

Employing Observation Journals to Enhance Self-Awareness and Writing Skills

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Abstract

This article focuses on how the employment of a specific kind of observation journal can help intermediate to advanced English language learners (ELLs) become astute and perceptive observers of their host culture and its language while simultaneously developing their fluency and cohesiveness in writing (Randolph, 2017a). This piece will also highlight how observation skills are of crucial importance for all ELLs in terms of their successful assimilation and understanding of their host culture and its language. An explanation of observation journals and their multiple uses are given, and a grading rubric is offered. The article concludes with student-reported benefits that focus on the ELLs' awareness of enhanced language skills and an appreciation for their newly acquired observation skills.

Introduction: The Motivating Factors

Four significant factors motivated me to develop and use observation journals in my writing classes. First, I noticed that a significantly large number of my students were paying more attention to their smartphones as they strolled across campus than they were to all the unique details of their local environment. This “smartphone seduction” (Randolph, 2017a, para. 8) inspired me to encourage my students to make simple observations while walking on campus and spend less time looking at their devices. Second, I felt that helping my students develop the art of observation would be one of the most important life skills that I could teach them; I believed it would help them become successful in their future careers, and it would help them develop as critical thinkers. That is, I was certain that becoming mindful observers would prepare them to be more aware of their future situations at work, their family dynamics, and issues in society. I sensed that the more they observed, the more they would develop intellectually and spiritually—two important factors for their happiness and survival. Third, I wanted to help my ELLs

assimilate into their host culture and develop their language skills. By observing other individuals' body language, facial expressions, gestures, and language use, I felt they could turn their free time into an independent and self-guided language classroom. And lastly, I wanted my students to develop a love for writing by doing it frequently in short bursts and by writing about things that captured their immediate attention. I concluded that the observation journals were the perfect answer for this (Randolph, 2017a).

The Observation Journals and The Six Categories

The observation journals are essentially short, focused, and descriptive pieces about daily observations. They are not reflections of past events, but observations that focus on the moment at hand. In this sense, they are a tool for developing a higher, more acute consciousness of our external and internal worlds. In terms of content, each entry requires a title, a note about the observation's category (see below), and a paragraph detailing the observation.

The paragraph includes the following:

- a lead-in sentence that introduces the topic;
- a topic sentence that explains the focus of the observation;
- a reason that states why the content of the observation is of interest to the student;
- a developed example/explanation elaborating on the observation or the reason of interest; and
- a conclusion. (Randolph, 2017b, para. 2)

Although students were initially free to observe anything of interest, I found they needed help focusing on a specific topic and developing it. I subsequently devised six specific observation categories for their journals. These include:

1. Culture-based observations (e.g., the cultural norm of one person holding the door for another);

2. Language use-based observations (e.g., how a certain buzzword or idiom is used among friends);

3. Classroom dynamics-based observations (e.g., students who sit in the front of the classroom volunteer more than those who sit in the back);

4. Nature/environment-based observations (e.g., observing the first snowflake at dawn);

5. Self-reflection-based observations (e.g., being aware of a particular change in emotion and realizing how it affects them). (Randolph, 2017a, para. 13); and

6. Sensory-based observations (e.g., being aware of certain tastes in the local cuisine or the aromas at dinnertime in the neighborhood).¹

The Various Uses for Observation Journals

Observation journals have many useful elements in that they can be used as an end in themselves, or they can be used as material for creative writing, academic research, or informative presentations. For example, I have students write poems or short stories based on their observations. The detail they use to describe the situations in their journals lends itself to genuine and descriptive poetry or detailed scenes in a story. In terms of the academic research or informative presentations, I first have the students make multiple observations and write them up in their journals. Then, I have them choose one observation (from the first three of the six categories) and do an ethnomethodology project. These are research projects based on the students' own observations and follow-up research. This entails making hypotheses and then investigating the student-generated hypotheses through interviews and data collection (McPherron & Randolph, 2013; Randolph, 2016).

Assessment for the Observation Journals

I developed a rubric for the observation journals that provides two functions: (1) it gives a framework to assess and evaluate the students' work, and (2) it guides the students to write coherent and well-developed journal entries. I make it a point to review the rubric before starting the observation journal project. This helps the students keep in mind what is required of them and what I am looking for in terms of quality and content. Reviewing the rubric before assigning the journals has helped them to focus on the details and develop a sense of coherence in their entries.

¹ This category was added after presenting on observation journals at CoTESOL in Denver, CO. A participant in my session felt that this would be another useful category for our ELLs.

