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Journals in the Language Classroom

In this article I describe some of the ways that journals can be used as teaching tools in the language classroom; in fact, the suggestions I make could be applied to the use of journals in teaching just about any subject. I begin by describing the concept of writing to learn, which is the theoretical foundation that journals are based on. After that, I give practical advice for using journals in the classroom. Next, I share my own advice and present feedback about journals from students at the American University of Bulgaria. Finally, I end with specific suggestions for how journals might be used at different moments during a lesson.

Writing to learn

One way to begin is by thinking about the concept of writing to learn. But, rather than starting with a definition of the concept, I would like to start with a thought experiment. Suppose someone asked you to grab a piece of paper and jot down an answer to the question, "What things are important to you as a teacher?" What would you say? Perhaps you would write about the things you want your students to learn. Or maybe you would write about the sort of atmosphere you like to have in your classroom. Or perhaps you would write about the factors that led to your becoming a teacher.

If you had, in fact, grabbed a piece of paper and jotted down some information, you would have been doing a type of writing called writing to learn. Writing to learn is thinking as you write. And this thinking as you write is the kind of writing that happens when people keep journals.

Writing to learn is based on the assumption that students' thoughts and understanding can grow and clarify through the process of writing. And growth in thought and understanding can certainly happen in the foreign language classroom.

Writing to learn is usually contrasted with writing to communicate. Writing to communicate is the sort of graded writing that is typically assigned in classrooms. According to Young (1999), there are several key differences between writing to learn

and writing to communicate: (1) writing to learn emphasizes discovery thinking, as opposed to critical thinking; (2) the emphasis is on developing ideas rather than revising, crafting, or clarifying; (3) the writing is designed to make sense primarily to the writer, rather than to a reader; (4) the audience is the self and trusted others, rather than a distant audience; (5) the language can be personal, rather than academic and formal; (6) the teacher plays the role of mentor or coach rather than judge; and (7) forms include journals, blogs, and rough drafts rather than graded essays, reports, or business letters.

This list is one way to think about how writing to learn and writing to communicate differ. Another way to think about what writing to learn is has been illustrated by Casanave and Sosa (2008):

> [A] second language student, bored by textbook exercises, longs to be challenged by something more interesting, which almost always means something more difficult and more interactive and almost always something outside the conventional school setting. … But if she is doing this in her L2, she must hold to a belief that may make her fearful at first—she must believe that she does not have to wait until her language is error-free in order to transform her experiences and complex thoughts into lines of words. The lines do not need to be long. The grammar does not need to be perfect. … She also needs to be convinced that there is a receptive audience consisting of other people who are interested in what she has to say. (92)

Advice about using journals

Having described what writing to learn is, I now offer advice about using journals in the classroom. Art Young is one of the world's experts on the topic of journals. His advice is to integrate journals "into the fabric of a course" and "make regular, frequent use of them in class," which will impress upon students "that journals are valuable, not just 'busywork,' because they are used daily as students and teacher build the knowledge of the course" (Young 1999, 18).

To add to Young's advice, I offer seven suggestions:

1. Ask students to buy a notebook they can easily carry around with them. Inspiration for a journal entry might come to them at any time, and they are more likely to write in their journal outside of class if the journal is easy for them to carry around wherever they go.
2. The language of the journal could be English, but it could also be their first language (L1). Or it could be a mixture of both. For advanced students, it makes sense to have them use the target language. For beginners, a journal in their native language might be a place where they can express their feelings without having to worry about remembering difficult grammar or vocabulary.
3. Collect and read the journals on a regular basis—but do not correct. If you feel you should respond, then write about something you liked. Remember that "in a language class, in the end, everything boils down to the same question: *Can you use language in ways that allow you to convey whatever your thoughts are?* … Can you express something about yourself, your ideas, your curiosities, and questions?" (Casanave and Sosa 2007, 17; italics in the original).
4. Ask students to leave a blank page between entries for room to comment later. Class time could be devoted to having students read and reread entries and respond to what they have written. In my experience, students really enjoy having a chance to comment on their own growth and development in the journal.
5. Encourage students to write about a wide variety of topics, but the topics should always, at least in some way, connect with the class. In his book, *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean suggests that one way to begin class is to ask students to discuss a question that they wrote about the night before in their journals (Bean 1996). Such a question might be "What confused you about today's reading or class?" Or "How does your

