

MAKING CONNECTIONS

WITH

DIALOGUE JOURNALS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING
DEGREE AT THE SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING
BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

BY

CATHERINE ELLIOTT

OCTOBER 2003

This project by Catherine Elliott is accepted in its present form.

Date _____

Project Advisor _____

Project Reader _____

ABSTRACT

This paper makes a case for the use of dialogue journals in the second language classroom. In Part One the author examines the research of experts in the fields of second language acquisition and writing instruction and presents their findings as a rationale which supports the use of dialogue journals. In Part Two the author draws from her own experience in the classroom to illustrate how dialogue journals can be used effectively with second language learners.

ERIC Descriptors
Second Language Learning
Writing (Composition)
Writing Skills
Second Language Instruction
Teaching Methods
Writing Exercises
Writing Instruction

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Freeing Students to Write.....	1
PART ONE	Background and Rationale	
Chapter		
I	What is a Dialogue Journal?.....	5
II	Starting Out.....	8
III	Responding.....	10
IV	Personal vs. Content-based Dialogue Journals.....	13
V	Dialogue Journals and Stephen Krashen’s “Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition.....	17
VI	Error Correction and Grading.....	20
VII	Balancing Journals with Formal Writing.....	23
VIII	Making Connections: the Affective Factor.....	26
PART TWO	Dialogue Journals in my Classroom	
IX	In the Beginning.....	31
X	Logistics.....	35
XI	Taking Risks vs. Playing it Safe.....	40
XII	Gifted and Special Needs Students.....	45
CONCLUSION.....		49
APPENDIX A.....		51

APPENDIX B.....	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	53

INTRODUCTION

Freeing Students to Write

In order to learn how to write, one must write as much as possible. And, the more one writes, the better one writes. My experiences both as a student and as a teacher of languages have convinced me of the truth of these statements. How do we, as language teachers, encourage our students to write on a regular basis, and in a meaningful context? In this paper I will explore the rationale behind what I consider to be a very valuable teaching tool of writing (and reading) in the second language classroom: dialogue journals. Although my primary focus will be to examine the connection between dialogue journals and the development of writing skills, I will discuss the ways in which students' reading skills are enhanced as well.

I am a teacher of French in a public high school in the rural southwestern corner of Massachusetts. I have taught for almost fifteen years, and the teaching of writing in the classroom has always been one of my favorite challenges. Ten years ago I enrolled in a course for teachers on journal writing at North Adams State College, now the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Actively experimenting with journals since that time, I have discovered that journals can help students break through writing blocks and free them to discover written language as a powerful means of communication and self-expression.

Students who begin studying a second language in middle or high school bring with them years of prior experience with writing. Some of them already write for pleasure and are eager to test their writing skills in a new language. Some of them have learned to fear writing, having failed countless spelling tests and seen oceans of red ink on their papers in school. These students already consider themselves poor writers of English, and see no reason why they should be anything other than poor writers of French. I have learned that it is my job to help both types of students overcome their separate sets of obstacles.

Many of my students who already write well in English very quickly become frustrated with the writing they produce in French, which they find inferior in both content and structure, and not indicative of their true ability as writers. These students sometimes write well-developed, eloquent papers first in English, and then laboriously attempt to translate them into French, often producing pieces of writing in French that are almost incomprehensible. It is difficult for these students to stick to what they know of the French language when they write. They dislike the fact that it takes a very long time to learn a language and use it well. They refuse to try to find simpler ways to express their thoughts. It is up to me to help them get over this frustration and help them discover that they *can* express themselves in French, using language that they need not be ashamed of.

Some of my students have the opposite problem: they stick to very basic vocabulary and sentence structure in order to avoid making mistakes. Their writing is often very repetitive, consisting of what is really a list of short choppy sentences arranged in paragraph form. For these students, getting the words down in French is the only goal

– constructing a piece of writing with form and fluidity is of no concern. For them, the work they are doing is French, it is not writing. The challenge for me with these students is to help them see that writing in French is more than a matter of applying grammar rules and using vocabulary – it is a means of expression with a purpose.

Most educators would agree that one of the keys to successful teaching is the use of a variety of instructional methods that tap into the different learning styles of a heterogeneous student body. What works for one student may not work for another, and language teachers therefore try to vary the way they teach, introducing new material in a number of ways and providing a variety of activities designed to help students practice and eventually master the skill being taught. When I teach, I am well aware that some of my activities are not effectively reaching all students. However, by varying the activities I use, I try to make sure that in the end all of my students have been given an opportunity to learn through instructional means that are appropriate for their specific learning styles. The only teaching tool that I have found to work well for *all* of my students, not just for some of them or most of them, is the dialogue journal.

In my experience, I have found that dialogue journals provide effective reading and writing practice for all of my students, regardless of their individual temperaments, strengths, weaknesses or learning styles. Both of the types of students I mentioned before, the frustrated writer who wanted to be able to say more and say it well, as well as the timid writer who was afraid of taking risks and making mistakes, experience success when writing in dialogue journals. In fact, in the last ten years that I have been using dialogue journals, I cannot recall even one student who did not eventually buy into this wonderful teaching tool. The beauty of a dialogue journal is that because it is so

specifically tailored to an individual student's interests, as long as the teacher is skilled in writing responses, the student cannot help but be drawn into a meaningful and personally relevant written conversation.

In this paper I will divide my discussion of dialogue journals into two parts. In the first part, I will explore the rationale behind this instructional technique based on the research of educators in the fields of writing, reading and first and second language acquisition. In the second part, I will share some of the experiences I have had dialoguing with students through journals in my French classroom over the last ten years.

I

What is a Dialogue Journal?

Dialogue journals may take many forms, but the type of journal that I use with my students and that I will discuss in this paper follow the guidelines set by Joy Kreeft Peyton in her 1993 article, “Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language Literacy.” Simply stated, a dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly over a semester, school year or course (Peyton 1993). Unlike most journals, in which only one person writes entries, dialogue journals serve as a means of genuine communication between two people. Dialogue journals provide a private forum for an exchange of ideas, opinions, and questions, as well as a venue to provide reactions, feedback, suggestions and advice.

In a dialogue journal, students write about topics of their own choosing or about topics related to the course content. Teachers then write back, responding to the students’ questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. Peyton suggests, and I agree, that it is important for teachers to write at least as much as the student has written when they respond. The teacher is a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the students’ writing (Peyton 1993). Dialogue journals are not corrected for grammar or spelling; in fact, form is not addressed by the teacher at all. The goal of the student writer

is to make himself understood -- to communicate. It is this goal that the teacher addresses in her responses, letting the student know that he has gotten his point across, that he has been heard.

Dialogue journal exchanges may take place daily, weekly, bi-monthly or monthly, depending on factors that include educational setting, language level, class size and total number of students. Logistically, it would be impossible for a teacher to read and respond to seventy-five student entries daily. However, many elementary teachers who work with a smaller number of students have found daily dialogue journal exchanges to be an invaluable teaching tool (Staton 1987). Daily journal writing is also more feasible for elementary settings because of the language level of the students. The turn-around time for journals written by beginning language students can be shorter because the entries themselves usually consist of only a few sentences, thus requiring responses of similar brevity. However, journal entries written by advanced students can be a page or more in length and therefore require extended, in-depth responses that take more time to compose.

In a dialogue journal, the mutual responsiveness of the written conversation is different from merely replying. A reply is an acknowledgement that the language has been understood; a response, however, involves an implicit commitment of self, an engagement with the other (Staton 1987). It is this engagement that distinguishes dialogue journal exchanges from other forms of writing. Dialogue journals are interactive and functional in nature, very different from traditional student journals in which the student and teacher are restricted to the roles of writer and reader respectively.

Over time, as students and teacher get to know each other through a dialogue that is unique to each student, a level of trust is established and a relationship develops. Journals provide teachers with a way to learn about their students' backgrounds, interests, needs and desires to an extent that would not be possible otherwise in a busy classroom setting. Students, in turn, get to know their teacher on a personal level, in an individualized, one-on-one context. Through dialogue journals, teachers are able to help their students with self-understanding, communication skills, negotiation of the classroom relationship and problem solving (Staton 1987).

Dialogue journals also serve as a means to develop students' reading and writing skills. Although the student entries are not corrected, the teacher models correct language usage in her responses. What the teacher writes becomes reading material of very high interest to the students, who naturally want to find out how the teacher has reacted to what they have written. The teacher is also able to tailor the level of her written language to the individual student, providing reading material that is challenging yet comprehensible (Peyton 1990).

