

The Dialogue Journal: A Method of Improving Cross-Cultural Reading Comprehension

Margaret S. Steffensen

Illinois State University

This paper outlines the uses of dialogue journals in different areas, then describes how they can be used to improve cultural understanding on the part of L2 students reading English texts requiring knowledge of American cultural norms.

INTRODUCTION

A significant problem for ESL students is reading texts in which the cultural background knowledge and assumptions are different from their own. There is now substantial evidence that when cultural background assumptions and constructs are missing, reading can become a time-consuming, laborious and unsatisfactory enterprise (Steffensen, Joag-dev, and Anderson 1979; Carrell and Eisterhold 1983; Barnitz 1986). The absence of the cognitive structures, or schemata, for incorporating information during the reading process can cause interference powerful enough to affect even the understanding of grammatical structures by native speakers of the language (Steffensen 1986).

However, there are compelling reasons why students and their teachers may be interested in culturally 'loaded' reading materials. They can be the means for acquiring information for social survival. They are an avenue for understanding the motives and values underlying behaviors in the target culture that the students observe but only partially understand. For students who have been confined to ESL curricula, literature provides intellectual stimulation through its content, which may range from local manifestations of culture to universal issues and moral precepts. There is exposure to a diversity of linguistic forms and nuances of meaning that are not normally a part of their instruction. Finally, for those teachers who see an inherent link between literature and language, culturally-dependent materials are an important component of the syllabus.

The dialogue journal, a long-term written conversation between student and teacher, is a means of reconciling these two apparently opposing considerations; the difficulty of understanding, remembering and recalling text information when it is based on an unfamiliar culture and the interest and need to read about that

Margaret S. STEFFENSEN is associate professor of sociolinguistics in the Department of English, Illinois State University. A member of the executive board of Illinois TESOL/Bilingual Education, she has published in the areas of cross-cultural reading, non-standard dialects, and language acquisition. Her field work includes two periods at an Aboriginal settlement in the Northern Territory, Australia and a longitudinal study of the acquisition of Black English Vernacular. She may be contacted at the Department of English, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61761, USA.

unfamiliar culture. Although rather new, this method has been used for a variety of students, from ESL elementary (Murray 1985; Reed 1986) to university level (Gutstein 1986), the hearing impaired (Shuy 1985; Station 1985; Walworth 1985) and teachers (Herbert 1985). It has been credited with improving fluency in writing (Seelevag 1986), reading comprehension (Shuy 1985; Walworth 1985), and composing skills (Farr and Janda 1985; Peyton, in press). There is evidence that when the dialogue journal focuses on use and the communicative intent of the message rather than usage, the control of grammatical morphemes improves (Peyton 1986). With such a wide and effective variety of applications, the dialogue journal becomes a powerful tool in the ESL classroom.

Walworth (1985) first demonstrated the advantages of using the dialogue journal to discuss literature. Her hearing-impaired subjects were familiar with the culture but needed help in understanding the literature they were reading. This was provided through the instructor's entries. In addition, Walworth points out that a novel provides a rich source for student commentaries and has the advantage of forestalling such vapid journal entries as, "How I spent last Saturday at the shopping mall."

In the present study, Walworth's directed dialogue journal was adapted for an ESL population as a way of explicating the culture and fostering higher level reading and composing skills. Guidelines for using the method and some of its benefits will be discussed.

THE PROJECT

A class of intermediate ESL students enrolled in a composition course at a large Midwestern university participated in the project. Three days every week were devoted to composition using the process approach, which emphasizes prewriting activities, addressing a specific audience, and revising extensively on the basis of peer and instructor reviews.

The class spent Tuesdays and Thursdays reading one of the novels selected for its cultural content and writing about it in their journals, which were collected weekly. Either my graduate assistant or I wrote a response in the journals, which were returned at following session.

The first novel the students read was William Maxwell's (1980) *So Long, See You Tomorrow (SLSYT)*, which revolves around two principal events: the death of the narrator's mother and an adulterous relationship involving two farm families that results in a murder and a suicide. Because the setting was the area in which the subjects were living, the novel provided a description of both the physical surroundings and activities and attitudes that still persist in the Midwest: the importance of home, family, and friendship; the value of work, religion, and the

land; differences in rural and urban cultures; and attitudes towards divorce and death. Each of these topics represented major differences from the cultures of at least some of the students. It was anticipated that the novel would present facets of the culture the students were experiencing and would provide a means of initiating a conversation about behaviors and customs the students found puzzling. The role of the instructor was to be that of a “cultural negotiator”, explaining text and context.