personal experience relate to the material?" Another possibility is to ask students to write a poem about the course material. One of the simplest types of poems that students could write is haiku. A haiku is an imagistic poem with 17 syllables arranged in three serial lines of 5–7–5. Imagistic means using concrete words like *spider, egg, ice cream,* or *pencil* to convey a general or universal feeling, idea, or concept such as beauty, justice, or language learning. Writing haiku is not difficult to learn, and it offers students an opportunity to creatively respond to what they are learning. One of my students, in just five minutes, created this haiku in her journal:

> taking an exam
> on a hot day violates
> basic human rights.
> (Darim, Lebanon)

Here are two more examples of haiku that my students wrote as a creative response to their reading on some of the dialogues of Plato:

> "Symposium"
> Join me in my house
> For a talk like cat and mouse.
> The cheese is on me.
> (Samar, Lebanon)

> Plato is long dead
> Yet his dialogues are still
> Alive and kicking
> (Mirvat, Lebanon)

I would suggest two sources for learning how to write haiku. For more on haiku as a tool for learning, see Ziliak's (forthcoming) article on haiku economics. For an excellent introduction to reading and writing haiku, with an extensive chapter on teaching haiku to young learners, see Higginson (1985). Richard Wright (1998) and Etheridge Knight (1986) have published a number of haiku that my students have found worth their time. In addition, there are many websites devoted to haiku that can be easily found with an Internet search engine. Making the connection between the class and the larger life of the student can offer a number of creative possibilities; haiku is one option.

6. Keep a journal along with your students. Ask your students to write during class time, and write along with them. Writing with your students tells them that the teacher takes the idea of journals seriously, and so should they. Keeping a journal along with your students also helps you see how much time is needed to complete a task, helps you be more reasonable with what you expect, and gives you a clue as to how interesting the prompts are that you give to your students.
7. Look for ways to use the journal during class time. Even if you can find only five minutes per week of class time, that time could be used for journal writing. Look for ways to connect the journal with what you consider important in the class. In the final section of this paper, I suggest specific journal writing activities.

Student opinions

I think that there is genuine value in listening to the voices of learners. Part of having a learner-centered classroom, at least in my opinion, means hearing the voices of the learners. Those voices remind me of the reasons I like being a language educator.

In the spring of 2007, I used journals as an integral part of my classes at the American University of Bulgaria. At the end of the semester, I asked students to write about what surprised them and what advice they have for students who are asked to keep journals. In this section, I offer three sets of opinions from my students.

Student Opinion 1

I was surprised by the ease with which the whole process went. It wasn't difficult, it wasn't scary and it didn't bite me. Probably the most surprising things about keeping a journal was the volume of paper I wasted (whole two trees dead—I feel like a murderer) and the exactness of details kept in my mind, which however have no chance of

being released except when a person is with a piece of paper and pen. Advices: Be creative! Love your journal! Your journal is your friend! (so are trees but you know, this is a journal-tree trade-off). Be specific! Be sincere! Be up to date with entries! Be ready to argue and defend your position! Be ready to make mistakes—both grammatical and spelling—that's why it's a journal and not a paper. Write about things you're interested in and which you like—make it interesting! (make a tree's death meaningful). (Magdalena, Bulgaria)

