

Journal writing: A silent kit for writing skills

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Abstract

This article explores how dialogue journals can be used as a silent kit to improve writing skill. Sixty-five primary school teachers with limited English proficiency wrote dialogue journals in a teachers-training course during nine weeks. Data was gathered from their journal entries and post-study questionnaires. Dialogue journal was found effective to foster the development of descriptive writing, usage of correct syntax & vocabulary, critical thinking and finally to raise learners' confidence in writing English. This article presents findings with necessary literature review and concludes with a number of recommendations on how EFL practitioners can use journals effectively to promote writing fluency of their students.

Journal writing: A silent kit for writing skills

Introduction

Dialogue journal is a tool that a teacher can use to make a private, written conversation with students over an extended period of time. It strikes a balance between a diary with its focus on self-discovery and the class notebook which concentrates on academic learning. By using dialogue journals, the teacher can engage in multifaceted interactions with students. Ideas, feelings and concerns can be shared in a private way. The journal provides the opportunity of improving writing by modeling language use. Another benefit of dialogue journal is that it serves as a bridge between natural spoken conversation and written expression with its participants and turns. Moreover, it allows students to develop self expression and personal voice.

Usually dialogue journals are used in teacher training program to reflect learners' new experiences with their professors as Brinton and Holten, 1989; Roderick, 1986; Roderick & Berman, 1984; see also *Dialogue*, September, 1988 (cited in Peyton and Reed, 1990:11). But, in this study, students wrote on teacher generated topics most of the time in journals with the purposes of developing learners' writing fluency with confidence.

The article is divided into three parts. The three parts of this article reviews existing literature in support of journal; explains the study and presents finding of the study. The article concludes with some recommendations on how EFL practitioners can use journals effectively to promote writing fluency of their students.

Literature Review

DEFINITION

Journaling is the practice of recording collection of thoughts, understandings, and explanations about ideas or concepts, usually in a bound notebook. Teachers ask students to keep journals, with the understanding that students will share their journal with the

teacher. A dialogue journal is a composition book in which each student carries on a private written conversation with the teacher for an extended period of time. To define dialogue journal, Peyton and Reed (2002:3) comment, '*A dialogue journal, put very simply, is a conversation between a teacher and an individual student. However, this conversation differs from all others they may have, in or out of the classroom; it is written, it is completely private, and it takes place regularly and continually throughout an entire school year or semester*'. Shrum and Glisan (2005:248) defines dialogue journal as '*.....a written conversation in which students communicate individually with the teacher. It can also be used to engage students in interaction with one another or in small groups.*' Dialogue journals can be exchanged in web.

Dialogue journals are interactive, functional, mostly written on self-generated topics, and deeply embedded in the continuing life of the classroom. Both persons write to each other in an informal, direct style about topics of mutual interest, usually on a daily basis at elementary level; two or three times a week for older students.

WHY JOURNAL IS USED IN THIS STUDY

Journal writing is gaining popularity as a technique in adult EFL classroom. Its uses vary greatly, depending on the purpose of instruction and the confidence level of the learners (Orem. 2001). This article looks at the use of journal as a technique to develop free writing with confidence among a group, with limited English proficiency. Some pointers, prompts, guiding questions, and suggested frameworks for journal writing were provided to the students with the focus of improving fluency in writing (see Lee. 2007). Topics and language structures were selected covering social, personal, professional and academic issues and considering the language proficiency of the learners.

Students compile their own experiences, thoughts and ideas and read teachers' responses and get encouragement in journaling. The total process helps students to develop self-esteem and gain confidence in writing. Dialogue journals are effective because it helps students create personal meaning, increase their motivation to write, facilitates writing skills, supports in the transition from oral to written communication,

and gives students chance to become an author. It can improve students' writing, enhance critical thinking skills, encourage observational skills, and develop creative skills. (Shrum and Glisan. 2005:248; Dymment. 2003)

Journals in the discussed study were instructed to be written twice in a weeks as proposed by Peyton and Reed (1990:4) and writing length was decided to be almost one page. Here languages were not checked, only ideas were shared which could be termed as communication. Brown and Sorrell (1993) recommend the importance of having structured criterion as a guide for students to follow when writing journals. So, journals in this study were completed within set criterion to achieve the objectives.

