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Using Dialogue Journals to Focus on Form

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Abstract

Dialogue journals have been used in a wide range of educational settings for quite some time. These written conversations between teachers and students are especially well suited for the ESL classroom. This article describes how many of the conditions known to foster second language acquisition are inherent in the dialogue journal. Traditionally, dialogue journals have not been a venue for focus on form or corrective feedback. Given the importance of focus on form in second language acquisition, dialogue journals could serve English language learners even better if some attention to form were included. This article suggests ways that a focus on form can be thoughtfully incorporated without inhibiting the conversational nature of the journal.

Introduction

Typically, dialogue journals have served as a medium for meaningful communication rather than a means to focus on form. These journals are routinely written conversations between a student and the teacher and sometimes between students themselves. Topics may be chosen by the student or suggested by the teacher in response to the classroom curriculum or student experience. In most instances, students record their entries in a bound notebook, leaving space for the teacher's written response. According to Peyton (2000), teachers use dialogue journals in a variety of settings to effectively engage both children and adults and native and non-native speakers. Because of the focus on communication, one of the main issues associated with dialogue journals has been the role of focus on form (Peyton, 2000), which Long (1991) defines as the

attention to "linguistic elements" as they occur in communication. Given the link between focus on form and effective second language learning (Ellis, 2008), dialogue journals could be even more beneficial to the adult English as a second language (ESL) student if focus on form was thoughtfully incorporated.

Educational Benefits of Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals have various educational benefits (Peyton 1993, 2000). To begin, they are an effective tool for dealing with the challenges of teaching large classes. Journals connect the teacher with each student. They also make teaching in a multi-level classroom more manageable because the journal assignments can be individualized. Furthermore, for adult learners, the journal is a place where students can bring their life experiences and cultural background into the classroom.

Not only does this make the communication more meaningful and authentic, but it also makes it more personal, placing the student at the center of learning. Finally, dialogue journals have also been helpful in the acculturation, assimilation, and adjustment of adult ESL students into their new cultural communities (McDonald, Rosseli, & Clifford, 1997).

Dialogue Journals and Second Language Acquisition

Dialogue journals are especially useful in the ESL classroom. In fact, they are ideally suited for language learning, meeting many of the conditions deemed necessary for the acquisition of a second language (Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed, & Morroy, 1984).

First, dialogue journals provide a context for meaningful communication. Researchers (e. g., Ellis, 2008) in the field of second language acquisition pinpoint meaningful communication, the give and take of messages in the target language, as a requisite condition for second language acquisition. According to Long (1998), it is meaningful communication rather than the objective study of language that promotes second language learning in both formal and informal language settings. Authentic communication is typically the overarching goal of dialogue journals, and the teacher is simply an interlocutor in a conversation rather than an editor of student errors (Peyton, 2000).

Second, the teacher's journal responses provide students with comprehensible input that is slightly above their current level of proficiency. Comprehensible input theory (Krashen, 1982) claims that in order to acquire a second language, students need exposure to the target language that is comprehensible and only slightly beyond their current level of acquisition. Being fully aware of the student's level of proficiency (based on the journal entries), the teacher can respond with language that is understandable to the student yet slightly beyond the student's current level of proficiency, making the dialogue journal an ideal venue for providing comprehensible input.

Third, students need opportunities for output in order to become proficient in a second language. Ellis

(2008) summarizes the findings of three research studies on the role of output in second language acquisition. According to these studies, language production causes the learner to (a) notice grammar, (b) test hypotheses, (c) automatize learning, (d) receive useful feedback, (e) learn discourse skills, and (f) acquire voice in personal writing.

Journals are an ideal channel for language output. In a journal, students put their thoughts and feelings into language. Although students may not be able to develop oral discourse skills in a journal, they can develop written discourse skills as they dialogue with their teacher and classmates in writing. In addition, when students commit words to paper, they pay attention to grammar and test their current understanding of the target language. Furthermore, by having some control of the journal topic, students develop voice in the second language.