This simple teacher-developed practice involves meaningful functional reading and writing as a single whole, just as speaking and listening are a seamless whole in oral discourse (Staton 1987: 49). Together, the student and teacher create a meaningful conversation based on thoughtful reading and responding. The main purpose of the journal is fluency, authentic conversation, and idea development in the written language (Delett 1998).

II

Starting Out

The conversation in a dialogue journal, just like any spoken conversation, needs to start somewhere. Often, the first entry in a dialogue journal is the most difficult entry to write, simply because the relationship between the student and teacher as dialogue partners has not yet been established. If the dialogue journal experience is to be a positive one for the student, it is important that he understand the process and the goal of the journal before writing his first entry.

When using dialogue journals with students for the first time, it is important to clearly explain the process and answer any questions they may have concerning issues such as confidentiality, grading, correcting, minimum length and turn-around time (Delett 2002). Supplying students with a handout outlining the teacher's expectations for the dialogue journal entries is often helpful. (See appendix A and appendix B.) The fine line between what is personal and what is private should be discussed with the class. It is effective to give students an example of what would be considered an appropriate topic of a personal nature (where one likes to shop for clothes) versus a topic that would be private and therefore inappropriate (preferred methods of birth control). The teacher needs to stress to the class that she will respond as a teacher, and not as a counselor or friend. With teenage students, especially, the teacher needs to make clear that although what is written will remain confidential, if an entry causes the teacher to suspect that the student may cause harm to himself or to others, or if an illegal activity is discussed, the teacher will be obliged to report this information to the school counselor.

In all of my years using dialogue journals, I have had to break the bond of confidentiality only once, when a student wrote in her journal about an abusive situation at home. After reading her entry, I spoke with the girl privately and explained that as a public school teacher I was obliged to report the situation she had described to our school adjustment counselor. The girl, although frightened and upset, did not protest and in a way seemed relieved. I believe that her entry was in fact a cry for help.

Teachers who do not feel comfortable sharing personal experiences with their students may prefer to use content-based dialogue journals instead of personal dialogue journals. The difference between these two types of journaling will be discussed in chapter four.

Once the teacher has explained the concept of dialogue journals to the students and clarified her expectations regarding the nature, length and frequency of entries, the written conversation may begin. Each student will need a journal. Single sheets of notebook paper kept in a three-ring binder are an option, but I find that bound journals work best. Although some teachers allow students to supply their own journals, I prefer to use the small lightweight journals provided by my school. Because I carry sets of journals back and forth between school and home, it is easier to transport them if they are light and uniformly sized. It is also possible to keep an electronic dialogue journal on a floppy disc that is passed back and forth between student and teacher. This option is only feasible if all students have ready access to a computer at home.

The next step is to provide a topic, or a choice of topics, for the students' first entry. It is better to supply a topic than to ask students to write about "anything they want." Students need guidance in all aspects of their learning, and wide-open topics can

leave students feeling overwhelmed or confused as to where to begin. Assuring that the students have clear directions results in a higher level of comfort with the task.

Here is an example of a starter topic for a personal dialogue journal in an intermediate or advanced level language class: *“In your journal, please write about a situation in which you were surprised. The surprise may have been pleasant or unpleasant, accidental or planned. Describe how you felt at the moment of the surprise and then how you felt a few minutes later.”* For a beginning level language class, a starter topic could be: *“Tell me about something that you like to do in your spare time. Why do you like to do this activity? Do you do it often?”*

It may take a few weeks before the logistics of the journaling are worked out. In the beginning, questions such as these are answered: How often will students write? Where will the journals be stored? Will the students write at home or in class? How will the journals be graded? How long will the entries be? (Delett 2002) After the teacher and student have exchanged journals a few times, a routine is established and a relationship begins to build. Both the student and the teacher are ready to share – giving and receiving, and learning, in ways they never thought possible (Peyton and Staton 1993).

III

Responding

According to the developmental psychologist Lem Semenovitch Vygotsky, all human learning is mediated through interaction with others (Vygotsky 1978). Dialogue journals, which are interactive in nature, provide an ideal forum for first- and second-

language learning. In dialogue journals, the natural desire of participants is to cooperate in the accomplishment of a written conversation – to be clear, informative and relevant. The more proficient language user (the teacher) facilitates the participation of the less proficient participant (the student) by modifying the qualities of her interaction and language in a variety of ways, according to the proficiency of the learner (Peyton and Staton 1993).

The distinguishing characteristics of dialogue journals are their interactive, functional nature, and the creation of mutually interesting topics. The interaction takes place between the minds of the student and the teacher. It is this access to the teacher's mind, and to an interactive and personalized response, that makes the dialogue journals work (Staton 1987).

Teacher responses are critical to the success of any dialogue journal. The teacher must be committed and fully engaged in order to write the types of responses that create the motivation and provide the models of thought and reflection, of unpredictability and honesty which students need (Staton 1987). When responding to students, the teacher should first and foremost respond honestly to the information presented. This alone validates the written product and, indirectly, the students' experiences and ideas (Albertini 1990). It is only after the teacher has acknowledged *what* the student has to say that she should respond to *how* the student has expressed himself. It is important to stress here that responding is very different from correcting. A correction often involves a notation made by the teacher regarding an error in spelling or grammar. A response, however, consists of the teacher's feedback, reaction to and thoughts about what the student has written.

Jana Staton (1987: 56) lists several characteristics of quality teacher responses to student dialogue journal entries:

- 1) Acknowledge and say something interesting about the student's topic before bringing up your own
- 2) Add new, relevant information
- 3) Be honest
- 4) Avoid quick, glib comments
- 5) Ask questions, but not too many
- 6) Write about as much as the student writes

As teachers, we should respond to students' entries by focusing on what they have to say, by paraphrasing our understanding of their main idea, by pointing out sections we feel are very well written and by asking questions about the parts that are not as clear. It is through our comments that we attempt to make students aware of our concerns as readers (Vanett and Jurich 1990).

It is also important for teachers to respond specifically and personally, but not *too* personally. A personal entry is meaningful; an entry that is too personal is revealing or exposing. It is up to the teacher, in her entries, to set a tone for the writing, a tone that does not put the teacher in the position of therapist or counselor.

IV

Personal vs. Content-based Dialogue Journals

What do students and teachers write about in their dialogue journals? The answer to this question depends on whether the written conversation in the journals is based on topics directly related to the course curriculum, or on topics that are generated solely by student and teacher interest. Although current research on dialogue journals often does not differentiate between the two, I have found it helpful to make the distinction between personal and content-based dialogue journals. Both types of journals can serve as valuable tools in a language class.

In personal dialogue journals, students and teachers write about themselves and about ideas and issues that concern them. These issues may or may not be related to course content. Vanett and Jurich (1990) have found that because the students write about their own experiences, they have little trouble finding enough to say to fill the pages and they are not blocked by not knowing what to say. In a personal dialogue journal, what the student writes is inherently meaningful to him, not only because he has full control over the choice of topic, but also because he is acutely aware that the reader will be responding to what he has written. This type of meaningful written correspondence is the perfect springboard to help reluctant student writers become more willing to develop their thoughts on paper. Gradually, regular dialogue journaling helps students gain confidence in their ability to write, and after a while they are able to apply the skills that they have honed in their journals to formal types of writing that may have intimidated them before (Vanett and Jurich 1990).

Susan Hinebauch is an eighth grade Language Arts teacher who uses personal dialogue journals to get to know her students in a way that would not be possible in a busy classroom setting. Hinebauch asks her students to write five pages each week in their dialogue journals, which she refers to as “reader’s/writer’s notebooks.” Through the back-and-forth writing that takes place in these journals, Hinebauch begins to understand what is important to her students and why. For Hinebauch, knowing her students is a necessity because if she is not relating to them, she asks, how well will they respond to material she is teaching (1999: 22)? It is only through a meaningful connection that students will be able to have an investment in the class, in school and in their own learning.

Hinebauch (1999:21) asks her students to “explore, observe and reflect upon the issues that anger, fascinate, confuse and delight them.” By giving her students the means to explore their own feelings, Hinebauch is able not only to address her own curricular goals as a teacher of (among other things) writing, but also her personal goals for helping students become more socially and emotionally literate (1999: 21).

