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ABSTRACT

Dialogue journals are discussed as a valuable component in developing writing and reading competence in both first and second language classes. A simple way for students to carry on a private written conversation with their teachers, journals may be written in daily or weekly for the entire year or course. Both student and teacher agree to write back and forth in a bound composition book about topics of interest to each of them. Not only is the teacher no longer responsible for thinking up topics for writing, but it has been found that the topics include a wide range of academic, interpersonal, and personal concerns. Both students and teacher are free to use the full range of language functions characteristic of face-to-face conversation, including questions, complaints, promises, denials, and apologies. It is suggested that although dialogue journals involve written language, the content and structure of this kind of discourse is more like face-to-face communication than like traditional school essays or reading texts. Examples of journal entries from children and adults studying English as a second language and from deaf students studying English are included. (NCR)

DIALOGUE JOURNALS: A NEW TOOL FOR TEACHING COMMUNICATION

Jana Staton, Gallaudet College

Wanted: a natural way to engage students in reading and writing. Must require no commercial materials, diagnostic tests, or teacher training. Must work equally well with first and second language learners, from kindergarten through adult years. Should be completely individualized, with topics of particular interest to each student and text adapted to each student's reading level.

Sound impossible? Dialogue journals are not a method of instruction in literacy for language learners, but they are becoming a valuable component in developing writing and reading competence in both first and second language classes. Dialogue journals are simply a way for students to carry on a private written conversation with their teacher, continuing daily or weekly for the entire year or course. Both student and teacher agree to write back and forth in a bound composition book about topics of interest to each of them, as cooperative conversational partners. Not only is the teacher no longer responsible for thinking up topics for writing, but the topics, as we have found in our research (Staton, Shuy, Kreeft, and Reed, 1982), include a wide range of academic, interpersonal, and personal concerns. In the dialogue journal, both students and teacher are free to use the full range of language functions characteristic of face-to-face conversation, including questions,

complaints, promises, denials, and apologies. The only material needed is a simple, lightweight composition book for each student.

Dialogue journals involve written language, but the content and structure of this kind of discourse is much more like face-to-face communication than like traditional school essays or reading texts. We say that the dialogue journal is functional, interactive communication, about self-generated (instead of teacher-dictated) topics, and is cumulative over extended periods of time in a shared context.

If you have never tried this way of communicating, it can be hard to imagine. Some examples from recent studies conducted by researchers at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and by others with students learning English as a second language demonstrate the conversational nature of the writing. (In all examples, comments and teacher entries are in roman type, student entries in italics.)

Laura is a sixth grade student from Italy, who has had no prior English language training. This is her third daily entry.

Ms. Reed, I like dis room and I like you Bekes you are a good teshir and teach my English. I like evryBety.

Everybody likes you, too, Laura. Did you read the book? We will read every day.

Mrs. Reed I like dis class bekes my learning in English and read book good and I like bas ball, plant and I like to sted too and I like scool to.

Kazutomi is an adult Japanese student, studying English in this country in an intensive summer program.

I don't buy a dictionary yet. If you take me bookstore and choose my dictionary, I am delightful. Prepositions are very difficult for me. In Japan, when I take English Examinations, I lose points due to prepositions. Also, I want to know about an idiom.

Good. Let's go to the bookstore on Friday at 4:00. I will meet you there. I can't go today because we have a faculty meeting. So Friday at 4:00 outside the bookstore, OK?
As I said, We'll have several lessons about prepositions. There are some rules we can study but often you just have to memorize them.

Idioms are a lot of fun. I'll try to use more when I write to you. Then if you don't get it (understand it) (an idiom) you can ask. OK?

I see. I willgo to outside the book store at 4:00 Friday, too. I understand "get it."
I know a few idioms, "get on," "get off," "get around," and "get away with it."

Please write me a lot of idioms in this diary.
And plasase write me plenty of prepositions.

Please correct error if any.

