The bridge between students and teachers: The effect of dialogue journal writing

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Dialogue journals are believed to positively effect ESL students' linguistic competence, understanding of course content, and ability to communicate in written English. This paper explores whether the benefits of using dialogue journals with EFL students are the same as with ESL students. Improvement in writing fluency is measured by comparing the total number of words students wrote in their journals in the first semester with the total number of words they wrote in their journals in the second semester. Finally, through an open-ended survey, I explore the affective consequences of dialogue journal exchanges with a teacher. In this paper, I present dialogue journal writing not only as a means of improving student abilities, but also as a tool for building trust between students and teacher.

ダイアローグ・ジャーナルは，ESLの学生の言語能力・コース内容の理解力・英語で書くコミュニケーション能力を向上させると言われている。本稿では，ESLの学生と同様の効果がEFLの状況でも期待できるのかを検証する。前期と後期のジャーナルの総語数を比較することによって書き言葉の　（ライティングの）　流暢さが改善されるかを調査する。また，自由形式のアンケートを実施することによって，教師とのダイアローグ・ジャーナルのやり取りがもたらす影響力について調査する。本稿では、ダイアローグ・ジャーナルが単なる言語能力向上の手段として活用されるだけではなく，学生と教師の信頼関係を築くひとつの手段となる可能性があることを明らかにする。

FOR SOME time in Japan, English has been regarded as a tool for passing high school and university entrance examinations. Also, for several years, many universities have been caught up in the TOEIC study boom, offering TOEIC courses as electives. However, I believe that English should be viewed not as an examination subject, but as a means both to help students discover their hidden talents and, through practice, as a means for empowerment. Dialogue journal writing can be one way to empower learners and to build relationships of trust between teachers and students. Integrating dialogue journal writing in the EFL classroom allows a meaningful teacher-student relationship to develop. The purpose of this paper is to report on the findings of a 1-year study on the relationship between dialogue journal writing and improvements in written English and the affective consequences of dialogue journals.

Previous research on dialogue journal writing

Dialogue journal writing is "a type of written interaction between teachers and students that focuses on meaning rather than form and is a means of developing students' linguistic competence, their understanding of course content, and their ability to communicate in written English" (Peyton, 1990, p. ix). It is often used as a supplementary activity outside the classroom over an entire semester or academic year, and is not subjected to error correction or grading. Dialogue journals are one way to help students improve their linguistic ability through meaningful interaction.

Over the last two decades, several advocates of dialogue journal writing have addressed aspects of linguistic improve-

ment in ESL settings in English speaking countries. Peyton (1986) states that "rather than overt correction of student errors, correct grammatical forms and structures can be modeled in the course of the interaction" (p. 27). Thus, dialogue journals provide opportunities for students to learn correct grammatical forms and structures by reading teacher responses and imitating them. In another study, Peyton (1990) addresses the acquisition of English morphology among ESL students. Whereas students made little progress in mastering the past tense of regular verbs and the plural and third-person singular -*s*, students made substantial progress in the use of the copula *be*, the progressive auxiliary +/-*ing*, and the past tense of irregular verbs. This indicates that dialogue journal writing helps learners acquire some elements of morphology.

Shuy (1993) and Nassaji and Cumming (2000) found that dialogue journal writing helps learners develop language functions. The case study conducted by Nassaji and Cumming analyzed language functions in dialogue journals between a 6-year-old Farsi speaking student (Ali) and his Canadian teacher (Ellen) over 10 months. They found that Ali's early journal entries tended to be restricted to reporting about either general facts or personal facts. However, as the journals progressed Ali began to report his opinions and ask questions more frequently. Eventually Ali's questioning increased, while Ellen's decreased. This suggests learners can improve communicative language functions in dialogue journal exchanges.

Concerning written fluency, dialogue journal writing may motivate students to write more. However, the connection is taken for granted, and there have been few quantitative studies. In a qualitative study, Holmes and Moulton (1997) examined dialogue journal entries of six ESL university students in a 15-week intermediate ESL composition class at an American university. They found a connection between writing regularly and the development of fluency. Thus, there is evidence that dialogue journal writing contributes to writing fluency.

Most literature on the use of journals in ESL settings seems to conclude that dialogue journal writing improves linguistic and writing ability. Here I will investigate whether similar improvements occur in Japan. Unlike ESL learners in English-speaking countries, EFL learners in Japan often lack exposure to English outside the classroom. The question is whether dialogue journal writing by students with limited exposure to English leads to improvements similar to those seen in ESL students. Two studies have already investigated this question with respect to Japan.

Casanave (1994) conducted a 1-year study on 96 journals written by 16 college students. Students were required to write dialogue journals every week for the first and second trimesters, and once every two weeks for the final trimester. Casanave offered some lexical and grammatical corrections but focused on content, writing comments, and questions because she wanted her students to write more fluently and thoughtfully. She used T-unit analysis to measure the length, complexity, and accuracy of student journals. Her analysis showed that 45% of the students did not improve.

