

The Effect of Dialogue Journal Writing on EFL Students' Writing Skill

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Despite the role writing plays in learning a foreign language, many students do not show much interest in taking an active part in writing classes (Myint, 1997). Thus different activities have been proposed to motivate students to write one of which is *dialogue journal writing*, and the present work tries to investigate the possible effect(s) of such activity on writing ability of a group of English students at Islamic Azad University- Hamedan branch. To do this, 50 students obtaining 1 and 2 on the TWE scale on the structure section of a TOEFL test were selected and randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. After some introductory sessions, the students were asked to write paragraphs on a weekly schedule and hand them in to be corrected. In the experimental group the students were, furthermore, asked to keep journals and hand them in. After 4 months, the students in both groups took part in a writing exam in which they had to write two paragraphs on the topics given. The comparison of the means at $p < 0.05$ shows a better performance in the experimental group which, in turn, points to a positive effect of dialogue journal writing on students' writing skill. ¹

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The ability to express one's ideas in written form in a second or foreign language and to do so with reasonable coherence and accuracy is a major achievement, especially in today's information society. But writing is a difficult-to-acquire communication skill, and the level of difficulty is significantly higher when a foreign language is involved. Differences in the language structure, the manner of expressing thoughts, writing styles and other culturally varying factors greatly affect the writings of a foreign/ second language learner (Benson and Heidish, 1995).

In spite of all efforts teachers make to render writing an interesting task or maybe because of them, many students encounter great difficulty in writing a single complete sentence, let alone a paragraph or essay.

And in a country like Iran, in which English is mostly taught through Grammar Translation Method in which scarcely is any emphasis put on improving students' writing in English and even at universities there is little exposure to English, and many students experience great problems even in their speaking, writing is avoided and disliked.

There are different factors which may account for the reluctance of most students to write a composition (adopted from Myint, 1997):

1. Unlike the speaking skill, the writing skill does not come naturally to students. It is a skill that must be learned. It does not flow smoothly as there is a lot of revision, monitoring, drafting and so forth. Most students find it difficult to write even in their mother tongue. When the task involves another language, e.g. English, it becomes almost impossible for the average student.

2. The formal atmosphere of the classroom does not lend itself to creative thinking, which is essential for any sort of writing. The knowledge that they must be careful not to make grammatical mistakes, which would seriously affect their grades, also hinders the students from putting in their best efforts. ("Why bother writing? Many reasons; we are going to get a low grade anyway with our lousy grammars").

So since writing is disliked, one of the great tasks of a teacher is to make the activity interesting in the first place, and motivate the students to take a more active part in the writing class. To help solve this, different activities have been proposed, one of which is **writing dialogue journals**.

Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals are written conversations in which a learner and teacher (or another writing partner) communicate regularly (daily, weekly, or on a schedule that fits the educational setting) over a semester, school year, or course. Learners write as much as they choose on a wide range of topics and in a variety of genres and styles. The teacher writes back regularly, responding to questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The teacher is primarily a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the learner rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the quality of the learner's writing. Topics for or types of writing may be specified to enhance the curriculum, and some correction may be given by the teacher, but the primary goal of the writing is communication.

The first documented use of dialogue journals was in the 1980s with sixth grade students, both native and nonnative English speakers, in California (Peyton & Reed, 1990; Peyton & Staton, 1993). Many teachers, however, report having communicated with their adult learners through journal writing before this. They are now used in many different educational settings-with adults and children, with native and nonnative English speakers and in teacher and volunteer training programs (Peyton & Staton, 1996).

At the Early Stages dialogue Journals enable students and teachers to interact on a one-to-one basis and in any learning context. They are, therefore, also very useful communicative events at the early stages of learning to write in a new language. The dialogue journal enables the beginner to generate some personal report and receive the teacher's direct feedback on it.

According to Peyton and Reed (1990), both young children who are beginning writers in a second language and nonliterate

adults can start a dialogue journal as soon as they are comfortable in the classroom.

Many teachers of adults learning English have found dialogue journals to be an important part of their classes. Dialogue journals not only open new channels of communication, but they also provide natural contexts for language development. When adult learners write with their teachers, they have opportunities to use English in a supportive, nonthreatening interaction with a proficient English speaker who knows the language and the culture. Because the interaction is written, it allows learners to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing (Peyton, 2000).

Dialogue journal writing is consistent with a learner-centered curriculum orientation, in which learners write to express themselves, to make sense of their own and others' experiences, and to develop their abilities (Auerbach, 1999; Isserlis, 1996). This type of writing can also be an important component of a "critical inquiry approach" (Van Duzer & Florez, 1999), as learners and teachers think critically together about texts and events that affect them and respond in writing.

The Benefits of Dialogue Journal Writing

Extended contact time with learners: Teachers have very little time to spend with individual learners, and dialogue journal writing extends that time. This time can not only build strong personal and intellectual ties, but it can also give learners access to the knowledge of a member of the new language and culture, and to the teacher, detailed knowledge about the learner's strengths and needs.. Through this relationship, the learner has regular opportunities to reflect on new experiences and emerging knowledge and to think through with another individual ideas, problems, and important choices.

Management of classes with learners of varying language ability and interest levels: All learners can participate in the dialogue journal activity to some extent, from the first day of class. Because learners' dialogue journal entries give continual direct and

indirect feedback about what they understand in class as well as about their language progress, the teacher receives information that can lead to individualized instruction for each learner.

Assessment of learner needs and progress: Having learners write about what they want to learn and why is an excellent way for teachers to conduct needs assessments. Learners can respond in the journal to questions like, “Where do you use English?” “What language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, use of vocabulary, use of grammar) are you interested in developing?” and “Where are you having the most difficulty with English?” (Bello, 1997; Weddell & Van Duzer, 1997) The writing itself, of course, gives teachers valuable information about what learners know and are able to do in writing. If learners agree, specific dialogue journal entries can be included in a portfolio to demonstrate progress.

