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JAPAN

Using Task Journals with Independent Readers

I T IS GENERALLY ACCEPTED THAT LANGUAGE LEARNERS BENEFIT CONSIDERABLY BY reading independently. Krashen (1993) provides an overview of research indicating that learners who read avidly experience gains in reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and writing ability. In a more recent study, the amount of reading students did proved to be a reliable predictor of ESL students' TOEFL scores (Constantino et al. 1997). Students who read independently are often asked to do some kind of record-keeping or comprehension-based tasks. There is some controversy, however, as to whether tasks like these are effective and useful or if they detract from the pleasure of reading independently, and hence, are counterproductive (Day and Bamford 1998; Renandaya, Rajan, and Jacobs 1999).

My experience with intermediate and higher level university students is that when asked to read independently, they often want to read unsimplified adult fiction. I have found it very beneficial to assign tasks to students in the form of a journal to help them with the opportunities and challenges these texts present. It is crucial, however, that the task journal be properly designed and integrated into the reading course. This paper will look at the design, implementation, and integration of a task journal that is designed to: 1) stimulate students' thinking about the text, 2) promote reflection on the reading process, 3) give students practice with a practical strategy for vocabulary building, and 4) serve as a basis for assessment of student reading. Before describing each of these tasks in detail, I will briefly explain the role independent reading plays in my reading courses.

Reading course design

There is great variation in the way reading is taught in ESL/EFL contexts. Approaches to reading instruction are often looked at in terms of the dichotomy between the intensive and the extensive approaches (Aebersold and Field 1997). Bamford and Day (1998) further clarify this distinction by citing four major approaches to teaching reading: 1) grammar-translation, 2) comprehension question and language work, 3) skills and strategies, and 4) extensive reading. Reading may also be taught through a literature-based approach with higher level students. Actually, many ESL/EFL reading teachers adopt an integrated approach combining two or more of the above approaches.

In my Japanese university reading classes, which are made up of moderately motivated third-year English majors, students typically read two- to four-page articles in class followed by vocabulary and comprehension questions, and some discussion of the themes presented. To complement this in-class reading I also ask students to read between one and three unsimplified novels per term independently outside of class. I suggest that students read relatively simple novels, as this facilitates their being able to read quickly, which is one of the main features of the extensive reading approach. Appendix 1 is a list of the books I currently recommend to my students.

Students are responsible for purchasing or borrowing one of the books from the list and then trading amongst themselves throughout the year. This approach avoids some of the difficulties associated with setting up and maintaining a student library. After reading one book from the list, students have the option of reading books not on the list as long as they are careful about difficulty level. Every year students are asked to rate the level of interest and difficulty of the books they read. I keep on the list those books that tend to be of low difficulty and high interest (see Bray, in press).

The very nature of independent reading makes it difficult for the teacher to evaluate whether students are actually doing the reading or to intervene if they are having problems. For this reason, simply giving students an independent reading assignment and counting on them to successfully complete it is not always feasible. Teachers commonly assign some basic record-keeping tasks in the form of a reading log or reading record for students to show how many pages they are reading per week. Some teachers also find it useful to ask students to write a summary of or personal reaction to what they have read. This is not only useful as an accountability measure, but also as a way to help students better understand and appreciate what they are reading.

In addition to record-keeping and comprehension-based tasks, I have also incorporated tasks into the journal to help students in two other areas where they have considerable needs: reflection on the reading process and vocabulary development. In the section that follows I provide a short description of each of the tasks in the journal and a brief explanation of their use.

Task journal design

The task journal I use with independent readers includes basic record keeping as well as five tasks: Summary, Prediction, Opinion, Reflection, and Vocabulary work. See Appendix 2 for a sample journal page.

Summary

The first task is for students to write a short summary of what they have read. Summary writing is a tried and tested activity in reading classes. It requires students to think about what they have read and condense it into its essentials. Thinking about what one has just

read rather than rushing onto the next activity is in itself an important practice to develop. Although a superficial reading may be adequate for some types of texts, it seems a shame, particularly with adult fiction, not to put some work into exploring the ideas and themes presented.

