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The Effects of Dialogue Journals in Enhancing ESL Students' Writing

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Several methods and techniques have been advocated in recent years to help students become better writers. Advocates of the communicative approach stress that communication is a central and important goal of writing, and thus students are being taught to consider their audience and their purpose for writing (Raimes, 1983, pp. 8–9). The Language Experience Approach, evidence of how schema research has affected the way we look at student writing, encourages students to use familiar experiences and known language to create texts (Gunderson, 1991, pp. 64–65). The Whole Language Approach has influenced teachers to integrate writing along with reading, listening, and speaking in the classroom (Gunderson, 1991, p. 16). Many ESL researchers and teachers see the writing process as more important than the product and thus students are encouraged to explore topics, to gather ideas from their own experience, and to use drafts and revision in their writing (Reid, 1993, pp. 31–33). Recent methods advocated in teaching writing seem to focus on getting students to be aware of their audience and purpose for writing, to write on meaningful topics, to write greater quantities for increased practice in using the language, to benefit from integrated activities in the classroom, and to use writing to be creative and explore their writing topics in depth.

A technique employed by many ESL teachers in recent years which focuses on factors mentioned above is the technique of dialogue journals. Davis (1983) provides a description of dialogue journals, explaining that they are a modified extension of traditional journal writing. Instead of evaluating or grading the students’ entries, teachers simply provide feedback to each entry in the form of a written response. In turn, students reply to the teacher after reading the teacher’s response (p. 112).

Dialogue journals, according to the in-depth definition offered by Kreeft Peyton (1987), incorporate in the following ways the goals and foci of teaching writing mentioned earlier. First, dialogue journals use an integrated approach in that the students write their entries, read the response offered by their teacher, and engage in a written conversation. Secondly, the ongoing written conversation maintained between the students and the teacher ensures a real audience for the students’ writing and a purpose of real communication with the teacher. Thirdly, the students are able to choose their own topics for their dialogue journal entries, ensuring that they will be culturally familiar with and interested in the content of their writing. Fourthly, since the entries are not graded, the students can feel free to focus on the exploration and discovery process of writing and are less threatened if they make mistakes during their experimentation with the language.

Kreeft Peyton (1987) also suggests that using journals in ESL writing classes can be especially helpful because all students can participate in the activity and they can write at their own individual level. Dialogue journals give students the chance to daily practice writing skills that lead to fluency. Also, Kreeft
Peyton (1987) claims that “communication, on a one-to-one basis, is crucial—not only to help [the students] adjust, but to help the teacher understand them and address their special needs” (p. 3).

Given that the use of dialogue journals is a technique which has been identified as enhancing students’ writing abilities, what effects have been identified in the use of dialogue journals with ESL students? When asking this question, we can look at the four previously mentioned goals that are incorporated in the use of dialogue journals to create five inquiries into the results of studies involving dialogue journals. For instance, how does what students write in dialogue journals compare with what they write in more formal writing assignments in which the audience is not as real or is not defined? Does being able to choose a topic on which to write affect student writing? Do students write more or less in dialogue journals compared to more formal assignments? How does the ongoing conversation, an integrated aspect of dialogue journals, enhance student writing? What effect does the freedom provided in dialogue journals have on student writing and what opportunities does that freedom afford students? The previously mentioned inquiries can be addressed by a review of literature related to writing and the use of dialogue journals in the ESL classroom.

**Literature Review**

A review of literature of research involving dialogue journals reveals that there are many benefits for ESL teachers’ and students’ use of dialogue journals. Five primary benefits can be identified from the research:

1. Dialogue journals provide a real audience.
2. Dialogue journals help students focus on meaningful topics.
3. Dialogue journals affect the quantity of writing.
4. Dialogue journals provide conversation practice.
5. Dialogue journals allow students freedom to explore and discover.

**Dialogue Journals Provide a Real Audience**

In a study involving dialogue journals, Kreeft Peyton, Staton, Richardson, and Wolfram (1993) found that having a real audience affected student writing. The subjects of their study were a group of 12 LEP students from a sixth grade class of 27 LEP students in Los Angeles. The group of 12 students chosen for the study was composed of students with an equal distribution by sex, ethnicity, and English language proficiency. The study also made a “more in-depth analysis of three of the students, selected as representatives of the three proficiency groups [which were high, middle, and low]” (201).