Joy Kreeft Peyton and Jana Staton, strong proponents of dialogue journals as tools to help students improve their writing skills, point out that “ironically, when students produce written language in school, their topics are often chosen *for* them by the teacher and have little relation to their background knowledge or interests (1993: 4).” The research conducted by Peyton and Staton not surprisingly demonstrates that students of all ages write with the most enthusiasm and skill when they write from their own experience and interests, when they have an audience and a message, and when they are

“accomplishing their own agenda (1993: 4).” Students who write about topics that are meaningful want to be understood and heard. Because of this, it only makes sense that they are apt to take care to make their writing clear and intelligible. A clear sense of communicative purpose with an active audience sparks in students an urge to make themselves understood. This, in turn, increases the students’ motivation to write well that is to say in a way in which the reader will be able to understand and connect with what they have written.

Content-based dialogue journals work much the same way as personal dialogue journals, the only difference being that the topics of the written conversations are based on class content, most often an assigned text. Some teachers call these literature journals. Nancie Atwell is an English teacher who has had success with content-based journaling in her classroom. Atwell believes that the written exchange between two readers enables both parties, the adult expert and the student, to delve deeper into the written text (Atwell 1987). Atwell had had previous success with writing conferences, face-to-face conversations with students about what they were reading and writing. Dialogue journals provided a way for Atwell to extend these conversations almost without limits.

Atwell points out that there is no one correct way to approach or interpret a text. There are instead, she says, “individual readers with an incredible range of prior knowledge and experience (1987: 166). Dialogue journals offer teachers an alternative way to talk to students about literature in a forum that is not constrained by the number of minutes in the class period, or the number of students in the room. A student who might be unsure of his take on a piece of literature and therefore unwilling to share this view in front of his peers may find it easier to write about in the privacy of the dialogue journal.

Margaret Walworth, a reading teacher, finds that content-based dialogue journals provide valuable information about how each student is dealing with a particular reading assignment. For her, dialogue journals are a way for a teacher to guide her students toward more effective reading techniques when necessary. Walworth notes that group discussions on a piece of literature are often more productive if students have had a chance to write about (and receive feedback on) their ideas first. The privacy (and therefore safety) of the dialogue journal allows all students, not just the out-going ones, to discuss with their teacher their impressions, questions or confusions about what they are reading; students are able to “articulate their inner voices” and then receive meaningful feedback from the teacher (Walworth 1990: 38) on their ideas.

The *Transactional Theory* of Louise Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) argues that literature involves a connection or transaction between the reader, the writer and the text. The reader applies his thoughts and feelings to the text and the transaction occurs because of these thoughts and the reader’s life experiences. The transaction then becomes another life experience for the reader that will affect what he reads next. Teachers of literature are able to tap into this very personal way of responding to a text through the use of dialogue journals. Teachers, in their written responses to students’ reactions to a piece of literature, help students articulate how they see the text through the lens of their own experiences. This journal technique is helpful when dealing with students who mistrust their own reaction to a text and who are instead searching for the “right” or “correct” interpretation. The dialogue journal, because it is so personal in nature, helps to encourage students to trust and value their own reaction to a text. The end result is a more meaningful reading and writing experience.

It is not uncommon for teachers to hear their students ask “But why do we have to read this book? What does it have to do with us? With our lives?” Content-based dialogue journals can come in very handy here, because through the journal writing, the gap between what the students read or discuss in class and what they actually think about outside of class can be bridged (Sandler 1987:318). Peyton explains that in order to develop an understanding of a novel or essay there needs to be an exchange between students and teachers that involves a mutual search of meaning (1990). The personal content of the dialogue journal is one of the most effective ways for this exchange to take place.

V

Dialogue Journals and Stephen Krashen’s “Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition”

Language teachers who are familiar with Stephen Krashen’s theories of language acquisition agree that dialogue journals are “Krashen-friendly.” A closer look at two of his principles will show how naturally journaling fits into an approach to language teaching based on Krashen’s work.

Krashen’s fourth hypothesis of second language learning is the input hypothesis (1981). The input hypothesis states that a language learner who is at a certain level (level i) must receive comprehensible input that is at a level slightly higher (level $i+1$) in order to develop progressively higher level language skills. In other words, we only acquire language successfully when we are exposed to language that contains structure that is

slightly beyond what we already know. The understanding of $i+1$ input is possible thanks to contextual clues and our background knowledge of language and the world around us (Wilson 2002).

Most readers have had the experience of trying to read a text on a subject that is foreign to them. In such situations, the fact that the content (vocabulary) is unfamiliar makes the text challenging, even for experienced readers with high proficiency in the language. For example, a doctoral candidate in biophysics might have an easier time reading an article entitled *Ryanodine Receptor Isoforms in Excitation Coupling* than the article *Bundling and Tying: Antitrust Analysis in Markets with Intellectual Property*. However, a professor of economics would no doubt have an easier time with the latter and struggle to comprehend the former. It is easier for readers to understand a text if it is on a topic that is familiar and of high interest to them. It makes sense, therefore, that in order for the $i+1$ theory to work best, the input should preferably be on a topic that is familiar and of high interest to the language learner. This is what makes the input *comprehensible*, even at the $i+1$ level.

Dialogue journals provide teachers with a natural setting to expose their students to language that is ideally suited for $i+1$ input. The content of the journals, because it revolves around topics chosen by the students, is at the same time familiar and of high interest. Students are very highly motivated to understand the responses that the teacher has written for their eyes only – responses that are also tailored to their current level of proficiency in the language. It would be impossible for a teacher to find a text written at the right level of $i+1$ for an entire class of students because rarely are more than a few students at exactly the same level of language proficiency. Teachers do their best to

provide a wide variety of texts written by many different authors in order to meet the areas of interest and the proficiency levels of as many students in the class as possible. No text, however, is a perfect match for the whole class. On the other hand, when they write in the dialogue journals, teachers are able to tailor the level of their entries to the $i+1$ level that is appropriate for every single student in the class individually. No two journal responses are alike, and neither are they at the same language level. One of the biggest benefits of dialogue journals is the text that they provide the students, text that supplies them with the $i+1$ language input they need in order to develop their language skills.

Jana Staton points out that “the teacher, in responding, can progressively increase the complexity of her response, staying just ahead of the student. This creates a text which is continually challenging in terms of comprehension and inferencing” (1987:54). Similarly, Joy Kreeft Peyton explains that the teacher’s written language “serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the student’s proficiency level; thus, the teacher’s entries can provide reading texts that are challenging, but that are also comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written. Beyond the modeling of language form and structure, the teacher’s writing also provides continual exposure to the thought, style and manner of expression of a proficient writer” (1993:3).

Stephen Krashen’s fifth hypothesis of second language learning is the affective filter hypothesis (1981). According to Krashen, comprehensible input alone is not enough to guarantee second language acquisition, a second condition is necessary: a low or weak affective filter (i.e. a student who is not anxious). An affective filter is a “mental block, caused by affective factors ... that prevents input from reaching the

language acquisition device” (Krashen 1985: 100). The lowering of the affective filter is what allows the input “in” (Wilson 2002). Low-stress situations which maximize the penetrability of the comprehensible input are ideal for building language competency. Krashen stresses that students should not be put on the defensive and that classroom stress should be minimized (Wilson 2002). Dialogue journals provide teachers with a way to help students receive language input in a non-threatening and non-stressful way. Because the journal entries are not corrected for grammar or spelling, students can freely try to express themselves without worrying about how many mistakes they are making or how many points will be taken off. And, because the topics are student-generated, there is also no worry about whether the content of their entries is right or wrong or whether they have answered the teacher’s questions correctly.

VI

Error Correction and Grading

There is considerable debate about whether or not teachers should correct the mistakes their students make when they write. The questions of how, when and how often (if at all) it is best to correct the structural, grammatical and spelling errors of students learning a second language are not easily answered. The complex and highly disputed topic of error correction is worthy of a thesis all to itself. I, myself, do believe that error correction can be used effectively in the second language classroom setting. And, I agree with Schmidt and Frota (1986) who have found that seeing corrected versions of their writing helps students understand what they are doing wrong. I do

believe that error correction has its place. That place, however, is *not* the dialogue journal. Experts in the field of dialogue journals including Peyton, Staton, Vanett and Jurich all agree that a student's entry is a text which requires a meaningful response, not a list of corrections.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, students are better able to absorb language input if they are relaxed and not anxious. In their dialogue journals, students are free to write as much as they want, free to experiment with new structures and free to try out new vocabulary without the worry of being penalized for grammar or spelling mistakes. Karen Sandler points out that the ungraded and self-expressive nature of the dialogue journals offers "just the kind of encouragement needed to inspire students to play with language in a non-threatening situation" (1987:312). It is also important to note that even though their mistakes are not corrected, students are still able to get a sense of whether or not their writing is intelligible by reading the teacher's response to what they have written. If the teacher is unable to understand part of a student's journal entry, she may choose to address this indirectly in her response by asking a question referring back to the confusing section. Nancie Atwell, who uses this strategy, says that her dialogue journals were conceived as a "first draft chat, not polished pieces of writing." She makes no corrections on them but does comment if she has trouble reading them (1987: 167).

