

## **JOURNAL WRITING WITH A LANGUAGE ASSOCIATE**

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- 1. Why we did it?**
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### **1. Why we did it?**

As an experiment based on the experience and recommendation of Joy Kreeft Peyton. Peyton has a Ph.D in linguistics from Georgetown University. Her main area of expertise is in the use of dialogue journals to promote language learning and literacy skills among native and non-native speakers of English. She has worked with limited-English-proficient students from kindergarten to high school, and also with adults to whom English is their second language. She has also held numerous teacher workshops on the topic. Peyton spent a short time in Comaltepec with Judi Lynn, and so her recommendation to try the use of journal writing with our language associates came out of her first-hand experience with the literacy situation in the village. She sent Judi Lynn a paper she had written called "Literacy through Interaction" which explains the nature of language acquisition and literacy development through written dialogues, and outlines procedures for setting up a dialogue journal program.

### **2. How we did it?**

Using Peyton's basic premise that journal writing can be useful in literacy development and language acquisition, we used some of her ideas and adapted others to meet the needs we felt we had in

our program, i.e. to improve our own language skills in Chinantec, both oral and written, and to encourage our language associate (LA) to write his own language more fluently and naturally.

### 3. What we did?

a. At the start of each day we all (LA and linguists) wrote in our journals. We explained to our LA that this would be his diary in which he could record anything of interest to him; that we would also be writing journals in Chinantec because we wanted to speak and write better Chinantec, and that we would all be sharing our journal entries together at the end of each writing session. We wrote for about 30 mins and then shared together for a further 30 mins.

b. We wrote in bound notebooks, not in loose-leaf notebooks nor ones where the pages would easily fall out.

c. We all chose our own topics. Some examples of these are:

#### Language associate:

Flying in an airplane to Tucson  
 Trip to the museum  
 Fiesta in the village

#### Linguist:

Seeing a porcupine  
 Going to the village for the first time  
 Appreciation that LA has come here to work

d. We came together to share our journal entries. Our LA read his first, and we made comments expressing interest or asked questions, not to correct or criticize, but to encourage and approve. Then we read ours aloud, and the others asked questions or made comments with a view to correcting, improving or evaluating the journal entry. Our LA corrected our pronunciation as we read aloud as well as our written Chinantec.

### 4. Results:

The journal writing resulted in benefits for language acquisition and for literacy skills as well as a series of benefits in the area of social interaction and communication.

#### 4.1. Benefits for language acquisition for the linguists and literacy skills for the language associate

Language acquisition improved for the linguists and literacy skills were gained by all of us as seen in a-d following:

- a. Because of the daily practice of writing freely in his own language our LA gained a greater naturalness in writing, even though he has been writing in his language for several years. The linguists also improved in their control of written Chinantec.
- b. Language acquisition improved for the linguists through writing daily in Chinantec and because our LA corrected our work. When we did not control something in the language, we purposed to focus on that area in our writing and in our daily language usage.
- c. The linguists' understanding of the structure of the language improved.
- d. They became more able to discern what natural discourse is.

#### 4.2. Benefits for communication skills.

Peyton mentions in her article some additional benefits apart from those of language acquisition and the development of literacy skills. (Peyton in italics)

- a. *the amount of contact time between student and teacher is increased.* From our experience of time spent in journal writing with our LA, I submit that the quality of that time spent together was improved as a direct result of what we were doing.
- b. *in journal writing students have the opportunity to express themselves freely, without fear of censure or embarrassment.* Since none of what our LA wrote in his journal is for publication, we feel that he did write with greater freedom and naturalness. And since we did not criticise or dispute his writing, but rather approved and showed interest, he gained greater confidence.
- c. *because the interaction is written, students have time to reread previous entries and to reflect before having to respond.* As they receive positive feedback from the teacher, they gain confidence in their writing ability to express themselves in English and in writing. Our LA did gain in confidence in his writing ability to express himself in his language even though he has had several years of writing experience already. The linguists also gained in confidence in their writing ability in Chinantec because of writing on a daily basis, having time to reread the entries and also from the interaction and positive feedback from the LA and the other linguist.

d. the reading and writing that is done is closely tied to the students' life experience and gives them the opportunity to reflect upon that experience with another person. The journal-writing part of each day was a reflection on the life experience of each of us, and an opportunity to reflect on that experience with one another. I believe that it gave us a closer bond of relationship and a greater interest in one another.

e. all students, no matter what their language proficiency level, can participate in the activity to some extent? This was certainly true in our experience, since we had a native speaker of the language (the LA) and two non-native speakers of the language (the linguists), all at different levels of proficiency, and we all participated in and benefitted from the experience.

f. journals provide a means for the teacher to discover the student's interests and concerns. This information builds strong ties with students. We were able to discover more of our LA's interests and concerns as he wrote in his journal. Since he rarely shares any of his personal concerns with us, it was helpful to hear some of them in his journal entries. Homesickness was apparent when he focused on current village events with a touch of nostalgia. Also we found out about current events in his life which he may never have shared with us apart from the journal writing. I personally was also able to share more feelings and concerns in my journal writing and found that this seemed to help our LA to do the same, e.g. after I had written about culture stress I had experienced living here, he shared with me verbally about culture stress he was experiencing. So ties between us were strengthened.

g. student entries give a good indication of their progress. The linguists' journal entries improved in style and naturalness over the 5-week period. The LA's progress showed in more natural translation. When an LA is away from his home and language environment for long periods of time, it is essential to provide ways in which he can maintain the most natural language usage possible in these circumstances. Talking his mother tongue with a non-native speaker of that language will eventually have an adverse effect on the naturalness of his own language usage. Journal writing provides a means of daily language usage, helping the LA to retain naturalness in discourse which is essential for a good translation.