Original Paper

Dialog Journal Writing and its Effect on Learners' Speaking Accuracy and Fluency

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Abstract

This paper focuses on dialog journal writing as one possible method of improving speaking skill of EFL learners. The present study was an attempt to investigate the impact of dialog journal writing on EFL learners' speaking accuracy and fluency. The participants were 48male intermediate level students who were randomly selected from two classes at Simin language institute in Qaemshahr, Iran. They had registered for a free chat course. First, they were administered a pretest for homogeneity. Next, the experimental group was treated with journal writing in 20 term-long sessions. Following the treatment, a posttest was given to both groups. The findings indicated that there was a significant difference between two groups in terms of speaking accuracy and fluency. The findings also showed that dialog journal writing helped students communicate more effectively, fluently and accurately. Further, the findings provided useful information for teachers to help adult learners to develop their abilities to communicate in the target language.

Keywords
dialog journal writing, oral production, accuracy, fluency, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Using foreign language for communication especially outside the classroom is difficult for EFL students. Some learners are afraid of speaking because they are worried about their lack of proficiency although they know a wide range of grammar rules and vocabulary. To solve this problem, learning collaboratively that provide the maximum opportunities for student to interact has been suggested (Starnes, 2012).

Dialog journal writing (DJW) is a collaborative activity (Staton, 1984). Journaling in its various forms is a means for recording personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights (Hiemstra, 2001). Barkley, Cross, and Major(2005)believed that dialog journals offer a formal medium to students to record their thought, connect course work to their personal experiences, and ask each other different questions. Using journal writing, learners express their thoughts and feeling via writing for learning a language and also social skills (Progoffet, 1975).

Journal writing is a systematic way of recording things as the writer develops ideas on a specific topic or event. Journal writers write their thoughts on the paper quickly without thinking about the fact that whether the form is correct or not and the teacher is a facilitator in these classes (Krashen, 1998).Therefore, students are less under pressure and feel more comfortable in the class. Students also enjoy DJW as their teachers participate in authentic dialogs which improve communicative aspect of writing and allow writers to use the full range of available language functions, or "speech actions". Complaints, questions, promises, challenges, directions are all parts of dialog writing.

DJW not only opens a new phase of communication but also provides another context for language and literacy development. Moreover, students can have the opportunity to use English in a safe and non-threatening atmosphere in interaction with proficient English speakers (Peyton, 2000). It makes a closer relationship between students and teachers and allows teachers to be aware of what goes on the mind of students.

DJW is an effective approach to integrate reading and writing instruction to become an essential part of beginning literacy instruction. The use of electronic mail as dialog journals in literature discussion can also be used as a strategy to develop independent reading skills among children through cooperative learning (Cress, 1998).

Integrated skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing can provide students with the ability to communicate ideas through collaboration, discussion and presentation. Among them speaking has been one of the most focused skills in last decades but writing is a skill that has been recently focused again pedagogically. There are some similarities between these two skills and some studies have been conducted to investigate the effect of writing and speaking on each other.

Some researchers such as Cooper (1982), Mangelsdorf (1989), Negm (1995) viewed speaking and writing as similar forms. They believed the same set of sentences seems to be acceptable in written or spoken language and the mechanism is the same. Furthermore, we have the same functions in speaking and writing and the difference lies in output so these two skills appear very close and similar in some ways.

On the other hand, Magnan (1985) states that writing is sometimes the only possible form for speech and speech is the most feasible form for writing. Klein (1977) regarded writing as talking to oneself which is considered one of the characteristics of effective speakers. Of course, there are also some opposite views. Some studies conducted by Nunberg (1990), Mazzie (1987) and Redeker (1984) refer to the differences between speaking and writing.

For example, Nunberg (1990) reported that written language appears to use punctuation in some ways that have no equivalent using intonation in spoken language. Shuy (1981) believed these views are largely the product of comparing formal with informal speech and are considerably less obvious when one compares formal speaking to formal writing. As a result, it seems that writing and speaking may share some components.

Myers (1987), Shuy (1981) and Magnan (1985) confirmed that speaking can improve through writing.

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Myers (1987) maintains that speaking and writing develop reciprocally and directly affect each other. Moreover, Shuy (1981) argued that both oral and written languages come from the same source which is communicative competence. Weissberg (2006) takes this opportunity to call for a change in the way ESL writing is taught. He urges L2 writing instructors to present spoken and written language together in the L2 writing classroom in a more balanced way. This practice theoretically allows each individual learner's strength in one modality to support their development in the other weaker area.

But why this subject is interesting for the writers is due to the fact that nowadays speaking English as a foreign language is known as a vital skill for people. Iranian parents spend a lot of money for their children to pass speaking classes in private English language institutes because speaking is forgotten in our public schools and universities. The courses are only based on reading and writing, so students do not have enough chance to communicate orally with each other in the classroom. Using this method in the classes can be a good way to improve students' speaking skill along with improving writing ability.

