

JOURNAL - WRITING AS FEEDBACK AND AS AN EFL-RELATED-ISSUES DISCUSSION TOOL

O Uso de Diário como Feedback e como Instrumento para Discussão de Assuntos
Ligados ao Ensino de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira

Das Führen von Tagebüchern als Feedback und als Diskussionsgrundlage für den
Unterricht English als Fremdsprache

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SUMMARY

This paper reports the results of an experience in which journal-writing was used to tap into the students learning processes so as to provide them with feedback on their teaching/learning processes and with the opportunity to discuss EFL teaching problems. This was accomplished by asking students to ponder over their learning experiences together with their reactions to class activities, and were recorded on a Portuguese-written journal. Students were also asked to write about the methodological assumptions underlying each class activity so that they could develop their own views on language teaching.

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma experiência na qual o diário foi usado como instrumento que permitisse dar aos alunos feedback sobre seus processos de aprendizagem e discutir assuntos relacionados com o ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira. Foi pedido aos alunos que refletissem sobre suas experiências enquanto alunos, bem como sobre suas reações às atividades de classe. Estas foram descritas em Português apesar de tratar-se de curso de Língua Inglesa. Os alunos também escreveram sobre os motivos em que se baseavam as atividades de classe, de forma a permitir que eles desenvolvessem uma visão pessoal sobre o ensino de línguas.

INTRODUCTION

The "Letras" curriculum which any university level institution in Brazil has to meet reflects the belief that "Letras" undergraduate programs should mainly teach language to prospective English teachers. Though every English undergraduate student has to take courses such as "Teaching Practicum" where he/she is put in contact with the experience of teaching an English class, these courses have traditionally left the discussion of the more recent research findings in EFL learning and teaching as an area to treat in graduate programs. The English undergraduate student thus ends his/her course without this important information in the curriculum requirements he/she has completed.

In most university settings, courses such as "Teaching Practicum" focus on the study of methodological approaches to the teaching of English and on the development of classroom and testing materials. Issues such as second language acquisition research, the teaching of specific skills, and new trends in second/foreign language teaching are

barely discussed. Since the discussion of EFL learning/teaching issues is important, students, as future EFL teachers, should be sensitized to the processes involved in teaching and learning a foreign language.

At the same time, students are usually very passive as learners. They expect their teachers to bring them sundry materials and new teaching techniques which should promote 'learning' at the end of the term. In fact, students sometimes hold teachers responsible for their own learning. Good or bad 'learning' is conveyed through grades which the majority does not know how to interpret. In short, students are usually unaware of what it means to be involved in their teaching/learning process as learners.

As future EFL teachers, students should analyze the teaching/learning process they experience. The experience of analyzing and pondering over themselves as learners will make them see that there are so many things involved in this process that

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they will be able to look at it critically so as in future to act on it conscious of its nature. .

This paper reports a project which aimed at providing students with the chance to discuss EFL learning/teaching issues in traditional language classes. The project also intended to make students more aware of themselves as learners so as to make them realize their active role in the teaching/learning process. The assumption was that both of these objectives would better prepare English majors in "Letras" courses to become EFL teachers.

Journal-writing was chosen as the most appropriate way for students to analyze and ponder over their teaching and learning process. Journal-writing has usually been used as one of the ways to foster personal language use of a second/foreign language in classroom settings. Students are usually asked to write about their own interests once a week. Journals are not evaluated for grammar or style. They are responded to with comments and queries about their content (CELCE-MURCIA & MCINTOSH, 1979 and SAVIGNON, 1983). Journals have also been used as feedback for the teacher and the student involved in a language teaching/learning situation in the University of California Los Angeles (MICCOLI, 1984a).

THE PROJECT

In this project, journal-writing served not only as feedback for teacher and students but also as a starting point for the discussion of a variety of issues related to EFL teaching.

The first objective was to use the journal as a source of feedback on the teaching/learning process students were experiencing. The assumption was that recording their points of view and feelings on what happened in class would make them become more aware of their roles as learners in the language classroom. This would make them become more active in the teaching/learning process.