The second novel chosen was *Early Autumn (EA)* by Robert B. Parker (1981). A popular detective story which has been serialized for television, the setting is present day Boston. As in the Maxwell novel, there is a divorce, but also a custody fight and kidnapping. Besides providing a perspective on an urban community, this novel shows how certain traditional behaviors have evolved in today’s society.

Some teachers object to individualizing instruction with a dialogue journal because they expect it to entail a major time commitment. However, writing journal responses took about two and one-half to three hours each week. No other teaching or preparation time was needed for the Tuesday/Thursday sessions.

Another objection that instructors occasionally raise is that they are not fully competent to discuss their own culture, but this is not a serious obstacle. The culture of any group is complex and subject to varying interpretations. From their instructor, students receive one perspective on the social system which they are attempting to understand. While this viewpoint may not always reflect a consensus,¹ it will be more accurate than the student’s which are likely to be incomplete or incorrect. Furthermore, the author is also a participant in the conversation, and what is presented in the novel will constrain the instructor’s interpretation as well as the student’s.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE METHOD

The instructions given during the first class were deliberately vague. I suggested that the students read for about thirty minutes, then write their reactions or pose questions about their reading. Various types of responses were made in the instructor’s entries to foster more thorough levels of text processing by increasing students’ understanding of the cultural norms implicit in the texts.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

First, instructors’ entries provided answers for questions, which ranged from matters of literal understanding to higher order inferencing. Often we engaged the students in a Socratic dialogue, sending them back to the novel with additional questions:

¹There is evidence that even members of subcultures have considerable insight into the rituals and behaviors of the dominant culture. (See Steffensen, Joag-dev and Anderson 1979.)

S(tudent): Why did Clarence sent words to his ex-wife about not letting Cletus (his son) to see him any more while it seemed like they loved each other a lot?

I(nstructor): Look over again the part where Cletus goes to visit his father. What went on? How did Clarence feel with Cletus there? What did Cletus expect from his visit and his father?

By reading the text with these questions in mind, unfamiliar aspects of divorce and visitation procedures were understood.

The only questions not answered were those about specific words because that would encourage students to view reading as a dictionary exercise, a misconception many already had. Turning attention away from individual lexical items encouraged students to process higher level units and to infer the meaning of words from context. However, explanations of idioms were provided since these involved cultural knowledge that could not be inferred.

CORRECTING ERRORS

A second category of instructors' responses consisted of correcting errors, which also showed many different levels of misreading attributable to schema interference. Instructor responses were intended to promote deeper levels of understanding:

S: Fern had said, "I won't have you breaking up somebody's home!" Hard to imagine that this came out from her mouth.

I: The whole business about breaking up a marriage (on pg. 128) is important. Who said that? Not Fern (who had broken up two marriages). This argument, between Fern and her uncle (who is like a father to her), tells you a lot about Fern's character.

Occasionally it was possible to predict on the basis of the students' cultural background that schema interference and text distortion were occurring even when there were no explicit errors. I suspected that the Japanese student who wrote this fragmentary entry had misunderstood the implications of suicide for Americans:

S: He wanted to inquire into the case. He could find some facts behind the case. At last, Cletus's father was found to be dead. He committed suicide. I don't have many thing to write today. (complete entry)

By explaining American attitudes towards suicide, a significant insight was provided that elicited a more coherent, communicative response from the student:

S: I didn't know the suicide was a crime in U.S.A. Because in Japan, the

person who committed suicide was regarded as the person who compensated his crime by death among people. I was surprised.
(continued)

The second entry shows greater coherence and an increase in words, sentence length and grammatical complexity.

COMPARING CULTURES

Students often compared the American and their native culture. This was encouraged because it increased understanding of the social environment:

S: It's really a big difference between the U.S. and Vietnamese cultures. It's very rare that a wife divorces her husband in Viet-Nam. American women really have a lot of freedom in many things. That's what I love most in the U.S.

We commented:

I: Divorce, or the freedom to divorce, can be both a good thing and a bad thing. Divorce affects many people and is very difficult, emotionally, to pull through. In America, it is sometimes thought that people over-use their freedom to divorce instead of trying to work out marital problems. You are noticing the important aspects of the novel and our culture. Keep up the good work. The comparisons you make between Viet Nam and the U.S. are teaching me a lot, too!