The rubric consists of six different categories, and each one is rated on a five-point scale. The categories and what each entails is listed below in Table 1.

Table 1. The Rubric for Observation Journals

Item	Focus
Content and cohesion	How well has the entry generally expressed the observation through implementing the paragraph template?
Observation focus	How well does the entry focus on the specific observation and express it clearly in the paragraph?
Development of the example and explanation	How well is the example/explanation part of the paragraph expressed?
Vocabulary use	How much class-acquired vocabulary was recycled and used?
Takeaways	Does the writer appear to have learned something from the observation?
Care and caution	Does the entry appear to be carefully thought out and written, or does it appear to be quickly penned in a matter of seconds?

(Randolph, 2017b, para. 6)

Student-Reported Benefits and Survey Results

Each semester I ask my students to take a survey on the observation journals. In the fall term of 2017, I asked my three advanced writing classes to complete the survey (*N*=47). This particular survey had four questions:

- Did you enjoy the observation journal project?
- What did you like/dislike about it?

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- Did it help you improve any of your language skills?
- What other benefits, if any, did you get from the project?

The majority of the results from the surveys were overwhelmingly positive, and the students provided useful feedback. For the purpose of this article, I would like to focus on questions one and three of the survey and offer the results from one section of an advanced writing course and one from a high advanced writing class. I would like to address these two questions in particular as the students provided detailed answers regarding the survey questions, which I believe will shed light on how valuable this project is.

In my advanced writing course ($N=17$), 15 students reported that they enjoyed the observation journals and two did not enjoy them. However, the two students who claimed they did not like the observation journals stated that they benefited from them and found them useful in terms of understanding their host culture and also how the language is used. Regarding question three, 16 claimed the observation journals helped improve their confidence and accuracy in writing and their confidence and fluency in spoken English. One student reported that the observation journals did not help. That student, however, did report learning a great deal about the local culture and customs.

In the high advanced writing class ($N=17$), 13 students claimed that they enjoyed the journals, three stated they did not enjoy them, and one reported they both enjoyed them and did not enjoy them. According to these students, the reason for not enjoying the project was based on their aversion to writing. They liked the actual observation time, learning about the local culture and how the local residents used the language, but they did not like writing about the observations. With regard to question three, 13 students reported the project helped their fluency in writing and speaking, and they learned a great deal of useful and important vocabulary. Four students claimed the project did not improve their language skills, but they did report that they became better observers and their “eye for detail” was enhanced.

From the instructor’s perspective, I clearly noticed four major improvements. First, my students’ use of vocabulary improved, and I quickly saw that they were picking up on the local buzzwords—both academic and informal—and using them in their journals (e.g., some words my students noticed and used were “critical thinking,” “holistic,” “holistic approach,” “innovative,” and “mindfulness”). Second, their entries became much more

focused and accurate as opposed to stating mere generalities. For instance, they started employing details in their sentences, like the following: “A significant number of Americans who I observed in Lincoln, Nebraska, like to walk.” This was more precise than earlier entries, which were very general; for example, “All Americans exercise.” That is, “a significant number” is more exact and more academic than “all,” and “walk” shows more precision than the general category of “exercise.” Third, their paragraph structure gained a real sense of logical and fluid cohesion; one idea effectively flowed to the next. This developed, I believe, because the frequency of working on the journals gave the students a chance to practice writing, which ultimately enhanced their sense of control and confidence. And fourth, their descriptions were much more detailed and fully developed. I could see that the skill of observing and picking up on the details was effectively and almost naturally transferred to their writing. That is, as they became careful observers, they also became careful writers. For example, one student who was fascinated with birds took the time to learn the names of many varieties as the semester progressed, and he would go into great detail describing their shapes, colors, and sizes. This was an impressive development and stark contrast to his initial use of “the birds in Lincoln, Nebraska,” which was how he referred to them earlier in the term.

Concluding Remarks

Our daily life is a non-stop, 24-hour experience of unique thoughts, interactions, events, and inspirational information. Each moment is truly a gift. It is our job as teachers to inspire our students to become aware of their surroundings, learn from their observations, record the useful elements, and become wiser in the process. I feel that the observation journal project is one activity that will help our ELLs both inside and outside of the classroom as they meet and learn from new and exciting challenges. These journals encourage students to seek ownership in what they observe and then write about these observations. Ultimately, the more a student is involved in the learning process, the more he or she becomes interested in it and learns from it (Medina, 2009; Willis, 2006). The observation journal project, I believe, provides such an opportunity for productive daily learning and personal development to take place.

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