The second objective was to use students' points of view about different class activities as a starting point for the discussion of issues related to EFL teaching. These discussions, called Teaching Methodology Discussions (TMD's), would involve students in discussing the teaching process, i.e., the problems they might face as future English teachers together with tentative solutions for these problems. This would make them realize the decisions a teacher makes before entering the classroom as well as what it means to be an EFL teacher in Brazil.

As a final objective, the use of journal-writing was expected to furnish information on whatever might be affecting students' learning process. This would allow me to have access to the other side of the teaching process as well as make changes, if necessary, in the course syllabus or teaching programme so as to assure the best learning opportunities during the academic term.

SUBJECTS

In all there were 35 students involved in the project which was carried out during the second semester of 1985 and the first semester of 1986. The students were undergraduates taking English courses at Faculdade de Letras, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Nine of them took English III,A in the second semester of 1985. During the English II,B and the 13 students who took English III,B and tre 13 students enrolled in English IV,B also took part of the journal-writing experience. See Table 1.

TABLE 1

<i>Students Involved in Project</i>			
TERM	2 nd sem. 85	1 st Sem. 86	Total per Course
COURSE			
English III	09	13	22
English IV	—	13	13
Total Students in Project	09	26	35

PROCEDURES

The journal was presented to students as one of their course assignments. Students were given the following guidelines as how they should proceed to write it. First, they were told that the journals would be written in Portuguese. This would avoid the limitations that writing in English might bring. Second, they were instructed to write according to two roles — as observers and as learners:

As observers, they should describe each classroom activity step by step depicting what had been done and how the teacher had conducted the activity. They should be objective and focus on details. As part of their roles as observers, they were to speculate on what may be the rationale underlying each of the classroom activities the teacher brought to class. It was believed that students tentative guesses would engage them more actively in the learning opportunities brought to class and, consequently, in taking the most out of them.

As learners, students should write about their feelings towards each one of the classroom activities. This included reporting feelings of success or frustration as a result of their performance. They should also try to explain what/who had either helped or affected their performance. This was devised to have students write about themselves as learners since they usually see themselves only as students. In asking students to write about themselves, I expected them to become more active learners.

Students were assured that journals were confidential, i.e., no one except the teacher would

have access to them. During TMD's students would only report to their classmates those parts of the journal which they felt at ease with. It was also stressed that journals would be assessed according to the quality of analysis and argumentation in them. This would allow students to disagree with any class activity without affecting the original purpose of the project, i.e., look at the teaching/learning process with critical eyes.

It was suggested that it would be better if students wrote their observations and feelings as soon as classes were over so that they would not forget the sequencing or their reactions to any class activity. Those who could not do that — nighttime students, were asked to outline the class activities of the day so as to be reminded of their reactions when writing their journals.

Journals should be written as explained above starting from the second day of class until the end of the semester. At the end of each month, the teacher assigned a 30-45 minute session for TMD's. Students should bring their journals to class on that day. Their observations would serve as starting point for the discussion, and the end of the session the teacher would collect the journals for comments.

In the end of the first semester of 1986, students received a final-evaluation questionnaire to fill in. (See Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire). A final-evaluation questionnaire was necessary so as to have a broader view of students' reactions to the project which the first-semester-of-1985 students' did not fill in.

As this project required the students' commitment and organization, reactions against it were expected. Surprisingly, these were not as strong as anticipated, probably because keeping a journal counted for the final grade. However, there were 5 students who did not keep the journal regularly. Two of them argued that assigning a grade to it made it compulsory rather than a spontaneous account of the teaching/learning process, which, in their opinion, was the best way to approach the journal assignment. In spite of that, if a grade had not been assigned to the journal as part of final grade, very few students, if any, would have taken the assignment as a serious course project.