Stephen Krashen (1983) makes a distinction between language acquisition (using language for real communication) and language learning (knowing about language). He argues that teachers should strive to make language acquisition their goal and believes that adults do not lose their ability to acquire languages the way that children do (Wilson

2002). It is clear that dialogue journals, due to their personal and interactive nature, are well-suited to helping students use language for real communication rather than simply learning about the language. The practice students get reading and writing in their dialogue journals helps them develop a “feel” for correctness that brings them closer to true acquisition of the language.

Another advantage of non-graded and non-corrected journals is that students are more likely to take risks. Sandler finds that this freedom “encourages the experimentation—and failure—that leads to ultimate success” in language learning. She notes that her students “frequently remark that what led them to conquer a new structure was their need to find a more nuanced way of expressing themselves” (1987:316).

Some language teachers are fortunate (I think) in that they do not have to issue grades to the students in their classes. For those teachers, the question of how to assign a grade to a dialogue journal is moot. However, for the large numbers of us who are required to submit a grade for each of our students at the end of the quarter, semester or year, the question of how best to incorporate the dialogue journal into the course grade is a delicate one. We want our students to feel free to write in their journals without fear of being penalized for the mistakes they make. Structural errors, then, cannot be figured into the grade for the journal.

On what criteria does the teacher then base her grade? The solution of many has been to set up a clear set of guidelines at the beginning of the year, laying out the teacher’s expectations for the dialogue journals. Jennifer Delett (2002) goes over her criteria for grading the journals carefully with her students. She explains to them that the journal grade will be based on whether or not they submit their entries on time, whether or not

they have written the required number of entries for the marking period and whether or not they have written the specified page length. Most teachers grade the journals on length and frequency of entries. Many use a rubric which they go over with students at the beginning of the year. How heavily to weight the journals when calculating the final course grade is a personal decision which each teacher must make on her own. In my classes, the journals are graded once per marking period and this grade counts as one major test. Because I usually only give one other major test per marking period, the journal grade ends up making up between ten and twenty percent of the course grade.

VII

Balancing Journals with Formal Writing

Dialogue journals are valuable instructional tools which can play a big role in helping second language students develop writing skills. However, it is important for teachers to incorporate other types of writing practice into their lessons as well.

Depending on the course curriculum, students may need practice writing texts such as resumes, cover letters, movie reviews or instructions for following a recipe. Some may need practice analyzing a piece of literature or writing a research paper or preparing a scientific article. One of the beauties of dialogue journals is that they help to form a natural link between what I will call “free writing” (without a specific topic or required format) and “formal writing” (for a pre-determined purpose, often academic in nature).

Peter Elbow, a well-known and well-respected authority on writing, speaks of the importance of the generation of uncensored writing (“free writing”) before critical revision can take place effectively. Most people, he says, get more and better thinking—and less time-wasting—if they start off generating (1986:62). A journal is a perfect place for a teacher to encourage generation and brainstorming from her students. Elbow defers criticism of his students’ initial writing in order to build their confidence and show them that they can quickly learn to come up with a great quantity of words and ideas (1986:62). The fact that in a dialogue journal the teacher responds to these initial writings not only prompts students to re-visit topics and write about them more in-depth, but also serves to gently prod those who may be experiencing writing blocks. Even if a student finds himself at a loss for a topic of his own, he can always focus on responding to the teacher’s entry and answering any questions she may have asked. The simple act of answering a few questions may be enough to help him overcome his writing block.

Joy Kreeft Peyton explains that dialogue journals encourage students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and so provide a natural comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing (1993). Traditional journals in which the students write but the teacher does not respond provide good practice for generation of written ideas, but the goal of communication is less clear. This goal, the goal of back-and-forth communication with a designated audience, is part of what makes the dialogue journal a good stepping-stone to other types of writing that also have specific purposes but are more structured in nature.

Lauren Vanett and Donna Jurich firmly believe that an important link exists between journal writing and formal writing. According to their research, once the journal

writing is recognized as valid, “it provides the missing link between personal writing and the formal prose required of our students in academic writing classes” (1990:31). Vanett and Jurich often have students select and revise selected journal entries. By revising a journal entry into another form of writing, they explain, students begin to develop an awareness of how a change in purpose and audience affects their writing (1990:28). Much like Peter Elbow, Vanett and Jurich agree that often the greatest barrier students face to becoming successful writers is “gaining familiarity and relatively easy access to the process of putting ideas on paper” (1990:25). They have found that journal writing allows students to practice specific skills (summarizing information, explaining a point of view, writing persuasive pieces, for example) which they will eventually use in other more formal types of writing.

Journal entries can function as precursors to other academic assignments, suggest Vanett and Jurich. The goal is to have students “practice the use of various heuristic devices with highly accessible content before using those same devices with their more challenging academic assignments” (1990:27). Let us take the example of past narration. In their journals, students often write about past experiences that are meaningful to them, and they generally use the narrative form. Thus, explain Vanett and Jurich, when these students face objective reporting tasks in which they have to narrate a sequence of past events, they already have some practical experience and understanding of narrative, the importance of chronological order and the need to use transitions to keep the order of events and their ideas clear (1990:28).

The value of the confidence-building that is associated with dialogue journals cannot be underestimated. Many people (and I am one of them) face writing tasks with a

certain degree of apprehension, and sometimes dread. How will I get my point across? Is my vocabulary sophisticated enough? Am I making any sense? How will I be able to take what I feel and put it into words? Does anyone really care about what I have to say? These questions are just a few that may cross the mind of a student who has just received a formal writing assignment. There is no doubt that the majority of students are less anxious about writing in their journals than they are about tackling formal writing assignments. This is probably due to a combination of factors which include the absence of grades and corrections, the personal and sincere response of the teacher and the fact that the topics are student-generated. When dealing with student anxiety associated with formal writing tasks, teachers can take advantage of the fact that most students are prolific writers in their journals. A teacher can take a student's journal, sit down with the student, and show him what he has already been able to accomplish. The journal entries are proof that the student *can* write, *can* get his point across, *can* find the words to express his thoughts. Karen Sandler (1987:318) believes that the self-sufficiency required in formal writing often only comes to the surface after the students have complained loudly that they can't possibly do what the teacher has asked them to do. By pointing to their journal entries, teachers show them that they can.

VIII

Making Connections: The Affective Factor

There are many valid reasons to incorporate dialogue journals into the second language curriculum; in my opinion one of the most important is to foster a meaningful

and personal connection between teacher and student. Teachers teach best if they know their students well. However, very few teachers have the time to be able to get to know their students by talking with them privately one-on-one on a regular basis.

Traditionally, teacher-student relationships have been based on the interactions that take place within the public classroom setting. Teachers can learn a lot about their students from what they write in class, however rarely does this writing involve a personal exchange over an extended period of time, and even more rarely is the student afforded a chance to get to know his teacher on a personal level. Dialogue journals, when used effectively, create a space that is private, safe and comfortable—a space in which teacher and student can develop a relationship that is built on sharing and trust.

Joy Kreeft Peyton (1993) points out that dialogue journals serve to extend the contact time between student and teacher. Unlike most classes, journal entries are not constrained by time or space. The entry is never over before the writer or the reader is ready for it to be over. The entry does not need to be written or read on a certain day or at a certain hour. The entry can be written or read in a classroom, in bed, on a park bench or on a river bank. The entry can be written or read all at once, or in several sittings. The flexibility of both the content and the structure of the dialogue journal increases the likelihood that each student will be able to find a way to make the journal work for him. And, this same flexibility increases the likelihood that the teacher will be able to make a personal connection with each of her students individually, based on the exchanges that take place.

