

## Using dialogue journals as an alternative to traditional writing assignments

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When language students are given a writing assignment, they brainstorm some ideas, organize them, and look for the right language to express them well. Then they take their completed assignments to class and hand them in with confidence, thinking that they did a good job. They wait with anticipation for the return of their assignment, hoping to receive a message from the teacher about how he or she was interested in the ideas. But, most of the time, the teacher returns the paper with a bunch of red marks signaling grammar errors and makes no comment at all about whether or not he or she found it interesting. The student leaves the class disgusted, unhappy with the effort that he or she made, and maybe even unwilling to make the same effort again.

The student may ask legitimate questions like: "Why should I bother to write if the teacher only makes grammatical corrections?" "Why should I waste my time to write if the teacher doesn't even read the ideas?" At the same time, the teacher may have complaints or questions: "Why should I waste my time marking grammatical errors if the students don't improve?" And one of the most common complaints: "They don't even read my comments!"

These are the reasons that justify the use of dialogue journals. A journal is capable of solving these problems for both teachers and students.

### **What is a Dialogue Journal?**

A dialogue journal is a notebook that is used exclusively for one class. Burnham (1987) notes that journals have been used since the mid-1960s in many types of classes, from writing and literature classes to math classes, religion classes, and even chemistry classes. There is no limit. He also claims that the proof of the success of journals is in their use. Unfortunately, many teachers do not use them yet, despite the 30-year history of successful journal writing.

A dialogue journal may be private or it may be public. If it is private, it can be a two-way dialogue between the student and the teacher in the form of letters, or it can be for the student alone. If it is public, it is for the student, the professor, and for the other students. By using public journals, students have an opportunity to get to know each other in a way that they would not normally have within a regular class. Also, sharing journals with classmates and doing collaborative writing activities promotes community. Additionally, when students exchange journals, they are getting practice in reading as well as writing.

### **Why should we use journals?**

It is important to note that writing does not come naturally to most of us. We have to struggle to learn how to write well in our first language, and in a foreign language it is even worse! But we do know that studying grammar does not really improve writing. The only way to improve writing

is by writing.

One problem that students face is the problem of audience. Students generally think that everything is written for the teacher. This in turn causes many students to A). not write; or B). write with a "formal" style that they think the teacher wants to read. Unfortunately, this "formal" style is usually complex and confusing and does not express ideas very well. I saw this happen in the United States when I was teaching composition to native speakers, and I have seen it here while teaching composition to nonnative speakers.

When students use a journal, there is more of a tendency to have clear, natural writing; writing that shows the individual "voice" of the writer. Journal writing is usually expressive, open, and even playful. As a teacher evaluating students' writing, would you prefer to read a stiff, formal paragraph, or a playful bit of freewriting? Which do you think the students will enjoy more?

Another benefit of the dialogue journal is that it encourages real communication. By communication I mean actual conversations between the teacher and student and among the students. If the current literature on language teaching is to be believed, we are teaching communicative, or functional, language. Writing something meaningful for others to read is using the language in a completely natural, functional way, unlike a paragraph writing assignment where the students must write about three reasons to stop smoking.

As a result of this conversation, students gain confidence. We as teachers are no longer criticizing students' use of grammar. We are complimenting them on their ideas and talking to them as well as listening to them. Many teachers today do not have

time to honestly listen to their students. Many classes are very large, and very little time can be dedicated to listening to individual students. But with a journal, it is possible to listen frequently. And when students realize that the teacher is listening, they will tell him or her many things! Frequently these things help to explain classroom behavior or other factors that the teacher is concerned about.

As students become more confident, they also become more adventuresome with language. They start creating and inventing in ways that they may not have realized possible (Sandler 1987). And surely teachers will be surprised. Writing changes from being something to be feared to being something that is enjoyed. And as a result, both the teacher and the students have more fun.

And one final reason why we should include journals in our language classes is that writing is thinking. Writing is problem solving and discovery. The journal practices writing, so that means that the journal is thinking.

#### **How can I use journals?**

All students can use journals. It is possible for students at all levels to use a dialogue journal, including beginners and children. One strategy may be to allow beginners to write in Spanish as well as in English. A successful example of one foreign language teacher who used journals is Sandler (1987). She describes how she gets beginning students of French as a foreign language to write after the first day of class. In addition, Staton (1987) describes journal writing with primary school children. Journals have also been used successfully in high school and university classes (Burnham 1987).