Prediction

The second task, Prediction, follows the summary task and asks students to consider the story as it has unfolded and imagine what might happen next. The prediction process requires students to use their background knowledge as it relates to the story. Students relate what they know about life and people (content schemata) to what they know about the genre of the particular novel they are reading and how it tends to develop (formal schemata). The importance of having background knowledge, not only for prediction but also for basic comprehension, is an example of the interactive nature of reading. Rather than being a one-way process of extracting meaning from text, meaning is created through the interaction between the text and the background knowledge the reader brings to the process (Carrell and Eisterhold 1988).

Activating schemata before reading makes reading easier, and many classroom prereading activities have this as the goal. Asking students to predict what will happen next in a story while they are actually reading it also activates schemata, and hence, should have a positive effect on the comprehension of the reading that follows.

Opinion

The third task, Opinion, requires students to think about what has happened in the story and to write what they think or feel about it. Whereas the first two tasks focus on the text itself, the opinion task focuses on the reader's reaction to the story. This task requires the reader to consider the themes presented in relation to his or her own situation, values, and beliefs.

I tell students that this task is relatively open and that I want them to write their opinions about what they like or dislike, agree or disagree with, and do or do not understand. This is an interesting section of the journal to read because the teacher can learn a lot about students' beliefs and attitudes. For example, by looking at the quotes from students' journals

in previous years, I can see the extent to which students empathize with the characters (quotes 1 and 2), react to the characters' actions and opinions (quotes 2 and 3), see connections between their world and the story (quotes 4 and 5), and consider new points of view (quotes 2 and 5). While in the prediction section I tell students that one or two sentences are usually sufficient, in this section I tell them to write a bit more.

Journal Excerpts
from Task 3 Opinion

1. *The Wizard of Oz*
   "I think the story is fun because Dorothy's party members increase more and more. If possible I wish to join the party and enjoy the journey."

2. *The Color Purple*
   "I was moved by the bond of affection between Nettie and Celie. If I were Celie or Nettie I couldn't bear my loneliness. I think they have very strong spirits. They can stay strong because they believe they must to be able to be together some day."

3. *The Bridges of Madison County*
   "They are having what is called 'fling.' She is a married woman. I can't understand what she is thinking."

4. *The Catcher in the Rye*
   "He looked as if he was selfish, but in fact he does as he wants to do. There is a man like Ackerley around me, but this man never notices his bad points."

5. *Tuesdays with Morrie*
   "I didn't understand why Morrie could be so accepting. I think that dying is surely fearful. Will I accept death like him? I can't accept death absolutely. So I am glad to see him. I want to accept death like him, gently."

Reflection

The fourth task asks readers to move beyond the text and their reactions to it and to focus on the reading process itself. By asking students to reflect on how their reading is going, and in particular, the level of difficulty they are experiencing, students are led to consider why a particular section is easy or difficult. Reflecting on learning processes can help students become more aware of where their problems lie, which can activate problem-solving abilities. Being

able to solve one's own problems is one of the key elements of being an autonomous learner.

Looking at the examples from the student's journals, one can see that this task stimulates students' reflection on the relationship between reading difficulty and other features of the text, including grammar complexity (quote 1); discourse features, such as dialog and narrative (quote 2); and story content and students' relation to it, that is, if the content is familiar or interesting to the student (quotes 3 and 4). Concerning vocabulary difficulty, the teacher can see the extent to which students are remembering to use the strategies taught to help them deal effectively with unknown vocabulary, such as guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from context (quotes 5 and 6).

Journal Excerpts
from Task 4 Reflection

1. "I think this chapter was a little difficult because sentence structure was difficult."

2. "I understood this chapter very well because there is more conversation."

3. "We can sympathize with him. It makes it easy to read."

4. "The story is interesting so I can read many pages. I have a lot of unknown words, but I can understand."

5. "This time I can understand easily. I can image the word without reading the dictionary."

6. "I gradually got used to skipping the unknown words and guessing meaning correctly."

New words

The fifth task requires students to take notes on new words they encounter that they feel are important enough to try to remember. There are two main ways of learning new vocabulary: incidental vocabulary learning and direct vocabulary study. According to Nation (1997:15), incidental vocabulary learning can happen in two ways: for new or unfamiliar words the reader can guess the meaning from the context, or for words the reader already has seen before, there will be "a gradual process of one meeting with a word adding to or strengthening the small amounts of knowledge gained from previous meetings." He adds, however, that incidental vocabulary learning is fragile and "if the small amount of

learning of a word is not soon reinforced by another meeting, then that learning will be lost" (Nation 1997:15). Because another meeting with a word through reading is less likely to occur with unsimplified texts that contain a broad range of vocabulary, some type of direct vocabulary study may be appropriate when students read adult fiction.