The study

AIM

In this study the main aim of journal writing was to develop the learners' confidence of writing in English. It was an effort to develop writing skill indirectly. Seemingly, primary objective was to encourage students to write their thoughts, believes, experiences and reflections in English.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The learners in this course were primary school teachers with limited English language proficiency. There were sixty-five students in the course and everybody participated in journaling. Two entries were done each week and the total duration was nine weeks. Post study questionnaires were used to know students' opinions. Entries from the journal without any change are also presented as evidences in the finding part. In addition, some interviews were taken to those teachers who supervised the tasks, checked the journals and gave necessary feedback. There were seven teachers involved in the process including authors.

PROCEDURE

For doing this writing practice, a note book was given to each student. Having the note book for journal writing on their lap, the blank look given by the students stated "What to

write?” It was natural at their level. So, some topics, prompts and some guided questions were written in their journals as teachers’ responses. Presumably, at the outset, many learners lack confidence in their own writing. In addition, to remove their apprehension of the task; they were told that this activity was a part of their language learning and it will not be evaluated.

Before deciding on what topics or issues to be used for journal writing, learner’s ability was considered and each student was given separate topics to write. It was done to make everyone bound to write something of their own. To make the task easier, the topics were selected either from the learners’ day to day life, or from their surroundings or from the familiar events (e.g. memory, food habit, culture and festivals of the particular person where they come from). Even, course delivery plan was followed while giving the task for the resonance of the participants’ everyday learning from the training. In this way, the participants were drawn into a frame of writing journal twice a week according to Peyton and Reed (2002: 4), who comment, ‘*If it is not possible to write and respond daily, it is crucial that writing takes place regularly, at least twice a week.*’

Students were encouraged to come-up with own ideas and language. Shrum and Glisan (2005:249) suggest that the response of the teachers to the content of each journal entry is important rather than correcting grammar, vocabulary and spelling. They were made understand that journals will be neither graded nor corrected; only the content will be considered not grammar or any other errors.

After the initial hiccup, students were found interested in communicating through journal and they were eager to know about the teachers’ responses and valued (see Ferris (1995). Furthermore, from the teacher’s point of view, it was interesting to note how students react after getting the feedback. Thus, journal helped the two parties to build up a relationship and students started to talk about their lives at home, at workplace, and in the community.

Findings

According to Nunan (1992:118), journals are ‘important retrospective tools in language research’, because dialogue journals are an acknowledgment of students’ linguistic and cognitive development. Followings are some outcomes found in the study, where journal-excerpts are drawn and presented from the actual writing of students and teachers without any change to grammar, spelling or punctuation.

WRITING DONE ON VARIOUS TOPICS: The writing is varied in terms of topics. Students were allowed to write personal topics although non-personal topics were initiated most of the time to write. They wrote descriptions, narratives, comparisons, likings, dis-likings, complaints, arguments, and even suggestions. In a word, students were given opportunities to be engaged in reflection about experiences and to think about choices, problems, and ideas (Staton, 1984).

ACCURACY GAINED: By creating a dialogue setting, teachers support students’ reading and writing competencies and the acquisition of more complex reasoning skills (Kreeft, 1984). Therefore, with truly individualized practice, each student benefits in a different way. In the said study, language improvement was remarkable, though no direct input for linguistic development was given. Since students were all adults, they had grammar knowledge but they could not use those in their writing. Journaling made them aware in using language correctly. Therefore, in the post-study questionnaire, 87% respondents reported about grammatical improvement. Following entries present that problems with subject-verb-agreement, inappropriate usage of modal-verbs, sentence –structures and L1 interference were very common in the initial entries, which gradually became eliminated.

On June 6, 2009, Poly wrote:

(a) I should be a student goes to school regularly. I should be a student alwase read and write. I will be a student quaitte and polite. I has to be a student alwas truthfulness .I should be a student alwas her homework. I will be a student alwas her read made.

On June, 11, 2009, poly wrote again:

(b) A good house wife should everyday clean her house. She should always take care her family members. She should always cook good food. She should always look after her children for helth, clean and study. She should help to her sometimes.....

(Appendix-1)

In the above two entries (a and b), usage of modal verbs is remarkable.

On April 13, 2009, Sultana wrote about Savar TARC (a training centre, situated at Savar):

© Savar TARC stand in the Savar at Ashulia. There are many big building, a library, trees, garden , a guard room a kitchen. There are two big field, three computer room in the TARC. There are two water tank in the TARC. Many people come here and learning different thing.