Finally, not only do second language learners need opportunities for input and output, but Long (1998) also suggests the importance of interaction. According to his interaction hypothesis, the acquisition of a second language is enhanced when learners need to resolve a communication problem by modifying their output and correcting their errors in order to be understood. Although journals do not elicit this kind of feedback immediately as in spoken discourse, they do provide a context where teachers can ask for clarification and provide feedback that will guide students toward using more native-like language.

Using Dialogue Journals to Intensively Focus on Form

Although meaningful communication, comprehensible input, and opportunities for output and interaction are considered necessary for successful language learning, second language acquisition theorists, such as DeKeyser (1998), generally agree that these conditions may be insufficient. To make progress, students need to attend to language form as well as meaning; thus, they need to become aware of the grammatical, functional, and lexical forms of the target language. Although dialogue journals have not

traditionally been a venue for such a focus, these rich sources of language data can be mined in such a way that students pay attention to language forms without compromising meaningful communication.

Ellis (2008) describes two approaches to focusing on form in the second language classroom. The first approach, an intensive one, is syllabus driven. Teachers focus on pre-selected language forms in their language lessons. This approach can be applied to the dialogue journal in both deductive and inductive ways.

Pre-Teaching of Forms

A deductive approach would entail pre-teaching items that students can then incorporate into their journal entries. For example, vocabulary words related to a particular theme can be handled this way. After learning the vocabulary in class, students incorporate some of the targeted words into their journal writing on a relevant topic.

The same strategy can be used to address grammatical forms and language functions. The teacher can design lessons and classroom activities to teach comparative adjectives, for example, and then follow up with a journal entry that requires students to compare two people, places, or things, utilizing the forms taught and practiced in class. In his application of cognitive perspectives on language learning, DeKeyser (1998) states that when learners keep this declarative knowledge of a language form in mind while completing a communicative task, they gain procedural knowledge that eventually becomes automatized with practice.

Sample Journal Entries

A more inductive way to intensively focus on form in dialogue journals is to make use of sample journal entries to highlight language elements. For example, in a lesson addressing prepositions of place, teachers could ask students to read a sample entry which describes a place and take note of prepositions and how they are used in communication. As a follow-up to this lesson, students could then be asked to write journal entries

describing favorite rooms or places of interest.

Focusing on pre-selected forms is certainly one way to incorporate a focus on form in the dialogue journal. Ellis (2008), however, points out that this intensive approach takes time and is limited in the scope of errors that can be addressed. Teachers can address a wider range of errors in a shorter time span when they correct errors as they happen in student output. Dialogue journals present the teacher with an optimal opportunity to point out errors in students' language. The challenge is how to do this without compromising the meaningful communication and authentic interaction that is so fundamental to dialogue journals.

Using the Dialogue Journal to Incidentally Focus on Form

Although dialogue journals are a venue for free communication where students can express themselves without fear of the dreaded red pen, some corrective feedback should be included in order to maximize the benefits (Loewen, 2001). Is it possible for the teacher to provide incidental, corrective feedback that is individualized but does not impair the communicative nature of the dialogue journal? There are several reasons to believe so.

First, corrections are less likely to hinder the communicative nature of the journal if the teacher has laid the groundwork for meaningful communication at the outset, which may mean withholding grammar correction initially. During the initial phase, the teacher and student build a venue for meaningful communication. The teacher helps students develop a routine for writing and establishes guidelines regarding how much or for how long students should write. As in all phases of journal keeping, students are given a rich menu of writing topics; teachers interact with their ideas and introduce new topics in response to their ideas. This introductory get-to-know you phase not only establishes the journal as a place for meaningful, interactive communication but also enables the teacher to become familiar with the students' language needs.

Second, corrective feedback does not necessarily have to shut down communication channels. As Schulz

(1998) points out, most English language learners are favorable towards some focus on form and corrective feedback. Students from other cultures often request correction and feel short-changed by the teacher who does not deliver it. Students, especially adults, typically want more than a written conversation in their journals. Corrective feedback may actually encourage students to provide more output rather than hinder communication.

