

Literature Review: Maintaining Dialogue with Dialogue Journals

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Dialogue journaling is a popular writing activity used by ESL / EFL writing teachers. Some research (Peyton, 2000, Peyton & Reed, 1990) has shown it is beneficial for learners in promoting authentic communication, as well as acting as a reflective practice for learners (Kim, 2005). What makes dialogue journals (DJs) different from other writing activities is that it provides ongoing communication between learners and teachers. This relationship between teachers and learners maximizes literacy development through a meaning-making process where students encounter new terms and incorporate them into their linguistic repertoire. Additionally, DJs can be used with students writing to other students to promote more student interaction while giving students more opportunities to practice their writing. There are many benefits to DJs, however, it is only successfully implemented if the language used in them is truly dialogic. An issue among teachers who use DJs in the classroom is how to not only create dialogic communication, but how to maintain it as well. If students lose interest in writing the journal, the activity fails its purpose to create a medium of authentic language use. This poses the question: What are effective strategies used by teachers to maintain meaningful communication with students through the use of DJs? To answer this question, several studies of DJ activities and strategies used in the classroom will be presented which

show strategies often used by teachers.

What are Dialogue Journals?

DJs are written, periodic conversations between teachers and students as an ongoing practice without focus on forms or correctness (Jones, 2000, p.17). First, the subjects engage in constant dialogue with one another during a specified duration. In doing so, this creates an opportunity for students to participate in dialogic exchanges, while encountering terms, and vocabulary that they are unfamiliar with, and then allowing the students to adopt these new terms into their own language (Fallon, 1995). In this activity topics are not usually assigned, rather participants are free to write what they wish with some monitoring and guidance. The goal of DJs is to create a more learner-centered task while also improving literacy development. It is important for learners to understand that the goal of DJs is to express themselves freely and that the journal itself does not act as an evaluation tool (Larotta, 2009). This is different than many forms of language learning where students' language is constantly analyzed and evaluated. In this sense, it provides a sort of safe zone where learners can express themselves through their language. In doing so, DJs can be a source of motivation for students to test their writing.

Still, DJ activities are only successful for the students as long as the interaction between the participants remains meaningful language. If DJs do not produce meaningful language then there will be little development in writing. This could prove difficult to do as journal interest can wane creating language to become stagnant which could hinder students' development (Fallon, 1995). It is therefore important for teachers to ensure students remain interested and motivated to write in their journals.

The Role of the Teacher

In order for DJs to promote students' writing, the teacher has to play an active role as an equal participant. In a study by Peyton and Seyoum (as cited in Voit, 2009), the role of the teacher and how the teacher used strategies to promote writing amongst students with DJs was observed. In this particular study, the teacher acted as a respondent, and not an initiator. Results showed that the teacher elicited more writing from the students when giving more personal responses to students' journals. This shows that the teacher plays an active role in maintaining communication with the student (Voit, p.29, 2009). The teacher not only acts as a participant, but as a motivator. Someone who encourages writing from the student. However, while teachers may be able to encourage students, it is also their role to ensure that conversation continues and develops. This can be a difficult task for teachers. The following section will discuss strategies often used by teachers during DJ activities to maintain communication.

Teacher Strategies for Using Dialogic Journals

Using Generative themes

While DJs are often free of topic, it's important to point out that they are not just free-write activities. The purpose of this activity is to create "meaningful conversation" (Linnel, 2010, p.23). In order to create this dialogue, some teachers suggest the use of generative themes. Generative themes are complex topics about the learners' lives and a way for learners to express their views on the world (Larotta, 2009). Generative themes are not simply interests or hobbies; they are topics that challenge learners to think critically and connect written word to their realities. Examples of generative themes could be family life, employment, and culture shock. These are ideas that learners come into contact

daily. They are topics that are meaningful to the students' lives, which forces them to think critically for their writing. As Friere suggests, true dialogue cannot exist without thinking critically and learners should think critically about situations in their own lives (Sokol, 1996, p.67). These themes are the focus of dialogue journaling and often fundamental to dialogic approaches to teaching. Generative themes can promote true dialogue; they resonate with students and connect them to the written word, (Fallon, 1995, p.143).