Ricardo Schütz writes that when it comes to language learning, the authenticity of the environment and the affinity between its participants are essential elements to make

the learner feel part of this environment (2002). The authentic communication that takes place in dialogue journals helps to create an environment such as he describes, characterized by honesty, sincerity and sharing. In a similar vein, Susan Hinebauch (1999) refers to brain theorists and researchers who make a strong case that students are more apt to learn and to connect to the material they are being taught in school if their emotions are being engaged. She quotes Robert Sylwester, author of A Celebration of Neurons: An Educators Guide to the Human Brain who states that “emotion is very important to the educative process because it drives attention, which drives learning and memory” and that “emotion-laden classroom activities...can provide the important contextual memory prompts that a student may need in order to recall the information...in the world outside the school” (Sylwester in Hinebach 1999: 20). What better way to tap into a student’s emotions than in the private, personal and shared space of a dialogue journal?

Susan Hinebauch (1999) refers to the dialogue journals she keeps with her students as “readers’/writers’ notebooks”. Hinebauch explains that in order to make her course meaningful she had to create an experience and an atmosphere “that would allow students to discuss themselves and create more personal connections to the material we were studying” (1999:18). As a literature teacher, Hinebauch tries to keep her students as the primary focus when creating the curriculum. She finds that the journals are an outlet for issues that are significant to them, a voice for who they are. Hinebauch has discovered that often students will use the dialogue journal as a safe place to try their hand at writing poetry, a genre many consider to be an effective and intimate means of expressing emotions.

Joy Kreeft Peyton sees the journals as a means for teachers to discover “a great deal not only about their students as human beings, but also about what they are learning, where they may be having trouble, and where future lessons might focus” (1990:91). Through a dialogue journal entry, a teacher may learn of a student’s hopes and dreams, perhaps allowing her to help the student achieve his goals, through encouragement and advice. A teacher may also find out that more than one student is having difficulty grasping the theme of a novel, letting her know that this topic should be revisited in class. A teacher may discover that a student is not correctly using the present progressive tense, prompting her to model the correct usage in her response. So rich and varied is the information that a teacher can learn about a student through the journal entries that it defies description.

In the beginning, it is teachers and students who write in the dialogue journals. Over time, however, these “official” roles start to fade, and the people who are writing are just that, people, not necessarily defined by their role as teacher or student when they write. Vanett and Jurich describe such an experience in their classroom:

By writing autobiographically, we created a context for collaboration, a classroom that became more humanistic and democratic. We could no longer easily categorize ourselves as teachers or students and relate to each other in the prescribed patterns that these roles have historically dictated. Instead, all of us, teachers and students alike, discovered each other as individuals and began to establish new ways of interacting that took into account our varied backgrounds and experiences. Thus personal journal writing fostered an atmosphere that empowered our students and us, resulting in enhanced communication (1990:61).

The positive effect of the dialogue journals is not limited to the student, or to the student-teacher relationship. The teacher herself can benefit greatly from being part of the dialogue journal experience. Jana Stanton describes the great joy and renewal for teachers when they become involved in genuine dialogues with their students (1987:60).

Vanett and Jurich found that they became acutely aware of their own different learning and writing styles when they wrote in the journals along with their students. They explain that their increased awareness made them much more tolerant of their students' differences in and difficulties with the writing process and enabled them to encourage a variety of approaches to writing (1990:58).

Writing along with my students in dialogue journals over the last ten years has had a profound impact on me as a teacher. I have found the sharing of journals to be the key to developing the type of relationship with my students that allows me to teach them best. In Part Two of this paper, I will discuss my own experience with dialogue journals in my French classroom and examine their value as an instructional tool from a personal perspective.

IX

In The Beginning

I began teaching French in 1987, right out of college. Journals didn't make it into my classroom until 1992 when I took a course at North Adams State College taught by Dr. Karel Rose called *Journals: Reading/Writing Opportunities*. It was in this course that I first learned of dialogue journals. It took a while, however, before I became truly convinced of the educational value of the dialogue journals and fully integrated them into my curriculum. Now, I can't imagine teaching without them.

In Dr. Rose's class, I learned about many different types of journals that can be used with students in a classroom setting. In addition to dialogue journals, we discussed personal diaries, literary response journals, learning logs, peer journals, reading journals, and letter writing journals. I have to admit that I was a bit overwhelmed by it all. I could tell that journals were a good thing, but I wasn't quite sure where to start. Would my students benefit more from peer journals or reading journals? How many different types of journals could I realistically ask my students to keep? Could I have them keep one journal, and use it in different ways?

After I finished the course, energized by what I had learned from Dr. Rose, I began experimenting with journals in my classroom. I had some success, but not as much as I had hoped. I didn't have a sense of what, if anything, the students were getting out of the journal writing assignments. Part of the problem was that I was spending most

of my energy coming up with what I thought were really good journal entry topics and very little energy reading what the students wrote. (I rarely let students choose their own journal topics. They needed more structure, I thought.....) The idea was to get them to write, I kept telling myself. It's not about me reading – it's about them writing, so as long as they are writing I'm doing a good thing. I assigned a topic in class and then did a quick check the next day to make sure that the students had in fact written in their journals. I didn't need to take their journals home to do this – I could glance at the journals in class and give credit to those students who had completed the assignment. Generally, I counted each journal entry as one homework grade. The students rarely complained about the journals, but I didn't get a sense that they liked them either. I guessed that some of my students would have preferred taking home worksheets on grammar or vocabulary. “What's the point, if no one's going to read what I wrote?” I could tell that some of them were asking themselves this question as I checked off their completed journal assignments in my grade book.

The following year, still convinced that journals were a good thing but not yet sure how to incorporate them into my curriculum, I decided to have my advanced classes keep personal diaries in French. The assigned journal topics, even though I had put a lot of thought into them, hadn't sparked my students' interest the year before. Perhaps if they had the freedom to write about anything they wanted they would feel more motivated, more inspired, and enjoy the journal writing more. Concerned about privacy (these were personal diaries, after all,) I told my students that they should fold in half any pages that they didn't want me to read. That way, I thought, they would be able to use the journals as an outlet for their innermost and intimate thoughts without worrying about

me reading about things that were private. How good of me to give them this outlet! I was quite pleased with myself, and encouraged the students to go out and find “special” blank books to use as journals. I didn’t want them writing in the same ordinary spiral notebooks they used for other assignments. I wanted them to have beautiful journals which they would be able to treasure forever. I brought in an expensive leather-bound journal to show them what I meant. A week later, about half of my class came in with pretty journals they had purchased in bookstores and gift shops. The other half came in with spiral notebooks and looks in their eyes that could only be interpreted as: “You’re lucky I brought in anything at all, so you’d better not give me any problems.” Determined to make this project work, I let the spiral notebooks slide, and concentrated more on the happy fact that all of my students now had their own personal diary. I had them write *Mon Journal de Français* on the first page.

The personal diary journals were not a complete failure that year. Some of my students, I felt, truly had enjoyed writing in their journals. A few of them might even save their journals for a while instead of tossing them into the big trash bins the custodians put in the hallways during locker cleanout in June. Still, I wasn’t satisfied. Too many students had come to me throughout the year to complain that they didn’t know what to write about in their journals. “I don’t have anything to say!” they insisted. Some of them resorted to using their journals as a log of their daily activities. “I got up. I brushed my teeth. I got dressed. I went to school. I was bored. I talked to my friends, etc.” I had expected entries like this once in a while, but I was seeing them far more often than I liked. There seemed to be very little real thought behind what the students wrote. What it came down to, I decided, was that the journals simply weren’t meaningful

to the students. But why not? This was their chance to write about what *they* wanted. I was stumped.

It took a student in my French III class to open my eyes. “What about you?” he asked. “Do you keep a *Journal de Français*?” I had to admit to him that I didn’t. “Why not?” he insisted on knowing. “I’m too busy,” I lied. The truth was that I had never had much success journaling on my own. Although I had very much enjoyed Dr. Rose’s class on journals, personal diaries didn’t seem to work for me. How could I admit this to my students? Here I was, forcing them to do something that I wasn’t able to do well myself. Why did I assume that it would work for them, or that it would help them with their French?

I decided that it was time for me to try something different. I thought about the personal diaries and tried to pinpoint the reasons that they hadn’t worked for me, and for many of my students. What it came down to this time, I decided, was that it is a normal human reaction to want feedback. We all need reassurance that we exist, that we have been seen, heard, understood. We don’t live in isolation; we are social creatures and interaction with others is a critical part of what it takes to lead a happy, fulfilled life. If I asked my students to write in their journals, then it was my responsibility to read what they wrote and let them know that they had been heard. It was time, at last, to give dialogue journals a shot.

