Oral Dialogue Journals: Spoken Language in a Communicative Context

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It is often difficult to provide opportunities for ESL students to practice realistic oral communication with native speakers. Trying to pair these students with native counterparts can create scheduling problems. For low level students and students from some cultural backgrounds, face to face exchanges with a stranger may prove intimidating. There is, however, a solution—the oral dialogue journal.

Just as written dialogue journals have proved successful in helping students develop writing skills, oral dialogue journals can aid the development of spoken language skills. The oral dialogue journal provides a transition from the monitored security of written language to the spontaneity of spoken communication with native speakers, while allowing flexibility in scheduling. As with written dialogue journals, the oral dialogue journal can benefit the mentor as well. This article discusses the oral dialogue journal and its use in a short term, non-intensive English language program for Japanese students visiting the United States.

Written Journals

Written journals have been hailed as a panacea for language problems, and in many ways they appear to be just that for developing skills in reasoning and writing (Staton et al. 1982, Fulwiler 1987). In particular, journals are an important tool in improving writing ability.

The written dialogue journal is a special kind of journal which pairs a student and a mentor, usually the teacher, who then correspond in a conversational manner. The dialogue journal provides an interaction that can encourage scaffolding (see Vygotsky 1978, Cazden 1979), a process which enables the student to build on the cognitive processes of the mentor (Staton 1984). The mentor facilitates the student's development of new concepts and strategies, which the student then incorporates in future communication (Staton 1984, Kreeft 1984). The dialogue journal is also valuable for the mentor, who is able to more fully understand the needs of the student.

Dialogue journals also have proved to be useful in the ESL classroom (Gutstein 1987, Popkin 1985, Davis 1983, Spack and Sadow 1983). Their value in international settings is the focus of the April, 1988, issue of *Dialogue*, a newsletter about dialogue journals. The dialogue journal provides exactly what the ESL teacher is looking for: real language in a communicative context.

Oral Dialogue Journals

Journals have traditionally focused on the written medium. However, writing is often not the skill presenting the greatest difficulty for the second or foreign language learner. For the nonnative speaker of a language the written medium can provide security. When writing, the second or foreign language student has the

opportunity to try to remember or to look up words and expressions, to alter grammatical structures, and to reorder the text, while proofing the material as many times as necessary. All this can be done in a private environment without an audience. In contrast, speaking involves immediacy, with no chance to take back what has already been said. In order for there to be native input and feedback, the novice speaker of a language must perform under the watchful, often intimidating gaze of the fluent native speaker.

Spoken language can, however, receive the same kind of transitional help that the written dialogue journal provides for the writing process. By taping an oral dialogue journal, language students retain many of the benefits of the written medium while developing oral strategies and fluency. Students can listen to a dialogue repeatedly in the same way they can read passages over and over. They can pause whenever they wish and use dictionaries to aid both comprehension and production. Students can listen to their own speech as well, rerecording if necessary. All this is possible without the intimidation of a listener being present. The oral dialogue journal also helps alleviate the embarrassment of face to face contact by providing more neutral conditions under which to get to know the conversation partner, a benefit that Staton (1980) has likewise attributed to the written dialogue journal.

Students produce an oral dialogue journal by taping messages on an audio cassette recorder back and forth with a partner. The taping can be done as part of the class if language laboratory facilities are convenient or as an outside assignment. The partner can be the instructor, as often occurs with the written journal, or a target-language peer. Peer dialogue journals provide several benefits. Dalle and Hall (1987) have pointed out that peer journals require less commitment of time on the part of the teacher and allow a wider range of mutually shared topics. While the Dalle and Hall (1987) study involved ESL children exchanging written journals with native English-speaking children, the same benefits apply to the use of peers in the exchange of oral journals.

The Oral Dialogue Journal Project

In our ESL program we use both written and oral dialogue journals with our ESL students and those American students enrolled in linguistics courses. We first experimented with oral dialogue journals in 1987 during a summer program for visiting Japanese college students. As part of an annual exchange between our school and a Japanese university, these students spent two weeks on our campus, attending English class for two hours every morning. After the class, they participated in activities on campus and took field trips to places in and around the community. Following their two weeks on campus, the students spent an additional two weeks in homestays with families in the area. Although the Japanese students had studied English for several years, their oral fluency was very limited. The English classes were therefore devoted to activities which improved spoken English skills.