Kreeft Peyton et al. (1993) found that the writing directed to a familiar audience (which included dialogue journals and an assigned letter to a friend) had qualities that the other assigned writing (a social studies essay and a thank you letter to a stranger) lacked. The social studies essay, about a subject they had talked about for weeks, was less complex and elaborate. In contrast, “the dialogue journal entries and letter to a friend elicited the more frequent use of features that are useful in all types of writing” (p. 217). These useful features included “greater clause complexity, a greater variety of clause connectors, lower relative frequency of one of the most basic connectors, and a lower relative frequency of repetition as a cohesive tie” (p. 216). It seems that the difference in either having or lacking a familiar audience may have attributed to the differences in the characteristics of the students’ writing.

Divine (1995), in a study comparing dialogue journals with traditional journals, came to a similar conclusion in finding that significant advantages ensue from using dialogue journals compared to traditional personal journals. Divine studied a class of junior high German students using both types of journals. She found a significant increase in writing fluency with the use of dialogue journals compared to the use of traditional journals. Divine attributed the increase in writing fluency to the interaction that occurred between students and their teacher. It appears that once again, a familiar, real audience was a factor in increasing writing fluency.

**Dialogue Journals Help Students Focus on Meaningful Topics**

Reyes (1991) conducted a study of students’ ability to construct meaning in dialogue journals. Reyes studied sixth grade Hispanic bilingual students’ use of dialogue journals in contrast to their use of literature logs. When writing in their dialogue journals, the students were able to choose their own writing topics. On the other hand, the literature logs required the children to write personal responses to the literature that they were reading as a class assignment, and the teachers did not respond to every literature log. While the dialogue journal assignment placed no restrictions
on whether they could write in Spanish or English, teachers expected the literature logs to be written in English only.

Reyes, upon analyzing the data, found that dialogue journals, in comparison to the literature logs, provided students a more successful setting in which to communicate their ideas. Reyes attributed this success in the students' writing experience to a specific feature of the dialogue journals. She claimed that students performed better because they were able to select their own topics. In the dialogue journals, the topics selected by the students were culturally relevant, familiar, and important to the students; the literature log entries, on the other hand, contained little substance. Reyes believed that since the students were interested in the topics chosen for the dialogue journals, they were able to capitalize on their expertise regarding their own lives and situations. This factor in turn seemed to provide the students with better control over the construction of meaning in their writing.

What effect does the students' control over topic selection in dialogue journals have on the students' success in writing? Johnson (1989) found that when students were allowed to choose their own topic in dialogue journals, some ESL students were given the chance to initiate communication interaction in English when they otherwise would not. Johnson (1989), citing Urzua (1987), pointed out that when ESL students were able to choose their own topics that their own voices came through in the writing and they were more effective writers.

**Dialogue Journals Affect Quantity of Writing**

One obvious way of getting students to improve their writing is to get them to write more often. Kreeft Peyton et al. (1993), as indicated before, conducted a study looking at sixth grade LEP students’ writing development through dialogue journals as compared to more formal assigned writing. The four writing assignments examined by Kreeft Peyton et al. (1993) were dialogue journal writing, a letter to a friend, a letter to a teacher, and a social studies essay (pp. 203–204). The dialogue journal assignment (of which a week’s worth was examined) required the students to write at least three sentences daily and allowed them to decide what, when, and how much to write. The teacher responded to each dialogue journal entry, but in order to keep the focus of the dialogue journals on communication, no grade was ever given. The letter to a friend required the students to write to a personal friend about their favorite television program. The letter to a friend was used as a one-time evaluation, scored, and returned to students without further discussion. The letter to a teacher required the students to write one letter to a teacher who had given the class a set of encyclopedias to use. The social studies essay required students to compare and contrast deserts and grasslands, a subject they had been studying for several weeks. There was no specified audience for the essay other than the teacher as an evaluator who corrected and graded the essay before returning it to the student.

Kreeft Peyton et al. (1993) chose to look at the features of quantity, complexity, focus, and cohesive quality in the students’ four writing assignments. They found that the dialogue journals shared characteristics of the students’ more formal writing in complexity, focus on one topic, and cohesive qualities. In addition to the shared qualities, the dialogue journals had qualities that the assigned writing lacked, which included generating a significantly greater quantity of writing as a weekly total. Kreeft Peyton et al. (1993) attributed the larger quantity of writing as one reason for the students’ use of more variety of linguistic structures important for written text production. Besides allowing the students to produce a greater quantity of writing, the dialogue journals also “elicited the more frequent use of features that are useful in all types of writing” (217), as did the letter to a friend (see discussion above concerning Kreeft Peyton et al. [1993] under the section “Dialogue Journals Provide a Real Audience”). Thus, besides producing a greater quantity of writing, dialogue journals generated more useful writing features compared with the more formal writing assignments.