The teacher should also keep a journal. He or she should do the same activities and

assignments, and as a result, the students will feel that their work in the journal is justified. It also gives credibility to the journal. And, if the teacher shares his or her journal with the class, it helps to promote camaraderie as well as an open atmosphere in the classroom.

What goes in the dialogue journal? First of all, students can do their daily activities in their journals. It is already common for primary school children to use a journal to record their daily activities. But do they share these journals with other children? It might be a good idea to let them read each others' work and respond to it. Additionally, if multiple intelligences are being used in the language class, there are many possible activities that can be included in the journal, from collages, to poems, to song lyrics, to math or logic problems, etc.

Another thing to include in the journal could be observations. These observations could be written or drawn explanations of what the students see. Students can write about experiences in their lives. They can write about feelings or attitudes (towards learning a language or whatever). They can watch each other and write about what they see.

In addition to class activities, students can also be encouraged to put other things in their journals that they want to include. For example, they can put in newspaper clippings, pictures, stickers, drawings, or whatever they want. It should be stressed that the journal is personal, and each student can do what he or she wants in order to reflect an individual personality.

Something else that needs to be included in the journal is mistakes and errors. Errors are good. We should encourage errors. This means that students are trying new things and learning. If everything is

perfect, that means they are only using language that they know, without going any further. Errors show progress.

### **How can I evaluate the journal?**

First, it is important to note that evaluating journals is a lot easier than evaluating a bunch of paragraphs or essays. How many times has a teacher collected paragraphs from the students and then looked at them with absolutely no interest and no desire to read them or grade them? Every teacher has faced that feeling at one time or another in his or her career. But, imagine reading journals, where students write things about themselves, about their lives, their interests, their observations . . . That seems like a much more interesting proposal for a teacher.

For many teachers, the hardest part of adding a journal to their classes is deciding how to evaluate it. Teachers are accustomed to tests and formal papers and quizzes. Sometimes we think that if we don't do these, our students won't learn. How much do students really learn from studying for and taking a test? But, if a student is encouraged to write interesting things in a journal and to read the interesting things that his or her classmates have written, the student will learn more. He or she will learn how to use language to communicate, and that is much more valuable than studying for a test. One of the side effects of this type of work is that teachers enjoy themselves so much reading the journals and responding to the students, that they stop worrying about the evaluation.

When the time comes to assign a journal in a class, it is necessary to decide if the journal will be graded or not. If it is not graded, students can be encouraged to write, to read, etc., but students do not receive a grade at the end of the course. Unfortunately, some students may not see

the importance of this extra work, and they may feel the need to be rewarded for their effort.

When giving grades for the journals, the first step needs to be agreeing on how the journal will be graded. The best way to do that is to talk to the students. One strategy for grading journals is to brainstorm with the students what qualities they think a good journal has. Due to the fact that the students have been reading other students' journals, they have a good idea of what is good and what is not so good. And usually the students agree with the teacher.

When the teacher collects the journal to read, he or she should consider the following points.

- Read for content, not correctness (holistic).
- If grammar is going to be corrected on an assignment, tell the students before they do it.
- Make comments about content and ask questions.
- Have students answer your questions and encourage them to ask you questions.
- Have other students read and make comments.
- Keep a journal yourself that the students can read and make comments in.
- Share the journals with each other regularly.
- And finally, tell your students how you are going to grade their journals.

When it is time to collect the journals to read and comment on, the following points should be considered:

- Respond positively and honestly (in the form of a letter).
- Be respectful of each student.
- Make comments about content and ideas proposed by the student.
- Give of yourself: tell the students stories

about yourself, let them know what you think and feel.

- Do not make corrections of grammar unless you said you would (if you feel you have to make corrections, do so in the form of suggestions of possible ways to say something, not by using a red pen to mark errors).

And when giving a grade, the teacher may consider factors such as completeness (no less than a 3.0 if they have done a set minimum); extra work (student initiated); improvement; reflection; creativity, etc. This list can be modified and added to in conjunction with the students. It is important to not evaluate "quality"—if a student writes something silly, it is not a reason to get a bad grade on the journal. The important thing is that the student writes.

### Conclusion

I sincerely believe that dialogue journals are going to play an important role in the future of teaching in general, and language teaching specifically. We need to revolutionize the teaching and evaluation of students, and the use of journals may be the solution we are looking for.

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