Two other of these 5 students suggested that the journal should be written as a monthly assignment rather than as daily record of the teaching/learning process. These students argued that the daily writing of the journal was counterproductive on the grounds that they had many other class assignments which took most of their time. This would affect the quality of their journal entries. However, they were told that if they did not make daily entries on their journals, the objective of the project would not be accomplished as they would not tap into some of the important details in the teaching/learning process.

Only one of them stated that she had not understood the objective of the journal assignment thus neglecting it. This observation, which was part of her final evaluation questionnaire, was the reason

to consider preparing a hand-out on how to keep a class-journal with clear and specific directions and excerpts from former students' journals for future use. Hopefully, this hand-out will avoid the same problem to occur again.

Except for the student who reported not having understood the journal as a class project, the arguments against the journal did not seem valid when compared to other students' evaluation of the project. In fact, almost every student 'hated' — as they put it — the journal assignment for the first month or so. It was difficult for them to write about class activities, class performance, and personal feelings only because they had never done this before. However, as time passed they got used to it. In the end, almost all of them were grateful to have had the chance of analyzing their teaching/learning process.

In the following paragraphs the journal-writing experience is discussed. First, from the analysis of students' journals, which revealed a similar pattern of learning process among students, the five stages identified as part of this process are discussed. Second, journal-writing is discussed from the teacher's point of view, i.e., as feedback for the teacher, as a communication channel between teacher and student, and as a source of information on the teaching programme. Finally, the TMD's are analyzed and discussed. The analyses and discussions are illustrated with excerpts taken from different students' journals. (Excerpts were translated into English. See Appendix B for excerpts in Portuguese). In the conclusion, the whole project is assessed in terms of its value for teachers and students.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of the use of journals as feedback and as an EFL-related-issues tool is based on 20 students' journals — spontaneously submitted for analysis, and on the 26 final evaluation questionnaires filled in by the English III and IV students at the end of the first semester of 1986.

After reading all students' journals, it was noticed that all of them went through a process of adaptation to the classes. For example, every journal generally started with statements of students' feelings of inadequacy in class and of frustration with their performances. Then, with time, they started to feel less frustrated. Consequently, their participation in class improved, but there were still drawbacks. Suddenly, those drawbacks were not recorded anymore and students' attitudes and participation changed with the understanding of the unavoidable ups and downs in the learning process. This process was common to all the students who offered their journals for analysis. Five different stages within their learning process were identified. They were labelled — *Feeling Lost Stage*, *Gaining Confidence Stage*, *The Insight Stage*, *Putting Performance Aside Stage*, and finally *Realizing Learner-Responsibility Stage*.

During the *Feeling Lost Stage*, students go through the process of feeling inadequate in class. Some of the reasons for this may be failing to understand what the teacher says, or what is happening when there are many different activities going on in one same class, or even making sense of explanations. Students may also feel that their classmates know more than themselves, or even question if they belong to the class. The following excerpts illustrate students' feelings at this stage.

"Sometimes I feel lost... I don't know where I am and many times I can't make sense of what she (the teacher) says."

"I'm considering dropping out. I'd better talk to the teacher."

"The majority does not have problems because they have studied English before. It is different with me."

The first stage is critical for students. It is when they start missing classes as a consequence of these feelings. This stage is so difficult for students to overcome that it may culminate with drop outs.

At a second moment in the process, students begin to feel more comfortable in class. It is the *Gaining Confidence Stage*. As students experience this stage, they still have difficulties but they feel they can manage without feeling as overwhelmed as they did in the beginning. Here journals have statements which show that students can make sense of the class activities, that they feel more at ease with classmates, teacher and class activities, and that things are not as difficult as they had thought. The following excerpts are evidence of this second stage.

"I feel more 'integrated' in the class activities and this makes me happy."

"I found the group discussion a good activity because when we have doubts, it is good to have the chance to discuss them with the others."

"In spite of being a more difficult text when compared to the others, I noticed that I am having less trouble in understanding the words."

In the next stage, the *Insight*, students begin to realize that learning is a process and that it mostly depends mostly on themselves. They also begin to understand the rationale underlying classroom activities and, as a consequence, they feel they can perform better. In their journals, this is expressed with statements that are not as anxious as the ones found in the first stage.