The present study tried to introduce a new method for developing the speaking skill through writing and the aim of the study was to determine the effect of dialog journal writing on EFL students' speaking skill and students' motivation in language learning. Then the present research was an attempt to answer the following question:

1)   Does dialog journal writing have any effect on EFL learners' speaking accuracy?
2)   Does dialog journal writing have any effect on EFL learners' speaking fluency?

2. Background

Several studies such as El-Koumy (1998), Blake (2009) have shown that writing can improve learners' speaking ability. El-Koumy (1998) used DJW as a tool in the EFL classroom in Egypt to help improve learners' oral fluency. The posttest results indicated that the experimental group that used dialog journals scored significantly higher than the control group on oral fluency tests.

Morrel (2010) investigated the effectiveness of correcting written language errors of seven deaf and auditory impaired children from 7-11 years old using dialog journals for ten weeks. The study revealed that writing dialog journals motivates them to write and to take risks in expressing themselves through writing.

Another study by Razak and Asmawi (2004) found that email dialog journal can develop writing abilities and can start communication skills, so dialog journal writing enhances both learners' writing and speaking skills.

Blake (2009) considered the issue of improving oral fluency in a second language with the use of internet chats. His study was an effort to show the oral-written connection. The significantly higher gain scores in oral assessment of the internet chat group in a university-level ESL class support the notion that oral fluency improvement is possible through a writing program.

On the other hand, some researchers such as Kose (2005), Yoshihara (2008), Peyton (2000) and Denford-Wood (2003) have studied the effect of DJW on learners' attitudes toward learning. Kose

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(2005) explored the effect of using dialog journals on language anxiety and classroom affect. The study was conducted with one control group and one experimental group in the spring semester. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. He concluded that dialog journal implementation had a positive effect on attitudes towards English courses and it was a positive way to support students' writing.

Yoshihara (2008) was the other researcher who examined the effect of dialog journal writing. He found that dialog journal writing can be one way to build a trust relationship between teachers and students. The finding of the study also showed that journal writing developed a meaningful relationship between them.

Besides improving language skills, DJW can affect psychological aspects of learning and teaching. Some research studies have been done on the effect of journal writing on the process of teaching. Peyton (2000) states that students enjoy dialog journal writing as their teachers participate in authentic dialogs and it improves communicative aspect of writing. Peyton knows DJW not only as a new channel of communication, but also as the provider of another context for language and literacy development because Speaking and writing develop and affect each other.

Denford-Wood (2003) conducted a study on DJW among eighteen 10-year students in New Zealand. The students were required to write their reflections on three literature texts. They studied in the classroom in which the students were hostile towards the teacher. However, the usage of DJW facilitated class engagement and encouraged positive learning perspectives. The students were enthusiastic and were motivated to write via comments by readers. By having written feedback from the teacher, it helped students to be better writers, readers and learners.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The subjects of this study are 48 male language learners at intermediate level who were randomly selected from two intact classes at Simin English language institute in Qaemshahr, Iran in 2013. They were 14-27 years old and regarding language proficiency they were all considered as intermediate.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Proficiency Test

In order to homogenize learners based on their English language skill, Oxford placement test was used in order to, was taken before pretest. It showed that they were at the same level of language proficiency which was determined to be intermediate. It also proved the test had the liability of .89.

3.2.2 Speaking Test

To obtain the purpose of the study, eightoral questions were prepared and posed to the participants of the two selected groups as pretest and posttest. Learners were administered a pretest before any treatment and posttest after the treatment.

3.3 Treatment

During the study the students in the experimental were instructed to keep twenty journal writing entries during the period of a term in 20 sessions. They were free to choose their own topics and were not limited in any way on how to conduct their writings. Every weekend the students were given the opportunity to read and then speak in front of the class and discuss what they had written in their journal. The students were given a few minutes to communicate with the class. Surprisingly, they enjoyed going to the front of the class and talking about their favorite topics. Speaking in front of the class greatly motivated the students to speak and write more in their journals. Those in journal writing group –experimental group – engaged more in speaking and were more motivated.

3.4. Procedure

In this study, the experimental group consisting of24studentsreceived journal writing instruction, while the control group consisted of 24 students receiving a regular class instruction. Both classes were given the same oral pretest and post test. Oral tests were scored and the data were analyzed through SPSS software.

4. Results

In response to the research question, a series of t-tests were carried out on each dependent variable in order to determine for which measures differences reached significance. The minimum alpha for confirmation of the research hypothesis was .05. Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for both groups on the oral interview.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Pretest for Control and Experimental Groups

Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
accuracy1	Control	24	1.3333	.96309	.19659
	Experimental	24	1.0833	.88055	.17974
fluency1	Control	24	1.5417	.88363	.18037
	Experimental	24	1.2083	.83297	.17003

Comparing the means of the two groups as illustrated in Table 1 easily reveals that prior to the treatment, there appeared to be little difference between the two groups in terms of their oral fluency and accuracy. However, an independent samples t-test determined that there existed no significant difference between the oral fluency and accuracy of the two groups prior to the treatment. Table 2 shows the results of Levene's test and the t-test.

