

THE USE OF PERSONAL JOURNALS IN THE TEACHING OF ESOL

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Those of us who are charged with the responsibility of teaching writing and composition skills to students who are learning English as a second language often find that those students have considerable difficulty writing in English with any degree of fluency. Many of them are perplexed, indeed intimidated, by the task of having to write an essay in English. While the standard, traditional means of teaching writing to intermediate and high level ESL students are sometimes effective, these methods frequently fail to help us achieve our teaching goals because of the emotional and psychological obstacles which they often engender. What is needed is an effective, non-threatening vehicle for teaching students to write—a method that will help them overcome their diffidence toward written communication. Having students write and keep personal journals is offered as such a vehicle. The journal is offered as the unstructured counterpart to the structured composition class and is to work in conjunction with the formal teaching of writing.

There are four basic, compelling arguments for adopting daily, out-of-class journal writing as an adjunct to the writing production class. The first and most compelling reason is that it provides an opportunity for daily written communication. The second reason is that because the journal is unstructured and not graded, the students feel comfortable in experimenting with new structural patterns and vocabulary which they, in a formal composition, would not risk. The third reason is that experience shows that as a semester progresses, the journals become significantly longer as well as more experimental. These three reasons lead us empirically to believe that we have achieved our goal: to "loosen up" the students' attitude toward writing in English. The fourth argument for making use of the

journal is based on its success in more humanistic terms. The rapport that it very often sets up between the writer and the reader can be an important aspect of second language acquisition.

Not long after I began to teach high-level ESL writing, it became clear to me that too many of the students approached writing in English as drudgery. It also became obvious that some new techniques would have to be implemented if students were ever to be able to write cohesive and natural compositions. It was my hope that journals might be a successful solution, the most compelling argument for their use being that writing is an acquired skill which improves with practice. If the students were to write a short paragraph every day, the idea of writing in English would, theoretically, become less overwhelming. I envisioned the journal as an approximation of a goal rather than a goal in itself, as a means rather than an end. It would be a series of rehearsals for a composition or a vehicle for the practice of new grammatical and organizational patterns, rhetorical devices and vocabulary. It would provide students with an opportunity to "try out" or experiment with those patterns which they were learning both in and out of class, without the consideration of risk and grades.

The mechanics of implementing the journals started with my telling the students that they must write at least one half page, one paragraph, for me everyday. They could write on any topic of their choice. When students expressed difficulty in finding something about which to write, I suggested that they simply discuss their daily activities or tell me their feelings, reactions or impressions of their first weeks in the United States. As the journal idea became more entrenched and as its success became more

evident, my ideas on this issue of "what to write" became more refined. Now I suggest that the students use the journal as a sort of diary to be saved as a souvenir or record of their comments and thoughts about life here. Students like this idea.

The students were also told that I would only read the journals, that I would not pass judgment on them through grades or corrections. I would, I told them, collect them daily and return them the next day. I assured them that I very definitely would read their journals, although I would not mark them. It was not long, however, before the students began to ask me for feedback. They were simply not satisfied knowing that I read the journals; they wanted to know what I thought and whether a particular usage was right or wrong. Since my original intent had been not to grade or correct but to have the journals serve as a completely undisturbed exercise in free writing, I needed a solution to this student-initiated demand for feedback.

One possible solution with which I have been experimenting is simply to make comments and underline the careless errors that I know they can recognize and correct themselves, e.g. errors in verb agreement and spelling. In this way I hope to make the students responsible for their own learning. The question arises, however, whether even that amount of negative teacher feedback renders the journal no longer neutral. Perhaps in the students' minds there is no longer any difference between a journal and a composition.

The issue of whether or not to grade journals is a substantive one deserving serious consideration. There are two viewpoints at issue and they are working against one another. First, we have the students' need for feedback. Secondly, we have the notion that correction stifles spontaneity and naturalness and that it forces the students to spend too much time fretting over spelling, unparallel structure or whatever grammatical point and thereby inhibits the flow of ideas. Moreover, some students are disappointed in themselves when they make mistakes; some students are intimidated by risks. There is also research that militates against the use of teacher corrections.

Daniel Fader (1976:71) believes very strongly in quantity over quality. He states that content, style, grammar and rhetoric are clearly insignificant in journal writing; the mechanics will fall into place when the student is comfortable and feels natural about his writing. Donald Hall (1976:18-22) is even stronger in his argument that we must allow our students to loosen their minds and disallow "conscious control or focus on an attempt at mechanical perfection." Daily writing, he says, should be working rapidly without trying to impose a direction or necessarily to make a point.

If our goal is the unencumbered flow of ideas in English, it is clear that correcting journals is in itself counterproductive and that the journals are more experimental if nothing negative is pointed out. One possible solution has been advanced by Barry Taylor (in a personal communication). He suggests that we might try pointing out what is right rather than what is wrong and attempt thereby to be much more positive in our remarks. Instructor comments on journals should be qualitatively different from those on compositions. Tell the students that they are making better use of new vocabulary, that they are expressing themselves more clearly or being more logical. Comment that a topic sentence is good or an idea clever and well put. In this way the student is never told that he did something wrong. His self-confidence is no longer undermined in his attempts at innovation. In short, he is encouraged. To many students, writing is a mystery; telling them what they did right can be every bit as illuminating as telling them what they did wrong. We must not make the mistake of assuming that they realize it when they do something right. Critical to the success of this approach is a conscientious explanation of the purpose of the journal. It must be emphasized to the students that this is not a disciplined writing but a free writing and that grammar and its accouterments are not at issue here; the clear flow of ideas is the end goal of this exercise. The first and most salient reason for incorporating the journal is that it offers a daily, free writing exercise.

The second major reason for endorsing the journal is that it works hand in hand with classroom instruction. Because the students are not placed in a threatening

situation, they do experiment with incorporating new vocabulary and organizational, structural and rhetorical patterns of which they are unsure. They then reinforce what they have learned. I have seen students in my classes rehearse the use of the semicolon and the referential "such," for example, in journals and then, when satisfied and comfortable with their proper application, use them in compositions.

The third compelling reason to include the journals as an integral part of the writing class is that they make writing in English easier. We can see evidence of this fact in that the journals begin to assume the length and character of compositions as the semester progresses. Students very often begin writing journals with paragraph delineation, an introduction and a conclusion. It would seem then that the journals, and by extension writing in English, have become less troublesome.

The fourth reason to consider implementing the journal is a more humanistic but no less cogent one. The personal relationship that the journal engenders works in two ways. First, it offers students the occasion to talk about matters of a personal or critical nature with a guarantee of confidentiality. They know that their innermost thoughts will not be compromised. By students' own testimony, there is a sense of confidence and security derived from knowing that they have a confidant. Secondly, in learning the students' private thoughts and problems, the teacher is in a better position to deal with his/her students as individuals and meet their individual needs. Hence the benefits accrue in both directions.

Because foreign students too often approach writing in English as a chore, they have great difficulty in working toward a successive, progressive delineation of the end goal—clear and effective written communication. If we as teachers accept that writing is an acquired skill and if we believe that it must be practiced daily, we must provide our students with a field such as the journal on which to work toward that goal. In first supplying a ready topic for writing, secondly providing a non-threatening vehicle for the practice of mechanics and thirdly luring students to loosen up and write more while

at the same time allowing for a gratifying relationship to develop, the journal does deal with these fundamental needs of the student.

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