After six days (on April 19, 2009), Sultana again wrote about Bogra TARC (a training centre, situated at Bogra):

(d) There are many big buildings and some flower gardens, one kitchen, one dining, one culchural room in the Bogra TARC. There is a field in front of the TARC. Many people come here.

The syntax used in examples c and d is noteworthy.

L1 interference is another hurdle in a monolingual atmosphere that L2 learners have to overcome. Through the process of journaling students got support to eliminate L1 interference. A critical review of entry e and f, written by Rokeya on March 31, 2009 and

May 5, 2009 gives evidence:

(e) I am Rokeya. I am a BRAC School teacher and a house wife. I live with my husband, son and brother in law. We live in village. My husband is a besnessman. He get up early in the morning and she is an honest man. He get up early in the morning and she is a hardworker. My brother in law is our family member. We help her. He is an honest man and her education is M.A..... I love my family very much.

(f) My husband's name is Abdus Satter He is 37 years old. He is a shop keeper. He is 37 years old. He gets up early in the morning and goes to shop regularly. He comes back home afternoon. Then takes shower and eat lunch. After he did homework. Again he went to shop. He comes back home at night.....

Correct usage of tense also has been improved. Following entries (g & h) can be examined:

Momtaz wrote on 30-05-09 about the best friend in her life.

(g) Moktar is my best friend. Because he is very helpful, polite and honest.He always help me different subjects. Spacialy English and mathmatic. If I don't know any word mean he told and worte me. If I am sick he looked me. But five years ago he go abord. At first he worte three letters to me . But he forget me now. I think my friend Moktar is a selfish man.....

Momtaz, furthermore, wrote about her experience when teachers went to observe her classes on 10-08-09:

(h) When I have heard about the BRAC University teacher will come to my school then I felt very nervous. Because they are English teacher of BRAC University. But I am a teacher of BRAC school

.....I was very happy to see them. They talked to me in English. They sat down on the mat. They saw my English class .How did I take my class in English. I took my class in English. Then they had very happy to saw my class. I felt very happy to saw my class. I felt very happy too because I thought never the BRAC University teacher will come to my school. (Appendix-2)

STUDENT GENERATED WRITING: According to Peyton and Reed (1990:14), in dialogue journals students get the opportunity to express themselves openly and in private without being embarrassed about anything. Again, Orem (2001) comments, '.....teacher

must be prepared to deal with some sensitive issues in the lives of their students.' It was found that sometimes students shared joys and sorrows of their lives in the journal with teachers. One student shared the story of her life. She documented:

One day I went to a relative's house. There was a very smart and handsome boy. He worked in a sugar mill. He liked me but I don't know. He proposed me and married with me. Only four year I lives with his. One day, suddenly he died to an accident. I became upset and shouted crying. I had two little boys that time. Now they read in class ten and seven. They are very polite. So I think if he alive now, he becomes very happy. So I remember him still. So it was a bad and very biggest surprise of my life.

One student wrote about how her son misses his father, when she was asked to write about herself:

.....I love my child. My child is my son. I have only one son.I fell very proud that time he speaks some English, like Mamone Can I go to toylet? May I come in? My son's have not stay with his father, because he is a low mind man and a addact person. So we have saparated with him. We dislike him. Sometime my son remember his father, become she is very sad. I am also sad for my child..... (Appendix-3)

Another student shared about her husband:

..... I dislike my husband, he is not a good man. Permanently I have separated with him I did a very big mistake when I was young. Now I totally forget him. Now I decided that I will develop my life. If my Allah stay with me , I will must be successful. That is my main ambition. The sositety of the people will see that a helpless woman is never helpless... I see many dream of my life. I don't know that when my dream will be true...

CHANGED ATTITUDE: Students' attitude towards language learning was changed after journaling. Some of the students complained why they were over burdened with journal writing when they already had packed schedule. According to Shin (2003), one of the advantages of writing journal is that the increased awareness of writing gives students

their own writing style and habit. This was evident in the study. 100% respondents report their likings of writing journal as a tool to improve writing.