It took no time at all for me to realize that I had found the right type of journal for me and for my students. Dialogue journals were a hit with the vast majority of my students right from the start. And, I felt that even those few who were not too keen on them were still getting very good reading and writing practice. The time that it took me

to respond to all of the journal entries was significant, I admit, but I enjoyed it so much that it didn't feel like work, the way lesson planning or grading tests did. I loved the fact that I was getting to know my students on a much deeper, more personal level. I was excited by the fact that they were playing with the French language in their journals. I was gratified by the fact that they were making an effort to try out new structures in their entries. Most of all, I was touched that they seemed to care so much about me, and about what I had to say. If I had any doubts at all, they were completely erased when several teachers in my school stopped me in the hallway, wanting to know about "these journals" that so many of the kids were talking about.

X

Logistics

Although it took me no time at all to fall in love with the concept of dialogue journals, it did take me several years to work out the details of how to use them most effectively in my classroom. The first year that I used dialogue journals, not wanting to play favorites and not sure which level of student (beginning, intermediate or advanced) would have the most success with the journals, I decided to journal with all of my students in all of my classes. An admirable goal to be sure, but as I quickly discovered, one that was also overwhelming and completely unrealistic.

That year I taught five classes daily and my total student load was eighty-three. Figuring that I would have more time on the weekends, I asked students to turn in their

journals to me every Friday. Eighty-three journals! I had let students choose their own notebooks to use as journals, so they came to me in all shapes and sizes, and were quite bulky and heavy. Loading them into my car took two trips. Of course, transporting the journals was the least of my worries; the time that it took to read the entries and respond to each student was a far more serious concern. It didn't take me long to realize that responding to eighty-three journals in one weekend simply was not feasible. I was able to pull it off for two weekends in a row, but then had to admit defeat. Still, I was excited because the student entries were very interesting to read and I could tell that the students really looked forward to getting their journals back to find out how I had responded to what they had written. We were on to something good; I wasn't ready to give up.

To reduce the time I needed to respond, I had students submit their journals once every two weeks instead of every week. I staggered the classes: my two biggest classes (forty students total) gave me their journals one Friday; the remaining three classes (forty-three students total) gave me their journals the next Friday. My weekends were still full of reading and responding, but I was able to keep up this pace for a few months. After a while, however, I started to worry that I was burning out. Forty thoughtful, personal and meaningful responses on a weekly basis was taking its toll. It was still too much. So, during the second half of the year, I divided my students into three groups, and had each group submit journals once every three weeks. This meant that I was taking home about twenty-five journals every weekend, which was manageable. I wasn't completely happy about this, though, because three weeks is a long time to go in between journal entries. There had to be a better way.

That summer I thought a lot about what had worked with the journals and what hadn't worked. I racked my brains for strategies that would improve the journaling experience for me and for my students. The light bulb clicked on sometime in July while I was out to dinner at an elegant restaurant with a few friends. "What I like about this place," one of my friends remarked, "is that food is all about quality, not quantity." "You're right," I agreed. And I added, "We should be striving for quality in all aspects of our lives, not just our food. We try to do too much." Our conversation continued along the same vein for a few minutes before switching to a different topic. That night, as I was replaying the evening's conversations in my head, the root of my journal problem became clear to me: I was trying to do too much! Why was I trying to journal with ALL of my students? Sure, it would be nice, but was it really necessary, or realistic? It occurred to me then that if I limited the journals to two of my classes, the turn-around time for the journals would be quicker, the students (and I) could write in the journals more often, I would not feel overwhelmed by too many journals coming in at once, and the entire quality of the experience would be heightened.

It wasn't difficult for me to decide with which two of my five classes to use the dialogue journals. Although I had enjoyed the short and simple written conversations I had had with my beginning-level students, it was with the advanced students that I saw the greatest potential for the development of writing skills through journaling. It was clear to me that my two upper-level classes, French III and the combined French IV/V, would be the best place to concentrate with the journals.

The fact that I am the only French teacher in a small school also helped me make the decision to limit the journals to my two upper-level classes. For those students who

begin their study of French in seventh grade and then continue with French through all four years of high school, I am their French teacher for six years in a row! It is difficult for me to stay fresh and new for these students, and I am constantly seeking ways to keep their experience with me from becoming routine and predictable. I figured that the dialogue journals would be something for the younger students to look forward to, to work up to. Happily, I figured right.

Now that I have been using dialogue journals for many years with my upper-level classes, my younger students learn about the journals from the older students, and what they hear is generally very positive. When my French I and French II students ask me when they will get to use the dialogue journals, I explain that they will have their chance when they are in French III, if they chose to continue on to French III, that is. They accept this and look forward to the experience. Although I didn't plan it deliberately, the journals have become a motivating factor for students to continue their language study. The dialogue journals, in the eyes of the students, have become a sort of reward, or perk, for sticking with French for so many years.

Using the dialogue journals with two classes works very well for me; I have been happy with this arrangement for the last six years. I generally have between fifteen to twenty-five journals to work with, depending on enrollment. Last year I corresponded with eighteen students on a weekly basis over the course of the year. I have learned that it works best for me to have the journals come in on different days. For example, last year I had twelve students in my combined French IV/V class; their journals were due on Fridays and I returned the journals to the students by Monday or Tuesday of the following week. My French III class was small, made up of only six students. Their

journals were due on Mondays and I usually had them back to the students by Thursday or Friday of the same week. Once in a while, if we had a lot going on, we would skip a week of journaling. One of the most important rules that I have learned is that flexibility is critical. While it is important to have a system for the collection of the journals, it is just as important to be able to let the system slide, or be adjusted, depending on outside factors. Yes, students do need structure, but they are not robots. A change of pace is good once in a while. From time to time I try to throw in something a little different. For example, once I asked students to cut out a picture from a magazine of a piece of clothing they liked, glue it into their journal and then tell me why they liked it. I did the same in my response. Another time I had the students submit a journal entry that had no words, only pictures or symbols. Maybe this didn't have a whole lot to do with French, but it was fun, and it kept the journals from getting too routine.

Another thing that I have learned about the logistics of dialogue journals is that bigger is not better. It helps to use notebooks that are light-weight, slim, and easily transportable. I would rather a student go through two or three small notebooks in one year than have him carry around a larger and heavier journal. My school supplies small beige notebooks that measure seventeen by twenty-one centimeters, are four millimeters thick and weigh only three ounces. It is very easy for me to slip five or ten of these into my school bag, or even my purse. I have taken to carrying dialogue journals around when I am in town running errands and even on short trips. It is amazing how much responding I have been able to get done while waiting for a doctor's appointment, or for an oil filter to be changed, or for a movie to start.

Taking Risks vs. Playing it Safe

My French students tend to fall into two categories: those who take risks when they write, and those who prefer to play it safe. This is a generalization, I admit, but the two categories of students definitely exist to a certain degree. The risk-takers on the far end of the spectrum tend to be outgoing, confident writers in English with a lot to say. They become quickly frustrated with what they consider the “babyish” vocabulary and grammar taught in beginning French classes. Risk-takers want to express themselves in French as well as they do in English, and see no reason why they shouldn’t try to do just that. They spend a lot of time looking up words in English-French dictionaries, words that they haven’t learned in class yet. Sometimes risk-takers write in English first, and then try to translate word-for-word in French. The writing of risk-takers is often sophisticated in intent of thought, but unintelligible in terms of structure.

At the other end of the spectrum are the students who are acutely aware that their skills in French are far inferior to their skills in English, and who are very afraid of making mistakes when they write in French. These students tend to worry much less about what they have to say than about the grammatical correctness of their sentences. Sometimes I have to remind these students that there is no point to learning a language if you don’t use it so say something! Students who play it safe sometimes write very repetitious sentences in list form. There is often little attempt at making the sentences flow by using varied sentence structures and transitions. These students work with what they know, but do not stretch to take what they know to the next level. They prefer to

write about the concrete than the abstract and avoid critical thinking in their compositions.

I have found that dialogue journals can help students at both ends of the risk/safety spectrum, as well as the students who are somewhere in between. The fact that dialogue journals work for just about all of my students is one of the biggest reasons that I am convinced that it is worth taking the time to incorporate dialogue journals into the curriculum of a second language classroom

Take for example, a student I had two years ago in French III, Melissa. Melissa is a bright, curious and motivated student who is known at our school for being artistic, creative and individualistic. Melissa is very involved in the performing and creative arts; she prides herself on being a free spirit, unafraid of appearing different. Melissa was very happy to begin the study of literature in French III, and she eagerly tore through all of the readings I assigned. She was an active participant in group discussions and speaking activities. Grammar interested Melissa less, but she was aware that grammar was a tool which would help her to express herself, and so she gave it her best shot.