Facilitation of language learning: The primary focus of dialogue journal writing is topics and issues of interest to learners rather than correct form. The teacher’s written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the learner’s proficiency level; thus, the teacher’s entries can provide reading texts that are challenging but also comprehensible, because they relate to what the learner has written. Beyond the modeling of language form and structure, the teacher’s writing also provides continual exposure to the thought, style, and manner of expression of a proficient English writer. As learners continue to write and read the teacher’s writing, they are likely to develop confidence in their own ability to express themselves in writing. Many teachers using dialogue journals report that the learners’ writing becomes more fluent, interesting, and correct over time (Peyton, 2000).

Method

Noting all the benefits associated with using dialogue journals asserted by different scholars and considering the great need to motivate students to write more and enjoy writing as a communicative act, the present work aims at (a) investigating

whether writing dialogue journals as a peripheral activity in writing classes at Islamic Azad University of Hamedan can affect students' interest in writing and thus improve their writing skill, and (b) providing some empirical support to the ideas concerning the use of dialogue journals in teaching writing and thus contribute to the literature in the field.

Research Hypothesis

Writing dialogue journals affects EFL students' writing skill.

Participants

The subjects of the present study were 50 EFL students (between 18 to 27 years old; 7 males and 43 females) at the EFL Department of Hamedan Islamic Azad University all of whom had already passed two courses (eight credits) in English grammar.

To do the present work, first of all 160 EFL students at Hamedan Islamic Azad university who had passed their Grammar 1 and 2 courses successfully and had taken the Advanced Writing course, in which the focus is on the development of students' composition skills were asked to sit for an exam containing 40 multiple-choice items tapping into different aspects of English structure and grammar. These items had been adopted from the written section of the "Longman Preparation Course for the TOFEL Test" (1996).

Then 50 students whose obtained scores were 2 on the TWE scale (showing a minimal ability to convey ideas in written English) were selected and randomly assigned into two groups, one experimental and one control, 25 students each.

Procedure

To ensure that the subjects of the study were not so much different in their knowledge of written English, they were asked to take a test adopted from SAT II Writing (1996) in which they were

required to write a paragraph on the topic "***All advertising for tobacco products should be banned.***"

Then the papers were scored on a 20-point scale considering such factors as ***fluency, organization, grammar*** and ***punctuation*** assigning ***10,3,6,1*** points to each respectively. The comparison of the means of the obtained scores did not show a significant difference between the two groups.

Then after two introductory sessions to the course spent on talking about composition basics and parts of a paragraph and related concepts such as unity, coherence and audience, all the students in both experimental and control group were asked to write a paragraph for each session following a process approach to writing: brainstorming, drafting, revising and the final product. All their paragraphs were corrected by the researcher and oral and written feedbacks were given on grammar, mechanics, organization and ideas. However, students in the experimental group were also required to write journals on wide variety of topics ranging from daily activities to their own English learning experiences and English writing difficulties and hand them in every week to be read. The students were assured they would not be penalized for their mistakes on these to prevent their excess focus on form and correctness.

Data Collection and Analysis

After 15 weeks of treatment, while all the students in both groups had written around 10 paragraphs and had received proper feedback, they all were given an exam in which they were asked to write two paragraphs on the topics given.

These two paragraphs were scored following the same method for scoring the pretest described above: 20 points assigned to 4 factors: fluency, organization, grammar and punctuation each 10,3,6,1 points respectively. More scores were assigned to the first one since it was indeed the reason why the study was conducted in the first place: "to investigate the effect of keeping journals on the writing fluency of students".

After papers were scored, the mean score for each group was calculated and the mean scores were compared using a t-test the results of which are summarized in the tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1
Group statistics

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
PRETEST				
Experimental	25	10.7000	3.69121	0.67392
Control	25	10.8500	1.98768	0.36290
POSTTEST				
Experimental	25	14.3800	2.39712	0.43765
Control	25	12.3067	2.29574	0.41914
DIFFERENCE				
Experimental	25	3.6800	1.58729	0.28980
Control	25	1.4567	0.97656	0.17830

Table 2
Independent samples test

	t-test for Equality of Means			
	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference
PRETEST				
Equal variances assumed	-0.196	48	0.845	-0.1500
POSTTEST				
Equal variances assumed	3.421	48	0.001	2.0733
DIFFERENCE				
Equal variances assumed	6.534	48	0.000	2.2233

Conclusion

The comparison of the means at $p < 0.05$ presented in table 1 above point to a positive effect of dialogue journal writing on

students' writing ability in the experimental group. Furthermore, a comparison of scores obtained on each of the factors of interest (fluency, grammar, organization and punctuation) reveals interesting results: students in the experimental group had a better performance as far as fluency and grammar were concerned, but their performance was much the same as those in the control group on organization and punctuation.

The above mentioned findings make the present author strongly advise the writing class teachers to include some sort of dialogue journal writing in their writing classes. Though it surely takes much time and energy to read all the huge mass of writing students produce, the results are rewarding: seeing the students progress and get better today more than the day before because of the amount of exposure to language they have received without the formal constraints of a formal classroom. Dialogue journal writing is a way to come into contact with the students (Lockwood & Ross, 2000) and see all the factors - cognitive or affective- which hinder the students' progress in writing as a communicative activity.

Dialogue journal writing gives insights to the students' needs and helps them see their own progress: seeing they are able to communicate in written English what they considered incomprehensible if asked to write down in a formal way being careful not to make grammatical mistakes.

The Author

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