"As for freewriting, at first I thought it was awful because the teacher would keep track of it..."

As I kept writing I started to understand the activity's objective... now I feel more at ease (with freewriting activities)."

"As with the writing learning process we can see that... we can apply (the idea of process) to the study of a foreign language... As we work on these processes we will be training and broadening our (learning) abilities."

"Small passages, apparently unimportant, may completely change the message. In this sense I feel that (the activity) is demanding more attention from us in relation to the recorded text."

The fourth stage — *Putting Performance Aside*, shows that students are not so interested in good performance anymore. They realize that in the learning process there are ups downs or success and failure. The important thing is to go through the process without putting so much emphasis on getting everything right. These two excerpts below capture this very well:

"There are days in which I write more whereas there are days in which I write less. This doesn't frighten me anymore."

"I found the test very interesting. The most important thing is that I was not worried about the grade I was going to get on it. Because, honestly, I was facing it as another step in the evolution process of getting to know the (English) language. I enjoyed taking (the test) and I feel I did relatively well."

Finally, students reach the last stage — *Realizing Learner-Responsibility*, in which full awareness of the learning process takes place. Here students realize that they are responsible for their own performance as learners. They realize that learning depends mostly on them. This awareness of learner-responsibility is important not only for foreign language learning but for any new learning process. The excerpts below state this very well.

"The class-journal's function became clearer... And this made me see myself as an agent in the language learning process."

"We are learning to be self taught persons (kind of an exaggerated expression) and later we will complement what we have missed by ourselves."

From this analysis of the five stages which make up the learning process, we can see that the journal assignment had a twofold feedback purpose for students. Journal-writing made them see that learning is a dynamic process. It gave them feedback on their successes and failures and made them realize that both are important as parts of the whole process. Thus, it made them aware of their active role in the teaching/learning process. Journal-writing also provided them with feedback on performance and learning styles. This is important because when students write about their performance they have to consider what affects it. This usually makes students aware of their learning style thus giving them a chance to act upon their strengths and weaknesses so as to become better learners. The excerpt below illustrates well the meaning of the journal assignment to a student:

"When writing the journal we make both a self-evaluation and a learning evaluation. We evaluate what has been taught and whether we have learned or not. Through the journal we were able to evaluate ourselves... I felt more freedom and more at ease in being in the classroom."

For the teacher journal-writing also works as feedback. First, it works as a communication channel between students and teachers. In having access to the students' journal once a month after the TMD's, the teacher can have feedback on class activities, on either the students' or the teacher's own performance, and also on problems the teachers may not be aware of. These excerpts below illustrate the journal as a communication channel between teacher and students.

"I loved this class! It was dynamic... and very profitable since it expanded my vocabulary and developed my reasoning. I was able to loosen up when talking."

"When we corrected the exercises... I liked it. However, when each group had to talk about the exercises they had done, it was difficult for me to follow."

"There was one thing I didn't like... the attention you (the teacher) gave to some classmates who made us feel a bit insecure for knowing more (than us)..."

The three excerpts above are important for any teacher as feedback. The first one is a positive evaluation of a class activity which if it were not for the journal the teacher would not have access to. The second excerpt is an important feedback for the teacher to change or adapt the course syllabus. The last one makes the teacher become

aware of a problem which may be interfering in the teacher/student relationship.

From the students' point of view journal-writing brings a new dimension to the communication between students and teacher. It gives immediate feedback and posits complex problems that eventually will have to be solved. The following excerpts illustrate this:

"Journal-writing... helps us solve immediate problems and makes us start searching for solutions for more complex problems."

"In my opinion (journal-writing) is important for both the teacher and the student... it is what we are fighting for in all other subjects. It brings the right time for pondering, speaking, listening and changing."

The culmination of the journal-writing process is the TMD. Here the students voice their impressions, feelings and even their critiques on the teaching/learning process. Therefore, the classroom is transformed into a forum where everybody has the chance to express their own points of view.

