
Reading Journals: Solving the Problem of Input in the ESL Composition Class

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The ESL composition class has undergone a significant change in approach over the past few years. Teachers once encouraged students to model their writing after professionally written works which they studied and analyzed. If the students did any reading other than this in-depth analysis, they may have had an ESL reading text. Even so, the text was used for intensive reading, with reading assignments designed to help the students develop their comprehension and increase their vocabulary.

ESL writing classes then came under the influence of a composition theory which stressed process over product. The ESL composition teacher, embracing the tenets of the theory, found that time spent on 'reading skills' was time taken away from the workshop class, where brainstorming, writing, peer editing, and revision could take place. So the reading text was often forgotten. The teacher may have felt a pang of guilt, however, knowing that the students probably were not reading much outside of class, that fiction was all but ignored, and that students did not make pleasure reading a priority. As teachers began hearing more and more about 'comprehensible input,' they became all the more uneasy, feeling that perhaps it was asking the impossible of students to expect them to write well if they were not expected to read. Then Krashen stated what most teachers intuitively felt: "The acquisition of the special dialect known as the written language also occurs in only

one way—via comprehensible input of messages encoded in that dialect, known as reading" (1984:37). The problem was not how to get students to write (they were doing that in the workshop classroom), but how to get students to read. More specifically for the university ESL teacher, the question was how to fit reading into a class that met perhaps only three times a week for a semester.

An obvious answer for ESL students is extensive reading outside of class. The means of accomplishing that goal can be through a reading journal project.

Purpose

A reading journal is a means for students not only to read but also to react to their readings through short (one page) written responses. Used in a composition class, a reading journal project assures the constant input students should have to acquire good writing skills, that is, the exposure to well-written prose. Students are encouraged to read because reading is built into the writing curriculum. Although they are not tested on their comprehension, students are able to use writing as a means of assessing their knowledge and understanding of what they have read.

Benefits

Students in university-level ESL composition classes can benefit from a reading journal project by having the

opportunity to read the best works of well-known writers. Such reading exposes them to a variety of syntax, vocabulary, and creative expression in English. The readings can suggest topics for their writing, provide a common point of discussion, or become simply an individual pursuit with no follow-up in the classroom.

For the teacher a reading journal project is easy to develop, administer, and grade. Furthermore, the teacher uses time in the class for writing activities with the assurance that reading and some informal writing is going on outside of class. For the students the project is individualized, and there is no pressure on them for a grade. They are evaluated only on success in making reading and journal writing a regular activity during the semester.

Materials

The teacher may conduct a reading journal project over a semester or for the entire year. The materials needed are a notebook and a well-chosen collection of literature written in English. Teachers might prefer some representations of contemporary, international, ethnic and women writers as well as the 'classics.' Appropriate genre are short fiction, poetry, and drama; however, many ESL teachers find that non-fiction essays work well for independent reading, particularly in a composition class that stresses expository writing.

An anthology I recommend for advanced ESL students at the university level is *Fictions* (see the listing at the end of this article for bibliographic information and other possible titles). The book contains 102 well-chosen short stories. Many are

masterpieces of the genre (Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas," and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"). A few are stories in translation by representative writers from other countries (Jorge Luis Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," Anton Chekhov's "The Darling," and Yukio Mishima's "Patriotism"). There is a good representation of women writers (Willa Cather, Shirley Jackson, and Katherine Mansfield, to name a few) and black writers (Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin, for example). Most stories in *Fictions* are not too long (8-10 pages), and they fit well into a short independent reading session, which students set aside every day for pleasure reading.

Another good collection of fiction, one that contains stories, poems, and plays, is *To Read Literature*. This book emphasizes contemporary works, which many ESL teachers find more appropriate than classics for use in a language class. Many of the same writers from *Fictions* are also anthologized in *To Read Literature*, and both books contain a collection which, though not designed for use in ESL, might prove to be highly appropriate for use with international students.

Those teachers who prefer assigning essays might choose an anthology such as *75 Readings: A Freshman Anthology*. This collection includes essays of some frequently anthologized writers (George Orwell, E. B. White, E. M. Forster) and some contemporary writers (Peter Elbow, Erich Fromm, Ellen Goodman). The essays are organized according to rhetorical mode (description, process, definition, comparison/contrast, division/classification, argument, etc.). The book, compiled

by the editors at McGraw-Hill, is an inexpensive and attractive anthology, which makes it very suitable for ESL students.

Procedure

Students are assigned outside reading of four to five well-chosen short stories, poems, or essays a week. They are told to set aside at least thirty minutes a day for pleasure reading at a time and place convenient for them. There are no tests or any other evaluations of their reading comprehension skills. However, students keep a reading journal in which they write for fifteen or twenty minutes after having read each story. They are given guidelines on what to write, and every two weeks they return their journals to the teacher for comments. The teacher does not grade grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Instead he/she may write brief comments directed toward the content. Actually, it is the teacher's interest in and reactions to the students' comments which encourage and inspire some students. Sometimes the reading journal becomes a type of dialogue journal since the students may ask questions in their entries, thus allowing the teacher to respond to the student individually. Students may be given a + (plus) or - (minus) or points (which may be added to the final grade) for each entry completed.

Here are some suggested directions I give which may help the students in their journal entries:

1. Date each entry. Try to write a page each time.
2. At first the reading may be difficult. You may encounter unusual vocabu-

lary or unfamiliar scenarios. Relate the events of the story to something that is familiar to you. You or a friend may have had a comparable experience. Write how your experience differs from the one in the story.

3. Write about your reaction. If you reacted emotionally to the story, explore why you had that reaction. If you discovered something you never knew before, reveal that in your journal.
4. Write notes to yourself or the teacher about the story. If you thought it was particularly good or unusually bad, tell why.
5. You may wish to begin your journal entry by writing a brief summary of the story, particularly if you are confused or do not understand. Pretend you are explaining the story to someone who cannot read English. By concentrating on the major points of the story you are retelling, you may discover something you did not notice as you read it. Good writers know that they can sometimes write themselves into understanding.
6. Most importantly, ENJOY your reading.

Conclusion

The reading journal is one means of exposing ESL students to good literature by establishing an activity that fosters extensive reading in a non-intimidating format. Students are directed to react to what they read and to record their reactions in informal journal entries. They can explore ideas and question their

understanding. They may even initiate a written conversation with the teacher on the readings. When they do this, they have arrived at an important step in language acquisition--using language as a means of understanding and sharing ideas.

75 Readings: a freshman anthology. (1987). New York: McGraw-Hill.

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Krashen, Stephen D. (1984). *Writing: research, theory, and applications*. Elmsford, New York: Pergamon Press.

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