One of the teachers responsible for journal checking stated, *'They now have the ability to transfer their thoughts onto pages in English and also can translate words into English to use in their writings.'* Another commented, *'At the beginning it was hard to write even five sentences by them on one topic but now they can write at least a page though they have not gained the perfection'*

CRITICAL THINKING: The participating students' interest and gradual development of their writing infuse the teachers to initiate some thought provoking topics to write. Thus, a shift from descriptive and narrative writing to critical writing was found in all most all entries. Along with this, the change of reticent learners to an expected level was remarkable in this study. Here are two more examples:

Women are unwanted persons in our society. They are very hard worker but get poor salary. In fact male and female both equal. Without women don't improve our society. The present society women are working in garments, factory, houses, schools, college etc. But they get poor salary.. If we don't respect the women we don't success in society

A reflection like this from a woman of underprivileged society is thought provoking and it proves her ability to express her thoughts in target language.

In another excerpt a student wrote about herself, when she was asked to.

Teacher's comment: *What do you think about yourself? - Smart, genius or average? Why or Why not?*

Student: *I think, I am not smart, because if any person is smart than the person should be careful, polite, literaty, honestly, confident, Handsome, gentle and smiling face etc. Otherwise the smart person should be clean and neat and hard worker. If these qualities*

has not within any person, he cannot be a smart person. So I think, I am not smart and genius because these qualities have not me. (Appendix-4,5)

Teacher's comment: *I don't think so. I think you are smart and genius.*

CONFIDENCE GAINED: Hancock (1999) points out that frequent writing in journals will assist students whose first language is not English to develop confidence in writing English. When the entries of the journals are examined it is found that the later entries are comparatively longer and well organized, which proves the confidence and fluency development in students. Following entries by two students Nurbanu and Firoza also support this:

(a) This training is the best training for all BRAC Primary school's teacher because we did not know how to teach English little children. After this training I will teach my students very carefully. I have got many method and tagnic from this training If I can use this method or tagnik , the students will understand very easily the lesson.....Really I am very happy for this training. This micro teachings help me to teach BRAC students or other students. I am practicing different tipes of dialogue. This dialogue help me for real life. When I have come 1th phase training nothing understand English speaking. So I am feeling very good form 4th phase training. (Appendix-6)

(b) I am Firoza. I am from Shatkhira. Now I can speak more English. No I make lesson plan. I take the class and presentation. Now I am writing drama, story , lesson for book, but before I cannot write drama, story and books. Now I am very helpful to the students and my teaching method is very pleasing and nice. for this reason the students always respect me.

Challenges & Recommendations

Krishnan and Hoon (2002) comment that, if learners are forced to keep a diary and to use a language that is not their native language, they may not find the task simpler. At the

beginning, initiating journal was a daunting task. Participating students were not only reluctant in writing journal but also copied from other sources. There was a sort of fossilization with their thinking capacity as well. We could overcome this with the help of residential teachers. Learners could ask the residential teacher to give them ideas about the issues. Sometimes, learners wrote their first draft in a separate paper and submitted the second draft in the journal, but gradually they gained confidence and could write in the note book directly.

Peyton and Reed (2002:65) comment, '*.....students writing should not be overtly corrected. The teacher may model some of the words and structures used incorrectly by the students..... However some students are concerned about the correctness of their writing and want correction in their journals.*' Initially frustration was found among the students as journaling was thought useless since they were not corrected. Some students met the teachers and asked whether these journals are read at all. We explained the objectives and showed the link between their writing with teachers' comments to convince the learners.

Another disadvantage of journaling is the amount of time teachers have to spend for reading and responding because of large sized population (Peyton and Reed, 2002:64). There were seven teachers and the checking was divided among the teachers to make the task easier.

Since students had tendency of copying others' writing, topics or issues related to their previous write-up were given as prompt for next writing with teachers' responses. These topics were not listed earlier but created by the teacher instantly relating the writing of the students and each student was given different topic to write on. Finding prompts, questions or topics was also another challenge for the teachers. A lot of peer discussion among the teachers took place while checking.

During the whole period (nine weeks), only eighteen entries were done by the students. But if students were given a daily journaling, as teachers believed, the more development could have been observed.