In other cases, students commented upon universals of human behavior, which involves making an implicit comparison:

S: I noticed that this story mentioned the little boy, Paul, was turning his face away from Jack. It is strange that people have different culture in different place, but the human's nature is the same everywhere. In this case, Paul was trying to hide his feeling by not letting Jack see his face.

INFERCING

By pushing students to deeper levels of inferencing, we expected to accelerate the formation of schemata as both generalized cognitive constructs and the specific information to be incorporated into those schemata developed. As he started to read the Maxwell novel, one student remarked:

S: The kid is too bad. He has no opinion and is almost completely neglected by his parents. I wonder why his mother hired Spensor to take him back.

This provided an opportunity to prompt a deeper understanding of the dynamics of

the situation and to draw parallels between the two novels:

- I: Your question about why the mother wanted the boy back is an important one. What are his parents doing with this kid? How are they using him? Do you see any parallels with the behavior of the Wilsons and the Smiths after those two couples split up? Remember Mrs. Wilson and the girls? And the life insurance policy?

It is important to develop the habit of drawing on background knowledge because no text is ever completely explicit and it is only by reference to generalized cognitive structures that comprehension can take place. By such processing, students were building the foundation for understanding, remembering and recalling specific exemplars of cultural behaviour that native speakers already have acquired through the process of inculturation.

EVALUATING

Finally, we asked students to make judgments about the characters and their actions through the strategies of querying and referring them back to the text:

- I: You are right about Clarence being hardworking and so on. But don't you think the author is telling us something more about him at the end of the chapter? Isn't he quite insensitive to his wife? And how good a wife is she? What does the scene about the collars show?

Let us now consider one extended interaction to see all of these processes in operation.

The writer started with the death of Lloyd Wilson and then in chapter 2, he talked about his family and his mother who died when she was thirty-eight I don't know what's the relationship between the murder and his family. . . .

After I read the first few pages of chapter two it gives me some information about the writer's family and his characteristic. His father and his brother were very quiet. It might be due to the disasters that happened to them. His brother and his relationship was not closed and his father was very busy with his business from the above, they give me a conclusion that the writer doesn't have a warm family and made him very quiet because nobody talked with him in his family.

In this initial entry discussing *SLSYT*, the student opens with a query about the relationship between the description of the murder, from which the story is told in flashback, and the death of the narrator's mother. In the novel, this relationship was tenuous and only briefly explained; many of the students missed it and found

the juxtaposition of events confusing. After a comment on one figure of speech that she particularly liked, the reader lists a number of phrases and indirectly asks for explanations by telling the instructor that she does not understand them. Her first entry concludes with an accurate description of the narrator's family and her evaluation of the relationship: ". . . the writer doesn't have a warm family . . ."

For me, the story seems disconnected. The writer wrote the small things that was happened in his life. Sometimes, he put two events on one paragraph which do not have any relationship to me (For example, a paragraph on page 15.) At the beginning of the paragraph he talked about he saw a snake trying to swallow a frog that was too large and would not go down. Then he talked about any other woman was going to sit in his mother's place, and take his mother's place in his father's heart.

I don't know why the writer wrote about his Halloween party. This seems unimportant for reader to know.

Her second entry deals with a complex metaphor. Although we would not answer vocabulary questions, this use of language called for an explanation:

What I was looking at was a snake in the act of swallowing a frog that was too large and wouldn't go down. Neither would the idea that another woman was not only going to sit in my mother's place at the dinner table but also take her place in my father's heart.

The student had understood everything, at the sentence level, but was unable to understand the text because she lacked the background information to synthesize these propositions. Her entry concluded with a judgment about the description of a Hallowe'en party that the narrator's widowed father insisted be held in one of the back rooms of the house. She did not grasp its significance and considered it unimportant.

The instructor responded:

The writer does make a big jump between the murder and talking about himself in chapter two. But right at the beginning of chapter 2, in the very first paragraph, he tells why he is writing the story and how the murder relates to him.

Do you really think the father and brother were quiet? Maybe they were suffering terrific grief. Do you understand what a sissy is? The author says he was one when he was a boy. American men want to be strong and always in control, not disturbed by even very bad things. At least, they don't want to show how disturbed they are.

That is a confusing symbol in page 15. We have an expression, "I can't swallow that (idea)." Can you figure out what that means? How does the image of the snake and frog fit? How did the boy feel about someone's taking his mother's place?

