

STUDENTS' DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING: AN EXCEPTIONAL COMMUNICATION TOOL BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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The purpose of this paper is to present dialogue journal writing as an important part of ESL/EFL language instruction. Journal writing consists of students' daily writings where they freely express their feelings, worries and/or interests, and receive a response from the teacher.

The role played by the teacher in dialogue journal writing is as important as the role played by the students, but the teacher's attitude towards students' writings definitely determines the success or failure of his/her pupils developing English proficiency.

Journal writing serves three main purposes. It serves as an authentic tool for student-teacher interaction, as a source of input for syllabus design and as a teaching source in which students will refer to teachers' writing as a model for appropriate English structures.

Origins of dialogue journal communication

The need to create a social context, in which the second or foreign language spoken became a language of communication, allowed the role of dialogue in learning to become a genuine situation for a relationship between teacher and student.

Dialogue journals, according to Peyton and Staton (1991), have been adopted since 1980 in educational settings—with native speakers of English in primary, elementary, middle school, and high school classes—for purposes of improving classroom communication. They are also widely used in ESL and EFL instruction to develop writing competency, practical reasoning, and problem-solving abilities.

What are dialogue journals?

Dialogue journals, according to Paul Jones' perception, are written conversations between a student and a teacher. Both partners write back and forth, frequently, and over a period of time, about whatever interests them. Their goal is to communicate in writing, to exchange ideas and information, free of the concern for form and correctness so often imposed on developing writers.

Studies done by Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed & Morroy in 1984 and 1988 show that there are five qualities that characterize dialogue journal exchanges and make dialogue journal writing a powerful teaching tool, different from other kinds of scholastic writing and classroom interaction.

1. The focus of the interaction is on real communication, not on the form.
2. Besides the privacy of writing, the absence of corrections makes dialogue journals relatively nonthreatening to most students.
3. Because the journals are individualized and student generated, they can capture and sustain remarkably high student interest.
4. Teacher and student can act as relatively equal partners in the discourse, temporarily stepping out of their customarily hierarchical relationship.
5. The genre encourages students to express in writing a wide variety of language functions, such as reporting facts, making requests, complaining, giving excuses, predicting, etc.

Empirical Study

The subjects in the present study were divided into two groups according to their educational level and also according to the environment where they were learning English. The first group were 58 eighth graders, in a public middle school in Glendale, Arizona. Ten of them were learning English as their second language and the rest were native speakers of English. They were all between the ages of 13 and 15.

The second group was made up of 21 undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language in Bogotá, Colombia. They were taking a summer vacation course in Phonetics and Phonology to fulfill the requirements of the syllabus in the 6th semester of their career at Universidad Distrital. Both groups did dialogue journal writing on a daily basis for a considerable period of time in class.

Some of the journal entries written by the students from both groups have been extracted and presented

here to explain and support the three main points in this paper:

1. Writing as communication permits the teacher to know more about the students personally as well as academically.

11-3-92

"Today I voted. It was the very first time I voted. I'm glad I did. Anyway, my Social Studies teacher took us down to the polling place at our school. I thought it was very interesting."

4-27-93

"Today has been the worst day of my life my dads in the hospital because of something that happened Monday morning. My dad ate a stake and some garlic bread the night befor and he was really tired. He had to drive himself to the hospital the next morning. He was in the hospitale because he had a heart atack."

6-16-93

"Teacher I am very apologize for not writing a satisfactory explanation but I did not really want to write. I am sorry. I am feeling sick."

1-11-93

"I like the title "forget" because it remember's me — my friends I left in Mexico, but I can forget some special people that make me happy, even cry when I was in Mexico. I can ever forget the way they treat me when I was to leave Mexico."

From the journal entries of both eighth graders and undergraduate students, it is important to consider the readiness of students towards starting communication and their disposition toward learning. It seems easy for them to do journal writing since it does not demand using a different style of writing but the one they use with their peers. Students can share their every day experiences with the teacher in an informal way.

Journal writing, considered a meaning-oriented task, does not require students to be concerned about the form and structure of writing but about the content of communication. Moreover, in dialogue journal writing, students feel they have an audience that will listen to them and respond to their message.

2. Student journal writing is considered to serve not only as feedback for teachers about what they have learned in class but also as a realistic, objective

guide to syllabus design. Since Dialogue Journals reflect students' interests, their weaknesses, and/or difficulties, it is the best tool for classifying materials to utilize in the classroom. The writing also gives the teacher information about students' language abilities, and a permanent, ongoing record of each student's progress in writing that can be reviewed throughout the year.

