

Student-Teacher Dialogue Journal Writing and Implications for EFL Teaching at the Tertiary Level

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dialogue journals have been studied and recommended as a writing activity enhancing communication, writing and language learning in both first and second language classrooms (Fulwiler, 1987; Holmes 1994; Kirby & Liner, 1981; Kreeft and others, 1984; Macrorie, 1987; Peyton, 1990; Peyton and Reed, 1990; Reed, 1988; Sandler, 1987; Staton 1988). This article grows out of my study (Bussba T. Khaimukk, 1999) on dialogue journal writing with Thai students at a university. It briefly reviews some important points in dialogue journal writing and reported one of the interesting findings and discusses some implications for teaching English as a foreign language at a tertiary level.

Dialogue Journals: Overview

A dialogue journal is an informal kind of writing using the conversational style intended for communication between two parties in a letter format (Appendix). A dialogue journal looks similar to a letter in format but differs from a personal letter or a diary in its special features; it is continuous and interactive. The writer is free to initiate a conversation on any topic of personal and mutual interest.

Staton (1988b: 198) defined dialogue journals as “functional, interactive, mostly about self-generated topics, and deeply embedded in the continuing life of the classroom” Fulwiler (1987: 56-67) indicated that the language used in the dialogue journals is usually colloquial, consisting of incomplete thoughts that the writers use to observe, question, hypothesize, analyze, and synthesize.

Dialogue journals were first used as a way to communicate with the students individually in a native classroom by a teacher named Leslee Reed. In her classroom, she and her students exchanged journals on a regular basis. Her initial goal was to establish rapport with the students so her students would realize what she expected from them and the boundaries of what would or would not accept. She found that the journal interaction gave her students not only "the ease with which they're writing in their journal" but also the ease with which her students were able to talk to her directly about problems. In fact, Reed intended to use the journals as a means for her class management. The journals, therefore, are a means for her to communicate with the students, in her words, "...in a way that my students can express and say and on the degree to which they are able to accept my response and see what I mean."

Writing dialogue journals as a means for classroom communication was found useful in learning and teaching for ESL learners by the same teacher, Reed, since early 1980s (Staton, 1988a). Studying the journals between Reed and her ESL students, Staton (1988c) found that their talking was about topics of mutual interest and topics were initiated by the students, yielding the reciprocal role between the student and the teacher.

With such special features dialogue journals have been found beneficial for non-native learners as well. Peyton and Reed (1990) discussed the benefits of dialogue journal writing in many ESL classrooms. They showed that journaling increases opportunities for communication between students and teachers, individualizes language and content learning, assists in the teacher's lesson planning, allows students to write for genuine communication, and provides an opportunity for reading. With its unique features and benefits, dialogue journal writing might also produce similar benefits for ESL students in an EFL setting as well.

Peyton and Reed (1990: 11) suggested the following ideas when assigning dialogue journals:

First, students have the opportunity to use writing to communicate. Second, students use writing to express concepts that are important to them. Third, they write to accomplish real purposes. Fourth, the journals are read by an interested audience. Finally, the students receive a reply that is genuine and meaningful.

Dialogue Journals and ESL Writing as a Process

Dialogue journal writing can be used as an activity to promote a process-oriented classroom. Two scholars that I have found most important to refer to on studies of ESL students' composing process are Raimes and Zamel. Their studies reveal that ESL writers are not so much different from their native speaking counterparts. Their studies on the ESL students' composing process have revealed that the writing acts include prewriting, beginning with forming, generating, shaping, refining or organizing ideas both on the paper and in the writers' mind. Raimes's (1985: 218) study, for example, reveals that ESL writers work with language and ideas reciprocally. Her ESL student writers, while writing, focus on meaning, rather than surface errors. She finds the pattern of their composing process to be: create text - read - create text - read - edit - read - create text - read - read - create text and so on. Her unskilled ESL student writers attend to both language forms and ideas when composing. The study implies that, although ESL writers require some proficiency in the second language (L2) at their disposal, language proficiency in L2 does not guarantee that they can write effectively or successfully.

Zamel's (1983: 165-182) case study on advanced ESL students revealed that her students "explore and clarify ideas and attend to language-related concerns primarily after their ideas have been delineated". She found that her students, both skilled and unskilled, involved in "constant interplay of thinking, writing and rewriting" and "clearly understand what writing entails — her students knew what to anticipate, how to pace themselves and what to focus on as they wrote and rewrote. She emphasized the importance of the instruction that includes students' "direct experiences with composing process" into the instruction. She also suggested that teachers incorporate instruction that allows the students an opportunity to explore their ideas in reference to a topic that engages them, giving the students an opportunity to "tell their readers what they mean to say before these writers are told what they ought to have done". In other words, the teacher should allow the students to think clearly before telling them what they should do.

