



Does Dialog Journal Writing Have any Effect on EFL Learners' Vocabulary Knowledge?

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ABSTRACT

The study was aimed to examine the effect of dialog journal writing on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge. Forty six intermediate level students from two intact classes studying English as foreign language in an English institute participated in this study. They were randomly divided into two groups; one group was considered as experimental group and the other as control group. To begin with, the two groups were homogenized by a proficiency test and then pretested by a vocabulary test. Next, the participants in the experimental group were required to write dialog journals twice a week for twenty sessions (one term). They wrote one at home and the other in the classroom, while the learners in control group receive a placebo. The findings showed that dialog journal writing had a significant effect on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge in the experimental group. Further, it reduced anxiety of writing, improved writing quality and fluency, built community in the classroom, organized class activities, and aroused intrinsic motivation. Moreover, the participants in the experimental group perceived dialog journal writing as an effective way for language learning, especially vocabulary.

Key words: Dialog Journal Writing; Vocabulary Knowledge; EFL Learners; Writing Proficiency

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INTRODUCTION

The dialog journal writing (DJW) seems to be an effective way for learning and practicing different components of language such as new words and new grammar rules. Moreover, it can help us to learn the way of thinking that is important too (Mirhosseini, 2009). English vocabulary pedagogy has been a major concern in EFL education. Although English writing is widely applied in many universities, schools and English institutes for specific purpose, but there is a great problem in English writing, and concerning students' vocabulary knowledge it makes a two-sided challenge. This article is an introduction of DJW into EFL education as a powerful tool for increasing vocabulary domain and practicing writing.

DJW is a written conversation in which students and teachers have mutual communication regularly (daily or weekly) over a semester school year or a course (Peyton, 2000). DJW almost has been used in the last two decades by many teachers in different educational ways and it is considered as an effective way to improve learning process

Dialog journals open new channels of communication and concentrate on transferring meaning by letters and vocabulary consequently; form and structure do not have a significant role in DJW (Peyton, 2000). When students write with their teachers, they have a great opportunity to create and use English words in an interaction with their teachers in a non-threatening atmosphere and they do not have any focus on form and correction. In addition, students can discuss and solve problems through their comments and reflections in this mutual interaction with teacher and even with other students.

Based on learners' DJW, teacher can individualize instruction for each student and encourage independent thinking (Fulwiler and Young, 2000). On the other hand, when students write a dialog journal they can record their backgrounds and individual experiences and extends teachers' contact time with them and based on this relationship and personal information from each student, teacher considers an especial instruction.

While many learners may begin their works by using a few words or think in their mother tongue first and then translate the words to the target language at the beginning sessions of DJW, it does not put pressure on learners with limited literacy or low vocabulary knowledge because when teacher responds to learners' writing, teacher' writing as a model of correct English usage and application of new words shows students how to compare this model as a correct one with their own writing (Peyton and Staton, 1993).

Furthermore, frequent use of DJW can create a brainstorming of vocabulary related to the topic in the class for students, which can apply in their DJW (Peyton, 2000). The purpose of learning process is to create

meaning and achievement to this goal without vocabulary knowledge is not possible. In fact, vocabulary and word are the primary tools of meaning and have a key role in understanding the text. Thus, investigating methods that have an important role in learner's vocabulary knowledge can be very useful for both learners and teachers and this study is going to examine the effect of DJW on this domain.

Iranian students' English writing is generally poor in terms of content, vocabulary and language use, and many of them have major problems to write a well-organized short writing using rich vocabulary. One of the reasons why Iranian students write poorly is their lack of practice in generating ideas and new vocabularies in English. Another reason is that the school instructor-centered curriculum has placed much emphasis on grammar correctness, which results in students' inability in generating new vocabularies and writing appropriately. On the other hand, because school writing is graded mainly for precision and accuracy, Iranian students are reluctant to express ideas in their own words freely.