From student's input offered in dialogue journal writing, the teacher can also identify the difficulties students might have when using the English language in written form. Those difficulties can be treated as the topic for a new lesson called "mini-lesson" by Least (1977).

As discussed above, the input taken from students' journals serves as a basis for syllabus design. From the journal entries listed above, three topics for mini-lectures were planned to be explained and clarified the day after the journals were read by the teacher:

- Homophones and homographs. An explanation was given by the teacher, after which written and oral exercises were developed.
- Past tense of regular and irregular verbs were reviewed. (e.g. laugh, illuminate, feel, write, etc.)
- Vocabulary words (remind vs remember) and spelling of words such as feel, substitute, especially, weren't, aren't, etc. were considered.

3. The third aspect of journal writing analyzed in this paper is concerned with dialogue journal as a form of writing that offers students a chance to read appropriate English structures in which the teacher is served as the model.

Teachers' written responses to student dialogue journals represent the model students need to be able to identify the form and structure of language. Style of writing, formal or informal, is another perceivable aspect of language that students can follow from the model in dialogue journal writing.

One important issue in dialogue journal writing in which teachers serve as models is the quality of teachers' responses and the amount of corrections to the students' writing. Peyton and Reed consider that one of the tenets of dialogue journal writing has been that students' writing should not be overtly corrected. The teacher may model some of the words and structures used incorrectly by the student, but the teacher's contribution to the journal is a genuine message, a response to the

content rather than a comment on the form of the student's writing.

Rose (1983) claims that instructors' responses consider neither the writer's intention nor his or her relation to the audience; Griffin (1982) argues that their responses create the impression that mechanical errors are as important as meaning-related errors, thus, contradicting what they tell students and confusing them.

Considering the criteria used in responding to student journal writing, dialogue journal writing can be considered as one of the "safest" and most effective engaging types of communication tools in language teaching.

The following journal entry from students' writings is an example of student-teacher interaction using dialogue journals.

1-8-93

"Mirrors: I like the title because when I look myself at the mirror, I don't know if I just look myself physically or if I reflect my feeling. Some times when I'm in the mirror I tell myself if I'm really are the reflection I'm looking."

Teacher's response: "It is both Norma, the beauty of your body, your face (physically) and the beauty of your feelings."

Conclusions and Teaching Implications

The findings of this study reveal significant improvement in the writing proficiency of both the learners of English as a Foreign Language and the eighth grader native speakers of English, using dialogue journal writing.

The dialogue journals from learners of English as a Foreign Language demonstrate a better quality of communication in their writing expression after having used dialogue journals in class for a month. When doing self-evaluation and peer evaluation of their journal entries, students help each other shape their own writing and gain a greater understanding of their audience and the boundaries of the assignments.

The writing of native speakers of English also reveals improvement in the quality of language they used to communicate through dialogue journals. The use of personal topics in the journals served as a stimulus; they always had content that was easily accessible to them.

Furthermore, findings from previous research done on dialogue journal writing inform educators of other important aspects worthy of attention:

1. Students learning a second or foreign language do not learn the formal features of a language in isolation; they learn the conventions in a contextualized situation using both spoken and written discourse.
2. Teachers should be aware of individual differences and be alert to the possibility that students may have difficulty because of the conventions of the genre(s) they are asked to engage in, not just because of the linguistic features of the second/foreign language they are using.
3. Individual differences and difficulties may play an equally influential role in students' engagement with other more common genres than personal journal writing. (Teachers have a lot to learn, for example, about students' learning of and engagement with the academic essay, in which they must demonstrate some skill to succeed in educational contexts.)
4. The audience can strongly influence a student's engagement with a genre. The content (perceptions or reflections on personal events) of the entries in the students' journals is adjusted according to the audience they are writing to, in this case, the teacher.
5. Because the teachers responded to the students' journals as readers and not as evaluators, most of the students successfully adapted to the genre. These findings suggest that the audience, the teacher in this case, can be crucial to students' engagement with a genre, and therefore, teachers need to make conscious decisions about what audience role they play in response to students' writing. Applebee (1984) considers that rather than simply playing the role of evaluator, teachers must practice responding to student writing as interested readers and "collaborators" in learning.
6. Finally, journal writing can be especially beneficial for students who lack confidence in their ability to write in English and who lack experience with writing in English. It gives students practice writing in a nonthreatening situation to an audience who responds to what they have communicated rather than to what they have not communicated.

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