

Dialogue Journals for Increased Autonomy

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In many EFL learning environments, there is little or no opportunity to use English outside the classroom. That is certainly the case for Japan. No matter how many hours are spent in the classroom, without a chance to use the L2 in an authentic setting, only so much progress can be expected. In this paper, the reasons for starting this requirement are discussed. Following this, the methods of implementation are discussed along with a means for evaluation. Finally, in the conclusion, the author discusses how the use of dialogue journals has evolved and gives recommendations for use in other settings.

The learners were first-year students at a national university corporation (formerly known as national universities) in Japan. The students belong to a department in which English receives a strong focus compared to most public universities in Japan. In their first year, they have five 90-minute classes each week in a group of 30. Of the five classes, one is a language laboratory class in which they watch an 8-10 minute episode from a video series designed for EFL/ESL education and work in pairs to discuss it, answering comprehension questions. Another class is spent in a computer lab, working on long-term projects and short-term activities. The remaining three classes of the week utilize a pronunciation text, a writing text, extensive (graded) readers, project work, and of course miscellaneous activities.

Rationale for Dialogue Journals

Despite having five classes each week with the students, the author determined in April of 2003 to start that school year with dialogue journals. There were several reasons for this addition to the curriculum. First, the students had few opportunities to use English outside the classroom. As all teachers of second languages can attest, using the second language is a prerequisite to acquiring it. By writing in a dialogue journal, the students would have a daily chance to use English. Second, a dialogue journal would serve as a way of communicating with the students. Prior to implementation of the journal, the author was sometimes aware of various aspects of various students' lives through conversation. Third, differences in student motivation are always present, and quite often the teacher ends up organizing their classes according to the lowest common motivational denominator. By implementing a dialogue journal, with no maximum limit on entry length, the students with higher

motivation could be free to write as they desired. Students with lower motivation would be able to satisfy the minimum requirements if they so chose. While differences in cultures can impact on acceptance of learner autonomy (Sinclair, 2000), in Japan there is more awareness of the importance of respecting learners as individuals; the divide in level of acceptance is not as wide as it used to be or is still perceived by some.

Implementation

Prior to full implementation at the beginning of the school year in April of 2003, the author first conducted a short-term implementation with second-year students for a month in the 2002-3 school year. When he was put in charge of teaching the first-year students the following year, he decided to start the students on dialogue journals from the first day because of the positive results. For those considering dialogue journals, it might be wise to first implement them for a short period in the school year preceding the year of planned full implementation as it does take a substantial amount of time on the teacher's part.

As stated, when the new school year began, students were told of the dialogue journal requirement in the very first class, along with other requirements for the five-classes-a-week curriculum. Ho and Crockall (1995) state that teachers have to make learners aware that the responsibility for learning falls upon the student in the long run, and the author touches on this in his first class each school year. Japanese students are accustomed to a teacher-centered style of education, so this type of lecture from the author serves to alleviate their fears (Wilhelm, 1999) about diving into the deep, student-centered

end of the pool of knowledge acquisition. Students were encouraged to write daily, at least three or four sentences, and to focus on writing fluency, not accuracy. Beyond the loose minimum of three or four sentences, no ideal or maximum figure was given to the students. In this way, the students control the length of their entries; as Benson (2001) said, giving students such control facilitates their autonomy as learners. The papers are handed back to the students as soon as possible. This is important, for without immediate feedback, the value of the journal as authentic communication decreases, and students will only naturally lose interest.

For the teacher's part, it is important to state a few things. First, the teacher should strive to write as much or more than the student, and for this purpose the students must be told to leave a blank space after each entry in which the teacher can write. The reasons why the teacher should write as much as the student or more may be obvious, but, first of all, if the teacher only writes a cursory note after each entry, authentic communication cannot be realized. Unless the teacher has a class full of super students, it will be necessary at times to remind the students of the requirement to do the journal, and perhaps some individual prompting for particular students.

Evaluation for Purposes of Grading

It goes without saying that the teacher needs to keep accurate records of the students' journal hand-ins. The author basically granted credit for any week in which there were four or more entries, or sometimes three if they were longer than average entries. In the course syllabus, the specifics for evaluation are enumerated for the students: a certain number of weeks of hand-ins count for a certain grade for the daily

journal part of the course grade. They should still have a chance at an *A* for the journal part of their course grade, in the author's opinion. In the case of this particular course, the journal counted as 15% of the total grade, so that it would neither make nor break the students' final grade.