In addition, this educational system leads to low motivation for writing and is often stressful for students. Besides, traditional writing system not only put pressure on students but also fails to develop their writing. Based on instructor-centered curriculum students passively follow what they are instructed to do (Liao and Wong, 2007) but in DJW student actively write and express their emotions, attitudes and life experience.

Although many second language learners think English writing learning is a difficult and anxious activity but, the teacher can play an important role by using DJW in class to facilitate the process of English writing in a relaxed atmosphere in order to promote students' English writing.

The purpose of the study was to show how DJW would positively have an effect on learners' vocabulary knowledge and improve their English writing. In fact, the first purpose of DJW was to increase communication between students and teachers, and other issues such as vocabulary knowledge (Kamchatka, 2012).

Background

Several studies (e.g. Liao and Wong, 2007; Peyton, 2000; Peyton and Staton, 1993) have been conducted to examine the efficacy of DJW on students' learning or effective factors and have found positive effects. Some of the benefits of DJW to L2 language learners are the extended contact time with learners, easier management of classes with learners of various languages, abilities, and interest levels and the last one is the facilitation of language learning. In addition, some researchers such as Abdolmanafi Rokni and Seifi (2013), Holmes and Moulton (1997), Liao and Wong (2007) and Peyton (2000) confirmed that one of the most significant benefits of DJW is the reduction of students' English writing apprehension so that DJW can increase students' writing confidence. All of these qualities make dialog journaling very different from other school based writing. Alexander (2001) discovered that dialog journal recorded ESL students' writing development, and fostered the students' writing confidence. Peyton (1986) is one of the first researchers that worked on the use of dialog journals for ELLs. She conducted a study on non-literate students that should draw and label pictures in the journals. Then, students wrote a few words in response to teachers. Peyton (1990) also studied about DJW with first-grade students that were illiterate, she reported their oral English skills were excellent and promoted by using a great support for initial writing after instruction.

Another study conducted by Peyton (1990) examined the use of targeted grammatical morphemes. Her study indicated a considerable uniformity in acquisition order of morpheme. Earlier studies about DJW show that it is a powerful instrument for enhancing students' writing motivation, especially for students that are reluctant and slow in writing. Holmes and Moulton (1997) conducted a project based on DJW for second-language students, after 15 weeks, students reported that their writing fluency and motivation were developed and they could write easier and more fluent. Thus, it is clear that DJW helps to writing fluency and increases writing motivation. In two other studies, Nassaji and Cumming (2000) and Shuy (1993) discovered that DJW can help to learners to improve their communicative language functions. Indeed, the journals should be functional – that is demonstrating a variety of communicative purposes. In all these studies, the participants were students, but in a different study, Voit (2009) examined the effect of DJW on adult learners with very limited educational background. He found that DJW rarely improved the correct usage of grammatical morphemes in adult learners but improved confidence level of students.

The current research questions are: Does DJW have any effect on EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge?; Do Iranian students perceive DJW project as leading to more learning in vocabulary?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 46 intermediate level Iranian students who were randomly selected from an English language institute in Gorgan, Iran. They were from 13 to 23 years old from two intact classes. The classes met twice weekly, and lasted for one and a half hours. The study was designed for duration of twenty sessions, ten weeks in a term.

Instrumentation

Two different tests were carried in this study

Proficiency test: In order to gain a general attitude about the students' English proficiency, a test of NELSON, series 400B, was administered before the pretest. It proved to have a reliability of 0.82. It consisted of 40 multiple-choice items consisting of grammar and vocabulary. The time allotted was 40 minutes.

Vocabulary Pre and Post-test: In the present study pre and posttest was based on a set of multiple-choice vocabulary test adopted from TOEFL. In the pre and posttest 30 multiple-choice items were organized to elicit the students.

Treatment

This research draws from two sources: 1) an informal meeting and 2) the DJW sessions. The study was designed to last ten weeks in twenty sessions in which the control group did not participate in the daily DJW and they only received a placebo.