However, ESL students still have to grapple with language (Raimes, 1985). In fact, Raimes (1985) indicated that ESL students need "more of everything," from language to ideas. She further added that one of the most important factors ESL students

need is time. If ESL students are allowed to have more time, they, therefore, can spend time on everything they need such as drawing on their limited schema, particularly their background knowledge of the language and topic. They need time to search for vocabulary so that they can generate and develop ideas. This observation caused me to wonder if providing more time to ESL students through writing dialogue journals in class, even with their limited language proficiency, they would improve their writing skills.

The principle that the journals are not for correction or evaluation but the expression of content paves the way for promoting a writing classroom to be more process-oriented. Teachers can conceive of dialogue journals as a writing activity where students spend time generating their ideas, contemplating their writing assignment, and solving problems before actual writing without being concerned with forms of language. Scarcella and Oxford (1992: 124) also suggested dialogue journals as a prewriting activity, as "a means of making idea-gathering a more interactive process."

In this light, dialogue journals seem to allow the students an opportunity to experience writing as a process since they focus on making ideas, rather than the form of the language.

Studies of Dialogue Journals on L2 Writing

In classrooms, writing dialogue journals has a significant relationship with L2 writing. Peyton and Reed (1990: 7) identified the characteristics of the written interaction of dialogue journal writing in many classrooms, including the qualities of good conversations, student-generated topics, continuity, functions, and variation in terms of topic, genre, and length.

The teacher's journal entry usually serves as a model for the students. Peyton (1990b: 91) studied five sixth-grade ESL students, all of whom had been in the United States for less than a year. Peyton used both cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis of acquisition patterns. Students were found to acquire four noun-related morphemes and six verb-related morphemes through dialogue journal writing. She concluded that, at the grammatical level, "dialogue journal writing does reflect changes in students' language proficiency over time".

Peyton (1988a) studied one student's dialogue journal writing to demonstrate that dialogue journal writing is a powerful means for students to move from oral competence that they already possess to writing an extended prose. Over one year's time, she found that one of the students in Reed's class gradually moved from very limited to more elaborated, coherent prose.

Peyton and others (1990b) went on to study 26 sixth grade ESL students' writing by comparing their written products on three teacher-assigned tasks with their writing to the teacher in their dialogue journals. They found that students' language use, in terms of numbers of words, T-units, cohesive ties, and rhetorical complexity, was more developed in the students' dialogue journals than in their assigned writings.

Kreeft and others (1984) studied the interaction in writing dialogue journals when limited English proficient ESL students were allowed to interact with real audiences on the topics of their own interests. They found that students were motivated to write and use written language.

Similar to Kreeft and others' study, Peyton and Seyoum (1989) examined the interaction strategies of one experienced teacher, who has been using dialogue journals with native speakers for over 15 years, for promoting 26 limited English proficiency students. They found that the teacher responded to the topic introduced by the students rather than introducing topics. Moreover, when responding to the students, the teacher mostly contributed to the dialogue such as making statements or expressing opinions. By this strategy, the students produced the writing more than the minimum requirement.

In terms of language functions, Shuy (1988) analyzed two-week samples of ten journals in Fall and Spring terms. She found 15 functions recurring with sufficient frequency. They were: reporting opinion, reporting personal facts, reporting general facts, responding to questions, predicting future events, complaining, giving directives, apologizing, thanking, evaluating, offering, promising, asking information questions, asking procedure questions, and asking opinion questions. Her study also showed that the students and the teacher wrote approximately equal number of functions to each other. However, the students reported more opinions, complained more, and reported more personal facts whereas the teacher gave more directives, evaluated more, and asked more questions.

In terms of learning and thinking, Macrorie (1987) described dialogue journals as a "yes place" for the majority of the students since the journals get them thinking and probing their own ideas against those of others. Peers and even their teacher became more engaged in writing. Interestingly, Fulwiler (1987: 2-3) illustrated that good journals manifest a liberal number of cognitive modes. According to Fulwiler, interest and writers of journals are critical thinkers. They usually observe and see something of interest and attempt to capture it in language. They also question, which is more important than answering. They speculate or "wonder aloud" about the meaning of events they wrote about in their entries. They are aware of themselves in relation to others. They digress through pieces of thoughts. They synthesize their ideas and find the relationship of one idea to another. They later revise their previous thoughts. Finally, they inform, giving evidence of what they have read or thought growing out of the class.

