

Using Dialogue Journals with Hearing Impaired Pupils

Encouraging students to communicate in writing through the confidential medium of a personal journal can reap rich rewards in both language development and positive pupil-teacher interaction. The methods described in this practical article can be usefully applied in a wide range of educational settings.

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WHAT ARE DIALOGUE JOURNALS?

Dialogue journals consist of private written conversations between the teacher and individual pupils. Parents, professionals and care staff can also find this technique useful. Each child has his/her own journal. It is important that the child understands that these journals are confidential, and that the teacher will respect his or her privacy. I have told my class that I will not show their journals to anyone, unless I first ask their permission. They themselves can show their own journals to whom they wish. That is their own decision. The second major characteristic of Dialogue Journals is that there is no correction of the children's written work. The aim is to build the child's confidence in writing English. This is particularly important for deaf children where English is often their second language. The idea is that children will explore and experiment with their written work when the fear of correction has been removed.

The children's writing is valued for the message it contains. The teacher responds to what the child has written not how it was written. The teacher aims to sustain and extend the dialogue. The teacher can do this by commenting on what the child has written, for example "I am delighted to hear that your father is getting better; you must be glad."

The teacher may decide to write something relevant about him or herself, such as "I went to Kerry during the week-end. I was very near where you live," etc.

The teacher always uses grammatically correct English. The teacher's contributions provide a model of good English structure for the child.

CLASSROOM PROCEDURE

The teacher explains to the class what dialogue journals are. The manner in which this is done will depend on the age of the class involved. The teacher explains that these journals are private, and that there will be no correction of their work - no red marks.

The class can discuss the rules, ie. how often to write, what time of the day, where the books will be kept etc.

Each child is given his own journal or secret book. With young children the journals can begin with drawings. Pupil and teacher begin to communicate through drawings. The teacher can ask the child to explain the drawing and these can be labelled by the teacher. Teachers have found that the children very quickly begin to label their own drawings. The children begin to copy meaningfully. Gradually the amount of written work in the journals increases.

When I introduced the journals, I found that the children left blank spaces when they did not know the correct word or its spelling. I introduced individual dictionaries to the class. They come and ask me for words and spellings as they require them.

REACTIONS TO DIALOGUE JOURNALS

The children enjoy using the journals. They often ask for them, especially on Mondays when they are eager to tell me about their week-ends. Writing is no longer seen as a chore. I found that the quantity and quality of the children's written work increased greatly. There has also been a carry-over to other areas of the curriculum. With journaling, teachers find that the pupils use the teachers' contributions to expand and correct their own writing.

The children are also reading for meaning. They will read the contributions in the journal because they are specifically geared to each individual child. This concurs with top-down theories of reading which are becoming more and more popular in the area of remedial education.

The teacher can introduce the children to new vocabulary and structure according

to each individual child's knowledge and skill in English. I found that my relationship with the children improved. It gave me valuable insights into the children's backgrounds and interests. The children like the fact that the journal is very personal and geared to themselves as individuals. They enjoy the individual attention they receive in the journal.

PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

1) The child refuses to write or writes very little.

Solution:

I found I had to be very patient. With one child I had to wait three months before he wrote more than his usual one sentence contributions about which soccer team was playing which. Now, on his own initiative he takes his journal home and writes about what he does at week-ends.

There is sometimes a need to be flexible and allow the child to do another activity instead of journaling. The children could be encouraged to draw instead of write. The teacher can write, "You haven't written to me for a while. I miss hearing from you," etc.

2) I can't understand what the child has written.

Solution:

I write asking the child to explain it to me again. I write that I don't understand. "I am sorry please tell me more about it". If this fails, I will ask the child to explain in sign or speech gesture or drawing. I have found a knowledge and understanding of ISL (Irish Sign Language) is very useful. Honesty is the best policy. I never pretend to understand.

3) The child keeps changing the topic.

Solution:

I have allowed the children the freedom to change the topics as they like. Sometimes I refer back to things, eg. "I am very interested in what you wrote yesterday about..... . Please tell me more about it."

Teachers should treat the journal as ordinary adult/child conversation, that the children are allowed the space to write what they like. If the teacher feels that they should return to an earlier important topic he/she can gently draw them back.

4) The child doesn't answer my questions.

Solution:

I will try not to ask too many questions. Whenever possible I change the question into a statement. I only ask real questions (I don't know the answer). Research has shown that too many questions is not an effective way of getting a child to talk (or write). It is better to make a comment on what the child has written, or for the teacher to say something relevant about him/herself. Commands are often more effective than questions. I sometimes write that, "You have not answered my question."

I have found that when I give a small piece of information about myself such as "I was very worried yesterday", the children get very interested and ask me a lot of questions trying to find out why. The children start asking the questions.

5) The child wants to talk/sign about what is written in the journal.

Solution:

This happens more with younger children. The child will want to clarify the purpose and meaning of the journal. This is fine. If the children in my class start to talk or sign to me during journal time, I ask them to write to me instead.

6) The child only seems interested in drawing.

Solution:

I have not had this problem. Rob Baker suggests being patient, thinking of ways to encourage the child, asking him/her to label the drawing or tell you something about it. The teacher could also try drawing back to see what would happen.

I have found that journaling can be a very intense session. The children are coming with their dictionaries and their journal contributions. It can be very demanding on the teacher. A colleague of mine has a special day for each child

and will send the journal back and forth throughout the day instead of having a specific journal time for all the class. This is, however, a classroom management problem and is not inherent to the journals themselves.

CONCLUSION

Dialogue Journals are very versatile. They can be used under Total Communication, Bilingual or purely oral-aural system. In America they are used with E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) students, deaf students and students with learning disabilities.

The following points stress the advantages of dialogue journals for good I.S.L./E.S.L practice:

- 1) There is real communication in a free and relaxed atmosphere. Any language, whether first or second, develops best through natural conversation.
- 2) Attention is paid to meaning rather than form. The child is free to experiment with new language forms, and feedback from the teacher is given only to clarify meaning and not to correct.
- 3) The child can choose any topic to write about, according to his or her own interests. In the long run both child and adult are equal partners in the choice of topic for conversation. However, because this is a very different exchange from the usual teacher-dominated classroom situation, in the early stages the adult should hold back and allow the child to choose.
- 4) All the teacher's input is directed to the individual child and child's interests.
- 5) As it is a real two-way conversation, the teacher can carefully extend the child's use of second language structures step by step (rather as parents do for small children).
- 6) It is possible to expose the child to a wide range of language functions, eg. commands, explanations, questions, complaints, negotiations, strategies etc.

There are additional advantages relating to the fact that written language is used.

- a) There is time and opportunity for re-reading, reflecting on what has been written and referring back to earlier contributions. There is more context

available for the child or adult to refer to than is possible with ephemeral language forms (speech or live sign language).

b) The child can discover for him/herself that writing is not just an exercise, but a communicative act, with many possible functions.

c) Writing and reading experiences are combined in one activity. The teacher can use the journal as a piece of written language to make points about the way the language is used.

Finally, I hope that you have found this information useful. All the classes in our school are using Dialogue Journals. We have found them effective. Some Teachers of the Deaf in England have started to use them also. I hope that perhaps some of you will begin to experiment with Dialogue Journals in your own settings.