Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy

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Teachers often wish they had more time to communicate with their students -- to learn about their backgrounds and interests; to share information; and to follow their learning. The need to communicate is intensified with ESL students, who bring to the classroom a different language and cultural background. It is with these students that one-to-one communication is crucial--not only to help them adjust, but also to help the teacher understand them and address their particular language and literacy needs.

Many teachers of such students have found dialogue journals, interactive writing on an individual basis, to be a crucial part of their classes. Dialogue journals not only open a new channel of communication, but they also provide another context for language and literacy development. Students have the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening atmosphere, in interaction with a proficient English speaker. Because the interaction is written, it allows students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing.

What Is a Dialogue Journal?

A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly (daily, weekly, etc.). Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions.

In dialogue journals, students can write about topics that are important to them. Sometimes their concerns and interests are personal. Or, journal entries may relate to academic or work-related issues. Students may write descriptions, narratives, or complaints, as the topic and communicative purpose dictate.

Because the teacher is attempting above all to communicate with the student, his or her writing is roughly tuned to the student's language proficiency level. In most cases, teachers do not overtly correct errors. This is one place where students may write freely, without focusing on form. The teacher's response in the journal serves as a model of correct English usage. At times, however, students do request correction. See Peyton & Staton (1991) for strategies teachers can use to address students' errors.

With non-literate students, there is no initial pressure to write. Students can begin by drawing pictures, with the teacher drawing pictures in reply, perhaps writing a few words underneath or labeling the pictures. The move to words and longer texts can be made when students feel ready. Students can dictate their entries to an aide or another student who writes them down, writes a reply, and reads it aloud.

What Are the Benefits?

Extending contact time with students and getting to know them in a way that may not be possible otherwise. Through the journals, teachers may discuss, for example, the student's native culture and language, problems adjusting to the new culture, school procedures, and personal interests.

Management of classes with students of varying language, ability, and interest levels. All students, no matter what their language or literacy level, can participate to some extent.

Optimal language learning conditions. Dialogue journals focus on meaning rather than form and on real topics and issues of interest to the student. The teacher's written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the student's proficiency level; thus, the teacher's entries can provide reading texts that are challenging, but that are also comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written.
Beyond the modeling of language form and structure, the teacher's writing also provides continual exposure to the thought, style, and manner of expression of a proficient English writer.

The major drawback that teachers experience is the time required to read and respond to student entries. Some teachers who have been successful with dialogue journals report that the time is well spent, for the knowledge they gain about students’ interests and problems and the feedback they receive about the ongoing work and activities serve as the basis for future planning.

**What Are the Logistics?**

*Materials.* Most people use bound, easily transportable (for the teacher carrying a class set) notebooks. If there is easy access to computers, computer disks may be exchanged or electronic mail can be used.

*Frequency of writing.* The writing must be done regularly, but the frequency depends on the number of students involved, the length of the class, the teacher's schedule, and the needs of the teacher and students. Most teachers prefer to give their students time to write during class--at the beginning as a warm-up, at the end as a wind-down, or before or after a break as a transition. Ten to fifteen minutes is usually adequate to read the teacher's entry and write a new one. Teachers usually respond outside class time.

*Length of writing.* The amount of writing should be up to each student. Students should understand that long, polished pieces are not required.

*Writing instructions and topics.* Inform students that they will be participating in a continuing, private, written conversation, that they may write on any topic (unless a particular theme has been chosen by the teacher or the class), and that the teacher will write back regularly without correcting errors. The mechanics of when to write, when to turn the journals in, and when they will be returned should be explained. When students are unable to think of something to write, the teacher might suggest one or two possible topics or hand out a list of suggestions, or the class can brainstorm topics together.

*Journal partners* do not have to be teachers. Students can write with classroom aides, with each other, or with another class of students who are older or more proficient in English.

**References**


**Resources**

Follow-Up Discussion Questions

Dialogue Journals and Error Correction
1. A dialogue journal is a written conversation between a student and teacher (or aide, volunteer, or other more proficient speaker). Communication is the main goal, and “in most cases, teachers do not correct errors. This is one place where students may write freely, without focusing on form. The teacher’s response in the journal serves as a model of correct English usage.”

Many teachers agree with the above statement and follow it strictly. Other instructors are uncomfortable ‘letting errors go’, especially in writing. What are the benefits of NOT correcting errors in this medium, and what arguments might there be to the contrary? How do you feel about correcting errors that appear in dialogue journals?

Optimal Slow Down
2. This brief article lists many benefits to dialogue journals, including extended contact time with students, an outlet for personal communication, a task that can be used across levels, abilities, and interests, and “optimal language learning conditions.” Read back through the paragraph that discusses Optimal Language Learning Conditions.

List the benefits they describe in that paragraph:

It has been said that writing is language slowed down. Consider this statement. What impact could ‘slowing down language’ in this way have in the ESL classroom?

Logistics
3. Reflect on your own experience using dialogue journals in the classroom. What materials did you use? How frequently did students write, and how much? How did you get started, and how did you frame your responses? Talk about the logistics of using this activity.

What tips or suggestions would you give a teacher who’s considering using dialogue journals for the first time?

Follow-up submitted by Patsy Vinogradov, 12-06