Reading and Responding: Using Journals

Levels
Any

Aims
Promote second language development
Contribute to students' overall education

Class Time
No set time

Preparation Time
No set time

Resources
Any reading materials
Journals
Guidelines

Second and foreign language reading activities can be much more than language teaching tools. They can, additionally, motivate student interest in foreign language and culture and trigger explorations into self that contribute to intellectual and personal growth. Indeed, I believe that the most successful classroom reading activities benefit students in at least these two ways: by promoting second language development and by contributing to students' overall education. Students who read with comprehension and fluency, in a first or a second language, but who do not reflect on what they read in ways that are personally meaningful, are neglecting one of the most powerful and long-lasting benefits of reading. Reading, in other words, can involve more than comprehension. It may also include responding—through thought, talk, and writing—in ways that promote educational and intellectual growth.

I'd like to discuss just one of those ways of responding—writing—with the understanding that thinking and talk are necessarily part of the total process when we design reading activities: Students should think, talk, and write about what they read, before, during, and after. But writing has the special capacity to help students push their thinking deeply and to foster meaningful learning (Langer & Applebee, 1987). It does this in part by providing them with time for reflection as well as something to reflect on. It also provides a language and thought outlet—a voice, as it were—for the silent student.

Procedure

1. Select readings that are built around an issue that can provoke interest, even if the specifics of the topic do not suit all students equally. Consider why you are asking students to read something. One valu-

able purpose consists of reading to learn something about oneself and one's culture. If this is one of our purposes, we will not so easily fall back into comfortable habits of asking students to read in order to remember irrelevant information from a text just to show us that they can do reading skills exercises and activities. If the purpose is to help students engage with text as a way to learn about themselves, the problem of selecting texts becomes easier. We look for texts that spark issues that relate to our particular group of students.

2. Prepare journal guidelines. Once students have begun to think about an issue in ways that are relevant to their own lives, they are ready to read and respond to the reading. Responding by writing a journal requires some guidance from teachers if students have not written journals before. Students need to understand, for example, that a reading response journal is not a retelling of what the text was about. In my journal requirements, I tell students they don't even need to summarize or take notes unless they want to for their own purposes. This is because I want them to liberate themselves from the long-standing tradition, in Japan at least, of never having to go beyond learning what's in the text.

   Journal writing guidelines, then, conveyed in writing, in discussion and through examples of the teacher's own journal or the journals of previous students, should be prepared carefully and reinforced as students write their first journals. A set of good handouts is helpful, one general and one specific to particular readings.

3. Prepare general guidelines. General guidelines should describe the overall purpose of journal writing that is done in response to reading (or to film, discussion, and lecture, for that matter) and set out the parameters of the task for the particular class. For example, I always write in my guidelines what the minimum length (in words) should be, how often journals have to be turned in, and what my criteria are for evaluating them because individual journals do not get a grade. I also remind them to keep all journals in a folder so that they can periodically go back over them and monitor change in their language and thinking.

   I prepare students not to receive much feedback on language, assuring them that this will take place elsewhere in the course, and

try to convey a sense of what the journal writing literature says about the value of continuous extensive writing (hence the length requirement) for language development and for depth of thinking. I then describe more specifically what students should do in their journals. Here is an excerpt from the general guidelines for the advanced students (a simpler version is prepared for the lower levels):

What should you do in your journals? You should respond to issues and ideas from your readings. Please don't tell what the readings are about, except to make it clear which reading and which idea from it you are talking about. Respond to ideas in the readings that strike you as interesting, important, personally relevant, and so on. Here are some things you can do in your journals:

- Write about an event, issue, or idea in the reading that strikes you as important, interesting, or surprising. Tell why it is so, if possible.
- Relate what you read to something in your own life, experience, or culture.
- Explore an issue by asking questions about it in writing and trying out several different answers or solutions. It's OK to end with questions! Getting educated, after all, is partly a matter of learning how to ask better and better questions.
- Tell why you think that aspects of a reading were good or bad. Explain why if possible.
- Evaluate an issue in your own life or culture that is similar to an issue in a reading.
- Express opinions, doubts, confusions, and convictions that come to your mind as you think about what you have read. Watch and write about how these change over time.

These general journal guidelines may be all that is needed, depending on the experience of students with journal writing and on the kinds of readings that a class is doing. In some cases, such as with students who have not written journals before or in the case of particularly difficult readings, it may be useful to prepare specific journal writing guidelines.

4. Prepare specific guidelines. Specific written guidelines can help orient students to the task of journal writing and can allow teachers to guide students through the issues in texts that are too difficult for them to read on their own without feeling defeated. In early journal guidelines, for my advanced students, I prepared two kinds of questions that were designed to achieve both these purposes: "questions at the level of information" and "questions at the level of response."