The issues discussed in the TMD's are the same as those found in students' journals. However, it is here that issues which are related to EFL teaching such as second language acquisition, classroom management, syllabus design, materials selection, etc. have the chance to be discussed.

For instance, when the students question the teacher for the lack of correction during a speaking activity, or when they demand correction which is not given, the discussion of Krashen's monitor model may be introduced and it may explain the teacher's decision not to correct. Other more down-to-earth problems are discussed such as the teaching of the four skills or even the handling of very large groups in secondary schools.

This type of discussion broadens students' points of view on the process of teaching a foreign language in Brazil. It also makes them become aware of their responsibility as future EFL teachers, so as to change the current state of affairs. This excerpt is an example of the relevance TMD's have for students:

"We also had our TMD's which makes me feel more confident about what I expect from this university... In the end of these discussions there are always questions and doubts left. These are a consequence of our journal observations though we try to ponder about solutions during the discussions."

The TMD's also help students realize that they are not alone in their difficulties in following the course. This makes them less anxious and

encourages them to continue striving in the learning process. This student's comment illustrates this aspect very well:

"In the beginning of the course I was not able to understand the need for discussions (TMD's) but... I (later) found their value... methodological issues were discussed... it was interesting to see the different degree of our difficulties... This is good; shows me that I am not different."

CONCLUSION

Journal-writing has proved to serve very well as a communication channel between teacher and students. It has shown that through this channel, students can voice their opinions on their learning process so as to contribute positively to it. It has also demonstrated that because of the awareness that journal-writing brings about, students move from a passive to an active role in the teaching/learning process. Success or failure does not fall solely on the teacher anymore. Students understand the importance of their role as learners.

From the teacher's point of view, journal-writing works as feedback on the teaching process. Students write about their reactions to class activities, which allows the teacher to change goals and objectives in order to make them more appropriate to students' needs. As students write about their reactions to the teacher, they offer an honest feedback to teacher performance. Students also write about their own failures thus giving the teacher an account of the reasons for individual low performance. In short, journal-writing brings the students closer to the teacher and vice-versa.

Finally, journal-writing has also shown that the discussion of EFL teaching/learning issues can be introduced in usual 'language' classes. The analysis of classroom activities makes students realize that language teaching is a vast field where there is still much to research about the nature of the teaching and learning processes. Students realize there are no ready-made-answers for questions such as how to deal with large groups or what is the best way to teach grammar, writing skills or even reading, as many factors are involved in defining the best way to approach a teaching problem. From the discussion of issues involved in the teaching/learning process in the TMD's EFL teachers learn an invaluable lesson: that only through research, experimentation and creativity can the profession be a more exciting activity. Since this is needed for the improvement of the teaching of English, the use of journals can have significant potential value in transforming the current English teaching situation in Brazil.

APPENDIX A

I — TRANSLATION-COPY OF THE FINAL EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

In no more than two type written pages, write about your learning process this semester. Ponder on it from your journal observations of classes and try to answer the following questions:

1. Were you able to develop your own view on language teaching? Why (not)?
2. Would you use any of the materials or techniques from those brought to class? Which? Why (not)?
3. How do you see your performance in the following areas after the end of the semester:
 - a) language learning
 - b) teaching methodology learning
 - c) personal growth.
4. Final comments.

II — COPY OF THE FINAL EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Em até no máximo duas folhas datilografadas, escreva sobre seu processo de aprendizagem durante este semestre. Reflita a partir do seu diário, baseando-se nas suas observações sobre as aulas e sobre seu processo individual. Tente responder as seguintes perguntas:

1. Você conseguiu desenvolver uma visão pessoal sobre o ensino de línguas? Por que (não)?
2. Você usaria alguma(s) técnica(s) e/ou material dos usados em sala? Quais? Por que (não)?
3. Como você vê seu desempenho nas seguintes áreas após o fim do semestre:
 - a) aprendizado de língua
 - b) aprendizado sobre metodologias de ensino
 - c) crescimento pessoal.
4. Comentários finais.

