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The CATESOL Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7w72k508>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 3(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

Authors

Grant, Margaret

Caesar, Susan

Publication Date

1990

DOI

10.5070/B5.36660

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Journals Revisited: Student-Centered Materials for Teaching Writing

MARGARET GRANT and SUSAN CAESAR
San Francisco State University

In his text, *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*, David Nunan (1989) points out that "One particular aspect of humanistic education which has attracted a good deal of interest in recent years has been the incorporation of learner-centered principles into the language classroom" (p. 94). While seeking ways to make their classes both more communicative and more learner-centered, teachers at San Francisco State University have recently been using student journals and a responsive teacher's journal letter in their ESL composition classes. Spack and Sadow (December 1983), in an article in the *TESOL Quarterly*, recommend such a practice, "in which the teacher and students exchange journals which have a common general focus of ESL writing class issues and individual reactions relevant to them" (p. 579-580). Accordingly, the authors have found that journal entries can be a source of excellent, student-generated, classroom materials for teaching literary analysis, rhetorical form, and grammar.

In a composition class that is approximately equivalent to a college freshman composition course, student journal entries are part of the course materials, along with the text *Literary Contexts for ESL Writers: Connecting Form and Meaning* (Gajdusek & van Dommelen, 1988). The goal of the course is to enable students to write interesting compositions in which they make and support valid points in response to short pieces of authentic literature. We assist students in writing appropriate introductions and conclusions but do not instruct them directly in specific rhetorical forms as in classes in which the rhetorical form is the basis for the composition assignments. In addition, we hold students responsible for accuracy in using particular grammatical structures that we review with each literary passage. By using student journal entries to achieve each of these purposes, we find that the class becomes much more student centered than if students do all the preparation for their writing assignments from their textbooks.

At the beginning of the course, we explain to the students our expectations with regard to the journals. We point out that working journals are a means of sharing interesting and new ideas with others and that students will be writing their journals to share with not only their teacher, but also their classmates. Spack and Sadow (1983) state that "The sharing of selected journal entries with the group by means of the teachers' journals extends and enriches the interaction and leads to a more dynamic group awareness and exchange of ideas" (p. 580) We, therefore, tell our students that we will quote excerpts from their journals in our journal letters; however, we always permit them to note at the end of their journal entries if they do not wish to be quoted and then are careful to respect their requests. (As it turns out, they do this only on very rare occasions.) Also, as Spack and Sadow recommend, we edit quoted excerpts for grammar, except occasionally for the particular grammar point we are reviewing. We usually ask a student's permission to use a particular passage to work on and have never met with any resistance or embarrassment since the students are well aware, from peer reading each others' writing assignments, that most of their classmates make similar errors. In fact, regardless of the subsequent class discussion which never focuses on the writer himself or herself, students are generally pleased and proud to have their ideas included in the teacher's weekly journal letter.

Process of Producing Journal Letters

Here is how our student journal entries, in conjunction with the teacher's journal letter, become an integral part of our composition course materials. First, we decide which rhetorical and grammatical structures are most important for our students to review in the time available. Then we select short pieces of literature with themes that we believe our students would be interested in responding to. For this article, we use as an example "Appointment in Samarra," a short story showing the interplay of fate and free will, by Somerset Maugham (see Appendix).

Having decided on a particular passage, we carefully select topics for the journal entries in order to elicit the information and structures that students will need to use in their writing assignment on that passage. Literary points that students can explore might include the author's point of view, the theme, the characters, and their relationships to one another. At the same time, we also take into consideration rhetorical forms, such as summarizing, describing, and comparing/contrasting, as well as any targeted grammatical structures that the writing assignment may call for. For "Appointment in Samarra," in addition to points for literary analysis, we chose summarizing as the rhetorical focus and reported speech as the grammar point. Some sample journal topics include:

1. Which do you believe in, fate or free will? Give an example from your own experience to support your belief.
2. What is the author's attitude toward fate and free will?
3. Why do you think the master wasn't afraid of death?
4. Explain the irony in "Appointment in Samarra."

After the students have read the passage and become familiar with the vocabulary, we ask them to select two topics from the list for their weekly journal entries, which they write as homework. We advise them that we will evaluate their journal entries on the basis of innovative, clearly expressed and supported ideas, rather than on grammatical accuracy. When we receive the journal entries, we respond with written comments to each one and, at the same time, select those entries with content relevant to the literary, rhetorical, or grammatical features we have targeted. Then we write a letter to the class as a whole, addressed "Dear Students," in which we respond generally to the students' journal entries and introduce the selected excerpts. We edit these excerpts in a similar way to that suggested by Spack and Sadow (1983); that is, we use ellipsis for omitted words and brackets for added words, and we correct spelling errors. Occasionally, with the student's permission, we may use writing that can be improved either rhetorically or grammatically. Then we duplicate the letter and hand it out to the students.