I'll go outside the bookstore and wait for you. I'll also use lots of prepositions if I can. I don't like to correct journals because then some students become afraid to write. They are afraid of making a mistake. Sometimes I will paraphrase (say the same thing again a little differently. I did in this paragraph. Can you find it?)

In these examples, the student's initial awkward attempts to communicate are acknowledged, supported, and extended by the teacher's response. The natural conversational response patterns involve modeling a more appropriate way to say things, as the second example shows. The teacher in this interactional setting helps the learner to accomplish a successful communicative event in a process which many researchers refer to as "scaffolding" (Cazden, 1979; Staton, 1982, 1983). One finding in our studies of this process, initiated at CAL with a grant from the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1980, is that interactive writing does not lead to dependence on the teacher, but to greater independence in communication. A student who might write very brief entries at the beginning learns the strategies for elaborating on a topic by observation and participation, and gradually takes on the teacher's role in discussing a topic by writing more complex, elaborate, and independent entries (Staton, Shuy, Kreeft, and Reed, 1982).

Teacher-Developed Practice

The concept of dialogues in writing between teacher and student is a sound idea in terms of both theory and common sense. Dialogue journals, however, are a teacher-developed rather than research-initiated practice which has only recently been studied. There may be a number of teachers who have used something like an interactive written dialogue process; the research conducted at CAL under the initial NIE grant came about because of a particular teacher in Los Angeles, Mrs. Leslee Reed, who first began asking her sixth grade students to carry on a daily written conversation with her many years ago. In 1979 her use of dialogue journals came to our attention as a subject for the study of the development of functional communicative competence in natural language and the relationship between language interaction and acquisition of reasoning and self-knowledge.

The data from the first class studied (analyzed in Staton, Shuy, Kreeft, and Reed, 1982) were all from students who were native English speakers. In 1980, Mrs. Reed was transferred to a school in Los Angeles with students from over 20 different countries and 37 language backgrounds. In this rich multicultural and multilingual situation, we have had the opportunity to begin studying the acquisition of communicative competence by students who are just beginning to learn English as a second language. In addition, our original research led to the adoption of dialogue journals by a number of teachers in adult ESL, foreign language, and deaf education settings. In turn, this has led to a

second generation of research by Kreeft, Gutstein, Staton, and Stokoe, among others, which is providing us with a better understanding of the uses and benefits of dialogue journals used with second language learners.

Using Dialogue Journals in a Second Language Setting

The primary goal of dialogue journals is better personal communication and mutual understanding between each individual student and the teacher. Increased competence in using written language (either first or second) is a by-product of achieving this goal, just as communicative competence in children is a by-product of their daily language experience. Research has taught us a great deal about the conditions that ensure competence in a first language by the age of four or five: participation in successful communicative events with more experienced language users, initial reliance on contextual cues for the meaning of linguistic symbols, modeling ~~of~~ language instead of correction, emphasis on comprehension before production, focus on meaning, and implicit, unsequenced instruction (Krashen, 1978; Burling, 1982).

These natural conditions for first language acquisition are missing in the usual approach to teaching and evaluating writing and reading skills, but they are present in dialogue journal communication. The beginning student does not have to write more than he or she can think of to say at one time, and can return to a particular topic of interest and add details, bring up new questions, and continue the discussion at his or her own pace. Shuy has pointed out that students in most classrooms are expected when they write to

produce the equivalent of monologues in the formal register without ever having learned to use the more informal conversational registers which are closer to oral language (Shuy, 1982). That is, we ask students when they write to use a particular form of written language which is unlike the conversational style of any interpersonal language used in face-to-face conversation.

A second problem with writing (and also reading) instruction is that evaluation focuses first on learning the correct forms of written language: first the forms of letters, then words, then the right sequence of words in a sentence. At older ages, the discourse forms of essay and narration, with emphasis on paragraphing and topic sentences, are stressed. Despite our recognition that the communicative functions of language are always most important in assuring communicative competence, we transmit to language learners our own concern with form over function in writing and reading, with the surface appearance of language over its meaningful content.