The Hallowe'en party is important because it shows how the boy's life changed. Where did his father make him have the party? How would you feel if you had to entertain your professor and classmates in an empty back room of your house, next to the laundry room? What would his mother have done if she had been alive when his father made such an arrangement? What does this tell you about American ideas of hospitality?

The first strategy used was sending the reader back to a specific point in the novel ("the beginning of chapter 2, in the very first paragraph") for information about how the two narrative strands are intertwined. The student was monitoring her comprehension but had not acquired the methods for repairing breakdowns in comprehension. The questions about vocabulary items, which could be inferred from context, were ignored.

For a deeper level of comprehension, it was important to address the student's evaluation of the family relationships and provide information about the American grieving process. The concept of "sissy" also had to be understood both because it explained the controlled reaction of the father and older brother, and because the narrator is labeled a sissy. Such cultural knowledge would probably be acquired if the student remained in this country, but through the novel and dialogue journal it was provided efficiently, as she needed it for understanding.

The complex metaphor is addressed by first providing the expression, "I can't swallow that idea." Then, through a series of questions (What does that mean? How does this image fit? How did the boy feel?), we help the reader make the connection between the metaphor and events in the novel. Providing the implicit information made it possible to grasp the inherent unity of the passage, as the native speaker does. This is a phenomenon seen frequently: If the reader does not have the necessary schema, comprehension fails even when there is complete processing of words and sentences.

Leading questions were also used to explain the description of the Hallowe'en party. She did not see that this was based on American concepts of hospitality and that the author was providing a significant insight into the breakdown of the boy's family life. Once the schema and the relevant details were identified, the student was asked to consider her own feelings in a similar situation in order to form a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar. By contrasting the father's behavior with the mother's inferred behavior, the student was expected to form a more accurate understanding of normal American behavior.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE METHOD TO THE ESL CLASSROOM

A successful reader constructs the meaning of a text as the writer intended from cues that are present in the written symbols. When ESL students read a text with a heavy cultural loading, they are not able to attain as high a level of comprehension as the native speaker because they lack some of the generalized cognitive structures which underlie the material. With the directed dialogue journal, we supported the reading process as cultural negotiators by supplying the necessary background information and helping students relate the reading to their pre-existing knowledge. The goal of this collaborative process was to facilitate the development of the cultural schemata necessary for understanding, remembering and recalling specific textual details.

There were many benefits from this method which affected specific aspects of reading, writing, and even aspects of the classroom interaction. There was, for example, an increased attention to high level processes and a movement away from decoding and vocabulary translation. These higher level processes were promoted by instructor's questions which led to inferencing, evaluating and comparing the native and target cultures. Students were encouraged to read for broader comprehension rather than control of details, which is normally required for academic work.

The students were spending at least ninety minutes each week on rapid reading. Some of them continued outside the class as they became interested in the novels:

S: Today is the last day to read this novel. I like this story much I don't know what'll happen next. However, I've enjoyed this story. I'll have this book read during Christmas vacation.

The use of a novel greatly increased the opportunities for teaching about the culture because it provided a range of characters, activities and situations which the student was able to examine without being directly involved. It was relatively easy for both student and instructor to identify instances of cultural interference. Furthermore a novel set in the immediate environment portrayed social processes and values that the students experienced in their daily routines. The interaction of observations and reading stimulated conversations that occurred only infrequently in journals not focused on reading:

The dialogue journal is individualized instruction par excellence. The private, thoughtful nature of the interaction allows students to express ideas and ask questions that they would not have in the open classroom. The instructor is able to provide exactly the support the students need to increase their comprehension and reading skills. There is also a benefit for academic writing. Because the interaction involved explicating a novel, there was a higher proportion of referential to

expressive prose than is found in nondirected journals (Steffensen, 1987). The advantage of practicing the style of writing required in most university-level courses is clear.

One valuable effect not anticipated was that the students requested class time for a discussion of the novel. Having reserved ESL students assume some responsibility for their education indicated a high level of interest as did the animated discussion that followed.

In writing a dialogue journal, the student is directing the interaction. Relinquishing control to the student may be one source of the method's effectiveness. Another may be the fact that when students describe their own culture, they become the experts who are doing the teaching. While receiving substantive information from their students is interesting and provides a welcomed change from routine for the instructors, being able to display their expertise is probably more valuable for the students themselves: It provides an opportunity for them to transcend their language limitations and interact as equals with other adults.

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