

Perspectives on Journal Writing for the ESL/EFL Classroom

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How do we engage our ESL/EFL adult language learners in meaningful communication? Joy Kreeft Peyton suggests that teachers allow language learners to explore their own thoughts through dialogue journal writing. She offers a variety of ways that dialogue journal writing can stimulate learners to read and write with greater confidence. She also notes that this form of interactive writing holds the interest of most learners, promotes self-confidence in writing and contributes to the overall writing skill for academic and personal purposes. This article will focus on four issues concerning dialogue journal writing in an adult ESL or EFL context: 1) definition, 2) goals and procedures, 3) benefits and 4) limitations.

Definition.

What is dialogue journal writing? According to Peyton, it is a written conversation in which adult ESL/EFL learners and their teacher communicate regularly. Adult language learners write as much as they want on any topic, the teacher writes back in language that is appropriate for the individual learner's proficiency level, thus ensuring comprehension. Beginning adult learners often write only a few sentences, while advanced adult language learners may write several pages. Adults who are not literate in their first language may even draw pictures to clarify the meaning of their message. Journal writing focuses on "meaning rather than form and is a means for developing adult learners' linguistic competence, their understanding of course content and the ability to communicate in written English" (Peyton, ed. p. ix). In short, adult language learners and their teacher become engaged in meaningful, non-threatening dialogue through the written page.

Goals and Procedures

When engaging in dialogue journal writing, the learner's goal is to write for meaning and not for form. Grades are not given and grammar errors are not corrected. Although the adult learners may write primarily on topics they themselves initiate, the teacher's written responses may include questions or comments that encourage exploration or additional topics.

At the beginning of the writing process, the teacher must provide guidelines for the learners. However, control does not reside only in the teacher, instead, it is shared by teacher and learners. This collaboration in the writing process is essential for adult learners. Vanett and Jurich state, “The freedom to have some creative control over what is written seems inextricably linked to students developing a sense of investment in the writing process (Peyton, ed., p. 24, citing Beach, 1977). Adult ESL learners are learning a craft, and the content they write about engages them in the writing task.

I have used dialogue journal writing in my adult EFL classes in Sweden. I found that once learners understood the overall writing process, they were eager to begin writing. Furthermore, once they understood the purpose—to express whatever they wanted to say without fear of teacher correction—their first conservative attempts at writing gave way to more free expression. That is, when they realized that their subject matter should come from their own schemata, they began to write with greater freedom.

According to Peyton, successful dialogue journal writing occurs, when the teacher has a central purpose in mind for a specific teaching-learning situation. The teacher must ask: Is this task meeting the needs of my adult learners? What needs are being met? Which needs are not being addressed or are only partially being met? The needs of the ESL/EFL language learners vary considerably. For example the needs of my adult learners in Sweden were to learn English for academic purposes, while my adult ESL learners in Illinois needed communicative skills for survival and on the job use. When I chose to use the dialogue journal with each group, it was with different goals in mind.

Benefits

Let us examine several key questions often asked about journal writing.

Do adult ESL/EFL learners actually learn from journal writing? According to research by Lucas, adult learners who engage in journal writing profit from the experience in two ways: increased confidence in their writing skills and a deepened understanding of themselves (Peyton, ed., 99). Peyton adds that other academic disciplines improve if journal writing is systematically included in the curriculum (Peyton, *ERIC Q & A*, p. 3).

Not only does learner-generated writing build confidence, it also encourages autonomy which is crucial to the adult language learner. Transition to academic writing can be linked to journal practice. Journal entries can be precursors to academic writing.

Can dialogue journals be used with all ages of learners and with learners at various proficiency levels? Peyton gives an enthusiastic “yes” to this question. This interactive form of written communication was first used successfully with elementary children, both native and non-native English speakers in Los Angeles, California. Since that time, numerous others have tested the use of journal writing in many different educational settings including classes for non-native English speakers. Studies indicate that this learning activity may be used successfully for a wide variety of individuals ranging from elementary to adult level.

Of what value is journal writing for the ESL/EFL teacher? By giving extended time to individual students, this one-on-one activity helps the ESL/EFL practitioner to understand the cultural and language issues of his/her learners as well as their personal interests and needs. With increased understanding comes the possibility of helping learners to adjust more fully to the teaching-learning situation, to the new language and for those in an ESL setting, to life in a new culture. Journal writing also provides a springboard for other classroom activities, a continuing record of learner progress and an additional means for assessing general language proficiency. For example, an ESL/EFL teacher can use journals to discover certain grammatical weaknesses of individuals and the class as a whole.

Can this activity be used in a multi-level classroom? Dialogue journal writing is a very useful activity for classes comprised of adult learners from a wide range of ability levels. Peyton notes that all learners can participate, at least to some degree in this activity (Peyton, *Q & A*, p. 2).

An additional benefit includes the publication of student-produced materials which other ESL/EFL adult learners read. Commercially produced texts may contain material unrelated to the adult language learners’ experience, while student-produced materials present a more authentic view of life’s realities (Crandall and Peyton, p. 62).

Literacy programs, which sorely need materials, may also benefit from the publication of student-produced materials.

Limitations

There are two drawbacks that should be noted to journal writing. First, this activity requires considerable time commitment by the teacher to read and respond meaningfully to each learner’s entry. To lessen the workload, the teacher can require learners to write two or three times a week instead of daily. Second, some adult students may be reluctant to participate in journal writing, especially as it relates to student-published materials. If this is the case, the ESL/EFL instructor may want to engage the learners in the *process* of writing for an extended period of time. This process may

result in a deepened trust between the learners and the teacher as well a willingness to share their experiences with others.

Conclusion

Any ESL/EFL teacher who wishes to offer an alternative to traditional writing exercises might want to consider dialogue journal writing. This article has looked at a broad definition of dialogue journal writing, goals and procedures, benefits and limitations. In my opinion, any teacher who is serious about helping adult ESL/EFL learners progress in language learning should be informed about dialogue journal writing, and based on the learners' needs, should incorporate this learning activity into the curriculum.

References

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