The dialogue journal fits in with a new way of thinking about how to develop functional communicative competence in writing and reading and provide teachers with an approach that can be used with beginning learners. The dialogue journal allows beginning language learners to express their own ideas and encourages willingness to make an effort and to tolerate one's own mistakes (Burling, 1982; Shuy, 1981). Mistakes in form and syntax that are local and do not impede comprehension can be ignored for the moment, and mistakes that are global--which do interfere with understanding--can be

responded to naturally by asking clarifying questions, just as we would do in any friendly conversation (Dulay and Burt, 1978).

As an example of this different perspective on student communication and the kind of teacher response which is most appropriate and helpful, we might take an entry from the dialogue journal of one student in Mrs. Reed's class, an 11-year-old boy from Burma who at the time of writing had been in America a little over a year and was still minimally proficient in spoken English.

Mrs. Reed today at reading Mr. A spook in speker he said today is a something day and we have to think about something for one minute so I don't know what is that all about so can you tell what is all about please Mrs. Reed. I guess we going to have a a very happy Easter Party. You going to be a fat teacher in the school becuse you get a lot of cholclate and you have to eat all of them.... Mrs. Reed you know what at afternoon we going to have big party and after party we have to go Rhythms and our stomach going to fat and we can't not jumped on the walk and dance. Have a very very happy happy Easter.

Suppose we were to respond to this as many teachers have been taught to do with student writing (in a way that many students come to expect and even demand).

Mrs. Reed today at reading Mr. A spook in speker he said today is a something day and we have to think about something for one minute so I don't know what is that all about so can you tell me what is all about please Mrs. Reed. I

guess we going to have a very happy Easter party. You going to be a fat teacher in the school becuse you get a lot of cholclate and you have to eat all of them....

Instead of that kind of red-pencil response, this is Mrs. Reed's literate, informative, and caring reply to the student.

Yes, I will explain why every class was very quiet for one minute at 9 o'clock this morning. In Atlanta, a big city in our United States, there have been 23 children killed by someone or maybe more than one person. They have not caught that very sick person. We were very quiet to give us a chance to remember that 23 have been killed. 23 families have been saddened and feel so sad because their children are dead. It gives us a chance to remember that even here in Los Angeles there are sick people. Boys and girls must stay away from strangers and even stay away from people they know, if those people do not act the way they should!

Yes! your teacher will get fat eating all the candy. I will eat some each day. Thank you for the chocolate rabbit and for the lovely Easter Card! I love the card and I love you!

When written language is truly interactive and functional, then our traditional ways of responding to it by breaking it apart into little pieces while ignoring the message seems equivalent to slapping someone's mouth for incorrect pronunciation. This excerpt illustrates that the student is

accomplishing the task of communicating at a global level. It should also be noted that the student and teacher are both writing at a level of sentence complexity and discourse structure far above the level of the basal reader text (approximately second grade) to which this student was assigned by the official school reading test for ESL (Staton, 1982a). Student and teacher are mutually involved in constructing a reading text of direct, personal interest to the children, which is continually challenging the student in terms of comprehension and inferencing.

This example also helps make the point that dialogue journal communication should not be confused with direct instruction in grammatical knowledge. The journals allow students to absorb new language by immersion in a meaningful, self-constructed communicative event; grammatical knowledge about language and directed practice in specific forms are a part of classroom instruction, quite apart from the journal use.

Our research has demonstrated the personalized nature of language development, which the journals trace for us. Students bring to the interaction vastly different knowledge and functional strategies, and they change at different rates on different aspects of language development. It has proved impossible thus far in our databases to find any single feature or dimension of writing performance on which a majority of students improve significantly over time. This is because each student tends to change on different dimensions, and only longitudinal studies of individual students across time can describe the pattern of changes.