Previous studies (Fallon, 1995, Larotta, 2009) show positive effects of using generative themes for maintaining language with students in DJ activities. Results showed that conversations seemed more dialogic when using generative themes, and in comparison, when generative themes were not used, it was observed that students seemed to produce the same language about the same topics without showing any signs of improvement (Fallon, 1995). This shows that using generative themes in writing has a direct influence on the quality of writing produced. In Larotta's experience using this activity with adult learners, she writes "the participants in our dialogue learned about each other's reality and went beyond their own realities in order to gain a more comprehensive view of a topic and the world (2009, p.49)." This is an important part of DJs in that participants are constructing meaning through the activity, which would help with improving their writing capabilities. As students improve through the use of generative themes as topics, their responses have shown to become more consistently dialogic.

Student-to-Student Interaction & Community Building

While using generative themes as topics can show positive results for maintaining dialogic language, it's important that participants establish relationships with one another in order to be able to talk about

personal subjects. If this is not established, students may find it difficult to initiate or respond to difficult topics. In order to solve this, teachers recommend establishing relationships through community building. Community building is important for maintaining communication as better relationships allow for more diverse topics and greater exploration of creative language use. The teacher plays a pivotal role in building relationships with the students and most studies on DJ have shown the results of communication between students and teachers through writing. DJ activities, however, do not have to be confined to this student-teacher relationship. In some cases teachers allow students to interact with one another through journaling as well in order to foster better community building. Studies of DJs which include student-to-student writing shows that students can be more willing to share with one another (Fallon, 1995, Sokol, 1996, Trites, 2001, Kim 2018). A possible idea for this is “shared responsiveness,” which is the expectation of response. Fallon (1995) writes that amongst students who are members of similar communities that “... there is a sense of shared responsiveness often missing in interactions with adult educators or tutors” (p.142). This suggests, that some students may feel more comfortable when writing with other students because they can relate to one another through their experiences and connect with one another as fellow learners. This idea of “shared responsiveness” is important because with the expectation of responses, students are often more willing to continue dialogue with one another. Additionally, an experiment conducted by Kim (2018) showed that student-to-student journaling was beneficial for significantly improving writing complexity, while teacher-to-student journaling showed significant improvements in accuracy and fluency. These findings suggest that students are more

comfortable writing more complex sentences when writing to their peers. More findings from this study also showed that students who wrote to each other were less anxious and less stressed, while also becoming more interested in English learning. This shows that student-to-student journaling could help students develop a more positive outlook on their general English learning.

It's important to note, however, that allowing students to interact with one another through DJ activities has some potential problems regarding privacy. Some students may not want to share topics with one another, and in such cases, students' feelings should be considered. If they don't give permission or feel uncomfortable with writing with other students they should not be forced to do so. As a result, teachers looking to have student-to-student journaling need to consider these potential problems when administering these kinds of activities in their classrooms.

The role of feedback

The issue of correcting student writing often arises in DJ activities. In some cases, students enjoy writing in journals as they can write without fear and anxiety about the correctness of their writing. In some cases, however, students, particularly adult learners and learners from other cultures, often want feedback on their writing (Peyton, 1996, Quirke, 2001, Linnel 2010). When they don't receive feedback they may begin to question the purpose of DJ and lose motivation to continue. This could present a dilemma for teachers. While students are entitled to feedback, correcting students' writing might undermine the purpose of creating genuine dialogue of DJs and turn it into a grammar lesson rather than a conversation. On the other hand, denying them corrections when they ask for them, could also disrupt the conver-

sation as well. In order to solve this problem, there are methods teachers can employ to give feedback without compromising communication in the journals.

Since the first step to DJs is to establish communication between teachers and students, most teachers do not overly correct students' work as it may hinder communication (Peyton, 1991). Peyton argues that the teacher's responses to journal writing provides a model that sufficiently acts as correct form for the students, and that there are enough opportunities for form focused instruction in other academic settings. Many teachers adopt strategies of "hidden correction" (Quirke, 2001) with positive results. This method was suggested by Peyton & Reed (1990) and they called it language modelling. In this method, feedback to errors are provided in a response from the teacher. This is similar to recasts that are used by teachers where they repeat the student's language error in the correct form. This is a popular method for giving feedback as it does not explicitly point out a students' mistakes, but rather provides a correct, written model for students to observe and learn from. While many consider some feedback to hinder the natural flow of conversation which dialogue journals hope to establish, this method is an effective way of indicating an error for the student without disrupting communication. Students can continue writing, as well as get feedback.