In the light of the studies reviewed above, it appears beneficial to use the dialogue journals in the classrooms. Concerning the functional use of writing, Staton (1988d: 316-317) also recommended dialogue journal writing to be an activity of immediate value to students. Moreover, Peyton and Reed (1990) suggested that students who are literate in their native language and more advanced educationally can begin to write independently in their journals very early. For students who are more proficient in written English, dialogue journals are excellent places for discussing topics being studied in class, current events, or personal concerns.

Realizing the benefits of dialogue journal writing, I supplemented an EFL product-oriented writing classroom with the writing of dialogue journals. Through one semester, students wrote their journals regularly, twice a week: one to their teacher and the other to their peers. Almost all students found writing dialogue journals both an enjoyable and beneficial activity.

Although students were able to write journals since the journals were aimed for communicating their ideas, the students, to certain extent, found it difficult to write. From the pre-and post-course interviews, I found that students kept worrying about their grammar and correctness while writing. From regular class observation and analysis of their journal entries, the students frequently corrected their grammar while writing. Grammar, thus, is an inhibit in writing journals, rather than an enhance.

Most interestingly, one of the findings indicates that students need time to draw on their resource of language, particularly vocabulary and sentence structures. As Raimes (1985) noted, ESL students need time to work on their language resources. Through dialogue journals, the student found ways to fill in their incomplete knowledge of vocabulary. They perceived dialogue journals as places for them to learn English and vocabulary in particular. From writing dialogue journals with the teacher, one student talked about the benefit of writing dialogue journals in the interview:

I gain some vocabulary from the teacher too. Like the teacher uses the same word that I wrote in my journal but in a correct way.
I always look at the teacher's response that he would use my word in his response so I would use it correctly later.

Another student spoke of an added benefit of writing journals:

I learn more about language. It is like practicing writing and using vocabulary at the same time. Journals make me think more in English. I learn to use which word I should use.

In responding to students, the teacher also takes an opportunity to teach vocabulary by using words correctly, as shown in the following journal entry:

Student: Today it's very hard in class. I have to remember everything that you teach me. It's like to recover my knowledge before going to an examination...

Teacher: I'm glad you took this opportunity for review...

Not only the students gain vocabulary from the teacher but also from their peers. Since the students are also required to write their journals to their classmates, they also take an opportunity to learn from others who are more capable in writing. In one student's words:

Like I saw someone start to use the tense in this journal entry. I think about it too...for example, Tee. He uses some new vocabulary. If I don't read others' journals, I would stick to my own, thinking what I write is correct. But when I saw my friend's...yeah...I know we're

different. Even we talk about the same thing but he uses another kind of sentence.

Some students took this opportunity to help others learn the language as shown in the following journal entry:

Student 1: Last saturday I went to watch 'Godzilla.' I notice that the size of 'Godzilla' in start is not equal in final. But this movie is funny very much. Do you watch it? If you don't I think that you should watch it.

Student 2: At first, I'd like to tell you that the movie should be fun not funny. Actually, I don't have any time to hang around that much...

Another student reported:

Journals help me in writing, improve my writing skill. First vocabulary. Not only I have to know the meaning of the word I want to use but I have to know how to use in a sentence.

Unlike a few of those who already had some control over the language, many students reported their difficulty in writing journals stemmed from their lack of vocabulary resource. In one of the students' words:

The first difficulty I have in writing journals is vocabulary. When I talk to the teacher I want to use the correct word. I feel embarrassed if I use the word incorrectly.

The difficulty in writing journals is clearly stated in the following translated interview excerpt.

What I think a lot is vocabulary. It's pretty complex. Even now I have the courage to write without worrying about grammar but my problem is vocabulary. I have to think about vocabulary because I know only a few words. And I'm not brave to write such and such words because I don't know how to use them. Later, I try to use them all, all that I know, but it's still not enough.

One of the students who preferred to write the journals to the teacher gave me such an eye-opener. Her opinions were common but deeply reflected the cause of the writing difficulty. In her words:

I got some advice, writing structure, sentence organization, how to use verbs because the teacher is the native. For example, the teacher wrote longer sentences. He's the native. He's very good at his language. He could shorten the sentence using connectors. I look at his sentence connection. The sentence is concise. But my sentences are very long. I ever tried it...but it got messed up. I'm afraid my reader will not understand...and blame that we write incorrectly. The natives do not focus on grammar because they know they can omit it. But for Thais, it must be grammar. You can make an omission if you really understand it.

In other words, the student recognizes his lack of the native intuitiveness. The underlined statement indicates that students know what they need in order to use the language fluently and accurately.