**Dialogue Journals Provide Conversation Practice**

Dolly (1990) studied the conversational aspects of dialogue journals. This study involved dialogue journals written between 12 adult ESL students enrolled in an intensive English program and their teacher. Dolly saw the dialogue journals as very similar to oral conversation except for the fact that in dialogue journal conversation each entry that is responded to consists of several conversation “moves.” In addition, the responder does not have to answer every question or acknowledge every comment. Dolly described that each move in the dialogue journals either advanced or repaired the conversation. An advancing move introduces...
a new topic or continues a previous topic, while a repairing move corrects or prevents a communication breakdown. Dolly measured these moves of conversation management with an analytic system of coding procedures “based on work in the structure of oral conversation by Wells (1981), Long (1983), and others” (p. 318).

Classifying the results, Dolly (1990) found that though the degree and style of participation varied greatly among the students, the students did more to initiate the topics while the instructors did more to extend the topics. According to Dolly, the instructors did more of extending the topics through asking questions about previously initiated topics, which, according to Dolly, reflected the teacher’s “role as maintainer [of topics in the conversation] rather than initiator” (p. 319). Dolly’s statement about the teacher’s role as maintainer of a dialogue journal conversation refers to a point she quotes from Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed, & Morroy (1984) about the characteristic of dialogue journals that encourages “students . . . to assume substantial responsibility for topic initiation rather than merely responding or reacting to teacher input” (p. 319).

Dolly (1990) also found that repairs were initiated more by teachers, but that there were fewer repairs overall in the dialogue journal conversations compared to the amount of repairs in oral conversation. Dolly attributed this to the fact that being understood is less critical in dialogue journal conversation than in oral conversation. In dialogue journal conversation students have more time to ponder the written response before replying and they aren’t required to respond to everything that the other person has mentioned or asked in the previous entry (p. 320). These characteristics of dialogue journals provide students with a longer response time as well as more flexibility in responding compared to the shorter response time and pressure to respond that is characteristic of a typical oral conversation.

Other studies have also found a correlation between oral speech and the language used in dialogue journals. Mangelsdorf (1989), in referring to dialogue journals, indicated that the increased awareness of the reader in the use of dialogue journals caused students to use the kinds of interaction they use in speech. She explained that having a conversational setting in dialogue journals is important because classroom language can become too artificial. The feature of having real dialogue is no doubt critical for the ESL student since a sufficient amount of authentic dialogue and conversation opportunities may not be offered in the classroom.

Sagers (1993) also found links between oral and written dialogues. Sagers studied the written and oral dialogue journals of 12 Chilean students. From the results of her study, she concluded that with the ESL students in her study there is little difference between oral and written dialogue. Sagers’s findings reveal the need to teach ESL students the differences between oral and written communication in English. Sagers’s findings also help to highlight the important role that dialogue journals play as a means of developing oral language proficiency as well as writing skills with ESL students.

Dialogue Journals Allow Students Freedom to Explore and Discover

One study found a result identified with dialogue journals which was not expected by the researchers. Davis (1983) conducted a dialogue journal project with junior and senior high school migrant students. The two main goals of the project were to check the students’ personal occupational and career plans and to give the students opportunities to write and improve their fluency. The students were given a choice of topics to write on for 20 to 30 minutes at each session with their counselor. The counselors would respond to the student’s entry between sessions (the frequency of the sessions was not specified in the article).

Davis saw success in the program in that it enabled the students to practice writing skills leading to fluency. This writing practice was seen as “a first stage in writing development” (p. 113) and as an activity that “extends the writer’s conceptual understanding” (p. 113). Besides giving students the opportunity to practice expressing themselves clearly, the dialogue journal project also provided other advantages not foreseen. Close personal ties were created between the counselors and students, and the students could complain or ask any question in private to which they were assured a response.

Dialogue journals, as shown in the study by Davis (1983), can provide a non-threatening environment for the students to truly express themselves and an opportunity to clearly communicate using English. Johnson (1989) came to similar conclusion about the freedom offered to students from dialogue journal writing. Johnson observed that when students are very limited in their English proficiency, dialogue journals can be helpful in getting them to experiment with the language.
Dialogue journals allow beginning students a private place to voice their opinions and concerns without worrying about ridicule from other students or peers.