Student Opinion 2

At the beginning I did not exactly know what a journal was. I realized that one day as I was reading my journals I compared the ones I had written in the beginning with the ones I had written in the end. They differed so much from each other. The journals I had written in the beginning of the semester were more formal and seemed more like essays. … I started to change my way of writing journals. I became more open to them and less formal. I started writing using "I" and expressing my exact opinion on everything. And that was the thing I appreciated most. Usually I kept my ideas to myself as I am very shy and sometimes even if I wanted to say something I did not. Writing journals helped me not only [improve] my writing, an aim that I think I realized, but also it helped me [improve] as a person. It stimulated my critical thinking and looking at things deeper. I started to look at them from a different perspective and analyze them more. I found it really helpful [both] in the developing writing skills perspective or developing self-confidence and being more analytic. (Erka, Albania)

Student Opinion 3

At the beginning, I was very skeptical and worried, finding hundred reasons it would be difficult. … By opening the journal and starting to write on a topic before prior thinking on what to write, I realized I would come up with some really good thoughts and observations of issues. So it helped us not in just improving our performance in written English, but also in training us to think, to reflect on issues, to think of the problems and try to find solutions. … And I did not expect this. That is why it surprised me. I did not expect that I could put that much of reflective … writing in my journal. … I felt that the journal was the best place I could express my ideas. I could write a perfect draft in there. I could put the best very first thought in there. And it did not take much time. … So surprisingly, keeping the journal brought back my self-confidence for writing in English. It also helped me broaden out my thoughts, pushing me to think further about stuff and analyze problems. …

I would advise [students] to accept [the journal] from the beginning as a very good opportunity and not to worry about it at all. I would advise them not to think they will waste a lot of time writing the entries. Because they won't. They will actually gain time as they will become not just better but also faster at writing. And they will always find topics. I am sure when I say this. The last advice I want to give them is to just start writing, even if they think they don't [know] what to say on that topic. The words will come, the ideas too. (Arita, Kosovo)

Using journals in the classroom

As Fulwiler (1987) has shown, journals can be adapted to a wide variety of teaching situations. In this section, I offer concrete suggestions for using journals in three teaching situations.

Starting class. Start class with five minutes of journal writing. Students could be asked to write about a question that will be the subject of that day's lesson. Perhaps students could listen to a quotation that will form part of the lesson and write a response to it. Use the first five minutes of class as a transition from what the student was doing before class started (walking, eating, talking on a cell phone, listening to an iPod) to the subject of the class.

Ending class. End class by asking students to describe one thing they learned today or what lingering questions or confusions they still have. Ending class with a journal activity asks students to finish the period by synthesizing the course material rather than by grabbing their jacket, cell phone, books, and notebook.

Focusing. Interrupt a lecture by asking students to write for five minutes. Listening is a passive activity and note-taking is often mechanical. Plan a pause in the middle of the lecture and ask students to write an answer to a question that connects to the section of

the lecture they just heard. A heated discussion dominated by two or three students can be cooled off by asking all the students to write down their opinions on the topic and why they think as they do. A class where students are reluctant to participate might be re-energized by having students write about the topic. Even the best of students drift off and daydream occasionally. Journal writing requires students to stop being observers and to be participants for a few minutes.

Conclusions

Students certainly could keep electronic journals in the form of a blog or a wiki, or through email. However, paper-based notebooks offer a number of attractive features. A paper journal does not require electricity or an Internet connection. A paper journal is lighter and more portable than most computers. And while paper journals can be destroyed in rain or fire, people never lose an entry due to a computer virus or hard drive failure.

Paper-based journals also offer an additional advantage: they bring mind and body closer together. One of my students, at the end of a semester of intensive journal writing, commented that, for the first time, she realized there was a relationship between her mood and her handwriting. She discovered that she had four or five styles of handwriting—a self-discovery she had never made in her years of using computers to write.

Certainly journals will not work for everyone, but, for many students and teachers, journals offer an opportunity to find a personal connection with the course material. It is impossible for a student not to be engaged with the course material when she is writing—and learning—in her notebook.

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