
Using Exchange Diaries with High School Students

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English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers understand well the value of having students keep journals as a means of building fluency in the target language. They know about journal-writing variations, ranging from private, personal journals to teacher-student dialog journals. However, the thought of managing, checking, and responding to dozens, and possibly hundreds, of student journals can be overwhelming. As a result, they seldom seriously consider making journal writing part of their English class routine. Recently, however, my colleagues and I have discovered not only the benefits of dialog journals but that implementing a dialog journal writing program does not have to be as difficult a task as we once feared it would be.

I teach English at a private Japanese high school, but I think teachers in many other settings will identify with my students and school. First, our classes are large; it is not unusual to have 40 students in each class. Second, most of my students have weak academic skills, particularly in English. Third, they see no purpose for their required courses in English either at the present or in the future. They tend to think that English is just about memorization and that English classes are boring. About six years ago, my colleagues and I decided that we wanted to counter their impressions of both English language and English classes. We tried making several changes in our routine, but one of our most successful projects, now in its fourth year, has been a form of dialog journal writing that we call “exchange diaries.”

The Initial Attempt

We began by asking students to write in a diary once a week as homework for their writing classes. We checked their journals and corrected their mistakes. Some students showed considerable improvement in their writing, but most struggled with the assignment and thought of it as a burden. Over time, many simply stopped writing. After two years of experimentation, we reexamined our

goals and procedures and made some changes. We still wanted the assignment to be something that students could learn from as well as enjoy. Ideally, it would be sustained over time and show students the pleasure of communication. However, we realized that we had not taken the time to give students effective instruction or examples for diary writing. In addition, we realized that our careful checking of the journals discouraged both students and teachers. If we continued to correct students' mistakes, they would continue to be demotivated. Of course, teachers found reading and checking the journals to be extremely time consuming. The decision to forego correction made the activity easier on busy teachers and more pleasurable for students. In the end, we decided to use our reconceived exchange diaries as the homework assignment in 12th grade writing classes.

Procedure

Here is how we implement exchange diaries in our classes now.

In the first lesson of the year, we introduce the idea of using exchange diaries as their homework assignment.

Then, we give one notebook to a pair of students and hang a chart on the classroom wall showing their partners and the rules (see below) for using the exchange diaries. A sample chart might look like this:

Student #	Name	Student #	Name
No. 1	Hiroaki Ando	No. 34	Akiko Yamada
No. 2	Takashi Itoh	No. 33	Maki Yamada
No. 3	Yuki Itoh	No. 32	Yuri Miyata

Exchange Diary Partners

We frequently match boys and girls as writing partners. At first, some teachers were afraid that something awkward or wrong could happen, for example, that they might fall in love. After discussing our concerns, however, we decided that it was important for young people to learn how to deal with awkward or uncomfortable situations, within reason of course. We also decided to read the diaries three times during the year just to be sure that the tone and content remained respectful. We pointed out to students that they cannot choose their co-workers in the work

place, but rather they have to learn to get good results by cooperating with them. In other words, we asked them to try their best on this assignment just as they would have to do on the job later. In four years, we have not had any serious trouble.

We give the students an example of an introductory diary entry like this one.

April 5, 2010

Dear Takashi,

Hello, my name is Chieko Okada, and I live in Kanie-cho, which is a small town. It is to the west of Nagoya. It takes 40 minutes to come to Doho High School from my house. The train is always crowded. After that, I ride my bike to school. It is tough, but I enjoy school life in Doho. Now we're 3rd year students, so we have to prepare for the next stage in our lives—going to college or finding a job.

I'd like introduce my family. There are 5 people in my family, my grandmother, my parents, my brother and me. Next time, I'm going to tell you a lot about them. I want to know a lot about you.

Anyway I like English very much. What subject do you like best? Let's enjoy this exchange diary.

Good night,

Chieko Okada

The Rules

Here are the rules that we have established for this project, along with a few comments about how they have worked.

Rule 1:

You will write exchange diaries with your partner for one year. We will not change your partner. At first, students are nervous by how long the “assignment” sounds, but gradually they seem to enjoy communicating with each other. Nearly all students have continued writing exchange diaries for the full year.

Rule 2:

Please try to enjoy writing English. Your teacher will not correct your mistakes. We do not correct any mistakes in the diaries although we continue to cover accuracy in our writing lessons. Gradually students' sentences get longer and smoother.

Rule 3:

Now you are 12th graders and you will have to take interview style tests for college and jobs. You need to learn how to express your ideas and listen to others. Keep in mind how this activity will help you prepare for these tasks. Nearly all students do their best because they want to be seen as good partners and because they see how this opportunity for communication applies to their future.

Rule 4:

Please write 10 times or more by the final exam of the first term. Most students not only meet the first semester goal but also continue for the whole academic year. This participation rule is used to assign their homework grade. With fewer than ten entries per term, students' homework grades are lowered somewhat.

Rule 5:

Each diary entry should be at least 80 words. Most students regularly write more than 100 words.

Rule 6:

If you have some trouble, please talk about it first with your partner. If it is impossible for you to resolve, talk to your teacher. Since they are in their last year of high school, it is a good time for them to learn how to negotiate solutions to their problems with each other. They need to learn this skill because they will soon be in the real world. Thus, this assignment is about real life communication, not just about English. In four years, several students have come to me because their partner stopped writing for various reasons. In a few cases, I asked them to write their diaries to me. However, most students have managed to solve their problems by themselves.

Concluding Thoughts

My colleagues and I like this assignment because it takes little time to administer but has a highly positive impact on student motivation and learning. It also has several elements of a successful cooperative learning environment—a need to work together, individual accountability, equal participation, and interaction. Students love getting to know one of their classmates in a special way and having an authentic, communicative experience. They also realize that they can teach and learn from each other.

About the Author

Chieko Okada is a world traveler and part-time teacher. She began her professional life working in a trading company and enjoys using this experience to create meaningful, authentic experiences for her high school English students.