

INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE JOURNALS : REFLECTING ON LEARNING

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Self-monitoring and self-assessment are metacognitive learning strategies which, in my view, are crucial in foreign language learning and the development of learner autonomy, and I have been using interactive dialogue journals at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain) in order to help learners regularly apply these strategies as they evaluate their own learning. Such self-evaluation involves learners monitoring their progress through guided reflection on the learning process in conjunction with teacher feedback which enables them to redirect their learning efforts towards improvement and to set their own learning goals. I originally implemented dialogue journals with first year English Language students both as a means for developing writing skills and as a qualitative research instrument in a longitudinal investigation on integrated strategy training with significant results. Subsequently, I decided to include interactive journals as a evaluation requirement of an elective subject dealing with language teaching methodology in order to further explore self-monitoring and self-assessment practices in relation to teaching and learning processes.

Our dialogue journals consist of a series of written entries generated and directed by learners on a variety of relevant topics arising from class sessions collected in a special notebook or sent by e-mail. Entries are submitted on a regular basis and I respond, not by correcting or evaluating language-based aspects of their texts, a practice which so often inhibits foreign language writers, but by commenting on what the learners have chosen to reflect on, answering their questions, and by continuing the topic(s) currently under discussion. My written feedback also provides my learners with authentic FL input and establishes a valuable channel of communication between us, creating a more supportive learning environment as I adopt the roles of audience, coach or assistant rather than simply instructor or evaluator. More importantly, the journals provide a vehicle for learners to collect their thoughts on a wide range of issues, from reports of the strategies they usually use in their language learning, narrative accounts or anecdotes,

reflections on learning or classroom activities, or even matters of a more emotional nature, and are a way for learners to investigate their own learning processes or strategy repertoire as well as their potential as more fluent writers.

My original focus in the journals with my EFL students was on the improvement of foreign language writing skills by means of self-directed fluency-based practice as part of an integrated strategy training programme, especially since the teaching of writing is an area where a focus on formal accuracy often eclipses more communicative, content-based concerns and neglects the development of self-monitoring strategies. Although they may, in essence, still be a teacher-directed exercise with the instructor moving things along rather than evaluating or correcting, the informal and interactive nature of dialogue journals empowers learners to set their own learning agendas, leading to a changing student-teacher relationship. The journals evolve into an ongoing pedagogical dialogue beyond the confines of the classroom, providing the opportunity for learners to explore learning issues and discover more effective learning techniques, with the use of the target language as the channel through which teaching and learning take place. Furthermore, by taking responsibility for their writing development, learners become more involved and active in the learning process as well as highly motivated - in the words of another learner, "Have you ever thought what we feel when you return our diaries to us? It's almost indescribable. It's like a mixture of pride and curiosity (An English native writes you!)."

More recently, I have begun to investigate the value of dialogue journal writing with potential future teachers in a language teaching methodology context, as learners are invited to reflect on a variety of issues arising from class sessions and out-of-class reading related to teaching and learning. By means of exploring teaching and learning issues in this unstructured, self-directed manner we are able to pave the way for the encouragement of learner autonomy and the development of self-monitoring and self-assessment strategies in their own future classrooms. I'll leave the final words to one of my learners who sums this up quite nicely in a journal extract:

Many people have the wrong idea that the best teacher is that who guides and helps his students constantly. They do not seem to realise that one of the main characteristics of human communication is creativity, and creativity cannot be properly developed if we depend on somebody's teaching. Students must be taught to be independent, to achieve autonomy when they are learning. A teacher must be seen as a facilitator, someone who provides his students the necessary means of learning (strategies, activities, sources, context).