Overall Evaluation of Practice of Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals provide a natural path for such handing down of wisdom. All teachers would like to have an extended conversation with each student each week, but numbers and logistics usually make this impractical. The journal may not be an exact substitute for oral conversation; certainly, there is no real-time give and take involved. However, in a way it is like having a 10-minute conversation each week.

Occasionally, a student will use their journal as a conduit for venting about a personal problem, often concerning a friend, part-time job, or perhaps even another teacher. In responding, of course the teacher has to be careful about giving advice, and it would be unprofessional to comment negatively about another teacher (no matter how tempting this may be sometimes). Some other teachers, especially female, who have done dialogue journals, have commented that quite often female students write about personal matters, such as abortion, in their journal entries, and the teacher was at a loss as to how to respond, yet the teacher can ultimately tell the students to keep it a little less personal if need be.

One advantage that dialogue journals hold over real-time conversation is that the teacher can more accurately gauge the English level of the students and tailor their response to the individual. It's usually considered good practice to

include some words and expressions that are just beyond the student's current level. Also, like all forms of written communication, the student can refer back to the teacher's responses as many times as they like, and have ample opportunity to look up any unfamiliar words or expressions in their electronic dictionaries. In addition, the authentic purpose for which the dialogue serves is a tremendous plus, especially in a country like Japan in which there are few such opportunities. In terms of motivation theory, this authentic purpose should contribute to an increase in instrumental motivation (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). In addition, many students wrote about aspects of Japanese culture and occasionally raised questions about the author's culture (American). These kinds of exchanges would seem to reflect an increase in integrative motivation. Finally, a positive aspect of dialogue journals that is not related to English is the fact that the finished dialogue will be a treasure for the student to read in later years, a permanent record of their college life that they would likely not otherwise have. For those who take advantage of it and write regularly, they get an incredible amount of authentic input (my responses) and they get the chance to write much more than they would in any writing course as part of regular writing assignments.

On the negative side, there are really only a few things to consider. For the teacher, it does require a major investment of time. The author timed his journal response workload one week, writing responses to about 25 students' papers, and was not at all surprised to find out that the total came to five hours. Of course, people write at different speeds; the author would never call himself a fast writer. However, despite this requirement to invest a substantial amount of time each week

in responding to the journal papers, the author still feels it has been worth every minute. Another issue is that some students need more pushing than others, and some may stop completely. One adjustment that could be made, especially if it is one-class-a-week course, would be to require only two to four entries per week.

Evaluation

In the first term of the 2004-5 school year, there were fifteen weekly hand-in opportunities for the students. Out of thirty students enrolled in the course, half (15) handed in their journal papers at least 12 times. The mean average number of hand-ins was 10.83, and the median was 11.5. Of the handful of students who did turn in all of their journal papers to that point (Nov. 18, 2004), five in particular stood out in terms of sheer volume. Others were close, but because of time constraints and the aforementioned impossibility to make comprehensive conclusions, only statistics for these five were calculated. Their total number of words written was calculated, based on each one's word-per-line rate multiplied by the number of lines they wrote during the period from Apr. 15 to Nov. 18, 2004. Each of these five had written over 5000 words in this period, including one who had written over 9000, one over 8000, and another over 7000. This in itself is staggering when one considers that, even for a native speaker, 5000 words is quite a lot of writing. For further information, all five of these students averaged over 55 words per entry, and the one who totaled more than 9000 words averaged over 90 words per entry.

Conclusion

The author has thoroughly enjoyed this chance to communicate with students, and has been extremely pleased with the effort expended by the students and the results thereof. If you have the chance, try dialogue journals. It's not going to be every teacher's cup of tea. As stated above, in order to lessen the load on the student and the teacher, the number of entries required per week could be decreased. Also, make it clear that it is a part of overall course evaluation. However, it should neither make nor break the students' grades. If the teacher has a number of once-a-week classes, perhaps by staggering the dialogue journal assignments, he or she could avoid having to respond to hundreds of students' entries each week. One class could do it for a month or so, and then another class, and so on. If not, the students will surely perceive it as just another assignment, that the teacher is simply skimming through their words, and will work less diligently on writing regularly. Not to mention all the other positives that would fall by the wayside should the teacher only make brief comments. In conclusion, it's a good idea to try dialogue journals in some form and your students will benefit as much or more than any other form of writing assignment you could give them.

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