Dialogue journals provide ESL students not only with freedom to express themselves, but also with the freedom of flexibility offered when dialogue journals fill a need in a writing program. One need that can be filled by dialogue journals is that of a prewriting activity to prepare students for more structured assignments. Freeman and Freeman (1989) found that dialogue journals "can help students discover ideas they wish to write about in more formal contexts" (p. 189). Kreeft Peyton and other advocates of dialogue journals feel even more strongly about dialogue journals' power of preparation.

Given that the majority of research involving the use of dialogue journals has been carried out with first language populations and only a few studies have inquired regarding their use with second language learners, this study was carried out in order to further investigate the use of dialogue journals in adult intensive English program writing classes. Particular attention was given to adult ESL writing teachers' use of dialogue journals in the classroom.

**Research Design**

In order to probe factors influencing teachers' use of dialogue journals, a study was conducted with ESL writing teachers teaching intermediate to advanced level writing classes.

**Subjects**

Subjects for this study consisted of 13 ESL writing teachers at Brigham Young University's English Language Center (ELC). All the teachers had been teaching writing for at least one term and were teaching intermediate to advanced level students.

**Instrument**

Data was gathered using a questionnaire (see Appendix) which was designed to survey teachers' use of dialogue journals in their intensive writing courses. The questions asked were open-ended so as to allow the teachers the opportunity to explain factors influencing the use of this writing technique in their classes.

**Procedure**

The questionnaires were distributed to 13 intermediate and advanced level writing teachers at the ELC. Teachers were given ten days to respond to the questionnaire and then return it to the researchers. At the conclusion of the ten days, 12 of the 13 teachers had responded to the questionnaire for a total response rate of 92.3%. Responses from the survey were then grouped and tabulated by the researchers. The results of the data analysis are presented in the findings section.

**Findings**

Of the 12 questionnaires returned, only 5 (38.46%) of the teachers identified that they had used or were currently using dialogue journals in their writing classes. For the 5 teachers who had or were currently using dialogue journals, 3 of these teachers (60%) indicated that they used dialogue journals four times a week. The other 2 teachers (40%) indicated that dialogue journals were used two to three times a week. When asked about the benefits they have experienced in the use of dialogue journals, 5 teachers (80%) identified the following benefits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Number of Teachers Responding</th>
<th>Percentage of Teachers Responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students are able to write more freely without being overly concerned about mistakes.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The journal allows students to show personal feelings; develops student–teacher relationship.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students feel more comfortable expressing their ideas.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue journals help students get their ideas down on paper; the journals facilitate the writing process.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
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dialogue journals with ESL students, the 5 teachers using dialogue journals responded by identifying several benefits. The most frequent responses given are listed in Table 1. These responses from the teachers clearly identified their perception that dialogue journals had a positive effect on their students’ writing ability. These effects included the opportunity for students to express themselves better, to share personal feelings, and to assist in their development in the writing process by getting their ideas down in print.

Teachers were also asked to describe the type of feedback they provided as they responded to their students writing in dialogue journals. Responses from the 5 teachers using dialogue journals are given in Table 2. Similar responses were grouped by the researchers and the frequency of responses totaling 40% or more are listed.

Data from Table 2 shows that all of these adult ESL teachers felt it important to respond to the questions expressed by students in their writing. The subsequent responses and comments were identified by the teachers as important in helping facilitate the writing process. Of the teachers 40 percent also felt it important to ask questions regarding their students’ written work, to provide little feedback, if any, on errors students made in their writing and, finally, to share their own experiences.