Third, corrections can be a natural part of the dialogue. Just as an interlocutor would request clarification and confirmation in response to a misunderstanding, the teacher can legitimately do the same without interrupting the dialogue. Three examples are listed below:

1. "I'm not sure I'm following you here."
2. "What do you mean by....?"
3. "Did you mean to say?"

Errors can also be recast by the teacher in their correct form. For example, in response to a student's journal entry, "I go the mall last weekend," the teacher responds, "You *went* to the mall last weekend. What did you buy?"

Strategies for Giving Corrective Feedback

In addition to these relatively discrete methods, teachers can provide corrective feedback in more direct ways as well.

Make it a "P.S."

There are several strategies for providing correction in a direct but sensitive manner. For example, corrective feedback can be written as a "P.S." to the student (Peyton, 2000). This strategy underscores the primary importance of meaningful dialogue and the secondary importance of correct grammar usage.

Student-Initiated Correction

Another way to give corrective feedback without hindering communication is to put the onus on students for soliciting grammatical feedback. In the blank spaces of the journal that are reserved for teacher comments,

the student can ask specific questions about the grammatical correctness of the entries. The teacher can actually pre-teach these questions so that students have a storehouse of questions to guide them. Some examples include: (a) "Did I spell _____ correctly?" (b) "Is _____ word used correctly?" (c) "Is this sentence correct?" (d) "I wasn't sure how to say _____?" and (e) "Is there a better way?" In this way correction is not always something done to the student; rather, it is also initiated and can be controlled by the student.

Responding to Student Errors

Another gentle approach to correction is for the teacher to provide feedback to the entire class based on common student errors and needs (Peyton, 2000). For example, if a teacher notices common, repetitive errors in count and non-count nouns, a grammar lesson can be designed on the topic. For an inductive approach, student errors can be analyzed as a class (modifying the journal examples to maintain confidentiality) in order to infer the rule. A deductive lesson would highlight the rule first, and then give opportunities to practice the form and revise any errors.

Explicit Correction

Finally, if the student is responsive to grammatical feedback and the journal has been well established as a meaningful context of communication, the teacher may consider giving explicit corrective feedback such as listing grammatical errors and perhaps their related rules along with comments and reactions to the ideas in the journal. Below is an example of this type of interaction.

Student: In the snow you can skiing and sledding. You can also make a snowman, an igloo, and you can play snowball battles. (*The student continues to discuss the topic of snow.*)

Teacher: Yes! I hope you enjoyed the snow. Did you do any of these things? Which snow activity is your favorite? My children had fun making a snowman. They dressed him like Michael Jackson.

Remember when using "can" and other modal

verbs, do not use the verb +ing afterwards. So, instead say, I can “ski” and “sled”; or, I can “go” skiing and sledding. In your next journal, tell me what things your children *can* do on a rainy day.

Cataloging Errors

Keen students of grammar may even want to use the back of the journal to catalogue types of errors with their corresponding rules, allotting a page for each particular type of error. For example, one page can be allocated for words that were spelled incorrectly, another for verb tense and number errors, another for word usage errors, and perhaps another for article usage. By cataloguing their errors, students can become more aware of the types of errors they routinely make and monitor them in future entries. In order to preserve authentic dialogue, however, the teacher must balance attention to form with the overall intention of meaningful dialogue and communication.

Summary

The educational benefits of dialogue journals are many. Students develop voice in writing as they work out their thoughts, feelings, and experiences on paper. Teachers become familiar with the needs of individual students, both linguistically and personally. The journal is also an ideal venue for the English language learner to become more proficient in their language skills. Many of the conditions known to foster second language acquisition are inherent in the dialogue journal: meaningful communication, comprehensible input, output, interaction, and opportunity for focus on the form. Traditionally, dialogue journals have not been the place for focus on form. However, teachers can incorporate focus on form both intensively and incidentally without compromising the communicative nature of the dialogue journal. Given that meaningful communication is not inhibited, student journal entries can be a springboard for classroom language lessons as well as a vehicle for corrective feedback.

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