We usually start our class discussion of the excerpts quoted in the letter with the interpretation of ideas in the literary passage and move on to further exploration of related ideas. Then, we turn our attention to rhetorical form and its relationship to the current student writing assignment. Finally, we go over pieces of discourse in order to review targeted grammatical structures.

As an example, we include here a student journal entry written in response to the second topic above and then show how we have used it to teach the various points that we have mentioned.

The story, "Appointment in Samarra," describes a merchant who sent his servant to market to buy provisions. When the servant was in the market-place, he saw Death. The servant was scared because [he thought that] Death had made a threatening gesture at him. He went back to his master immediately and asked him could he borrow his horse. As soon as he got the horse, he fled to Samarra. After he left, the merchant went down to the market-place and saw Death still there. He asked Death why she had made a threatening gesture at his servant, and Death replied that it was not a threatening gesture. She was surprised to see the servant in Bagdad because she had an appointment with the servant that night in Samarra.

I think the writer believed in fate because he expressed this idea in the story. The servant thought that he would not see Death if he went to Samarra but he actually went to the place where he would die. After he left Bagdad, the servant might have thought that he would not die; however, fate was leading him to meet Death. Thus, we can infer that the writer believed in fate and that one can never escape from it.

In this instance, we began our class with a discussion of the student's comments about Maugham's apparent belief in fate, which served as a starting point for examining the roles of the master and servant, and more generally, people's attitudes toward fate and free will. The students then talked about the differing attitudes of the master and servant toward fate and free will. (Why wasn't the master afraid of Death? What was the significance of the designations *Master* and *servant*?) Discussion naturally moved to the roles that students perceived fate and free will play in their various cultures and their own lives. As students participated in the discussion, they expanded on all these ideas and, consequently, became more interested in and enthusiastic about incorporating them into their writing assignments.

From the rhetorical point of view, the first paragraph of the student excerpt provides a good example of a summary; however, it does not begin with an introductory sentence that states the main idea of the passage. Therefore, we asked students to consider what the reader's expectations might be upon reading the present beginning sentence and how we might better prepare readers to understand what the passage is about. They quickly suggested that it should begin with a sentence that stated the main idea of the passage—the idea they had, in fact, just been discussing. The students then wrote several versions of the first two sentences on the blackboard in order to express the main idea as concisely as possible and, at the same time, to establish a connection between the sentences. The easiest way for them to make this transition turned out to be by repeating the word *story*. Here is what they came up with:

In the story, "Appointment in Samarra," the author implies that everyone has a predetermined destiny and that there is nothing a person can do to change it. The story begins when a servant was sent by his master to buy merchandise at a market place in Bagdad.

Since the writing assignment for "Appointment in Samarra" calls for a summary of the passage, the students need to make use of reported speech; therefore, we reviewed the relevant rules at this point. In this instance, we used the reported speech sentences in the

above summary as examples. We asked the students to find examples of reported speech and write them on the board, at the same time indicating problems they could see. Their examples follow:

reported yes/no question: *asked him could he borrow his horse*

reported *wh*-question: *asked Death why she had made a threatening gesture*

reported statement: *replied that it was not a threatening gesture (incorrect tense)*

We then asked the students if it was accurate to write, *The servant asked him could he borrow his horse*, and, if not, why not. They were able to remind one another that they needed to use the signal words *if* or *whether* to report yes/no questions, and that they had to use statement word order. We also discussed the use of the past perfect tense in reported questions, and students pointed out that, in formal writing, it is usually appropriate to report a question or statement originally expressed in the past tense in the past perfect so that the time references are clear. The story uses the past tense to describe Death's actions: *She looked at me and made a threatening gesture*. Following the rule they had just applied, students could see that it was appropriate to use the past perfect in the reported statement, as well as the reported question. Finally, we applied this same rule to the sentence which follows in the student excerpt, *She was surprised to see the servant in Bagdad*, changing *was* to *had been*. From these examples, students were able to see the value of applying grammar rules contextually rather than dealing with them in unrelated sentences and, at the same time, more motivated to learn the rules since, without this knowledge, they might have been unable to write their papers accurately.

Our way of using the above student excerpt served to prepare the students for their related writing assignment and, we believe, definitely contributed to the quality of the papers we eventually received. Of course, for this discussion we chose examples from our student's journal entry to cover the area we considered important for our particular assignment, but other equally valid points could have been selected depending upon the learners' needs.

This procedure for using students' writing can help them learn a variety of points involved in writing compositions and can be adapted to almost any level. Using the students' own writing as a source of class materials increases students' sense that their ideas are important and worthy of publication and comment, heightens their interest and involvement in learning, and thus contributes to a more student-centered class environment. ■

Appendix

Appointment in Samarra W. Somerset Maugham

Death speaks: There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture, now lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said; it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.

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