Duppenthaler (2004a) conducted a study of 99 2nd-year Japanese high school students engaged in interactive dialogue journals with their teacher over 1 year. He analyzed the journals for improvements in writing proficiency in terms of quantity, accuracy, and quality against three types of written feedback: meaning-focused feedback, positive comments, and error-focused feedback. He found that meaning-focused feedback was significantly more effective than either positive comments or error-focused feedback in facilitating overall improvement in journal entries. However, in another study using the same data, Duppenthaler (2004b) found that journal writing with three different kinds of feedback had no statistically significant effect on students' in-class composition work. Although there was no significant transfer-of-skills effect, he did not rule out all possible effects, citing the fact that the meaning-focused group had steadily increased the number of error-free clauses in their journals and in-class writing samples.

More research into dialogue journal writing will deepen our understanding of its effects and whether or not it is equally effective in ESL and EFL contexts. This paper reports the results of a study examining the effects of dialogue journal writing on Japanese university students in terms of the quantity of words written. My research questions are:

1. Does dialogue journal writing contribute to an increase in the number of words in students' journals?

2. Does dialogue journal writing have affective consequences for Japanese university students?

Method

Participants

In three creative writing classes of 30 students each, 36 volunteered to write dialogue journals. Unfortunately, only 19 continued to write journals throughout the course. Only data from the 19 students who completed journals throughout the course will be considered here. Participants were business majors at a private Japanese university, with similar English language backgrounds. Most had concentrated on reading, grammar, and translation; few had previously written their thoughts and opinions in English. None had previously written journals in English.

Procedure

The class met once a week for 90 minutes over two 12-week semesters during the 2006-7 academic year. Ungraded dialogue journal writing was completed outside of class. Students e-mailed an entry to me, their teacher, once a week and received a response the same week. The purpose was to help students become comfortable writing English and to connect class content to their lives. My responses were content-oriented and included agreement, disagreement, questions about meaning or content, or thoughts and suggestions about the topic. There was no error-correction.

A self-report questionnaire was administered at the end of the school year to investigate student feelings about improvement in their writing and attitudes toward writing English.

Results

The 19 participants produced 354 journal entries. Each student wrote 10 to 14 entries per semester.

Dialogue journal writing and the length of student journals

In L2 writing, fluency is seen as a writers' ability to produce a lot of language without hesitation and interruption (Casanave, 2004). It is usually measured by the total number of words a writer can produce in a given period of time. In order to examine fluency, I compared the total number of words in students' journals in the first semester with the total number of words in their journals in the second semester. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the mean of total words written in journals during the first semester and the second semester.

Table 1. Comparison of total words in student journals from first and second semesters

	First Semester	Second Semester
Mean	456.84	482.68
95% confidence intervals		
Lower bound	397.73	410.22
Upper bound	515.95	555.15
SD	122.64	150.34
Skewness	.46	.47
SE (skewness)	.52	.52
Kurtosis	-.23	-.55
SE (kurtosis)	1.01	1.01

Note. $N = 19$

To determine if writing fluency improved from the first to second semester, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in means for the total number of words from the first semester ($M = 456.84$, $SD = 122.64$) to the second semester ($M = 482.68$, $SD = 150.34$); ($t(18) = -1.06$, $p = .31$). Thus, writing fluency did not statistically significantly improve.

Affective consequences of dialogue journal writing

Self-report questionnaire items measured students' sense of improvement and their attitudes toward English writing. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with higher scores indicating a higher level of agreement with the statements. I explained that the survey would have no effect on their grade and asked students to complete the questionnaire by comparing how they felt at the beginning of the school year with how they felt at the end.

Table 2 shows that students felt dialogue journal writing positively influenced their perceptions of their English writing skills. The ratings of Q1, Q3, and Q6 were over 4.00, reflecting students' strong sense of linguistic improvement. However, the data on writing fluency show no statistically significant improvement. Thus, there is a gap between student perception of improve-

ment and actual linguistic improvement as objectively measured.

Table 2. Self-report questionnaire

Questionnaire item	Average
Q1. My English writing ability has improved.	4.11
Q2. I can write English faster.	3.89
Q3. I can write more English.	4.00
Q4. I can write English more accurately.	3.42
Q5. I can write more complex English.	2.95
Q6. I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing in English.	4.11
Q7. This class helped me improve my English proficiency in	
Reading.	4.00
Speaking.	2.74
Grammar.	3.58
Vocabulary.	3.63
Q8. I fear writing in English.	2.47
Q9. I enjoy writing.	3.68
Q10. Writing is a process of self-discovery.	3.89
Q11. Writing helps me see things critically.	4.37
Q12. I'm nervous about writing.	2.42

Note. $N = 19$.

The affective consequences of dialogue journals are revealed in students' answers to the open-response section of the survey. Many students revealed positive feelings about exchanging dialogue journals with their teacher, stating it was a good opportunity and an enjoyable experience. One student said, "I do not like English, but I do not dislike it either," and that, "I enjoy not only writing the journals but also reading my teacher's responses." She seemed to enjoy the open and

honest exchange with her teacher. Another student indicated that dialogue journals, "provided us with the opportunity to ask questions which we hesitated to ask in class." Thus, the dialogue journal exchange provided students with an opportunity for frank and candid interaction with their teacher, which built trust between students and me. One student stated that, "I am glad to have become friendly with my teacher."