Conclusion

According to Peyton and Reed (2002:33), there is no empirical evidence that writing dialogue journals improves students' reading and writing skills like other activities that students could get engaged in the class. It would be very difficult to show improvement because a large numbers of variables are involved in this type of study. Whatever proofs, journal entries, teachers' comments presented in this article are testimonies of students' enhanced abilities. Effectiveness of dialogue journal to improve writing fluency is examined, the total process of journaling is described and literature are discussed to support presented arguments in this article. It is also shown that journaling makes students aware of their linguistic development, makes them confident and widen their areas of thinking. Therefore, journaling could be introduced as a silent tool along with regular curriculum of a course to promote writing fluency with others skills.

Keywords: dialogue journals, writing skill, accuracy, critical-thinking

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When Poly was asked to write some suggestions to be a good student, she wrote:

Subject: good student Date 06.06.09
Place Saver

I should be a student goes to school regularly. I should be a student always read and write. I will be student quite and polite. I has to be a student truthfulness. I should be a student always her homework. I will be a student always her read made.

On 11.06.09 Poly was asked to write some suggestions to be a good housewife and she wrote:

Subject: A good house wife Date 11.06.09
Place Saver

A good house wife should everyday clean her house. She should always take care her family members. She should always cook good food. She should always look after her children for health, clean and study. She should help to her sometimes.

On 30-05-09 Momtaz wrote about her best friend when she was asked to.

Subject: English About my best friend
Date: 30-5-09
Place: Saver
Moktan is my
best friend because he is very helpful, polite
and honest. He always
helps me with different subjects, specially English and
mathematics. If I don't know any word, mean or
word, I write to him. If I am sick, he looks
after me. But five years ago he went abroad. At first
he wrote three letters to me, but he forgot
me now. I think my friend Moktan is a
selfish man. I always miss my friend Moktan
because he was a best friend in my life.

On 10-08-09 Momtaz was asked to write about her feelings when her teachers went to visit her class.

Subject: English Date: 10-8-09
Place: Saver
When I have heard the BRAC University
teachers will come to my school then I
felt very nervous, because they are English
teachers of BRAC school University, but I am
a teacher of BRAC school
I was very happy to
see them. They talked to me in English.
They sat down on the mat. They saw
my English class. How they take my class
in English. I took my class in English.
Then they had very happy to saw my
class. I felt very happy too because I
thought never the BRAC university teachers
will come to my school. They had

I write about my son.

I love my child. My child is my son. I have only one son. My son name is Rownok Mhakatamud Nabi. He is my very sweet. Son. He reads in Baby-1. I feel very proud that time he speak some English, like "mamone can I go to toilet? may I come in? Exqueme" etc. Because I was very happy, and proud of him. My son's have not stay with his father, because he is a low mind man and a addict person. So we have separated with him. we dislike him. Some time my son remember his father, become she is very sad. I am also sad for my child. I travel my beautiful places with him, like sisupama zoo, museum, Rivens etc. He loves me very much.

He is a very
sweet boy. Thank
you for writing
about him!

Please write
about your
husband.

91.9.09

are help each other. They are no quarre.
They are make a friend. I like my room
mates. They are like me. I am Proved.

Now write
What you would miss
if you were not selected
for the training

Subject :

Date 11-08-09

Place _____

If I'm not selected for the training
I miss many things. As I can't speaking in
english. I can't instruction to in english for
my class. I can't write short poem, story
and drama. I can't saw nice scenery in
the TARC. I can't saw my teachers and
talk with him. I can't ought describe to
in english. I hope again I can will be come
this training because I speaking only in
english.

About my self

I think, I am not smart, because if any person is smart then the person should be carefully, polite, literate, honestly, confident, handsome gentle, and smiling face etc.

~~and~~ otherwise the smart person should be clean and neat and hardworker.

If these qualities has not within any person, He cannot be a smart

Beligand

person. So I think, I am not

smart and genius, because these qualities have not me.

I don't think so. I think you are smart and genius.

Date 07-08-09

Place Nilphamari

Subject :

This training is the best training for all BRAC Primary school's teacher because we do not know how to teach English little children. After this training I will teach my students very carefully. I have got many method and technique from this training. If I can use this method or technique, the students will understand very easily the lesson. I have got many English instruction for English class.

Really I am very happy for

this training.

This micro teaching help me to teach BRAC students or other students. I am practicing different types of dialogue. This dialogue help me for real life. When I have come 1th phase training nothing understand English speaking. So I am feeling very good for 1th phase training.