In sum, students have an opportunity to practice their writing skills and learn English through writing dialogue journals. Although writing journals emphasizes communication rather than grammar, students still find it difficult to write. One common reason is the students' lack of the target language resources and the native's language intuition.

Conclusion and Implications for Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Teaching writing a process-oriented way need not ignore the knowledge of the language. Studies on the composing process of ESL students indicate that the students need more time to process to think and plan before putting words onto the paper. Moreover, what appears to be successful in L1 and ESL writing instruction could be replicated in a foreign language situation (Zamel, 1976; Leki, 1992) As Taylor (1976: 311) contended, two decade ago, that,

There is no theoretically sound reason to wait until an ESL student has mastered all or even most of the complexities of the language before we proceed to teach these free composition skills.

It is appropriate to implement the writing process approach for students at a college or university level. In Thailand, students have already had some target language resource from their previous education (at least 10 years). In fact, because learning to write takes longer practice, the sooner we start teaching free composition, the sooner our students will be able to improve their writing. In other words, the sooner we start to apply a process-oriented approach into our product-oriented approach, the sooner the students will be able to write effectively.

The writing of dialogue journals, in addition, indicates the difficulty in writing. Although the dialogue journal writing is a way for communication ideas or thoughts, similar to oral communication, the students have problems in communication through the journals. Such problem stems from the students' lack of language resource, particularly sentence structure and vocabulary. The students, therefore, need more solid background in vocabulary knowledge. However much their knowledge on grammar is, it does not help them in writing unless they know the structure and the words they need. This implies that students usually spend time worrying about the product unless they have a solid background of the target language.

The study on writing dialogue journals, moreover, implies that sentence structures and vocabulary are needed in learning English, particularly for students whose native tongues is not English. It also indicates what Thai students, who do not use English in their everyday life, lack.

EFL students, such as Thai students, thus, need a solid knowledge of English language-- the foundation that serves as a reservoir from which the students can draw when they want to use the language, either to write or speak, let alone to listen or read.

The challenge of teaching English as a foreign language lies in how we, teachers of English, can provide the students with such a solid foundation of the language.

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Appendix

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Today I do an assignment. It's not difficult yet.

Yesterday I just very afraid about the assignment. (Because it's my first time to do it, you know). But today before the assignment, you tell me you don't strict about mistake you don't teach. So I feel better and I can do it!

About a grammar, I will try to practice it - I don't know how much so long.

I think if we are boss, not language, we can understand it clearly and can use it correctly and love it!
(I love English language but I'm not smart and not the boss it.)

Dear

You don't just learn a language. Language is only a tool for communication. You want to talk to people in person or on paper (in writing) to do this you need language. You see, language can never be the boss because it is always the people who count. It is the people who want to communicate and they use language to do this. If you are empty inside, you don't need language because you have nothing to say. But if you have your own ideas and plans and want to know things, language is important to you because you want to know, tell and understand your and other people's ideas. The better you know a language, the better you can communicate.

Good morning teacher

I have note that one thing that I've got my experience in this class. It is about practice and assignment. I have got easy personal information or photograph in practice. Inside it doesn't have anything strength. but In real assignment I have got many strength that I never seen. It is possible that sometime I get scare when I've got that things. ~~After going to the assignment~~ But it is not really really big things. the point is I have to practice to learn various thing that It could happen. Do you think It right? I think I shouldn't think that it is not my mistake because every thing have difficult and easy thing equal I don't have to learn only easy thing. so I have to learn difficult thing, too. I can only wish that I would have easy photograph next Tuesday.

Dear

I totally agree with you. Sure, it would be nice if only easy and pleasant things happened to us, but life is not like that. Sometimes good - sometimes bad. Sometimes easy - sometimes difficult. We should try to be prepared for the bad and the difficult, and enjoy the good and easy.

Dear, teacher

Today is last week before MidTerm exam. I feel ^{worry} it very much because I am not carefully enough to do it and I have ^{prob} many problems about English. But Ajam complain it in the class today. Thanks.

Dear

I hope I didn't complain but explain. The most common problem and usually the reason why many students make mistakes is that they are 'not careful enough'.

Very often in English things look very similar but have very different meanings — you have to be very careful indeed.

Good luck in your exams.

Dear,

Last Saturday I went to watch 'Godzilla'.
notice that the size of 'Godzilla' in start is not
equal in final. But This movie is funny ~~is~~
very much. Do you watch it? if you don't,
I think that you should to watch it.

At first, I'd like to tell you that the movie should be fun not
funny. Actually I don't have any time to hang around that much
because I have to review the lesson and prepare to study for
the mid exam. In my opinion, 'Godzilla' isn't interesting
It is just like the other exciting movies and it's nonsense to have
a big monster like that in present.