freer work.
- Δ Textbook dialog practice is unnatural. This let's them more to something more communicative.

Follow-up question: Yes, practicing a textbook dialog is natural. A lot of what we do in the classroom is. Does that make it useless?

Option four: Do students focus on (•) what the characters are saying or (◊) something else?

- Easy and what the learners expect.

- ◊ If they focus on the *innervoice* (what the characters are thinking) they deal with the dialog at both the surface (usual) level and at a deeper, more meaningful level.

- ◊ This shows a deeper understanding.

- ◊ Encourages (releases) learner creativity.

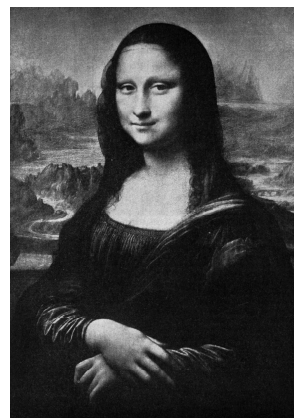


Follow-up question: For the next few days, try noticing how often you own “innervoice” is saying things that are very different than what you are saying aloud. This is not being dishonest. It is just self-monitoring.

Babies, bathwater and reinventing traditional tasks

Many “traditional techniques” are criticized as ineffective and out-of-date. And, certainly, just being traditional doesn’t make something good or bad. Many of the techniques, although criticized, continue to be used. Maybe instead of “throwing them out” we can look at ways to improve them by adding features of progressing language teaching.

Do you want to work alone or with a partner?



1. What “traditional” techniques do you use? (List things that are sometimes called “out-of-date”) What are your reasons? Why do you use them?

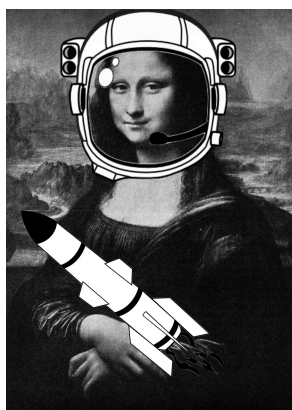
2. Choose one you want to work (play) with. Circle it.

3. When the technique is criticized, what (specifically) do people say is wrong with it? For each item, include a positive element.

Example: It is *x*. Tasks *should y*.

Dictation is completely bottom-up. Tasks should be more balanced.

Please really do state the suggestions positively and in ways people believe are valid. Otherwise, it is unlikely you are going to find the “useful element” in each idea.



4. (This step might be better with one or more partners so you can brainstorm.)

Go back to the idea you chose at step 2.

• **What are the most essential elements of the technique?**

Try to get to the core, basic parts. Example: For dictation, people might say, “*The teacher says sentences. Students write them.*” But actually the core of dictation is “Students hear something. They write.” This leaves us open to someone other than the teacher speaking, students writing something other than what they hear, students writing somewhere other than their notebooks, etc.

“Creative thinking may mean simply the realization that there is no particular virtue in doing things the way they have always been done.”

– Rudolf Flesch