When I assigned compositions that were based on the literature we were reading, Melissa approached the task enthusiastically and seriously. She had always done well in her English classes and loved to tackle topics such as character motivation and thematic development. She loved to analyze literature and write about her own thoughts and reactions to the text. Having enjoyed success with this type of writing in her English classes, Melissa set out to do the same thing in French III. This is where she encountered problems in her writing. Determined to submit what she considered a quality piece of writing, Melissa tried to write in French exactly what she would have written in English.

To Melissa, the quality of the writing lay in the content, not the structure, which she considered far less important. Unfortunately, when I read Melissa's compositions I could barely understand what she was trying to say.

One day Melissa stayed after class to discuss a poor grade she had received on a composition due to unintelligibility. I explained to her that although I could tell that her ideas were good, I had extreme difficulty making sense of her sentences. I suggested that she try to simplify, and that she not write out the composition in English before-hand. I also suggested that she write to me about the composition topic in her dialogue journal before she tackled the formal assignment. This turned out to be the best piece of advice I could have given.

When I assigned the next reading, a poem by Jacques Prévert, Melissa immediately started writing about the poem to me in her dialogue journal. Because the journal entries were not formal or graded, I believe that this gave Melissa the freedom she needed to sort out her thoughts without worrying about packaging them into a sophisticated piece of literary analysis. When I responded to Melissa, I used vocabulary that was new to her, but that she could understand in context. Melissa and I dialogued back-and-forth three times about the poem before I assigned the class a composition based on the same poem. Thanks to our journaling, Melissa had the tools she needed to put together a well-written composition that met her standards of quality content and my standards of intelligibility. Much of what Melissa had written in her journal made its way into the composition, but the writing was more clear and organized. I was also pleased to notice that Melissa had used quite of the bit of the new vocabulary that I had introduced

in my entries. Melissa continued to use her dialogue journal this way for the rest of the year, as a bridge between her thoughts on a text and her formal writing.

Todd, a student I had in last year's French III class, also learned to use his dialogue journal as a means to improve his formal writing, but in a very different way from Melissa. Todd is a perfectionist. He was always the last student in his class to hand in a quiz or a test, not because he was slow, but because he insisted on checking it three or four times for possible errors. He would come up to me several times during the quiz just to make sure that he had not misunderstood the instructions. Todd hated mistakes, and he very rarely made them. Todd's grades on tests for grammar and vocabulary were usually near perfect, and he almost always scored the highest mark in the class.

Todd, well aware of his limited proficiency in French, used only vocabulary and structures he was sure he had mastered when he wrote compositions. To Todd, any kind of grammar or spelling mistake was an indication of weakness, and he avoided them at all costs. He kept his sentences as simple as possible and it did not seem to matter to him that he kept repeating the same subject-verb-object structure over and over. I told him that he needed to try and write at a French III level, not a French I level, but to no avail. I could not get Todd to use anything other than the most basic vocabulary and grammar when he wrote. Todd was one of the brightest students in the class and he had a very sharp intellect, but his sophistication of thought was not at all reflected in what he wrote or how he wrote. The content of his writing did not seem to matter to him nearly as much as the need to avoid structural errors. I was frustrated because I knew that Todd had the ability to write better compositions; Todd was frustrated because even though he made

virtually no mistakes when he wrote, his grades were still mediocre because he was playing it too safe.

As I had done with Melissa, I suggested to Todd that he use his dialogue journal as a place to brainstorm ideas for his compositions before sitting down to write more formal assignments. The fact that the journals were not graded on structure was the key which allowed Todd to let go and experiment with the French language. In his journal entries, Todd's command of French was actually quite good and he didn't make as many mistakes as he thought he would. Todd hadn't given himself enough credit, and it was through the journals that I was able to show him how much he knew and prove to him that he was ready to bring his writing to the next level. Todd did not hold back anything in the content of his journal entries; he wrote about the literature we were reading with passion and from the heart. He used the safety of the pages of his journal to share with me how he connected personally with the text. I met with Todd after school one day and together we looked at what he had written in his journal. I pointed out sections that were well-written at a high level of proficiency, as well as sophisticated in thought. "This, Todd, is what I want to see in your formal writing" I explained. From then on Todd's writing was much more indicative of his true ability; the journal-writing had played a big part in helping him get there.

XII

Gifted and Special Needs Students

Mount Everett Regional, the high school where I teach, serves a very wide range of students. We are a comprehensive high school in the truest sense of the word. We are also very small, with graduating classes made up of between fifty and seventy students. Because of our size, multiple sections of courses are almost non-existent. This means that there is only one section each of French I, French II, etc. Our classes are heterogeneously grouped and there is no tracking. As a result, I teach students who have a very wide range of abilities and motivation, and I teach them all at the same time. Differentiated instruction is not simply a buzzword at Mount Everett – it is a means of teacher survival.

In an attempt to reach all of my students, I vary my instructional strategies often, and provide students with a wide variety of ways in which to practice their newfound language skills. I remind myself daily that what works for one student doesn't necessarily work for another. Dialogue journals, however, at least in my experience, are successful with almost all students, regardless of their level of ability. The journal provides each student with reading and writing practice that is geared specifically to his proficiency level. It is not difficult at all for me to write some responses that are designed to challenge the gifted students and others that are comprehensible to the students with learning disabilities. The beauty of the dialogue journals is that each student gets his very own text to read, tailored to his particular level of proficiency, level of ability and areas of interest.

In French III last year, Brittany was one of my favorite students. Identified as a student with special needs, Brittany had an IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) which all of her teachers were asked to follow. Brittany had particular difficulty with writing and spelling. No doubt the hardest worker in the class, Brittany spent hours studying for quizzes and tests. It broke my heart that she very rarely received a passing grade, so poor was her ability to remember the vocabulary and structures which were introduced in class. Still, Brittany loved French class and always entered the room with a smile on her face.

Brittany's dialogue journal meant a lot to her. This was a safe place for her to have fun with the French she knew, without worrying about whether she would pass or fail. In fact, Brittany often received the highest grade in the class on her journal because she wrote so much, so often, and with so much passion. Her entries were not always easy to read, I must admit, so garbled was her written language. With some effort, though, I could usually manage to sift through the misspellings and confusing word order to get to the root of her intended text. Brittany wrote and wrote and wrote. I wish that I could say that her writing improved over time, but I am afraid that it didn't. What did grow strong, however, was Brittany's love of French, her desire to learn, and her eagerness to participate as a caring individual in a meaningful relationship. Brittany's experience in my class was a positive one in many respects, despite her struggle with language skills. The dialogue journal, I am convinced, played a critical role in enabling Brittany to get as much out of the class as she did.

Claire was a tenth grade student I taught four years ago in French III. An extremely bright girl with a natural gift for languages, Claire hated to be bored. Claire

had taken French I with me in ninth grade; at the end of that year I recommended that she skip French II and enroll in French III instead, so high was her ability. I had never before, and have never since, worked with a student with such a natural talent for learning languages. Claire possessed an uncanny ability to recall even the subtlest nuances of the language that she saw or heard regardless of whether they were formally introduced in class or in the text. Her pronunciation was near native and the flow of her language, both when she spoke and when she wrote, was natural and smooth. Her active vocabulary, helped along by what seemed to be a photographic memory, expanded at a rapid rate. Keeping Claire challenged was no easy feat in a French III class made up of students whose level of proficiency was nowhere near Claire's.

The dialogue journal was a place where Claire could go as far as she wanted with her natural talent with nothing to get in her way. Claire's entries were always very long and full of questions. She wanted to know about verb tenses and alternate spellings and French slang and cultural differences among the many francophone countries. In my responses I would answer her questions or suggest where she might go to research the topic herself. We shared Internet web sites, recipes and tips on music and film. I spent more time responding to Claire than I did to my other students that year, but that was a matter of personal choice. I realized that it was unusual for a teacher at Mount Everett to work with such a gifted student, and I was happy to have the opportunity. The extra time I spent with Claire was very exciting as well as professionally and personally rewarding. Claire ended up leaving our school at the end of her sophomore year to attend a pre-college for gifted teenagers.