Although not a complete approach to vocabulary study, the vocabulary task in the journal asks students to keep notes on new words they encounter that they want to remember. I ask students not to interrupt their reading if possible, but rather to underline words in pencil and, afterwards, use a dictionary to get a better sense of the meaning of the words. Next, students should write each word in their journals, underlined in a phrase or short sentence, and include a definition or the L1 equivalent. This short list can then be easily reviewed, providing the repeated exposure necessary to remember the word.

Implementation and integration of the task journal

The success a class has with task journals depends to a large extent on how well the journals are integrated into the reading course. Initially, it is important to explain to students why they will be using the journal, what the purpose of each task is, and how to do each journal task. I give students a copy of a completed journal page from a previous year to serve as a model for both quality and quantity of writing (see Appendix 3) and a copy of the journal sheet with an explanation of each task in the first and second languages. Of course, copies of the journal sheet could be distributed, but I prefer to have students write the simple journal form in their notebooks using the brief headings, Summary, Prediction, and so on.

With these general directions and a sample page from a well-written journal, students should be able to begin their journals. However, giving each of the tasks some individual attention is also a good idea. The first task, summary writing, is particularly difficult, and students often write too much or too little. At the beginning of the year it is a good idea to give students focused practice with summary writing by having them all read the same section of a text and then summarize it in a short paragraph. The teacher can then ask selected

students to write their summaries on the board and analyze them together in class, or the teacher can collect and make copies of a few summaries to work with in the next class to clarify what a good summary is. The other four tasks can be dealt with in a similar fashion, one per week.

It is important to collect the journals within the first few weeks to check that they are being done correctly. After that, I ask students to bring them to every class, and I either check to see that they have been done or read them carefully, depending on my class duties. It is also important for the teacher to consider the amount of time students are spending on the journal and to advise students if they are writing too much or too little. The journal is designed to stimulate thought about the text and reflection on the reading process itself and, therefore, should add to the reading experience, not become burdensome and detract from it. With practice, journal writing will become easier and require less time.

One final point is that students like to see the teacher's comments on their journal entries, so it is a good idea to do this as much as possible. It is also good to use the journal as the basis for a quick chat with students about the books they are reading. I do not correct students' journals for grammar, but I do give students feedback on their writing, as well as make comments to encourage better work, if necessary.

Conclusion

Assigning independent reading is a common practice in ESL/EFL reading classes. Intermediate and higher level university students often desire to read unsimplified adult fiction when reading independently. Teachers might want to assign task journals to help students with the opportunities and challenges these texts present. The journal format presented includes tasks designed to encourage thought about reading content, reflection on the reading process, and vocabulary learning. Practice with these tasks during the school year may lead to their use outside of class when students read on their own. For the reading teacher, task journals provide a window into the students' reading experience that can serve as a basis for assessment and possible intervention. As long as the teacher ensures that the task journal is properly implemented and integrated into the course, the many benefits of using them, both for students and teachers alike, are a strong argument for their use.

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Here is a list of books I currently recommend students choose from:

1. *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum

2. *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White

3. *The Forgotten Door* by Alexander Key

4. *The Graduate* by Charles Webb

5. *The Bridges of Madison County* by Robert James Waller

6. *The Celestine Prophesy* by James Redfield

7. *Love Story* by Erich W. Segal

8. *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom

9. *Momo* by Michael Ende

10. *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tam

11. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J. K. Rowling

12. *Norwegian Wood, Vol. 1 and 2* by Haruki Murakami

13. *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes

14. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

15. *The Education of Little Tree* by Forrest Carter

16. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

17. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger

Below are the items that are included in the task journal:

Date:

Book:

Pages:

1. **Summary** (Write a short summary of what you have read.)

2. **Prediction** (What will happen next?)

3. **Opinion** (Give your opinion about what you have read.)

4. **Reflection** (How is your reading going?)
   Circle one: Easy   OK   Difficult

5. **New Words** (What new words do you want to remember?)