In previous years, during their first two weeks the students had interacted almost exclusively with each other. They had few opportunities to talk with Americans before their homestays and were thus unprepared for contact with native

speakers. The Japanese students would sit silent and embarrassed at the welcome dinner and two weeks later act much the same at the farewell luncheon. Reports also came back that these scenes were repeated when the students entered their homestays. To address this problem, we devised a way to promote interaction with Americans that would provide a transition to face-to-face conversation.

To begin the project, we gave American students in an introductory linguistics course cassette tapes and told them to prepare at home a two to five minute message. They were to think of the tape project as a pen pal experience, telling their partners about themselves and their families and asking similar information of their partners. The Japanese, who had been divided into two roughly equal classes of eleven and twelve students respectively, were to respond to the messages. The first group was given the taped messages at the end of the third class; the other group began taping the fourth day. Both groups of Japanese students were told during their initial classes that they would each be corresponding with an American student. They would need to answer the American students' questions and ask questions of their own. They should talk about their own lives and families while learning about their partners. One group of students was not permitted to write out anything before listening to the tape but were allowed to take notes while listening. The other group could also write out material ahead of time and bring it to the recording sessions.

During their English class, the Japanese students developed communication skills and discussed topics relevant to their conversations with the American students. For the last half hour of the class period every other day each group listened to the dialogue tapes and recorded a message back. These tapes were given to their partners the afternoon of the same day. The American students then took the tapes home, recorded back, and returned their messages the following afternoon so that the Japanese could receive them the next morning. This procedure continued for the remainder of the two weeks. At the end of this period there was a party at which the partners met in person.

The Results

At first the Japanese students had considerable difficulty understanding the American students and spent most of their time repeatedly rewinding and listening to the tape. They replied with a brief set speech about themselves and their families that had little to do with many of the questions their partners had asked. As a result, the American students simplified their speech, speaking more slowly with less complex vocabulary and sentence structure.

In the second taping, the Japanese spent a little more time actually recording. Some answered specific questions from their partners but most elaborated on the information provided in their first recording. The fact that one group had prepared material ahead of time did not appear to alter the quality of the dialogue. Both while listening and recording, the Japanese frequently pushed the pause button, taking notes and using bilingual dictionaries. Often the students would talk to each other, trying to find a word or expression. Sometimes students listened to each other's tapes. However, by the

third recording most of the Japanese had begun to answer the questions from the Americans and to ask their own.

The American students were anxious to share information about themselves, their families, and friends. After the initial recordings, pictures were sometimes inserted in the cassette container. On occasion other members of the family spoke to the Japanese students, and several students reported that their whole family listened to the tape. By the fourth and last set of messages both sides expressed eagerness to meet each other.

Although there was some shyness at the party during the initial face to face encounters, the room was soon buzzing with conversation. Some American students brought family members, and most of the students exchanged gifts and home addresses. In their student evaluations, many of the Americans mentioned the dialogue journals as being the highlight of the course. The Japanese students likewise indicated that the oral dialogues were both enjoyable and beneficial.

The Limitations

The project was not, however, without some difficulties. Unlike pen and paper, a tape recorder requires more elaborate conditions for use. Background noise and volume adjustment can be problematic. The oral dialogue journal also carries with it one of the disadvantages of written language: a lack of reinforcement through nonverbal clues such as gestures, facial expressions, and other body language. At times even the American students found it difficult to be spontaneous without an audience present. Since then we have suggested to students that they make a list of subjects to discuss, much like people do when calling long distance to friends and relatives.

Conclusion

Because of the success of the original project, we have made the oral dialogue journal a regular part of the ESL spoken language curriculum. Nonnative English speakers are paired with American students in various linguistics courses. The response to this project from both sides is always very enthusiastic. Recently one international student explained to me that the dialogue journal was her favorite part of the ESL course because she had the opportunity to learn so much more English than she encountered in the classroom. Like written dialogue journals, for both native and nonnative students oral dialogue journals provide a valuable communicative experience.

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