   Questions at the level of information help students skip over details and focus on key issues in texts that are especially long or difficult. Long and difficult texts should not necessarily be avoided, in other words, because once out of our classes, this is what students will encounter, especially if they continue using their second language to further their education. Such questions should be clearly marked on handouts as information questions and not response questions. An example from the readings on intelligence with the advanced Japanese students draws students' attention to the issue of how people in different cultures and professions decide who is intelligent and who is not. From a chapter of Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* are the following journal guide questions at the level of information. Note that the questions themselves are important sources of collected vocabulary that we would expect to appear in students' journals later and that they encapsulate some of the main ideas from the readings:

   - Gould tells us that Louis Agassi had no data to support his theory about the inferiority of Blacks. What kinds of data ("empirical evidence") did Samuel George Morton have? How did he measure cranial capacity?
   - Morton was considered an excellent scientist in the mid 1800s because his methods of analyzing his data were considered to be very objective and very precise (and therefore very fair and unbiased). However, Gould says that Morton used his data to prove a view that he already held about the intelligence of different races. Gould was thus skeptical about Morton's findings. What did he do?
   - What did Gould discover about Morton's analysis? (How did Morton manage to "fudge" his data?)

Questions at the level of response also emerge out of the readings, but ask students to engage with an issue, not with textual facts, in personally meaningful ways and at some depth. From the same reading in *The Mismeasure of Man*, I devised the following response-level questions:

- Imagine that you are a scientist in 1850. Somebody told you about the work of Samuel George Morton and what he was trying to prove. You do not like the fact that he had already decided which races were superior to others, so you decide to analyze the same 600 skulls that he did, but without a preconceived idea, to the extent possible. How would you try to measure these skulls so that your measurements were not biased?
- In general, what are the Japanese people's opinions about scientists? Do they tend to believe what scientists say? To be skeptical of what they say? What is your own opinion?

In short, these two kinds of questions help students distinguish between two very different ways of interacting with text. Both are important, but the personal responses will stimulate interest and depth of thinking in ways that information questions do not. When the specific information fades from memory, the issue will still be there if students have made it their own.

5. Respond to journals. Journals to which teachers do not respond may nevertheless be valuable in the sense that students have read, thought, written at length, and dealt with language and with issues. But a personal response from a teacher, no matter how minimal, sets up a communication that students find more rewarding than many other kinds of less personal interactions in a language class. Yet it is the case that most of us have so little time that the thought of reading and responding to 50 or 100 journals every week or two boggles the mind. There are shortcuts as well as compromises and compensations.

   The first shortcut/compromise involves great will power on the part of teachers to resist marking language errors. The second involves the will power to resist commenting on every idea or even every paper. For example, I often just put a check or line next to a passage that I find particularly interesting so that students know I have

attended to it. The third involves developing the skill to make most comments brief but meaningful for the student (not just *good* in the margin, but *I agree,* or *Why/How?* or *Interesting!*) and occasionally astounding some of them with a lengthy inquiry-type response of your own. Another compromise can be to write your own journal back to the students—one lengthy response to everyone—in which you touch on the issues raised by them in their journals. Another idea, which should be handled delicately because of the personal nature of some of the journals, is peer reading and oral or written response. A compromise on the question of linguistic feedback, which some students may persist in requesting, is to extract passages anonymously from the journals and write them on an overhead to be reviewed later for lexical, grammatical, and stylistic improvements.

But it may be that teachers will find that reading journals is not as tedious as they expected and that it comes to be a central aspect of their interaction with students. I have found that the labor-intensive nature of responding to journals is usually well worth the time. I learn more about the students' language ability, personalities, and interests than I ever could without journals (I have 60–100 students a semester), am able to design subsequent classes that fit their needs and interests, and receive invaluable feedback on class activities. Furthermore, it is exciting to watch a young mind explore an issue never before explored and write more English than he or she has ever before written, much to the writer's amazement and delight. I often find that a lengthy response happens rather effortlessly as I become caught up in an interesting idea.

The ways in which a teacher responds will influence students' subsequent journal efforts, the quality of their thinking, their engagement with subsequent readings, and their personal relationship with teachers. Teachers have the capacity, without making lengthy responses to every student's journal every time, of setting up a regular and meaningful communication with students that will help them understand what it means to respond thoughtfully to a text and why reading and responding can become a language class activity that they can "own."

6. Read and respond. This technique for teaching reading, perhaps unfortunately, cannot easily be set down and standardized in textbook form. To work well, readings, issues, discussion activities, journal requirements, and types of teacher responses must be adapted anew with each new class.

   With some groups, teachers may wish to help students liberate their thinking—lose their fear of making linguistic errors and of exploring heretofore unimagined original thoughts. With other groups, teachers may wish to help students reflect on language, issues, and themselves in more systematic, less free-for-all ways. Moreover, although I have focused on journal writing here, responding to reading can and should take many forms—oral, written, even artistic—with the result that the total picture in a specific classroom is complex, interactive, and unique to that classroom.

Caveats and Options

1. For additional ideas on communicative prereading activities, see Casanave (1986) and Casanave and Williams (1987).
2. A good source book for teachers unfamiliar with journal writing is Fulwiler (1987).
3. I have explored some of these aspects of journal writing in Casanave (1992).

References and Further Reading

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