When Claire left I remember thinking to myself that I was glad that I hadn't encountered her in the beginning of my teacher career when I was inexperienced and owned a much smaller "tool box" of instructional strategies. If I had met Claire in my first few years of teaching, I thought, I wouldn't have known about dialogue journals and would have missed out on getting to know this unusual girl through our written exchanges. The dialogue journals, because we took them home with us, provided Claire and me with as much time as we wanted for reading and writing practice while at the same time feeding Claire's hunger for knowledge about French language and culture. During class I did not spend more time with Claire than with any of the other French III students; and, neither one of us had the time to meet after school on a regular basis. Yet, because of the dialogue journal I didn't worry about holding Claire back. I knew that I was doing the best that I could, given the circumstances, to help her reach her potential in French. I don't think that I would have been able to serve Claire's needs nearly as effectively if it hadn't been for the dialogue journal.

CONCLUSION

The list of reasons to incorporate dialogue journals into the second language classroom is long and varied. Two of the most important of these reasons, in my opinion, are summed up in the title of this paper, *Making Connections with Dialogue Journals*. Through dialogue journals, teachers and students are able to make two kinds connections that may not have been otherwise possible in a traditional classroom setting.

The first of these is the human connection between student and teacher. At the end of the year, when I look out at the faces of my students in a classroom of twenty, I take much gratification from knowing that I have connected with each and every one of them in a very special way. This personal connection is a big part of the reason that I enjoy my job so much and plan on teaching until I retire. I strongly feel that the better a teacher knows her students, the better she understands their hopes, dreams, questions, fears and frustrations, the more effective her teaching will be. The time constraints in a public school are very real, and many teachers see over one hundred students each day. For many teachers like myself, there simply isn't time during the class period to foster relationships the way we would like. The dialogue journals give us that precious extra time we need to build meaningful relationships with all of our students.

The second connection is made up of the many ways that dialogue journals help students make connections related to the language they are learning as they develop their proficiency in writing and reading. Through their journals, students are able to make connections between the grammar lessons from class and the structures they see in their teacher's responses. They also make connections between the tools of language, grammar and vocabulary, and the purpose of language, meaningful communication. Students discover the link between the writing they do in their journals and the writing they produce for more formal assignments. Through their journals, students are made aware of the fact that the more they write, the more their skills improve. Dialogue journals provide a way for students to discover, on their own, that a second language is a wonderful means to self-expression for a multitude of purposes.

APPENDIX A

EXPECTATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS HANDOUT FOR DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN AN INTERMEDIATE LEVEL FRENCH CLASS

Dialogue Journals

In French III/IV this year, you will keep a dialogue journal. A dialogue journal is a written conversation between you and me. You will write to me in your journal, and I will respond. We can write about whatever we feel like. You must write in French – absolutely NO ENGLISH is allowed. If you get really stuck, it's OK to draw a picture.

You will receive a test grade for your dialogue journal each quarter. The grade will be based on how well you meet the given requirements for length and number of entries. To start off, I would like your entries to be a minimum of eight sentences each and I will expect you to write once a week. I will let you know specific due dates each week.

I will not correct your journal entries for grammar and spelling. The goal in a dialogue journal is for you to write an entry that I am able to understand. In other words, I will be concentrating on the content, not the form, of what you write. You will not be marked down for spelling and grammar mistakes. (We will focus on grammar and spelling in your formal compositions.) Try to ask me at least one question in each entry.

For your first entry, why don't you tell me about one or several things that you like to do when you are not in school, things that you do during vacations, on weekends, or after school.

APPENDIX B

EXPECTATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS HANDOUT FOR DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN AN ADVANCED LEVEL FRENCH CLASS

Les Journaux de Dialogues Écrits

Cette année, en cours de Français IV/V, vous allez participer à une conversation écrite, avec moi, qui durera toute l'année. Chaque'un de vous recevra un journal dans lequel nous écrirons. Vous pouvez écrire sur n'importe quel sujet. Je ne corrigerai pas vos erreurs de grammaire ni d'orthographe; ce qui est important dans les journaux est le *contenu* de ce que vous écrivez. (Nous travaillerons avec la grammaire et l'orthographe quand vous écrivez les compositions.) La seule règle est que vous ne pouvez pas utiliser l'anglais, même pas un mot. Votre journal comptera comme un examen chaque quartier. La note sera basée sur la longueur et le nombre d'écritures que vous faites. Vous devez écrire au moins une fois par semaine; je vous dirai chaque semaine le jour que je vais ramasser les journaux. Pour commencer, vous devez écrire un minimum de huit phrases chaque fois que vous écrivez. Posez-moi au moins une question chaque fois que vous écrivez.

Pour votre première écriture, parlez-moi de deux choses que vous avez faites cet été – une chose agréable et une chose désagréable.

Cette première écriture est pour vendredi le 30 août.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albertini, John. "Coherence in Deaf Students' Writing." In Joy Kreeft Peyton, 1990. pp.125-132.
- Atwell, Nancie. "Building a Dining Room Table: Dialogue Journals About Reading." In Toby Fulwiler, 1987. pp.157-170.
- Cook, Vivian. "Krashen's Input Hypothesis Model of L2 Learning." Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition. <<http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~vcook/krashen.htm>>
- Delett, Jennifer. "Using journals and logs in the foreign language classroom." NCLRC Language Resource. Vol.2, No.6. 21 July 2002. <<http://www.cal.org/nclrc/caidl26.htm>>
- Elbow, Peter. "Teaching Two Kinds of Thinking by Teaching Writing." Embracing Contraries. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. pp.54-63.
- Fish, Tom and Perkins, Jennifer. "Louise Rosenblatt." The Literary Criticism Web. July 28, 1999. <<http://cumber.edu/litcritweb/bios/rosenblatt.htm>>
- Fulwiler, Toby, ed. The Journal Book. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1987.
- Graybeal, Jean. "The Team Journal." In Toby Fulwiler, 1987. pp.306-311.
- Hinebauch, Susan. "Coming of Age: Making Connections." Voices from the Middle. Volume 7, Number 1. September 1999. pp.17-23.
- Krashen, Stephen. Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. English Language Teaching Series. London: Prentice-Hall International (UK) Ltd., 1981.
- Krashen, Stephen. The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications. Longman Press, 1985.
- Krashen, Stephen and Terrell, Tracey. The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the

- Classroom. Hayward, CA: Alemany Press, 1983.
- Meath-Lang, Bonnie. "The Dialogue Journal: Reconceiving Curriculum and Teaching." In Joy Kreeft Peyton, 1990. pp.3-20.
- Peyton, Joy Kreeft, ed. Students and Teachers Writing Together: Perspectives on Journal Writing. Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc., 1990.
- Peyton, Joy Kreeft. "Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy." ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, April 1998. <<http://www.cal.org/ericcll/digest/peyton01.html>>
- Peyton, Joy Kreeft and Staton, Jana. Dialogue Journals in the Multilingual Classroom. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1993.
- Pica, Theresa. "Questions from the language classroom: Research perspectives." TESOL Quarterly, 28. 1994. pp.49-79.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. Literature as Exploration. 1938. New York: MLA, 1983.
- Rosenblatt, Louise. The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.
- Sandler, Karen Wiley. "Letting them write when they can't even talk? Writing as discovery in the foreign language classroom." In Toby Fulwiler, 1987. pp.312-320.
- Schmidt, R.W., and Frota, S.N. "Interaction, acculturation, and the acquisition of communicative competence: A case study of an adult." In Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition. Ed. N. Wolfson and E. Judd. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1986. pp.137-174.
- Schütz, Ricardo. "Vygotsky and Language Acquisition." English Made in Brazil. 3 March, 2002. <<http://www.sk.com.br/sk-vygot.html>>
- Staton, Jana. "The Power of Responding in Dialogue Journals." In The Journal Book. Ed. Toby Fulwiler. New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1987. pp.47-63.
- Vanett, Lauren, and Jurich, Donna. "The Missing Link: Connecting Journal Writing to Academic Writing." In Students and Teachers Writing Together. Ed. Joy Kreeft Peyton. Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc., 1990. pp.21-34.
- Vygotsky, L.S. Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Walworth, Margaret. "Interactive Teaching of Reading: a Model." In Students and Teachers Writing Together. Ed. Joy Kreeft Peyton. Alexandria, VA: TESOL, Inc. 1990.

Wilson, Reid. "A Summary of Stephen Krashen's 'Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition.'" Language Impact. December 29, 2002. <<http://www.languageimpact.com/articles/rw/krashenbk.htm>>

Zamel, Vivian. "Responding to Student Writing." TESOL Quarterly, 1985, Volume 19, pp.79-101.