We are realizing that we know very little about the relationship betwen development of communicative competence in writing and the mastery of grammatical and orthographic forms. Joy Kreeft is now beginning research on just this point, and her data already show that the relationship is complex and not linear. She points out that ESL students in Mrs. Reed's classroom who begin the year writing carefully, with few errors, may become more daring and creative in their writing as they feel more comfortable with the teacher and the language and more interested in their topics, and thus may begin making many more "mistakes" as they try out new ideas and expressions. Here is a good example from Kreeft's corpus of the change from short, "safe," and generally correct entries early in the year to more complex but also less "correct" ones.

October 7 (first entry for this year)

We couldn't play sock the ball out of the diamond I changed classes I am en room 11.

October 9

today is not good day becus I cant spec ingglsh so I can tulk but p.e. time was so fun

November 12

today in the morning is stairs is full
tuesday is man pilgrim make and today is weman pilgrim make

be interesnt and pilgrim (my) is school corridor exhibit

me is delighted.

and. me is happy.

sam is every day be ill tempered

karen and me is love no I

sam is be ill tempered nevertheless

sam is my friend and

karen is too friend

nevertheless no girl friend

and today is my watch is be out of order owww no

Kreeft observes that the student drops his careful use of I as subject and begins to use "me" in November (he later returns to using "I"). He begins to experiment with punctuation ("and. me is happy"), with new words (nevertheless) and with graphic representation ("owww no."). In fact, this appears to be like the early oral language play of infants, which is an essential part of their mastery of a first language. In all our data, we have found that approaching language learning on the basis of error counts completely misses the larger and more important issues of how such miscues or misrepresentations occur in relation to the kind of communicative function or strategy being attempted, and how creative mistake-making in language contributes to mastery.

To summarize, from the perspective of teaching students to be literate in a second language, or of developing written competence in a first language, the dialogue journals provide a natural approach to written language acquisition. Not surprisingly, the development of mutual knowledge and a personal relationship of trust and understanding which the journals bring about is much like the counseling-learning encounter in Community Language Learning as developed by Curran (1976) and others (Stevick, 1980). Out of this context of knowing and being known, students have both reasons for communicating in the new language or mode and confidence that their first efforts will be acknowledged, understood, and responded to by an audience that is interested and cares about them as individuals. What we want, it seems, in any language learning situation is for the learner to become comfortable and confident enough to take risks, to make good approximations in trying out new strategies, and to be able to profit from immediate, correct modeling of the language as feedback in a natural conversational interaction. The dialogue journals allow this to happen in written form.

Dialogue Journals with Deaf Students

Because of the way in which this personal dialogue unites cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development within a tutorial setting, dialogue journals have been spreading rapidly among instructors in ESL and foreign language settings. These settings include kindergarten and first grade classrooms and many adult ESL and college language courses.

One of the most exciting applications of the dialogue journal is occurring at Gallaudet College, where both high school and college deaf students are being introduced to dialogue communication. For these deaf students who have learned American Sign Language (ASL) or Pidgin Signed English (PSE) as their first language for face-to-face communication, learning to write and read English is tantamount to acquiring literacy in a second language without having learned a written code for their first language (since notational systems for signed languages are not yet in common use). For many prelingually deaf students, therefore, their first encounter with written communication occurs in a language they have never heard or spoken. For this reason, many deaf students have difficulty mastering reading and writing, and spend extra years drilling on English grammatical structures such as determiners, prepositions, and other functional aspects of written English which are represented very differently in sign language. Only recently have educators noticed this similarity between deaf students learning written language and other students learning a second language.

While most deaf students do learn to master school tasks such as reading texts and writing directed essays, they may have little or no experience in real-life functional experiences of writing and reading in context. Often the deaf person is not able to respond fully and clearly in the written notes necessary for interaction with a hearing person and is unfamiliar with using written language in direct, functional style. Written language may remain an "artificial" language to them--something like mathematics, with essays and stories perceived as similar to math problems, to be "solved" (i.e., written

or read) by applying a series of rules or formulas. Small wonder that their writing, like that of students learning foreign languages, consists of simple descriptive essays on "safe" topics using repetitive language strategies that do not reflect their thinking or ideas.