Summary

Many of the responses given by the ESL writing teachers surveyed in this study were found to be similar to the benefits discovered in previous research, namely, dialogue journals provide a real audience, offer students conversation practice, allow students freedom to explore and discover, and permit teachers to monitor students and form close ties with them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Number of Teachers Responding</th>
<th>Percentage of Teachers Responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answer students’ questions and provide brief comments.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask questions of the students.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide little feedback on student errors.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share own experiences.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications of Research for ESL Writing Teachers

The research on dialogue journals indicates that teachers should use dialogue journals because of the advantages and benefits offered to students who use them. For teachers who would like to begin using dialogue journals there are many implications from the research that will help them in tailoring the use of dialogue journals to fit their teaching needs. For example, there are many possible variations of using the standard dialogue journal to aid teachers in making dialogue journals more accessible to all types of students. Kreeft Peyton (1987) recommends that when using dialogue journals with illiterate students, the students can start off by drawing pictures in their dialogue journals and the teacher can respond with pictures and a few words. In this way the students can begin to use letters and words when they feel comfortable. Kreeft Peyton also suggests that instead of restricting dialogue journals to the target language, the students (of teachers who are fluent in the students’ native language) can write in their native language and make the transition as their target language proficiency improves. By making dialogue journals accessible to every individual student, teachers can ensure that all will participate.

Besides varying dialogue journals to meet the needs of the individual student, teachers can also modify their use of dialogue journals to fit their classroom situation. Teachers can create modifications based on the technology that their class has access to or the subject that they are teaching. For teachers who have access to computers, Mangelsdorf (1989) suggests that a computer network can be used to write, store, and exchange dialogue journals. Utilizing computers for a dialogue journal assignment could add the benefit of better
familiarizing students with the use of computers for writing assignments, as well as facilitating the exchange of dialogue journal entries between students and teachers.

In addition, dialogue journals are not limited to use in the second language writing class. Dialogue journals can also be used in a reading, listening, or speaking second language class to provide a way for teachers to get feedback from the students about their individual classroom experiences, concerns, and suggestions. Teachers can use dialogue journals for content writing as well (Kreeft Peyton, 1989). Imagine the benefit of having a student write their feelings in their own voice regarding a science project, a social studies lesson, or a piece of art that they created or viewed. Dialogue journals are flexible tools for any type of classroom.

**Conclusion**

Dialogue journals are a worthwhile addition to any classroom, especially for ESL students. ESL students need more help on an individual basis because of their unique situation which involves not only learning a new language, but learning a new culture. Dialogue journals provide a caring audience, give the students a chance to choose their own topic, supply students with conversation practice, allow students to write freely without being evaluated, and permit students to write at their own level of proficiency. Because of these features, dialogue journals provide an ideal, non-threatening environment for the students to explore and experiment with the English language.

With encouragement and the aid of dialogue journals, teachers can open a way for their students to explore and discover ideas and topics in the world of writing. Students are encouraged to write clearly when they know that someone will be reading their entry and responding to what they write. Dialogue journals also give shy students the opportunity to take a private spotlight in voicing their opinion to a caring audience. An added benefit of dialogue journals lies in the close ties that can be formed between student and teacher (Davis, 1983, p. 116). In addition, the students can develop a sense of ownership of the entry because the dialogue journal entries are entirely of the students' creation. Dialogue journals also provide teachers with the chance to monitor individual progress on a daily basis.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

It is important to note that while there appear to be many benefits to using dialogue journals in the ESL classroom, there are also limitations to their use. In this study, 7 of the 12 teachers surveyed had not or were not using dialogue journals in their writing classes. Although these teachers did not express their reasons for not using journals in their classes, the literature has addressed several important reasons why teachers may not use dialogue journals. These reasons include that there is a large time factor involved in having students write on a daily basis with the expectation that teachers will respond to this massive amount of written work (Kroll, 1990), that dialogue journals do not provide the structured writing practice students need who are academically oriented (Jones, 1988; Kreeft Peyton, 1993), and that teachers' feedback on dialogue journals provides little correction of students' errors and may in turn reinforce poor writing skills.

Conclusions regarding the use of dialogue journals in adult ESL writing classes clearly require additional research. More writing teachers in other programs need to be surveyed in order to see if the benefits expressed in this study and the research will be confirmed. Teachers need to be probed more thoroughly regarding the use or lack of use of dialogue journals in the ESL classroom in order to identify those factors influencing the decision-making process of writing teachers.
References


Appendix

ELC Writing Teacher Questionnaire

1. Have you ever used dialogue journals in any of your ESL writing classes? If no, please explain your reason and skip to #5. (The term dialogue journal refers to a journal in which the student and teacher carry on a dialogue about any subject of the student’s choice. If the dialogue journals that you have used vary from this definition, please explain.)

2. How often did the students write in the dialogue journals?

3. What did your feedback to the students’ dialogue journals entries consist of?

4. In which ways do you think dialogue journals have benefitted your students?

5. What type(s) of feedback do you give in regard to students’ other writing assignments?