In terms of literacy, students also have positive feelings about dialogue journal writing. For example, one student felt that, "we had made improvements in terms of expressing our own ideas and feelings in English," "learned new vocabulary because we consulted the dictionary for the meaning of a word," and "writing dialogue journals with a teacher helped our in-class written tasks." On the other hand, some students had negative feelings towards journal writing, stating that, "the dialogue journal exchanges did not lead to any improvements in my English ability or writing, although I admit enjoying the exchanges." One student also mentioned that, "the dialogue journal exchanges did not help with in-class written tasks," an insight similar to that of Duppenthaler's (2004b) research conclusions. The transferability of skills from dialogue journals to assigned final papers should be further examined in future research.

Moreover, while students expressed confidence in their ability to clearly express their ideas in writing in English (Question 6 in Table 2), some students mentioned dissatisfaction with their ability to express themselves in English. One commented, "I could not write what I wanted to say because of my lack of English ability, so I just wrote simple things about my daily life." Another stated, "I was irritated because I could not express what I wanted to say in English." This suggests that the students had more to say, but had difficulty expressing themselves in English.

Limitations and implications

This study has shown that dialogue journals can positively influence student attitudes toward English and the student-teacher relationship. However, some limitations became apparent after the completion of the study. One is the sample size. On the first day of class that the three classes met, a total of 36 students agreed to participate in the study. However, the number of participants gradually decreased. In the end, I was only able to use data from 19 journals and surveys. One reason 17 students dropped out is that the exercise was ungraded. Therefore it is likely that

students perceived it as extra work unrelated to their in-class writing. Though generally regarded as a supplementary and ungraded activity, students may participate more if dialogue journals are assigned as a graded activity.

Second, students did not write very much. Students wrote less than 500 words per semester, which is unlikely to have a significant impact on writing ability. One possible reason they wrote so little is their low English writing ability. Some students expressed irritation and avoidance with regard to English dialogue journal writing; lower English writing ability and inexperience with journal writing may lead to writing less.

Third, allowing the teacher to control topics may be warranted. Dialogue journal writing is intended to build student autonomy by giving them freedom to select topics. In this study, I gave students full autonomy. As a result, they tended to write about daily events and activities but seldom went further. Though I asked about the social issues we had discussed in class, they often wrote that it was difficult to express their opinions about these issues in English and shifted to a topic they found easier to write about. Too much autonomy might prevent them from attempting to learn new vocabulary and phrases and from thinking deeply and critically. Therefore, controlling topics in dialogue journals should be considered in future research.

Conclusion

This study did not show statistically significant improvement in student writing. However, the student participants had many positive comments regarding dialogue journal writing. Some stated they enjoyed writing about themselves openly and in private, as well as reading the teacher responses. This positively influenced the student-teacher relationship. As the teacher I learned more about the students, which produced a more positive and trusting relationship. Students then felt empowered, perhaps thanks to my support and encouragement. My students developed a more positive attitude through interaction with their teacher as they developed their language skills, a quality perhaps common to Japanese students in general. Dialogue journal writing is one way to create common ground between teacher and students—a space for communication and empowerment.

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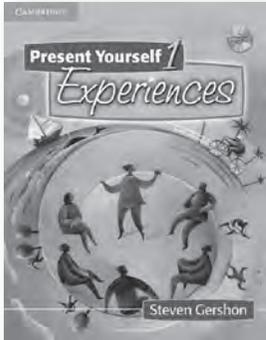
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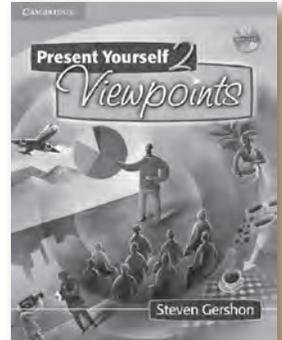
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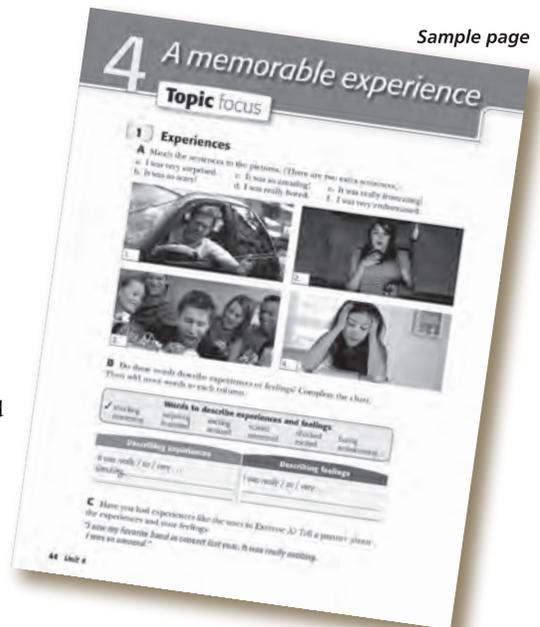
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