APPENDIX B

ORIGINAL EXCERPTS FROM STUDENTS' JOURNALS

Feeling Lost Stage:

"Às vezes me sinto perdida... eu me perco e muitas vezes não consigo captar o que ela diz."

"Estou pensando em trancar. Vou conversar com a professora."

"A maioria não tem dificuldades porque já estudou fora. Comigo é diferente."

Gaining Confidence Stage:

"Sinto-me mais 'engajada' no trabalho e isto me alegra."

"Achei boa a discussão em grupos, pois quando temos dúvidas é bom poder discutí-las com os outros."

"Apesar de ter sido dado um texto mais difícil em relação aos outros, percebi que estou tendo mais facilidade em perceber as palavras."

The Insight Stage:

"Quanto ao freewriting, a primeira vista achei péssimo, pois me cobriam... À medida que fui escrevendo fui percebendo sua intenção... agora já estou me sentindo mais a vontade."

"Assim como no processo de aprendizagem escrita podemos observar que... podemos aplicar (o processo) ao estudo de língua estrangeira... À medida que trabalhamos em cima destes processos estaremos exercitando e ampliando as nossas habilidades."

"Pequenas passagens, aparentemente sem importância, podem mudar completamente a mensagem. É nesse sentido que sinto que (a atividade) está... exigindo maior acuidade da nossa parte com relação ao texto gravado."

Putting Performance Aside Stage:

"Há dias em que escrevo mais e em outros menos. Isto já não me assusta mais."

"Achei muito interessante o teste. Mais interessante é que eu não tive muita preocupação com a nota que eu ia ter, porque na verdade, estava encarando como mais uma etapa de um processo de evolução no conhecimento da língua. Gostei de fazer e acho que me saí relativamente bem."

Realizing Learner Responsibility Stage:

"A função do jornal ficou mais clara... E isso permitiu que eu me visse como agente dentro do processo de aprendizagem de línguas."

"Nós estamos aprendendo a ser auto-didatas (expressão meio exagerada) e depois complementamos o que faltou sozinhos."

Journal-Writing and the Student

"Ao escrever o 'jornal' fazemos como que um exame de consciência e de aprendizado. Avaliamos o que foi ensinado, e, se aprendemos ou não. Através do jornal pudemos fazer uma auto-avaliação... senti mais liberdade e mais à vontade na sala de aula."

Journal-Writing and the Teacher

a) *Feedback on Class Activities, Performance (S's & T's) and on Problems*

"Adorei essa aula! Ela foi dinâmica,... e muito proveitosa, pois enriqueceu o meu vocabulário, desenvolveu meu raciocínio e consegui um maior desprendimento ao falar..."

"Na hora de corrigir os..., o que achei bom. Mas, quando cada grupo ia falando sobre os exercícios que fizeram, as vezes eu não conseguia acompanhar."

"Uma coisa que não gostava,... é a atenção que você dava a certos colegas, que por saberem mais nos traziam um pouco de insegurança..."

b) *Communication Channel between Students and Teacher*

"O jornal... ajuda a resolver problemas imediatos e a começar a pensar em futuras soluções para problemas mais complexos."

"Para mim, (o journal) é importante para ambos; professor e aluno,... é um espaço que estamos lutando para conseguir em todas as disciplinas, é o momento para refletir, de falar e ouvir, de mudar."

Teaching Methodology Discussions

"Também tivemos nossa discussão sobre Teaching Methodology a qual me faz ficar sempre mais confiante em relação ao que espero desta escola... Restam sempre no final de tais discussões as dúvidas e interrogações, nascidas das reflexões feitas anteriormente e amadurecidas pela discussão final."

"No começo das aulas eu não estava entendendo bem a necessidade dessas discussões mas... eu descobri a validade... Discutiu-se a metodologia... foi interessante ver o grau de dificuldade de cada um... isto é bom, sinal de que não estou como um peixe fora d'água."

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