Table 2.ComparingVariances and Means of Control and Experimental Groups on Pretest

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
accuracy1	Equal variances assumed	.100	.753	.939	46	.353	.25000	.26637
	Equal variances not assumed			.939	45.636	.353	.25000	.26637
fluency1	Equal variances assumed	.279	.600	1.345	46	.185	.33333	.24788
	Equal variances not assumed			1.345	45.841	.185	.33333	.24788

After the treatment period, the participants in both groups were given the same oral interview test as the posttest. The descriptive statistics for the oral interview posttest is reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Posttest for Control and Experimental Groups

Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
accuracy2	1.00	24	2.2083	.88363	.18037
	2.00	24	4.2500	.84699	.17289
fluency2	1.00	24	2.6667	1.04950	.21423
	2.00	24	4.3750	.64690	.13205

As it is illustrated in Table 3, the means of the fluency and accuracy of the experimental group (4.375, 4.25) came out to be higher than those of the control group (2.666, 2.208). However, in order to see whether the difference was significant or not, an independent samples t-test had to be run. The assumption for running a t-test is the equality of variances of the two distributions of scores that are to be compared. Table 4 demonstrates the results of test of Levene.

Table 4. **Comparing Variances and Means of Control and Experimental Groups on Posttest**

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
accuracy2	Equal variances assumed	.710	.404	-8.172	46	.000	-2.04167	.24985
	Equal variances not assumed			-8.172	45.918	.000	-2.04167	.24985
fluency2	Equal variances assumed	4.938	.031	-6.788	46	.000	-1.70833	.25166
	Equal variances not assumed			-6.788	38.272	.000	-1.70833	.25166

As Table 4 displays, the differences between the two mean ratings came out to be significant (t = 8.172, 6.788, df = 46, p= 0.001 < 0.05). This result indicated that the mean score of the experimental group who practiced keeping dialog journals was significantly higher than that of the control group.

Analyzing the results obtained from the experimental and the control groups with regard to the effect of DJW on the accuracy and fluency of oral performance, a deduction can be made that the instruction of DJW benefited the two characteristics of the respondents.

5. Discussion

The significant role of DJW can be inferred from the findings of this study. Findings suggest strong evidence for positive relationship between experience of DJW and improving oral proficiency and motivation in students so the results of the study are in line with those of previous researches. Regarding the questions of the study, the findings indicated that dialog journal writing can improve EFL learners' speaking ability and their motivation in language learning so provide further confirmation for the result of previous studies about the effect of journal writing such as Blake (2009), El-Koumy (1998), Kose (2005), Yoshihara (2008), Peyton (2000), Myers (1987), Shuy (1981), Weissberg (2006) and Staton et al. (1988).

El-Koumy (1998) used dialog journal writing and at the end of his project EFL learners' oral fluency improved and this is confirmed by the results of this article too. Blake (2009) addressed the issue of improving oral fluency in a second language with the use of internet chats. The significantly higher gain scores in oral assessment of the internet chat group in a university-level ESL class support the

notion that oral fluency improvement is possible through writing and it is in agreement with the findings of this article.

Kose (2005) explored the effect of using dialog journals on language anxiety and classroom affect. He concluded that dialog journal implementation had a positive effect on attitudes towards English courses and it was a positive way to support students' writing.

Yoshihara (2008) found that dialog journal writing can be one way to build a trust relationship between teacher and student. The finding of the study also showed that Journal writing developed a meaningful relationship between them and this is in line with the results of this study.

6. Conclusion & Pedagogical Implications

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of journal writing on EFL speaking and motivation. The results gained from comparing the performances of experimental and control groups indicated that journal writing can improve learners' oral production and enhance learners' motivation for learning in the learning process. It encourages students to interact with one another, to gain new ideas, to recognize their mistakes and to develop communication as well as writing.

This study also emphasizes the importance of dialog journal writing in the process of learning and teaching. Moreover, DJW can be effective in making student-teacher interaction easier. Further, in DJW project students made positive changes in their learning and resolved their problems by reflecting on their personal writing process.DJW can also provide EFL students with critical self-reflective writing ability increasing intrinsic motivation to write without fear and speak with self-esteem, too.

Today journal writing is becoming more known in schools and universities in Iran although most teachers do not have enough expertise. If DJW is designed appropriately, it can be considered as an innovative approach to language learning. Further, those learners who are more dominant and proficient in DJW can use it for communicating more effectively. Journal writing can improve students' writing as well as speaking proficiency. It can also give the students more courage to take risk to write and speak in social environments without fear. The students in this study were enthusiastic to write whatever was on their minds (write freely) and step by step they learned how to organize their mind and how to bring it out on the paper. Moreover, EFL learners of the present study developed some kind of awareness of their weaknesses and strengths in speaking.

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