At Gallaudet, over 20 instructors at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf and in the College are working collaboratively with me to try out dialogue journals and determine how they can be most helpful to both students and teachers in the learning process. At Gallaudet, besides the focus on literacy, we are equally concerned with how functional writing and reading will affect student thinking. Functional writing--to a real audience, about issues and topics that concern one--demands active cognitive processing, integration, and transformation of information. There is new evidence from studies of both children's development and other cultures that involvement in functional writing tasks actively develops the specific cognitive skills of the student, such as ability to take the perspective of one's audience or to generalize and make references explicit (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Staton, 1982). Our working hypothesis is that dialogue journals can facilitate the development of thinking and reasoning strategies in two ways: (1) by encouraging articulation and elaboration of ideas and perceptions and thus bringing them into consciousness; and (2) by providing access to the operations of another mind, so that one can "see" what the processes of thinking and reasoning are like.

It is too early for us to have answers about the benefits or most appropriate uses of dialogue journals for deaf students as second language learners, but,

as in other settings, the benefits for the teacher are already apparent. Teachers at Gallaudet and elsewhere find that dialogue journals help them get to know each student as a unique person, with ideas, questions, complaints, and gifts that would not be revealed in the highly structured social interaction of classrooms, and are even less likely to be known when the student and teacher do not share a common language. (Most instructors at Gallaudet can hear, and are themselves learning American Sign Language.) As this example from a Gallaudet dialogue journal shows, teachers find they can reinforce lessons taught in class and focus on individual student problems, as well as carry on conversations about other topics. This makes the time spent in responding (usually about 5 to 10 minutes for each journal) an extension of teaching, and a fun one at that.

The student is a freshman at Gallaudet College.

October 28, 1982

I know that in the future in Russia has more nuclear weapon in missile rocket than in U.S. What is your opinion about that? Oh HUH!

I think that both Russia and the United States should reduce the number of nuclear weapons. If Russia and the U.S. got into a war it could mean that all mankind could be destroyed.

November 4, 1982

I know what identify and identity mean but I want to make sure that I have understand what those means but these are different meaning. Please give me example of those words.

First thing: identify is a verb, identity is a noun.

"Identify" means to name something or someone, or point out someone or something.

Example: I will identify the man who robbed me (meaning I will name him or point him out).

"Identity" is when someone or something is already named or pointed out.
Example: The police know the identity of the man who robbed me. His name is Bob Smith.

The basic belief of the Gallaudet Dialogue Journal Project is that deaf students can learn to communicate competently at both the functional (social and cognitive) level and at the linguistic level of mastering the written code and conventions. We believe that the difficulties many deaf students experience in using written language are more the fault of inappropriate instructional methods for written language acquisition than the consequence of the students' early deafness. In this sense, dialogue journals should be viewed as only an example of the kind of functional, self-generated written

interaction which needs to be the basis for acquiring competence in writing and reading in a natural way.

Because each instructor actively participates in the dialogue, the dialogue journal is a different experience for each instructor in each setting. Our research and even colleagues' experience don't answer the question most teachers ask: "What will it be like for me?" The advice Mrs. Reed first gave us, and gives teachers she trains, is worth passing on: "Try it! It isn't for everyone, but you'll just have to try it for yourself." I'd add to that, try it for a sufficiently long period of time to break through the natural caution about honest, sincere expression and the learned, "safe" patterns of writing older students may have acquired. Not every teacher wants to get to know his or her students as persons, beyond their in-class or standard test performance. For those who do, and who also want language learning to be intrinsically motivated by the need to communicate, the dialogue journal can allow teachers and students to begin creating a personalized learning process in the target language.

Additional information about how to initiate the practice of keeping a dialogue journal will be available later this year from the Center for Applied Linguistics as a handbook by Leslee Reed and Jana Staton: Dialogue Journals: A Common Sense Way to Communicate.

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