Still, it is not recommended that teachers deny students corrections if they insist on it. It's important to note that ownership of the journal is the students' and it does not belong to the teacher. Teachers should consider the learner first, and individualize the use of feedback to the students' requests and needs. In fact, for some students corrections may act as motivation for them to continue writing, and may help them

produce better writings in the future. Although there is less literature on corrections, focus on form strategies are being developed for DJ activities as well.

Focus on Form

While not common among teachers who use DJ activities, there are also focus on form strategies that are sometimes used that are worth mentioning. Many argue that focusing on form, disrupts the balance of communication for students. Linnel (2010, p.25) argues that students can focus on language forms without compromising communication. Linnel suggests methods of providing pre-teaching forms for students to incorporate in their writing as well as providing sample journal entries. For pre-teaching forms, relevant vocabulary, and grammar, could be introduced prior to journal assignments. Sample journal entries could also be an effective way to have students focus on form. In these writing samples, examples that focus on language could be presented for the student to analyze, and ideally incorporate into their own writings. By providing such resources for students, students can learn from example and this could potentially minimize the use of explicit corrective feedback from the teacher. For a more explicit approach to feedback, writing conferences outside of the journal activity to focus on correctness of writing can also be used (Voit, 2009). Teachers can go over the journal entries with their students and address errors and other writing issues. By doing this the journals still maintain their purpose, and students can still get corrections as a separate activity.

It is important to note, however, that empirical work on focus on form strategies with dialogue journals have been rarely conducted at this point. Research is done on how these focus on form strategies work in conjunction with DJ activities and how they affect the language of

the DJs. It's unclear whether they would have any observable, positive effects on the students' writings. Furthermore, it could be argued that using such activities would just turn DJs into another writing activity. Future research could potentially see how the students' conversations and language use changes in DJs over time when conferences or other focus on form methods are used with their journals.

Discussion

Looking at the research, there are several strategies used by teachers in the class that show strategies for maintaining authentic conversation through DJ activities, however, it's still unsure how effective these strategies are and how they are employed effectively in the classroom. The concept of using generative themes has shown positive results, but many of the studies don't specify how to implement them for their DJs. How generative themes differ in talking about interests or hobbies may be difficult for students to grasp. It's not sure if teachers explained this, or if they provided a model for students to understand the idea. Community building practices also appear to be beneficial, but there is the issue of privacy when other students are involved as participants. Students may feel less inclined to share in their journals if they are aware that it will be read by classmates, which could be detrimental to the students' writing. Lastly, feedback is a common issue that comes up in the literature. Hidden correction is often recommended, but other methods are rarely mentioned. As previously stated, there are focus on form methods that can be used, but how those work with DJs and how they affect writing hasn't been explored in research. Since the role of feedback seems to be an issue with writing teachers for this activity, more research could be done to explore feedback strategies.

Furthermore, much of the literature on DJs leaves some additional

questions to explore. First, many of the studies claim an improvement in writing, however, there doesn't seem to be any measurement on this improvement. How is improvement being measured? Also, there are questions about how improvement in writing DJs transfer to other skills. Are their journals improving or is their overall writing improving in other writing activities? If their DJs are showing more authentic language use, does that transfer to more authentic language use in other skills such as speaking? Also, most of the research is targeted towards adult learners. Does this mean that DJs are better suited for adults, or children? How can DJs be used for students with less language abilities? All of these are gaps in research, and should be further studied.

Conclusion

The literature on DJs show that the assignment can be beneficial to students and that students reported enjoying them. It acts as ongoing, natural communication for students where they can be creative with their language without evaluation. The literature shows some activities that show positive results for maintaining the conversation, however, there are still some gaps in research to be addressed. Considering that DJs are popular activities for writing teachers, more research should be conducted in order to maximize the effectiveness of DJ activities.

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