Informal Meeting: An informal meeting was held before the DJW sessions started. It was between one of the researchers and the participants of the study. The concept behind DJW was introduced. The students were informed of what was expected of them throughout the experimental period. They were given freedom to write on any topics of interest. The purpose was a free writing with an emphasis on fluency. The students were also told that the experiment would continue for a period of ten weeks and that they were supposed to write at least twice a week to the teacher, a free topic at home and a certain topic in class. Finally, they were told to enjoy the exercise as their writing would not be graded or marked.

DJW Sessions: Students were given notebooks to write their daily journal entries in. Students wrote on the top-side of the paper and the teacher responded on the bottom-side of the paper. If the students did not know any vocabulary items, they put a blank space or wrote its Persian meaning, and then looked it up in a dictionary or asked their teacher. Every weekend the students were given the opportunity to speak in front of the class and discuss what they had written in their journal. The students were also given a few minutes to communicate with the class. Surprisingly, the students enjoyed going to the front of the class and talking about their interested topic. Speaking in front of the class greatly motivated the students to look for more related words to have more effective communication with their classmates.

Procedure

The study was conducted for twenty sessions (10 weeks) in a term. At the beginning of the project, the students were administered a proficiency test and a vocabulary pretest. After a brief introduction about the purpose of the study, the students in the experimental group participated in DJW project. Next, a vocabulary posttest was given to the students in both groups. Finally, the scores collected, computed and analyzed by the researchers.

RESULTS

The data which were collected from the two classes were analyzed by SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows. The participants' overall English vocabulary knowledge as shown by their scores from the pre and posttests is presented in Table1.

The descriptive statistics of the pretest revealed that both control and experimental groups had almost the same mean score on the pretest. It indicated that both groups were homogeneous in terms of vocabulary knowledge. The experimental group received the mean score of 5.044 and the control group received the mean score of 4.130. The mean scores of both groups showed that there was not any significant difference between the groups in the pretest. It should be pointed out that the t-observed is 1.426. Further, the descriptive statistics of the posttest revealed the experimental group received the mean score of 20.044, while the control group received the mean score of 12.174 (Table 2). It indicated that the experimental group using computer games outperformed its counterpart in spelling in the posttest. It should be pointed out that the t-observed is 4.921.

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig	t
Control	23	4.130	2.05170	0.161	1.426
Experimental	23	5.044	2.28589		

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig	t
Control	23	12.174	5.27130	0.000	4.921
Experimental	23	20.044	5.57167		

Apart from the vocabulary test, another instrument employed in this research was the questionnaire filled by the learners in the experimental group. With regard to the open-ended survey questions compiled along with the quantitative data; twenty three students in the experimental group were given two open-ended survey question items. It was done in order to assess their perceptions of the DJW treated in the experimental group. Item1 "I would like my teacher to use DJW as an extraordinary activity helping me to learn words. Do you agree or disagree with the statements? Please briefly describe why you agree or not." and item 2 "Do you have any suggestions about how you would like to learn words?" were intended to investigate students'

perspectives of DJW project and to elicit their free views and suggestions through the statements. The feedback from the questionnaire revealed that the usage of the DJW in learning vocabulary was positive.

With regard to the first research question, the result of this research displayed a significant difference in learners' vocabulary knowledge indicating that the learners who used DJW learned more words and deeply rather than the other learners in the control group.

With regard to the second research question, it can be stated that students in the experimental group expressed their positive ideas about the effect of the use of DJW saying that the treatment had an effect on the enhancement of their vocabulary during and at the end of the course. They cited that the use of DJW was so much effective to them and helped them to improve their other school activities. One outstanding factor that made the two groups different was motivation. The control group seemed to have a weaker motivation in learning, compared with the experimental group.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicated that DJW helps Iranian EFL learners to write with more motivation, confidence and fluency. Comparing writing scores in pre- and posttests, they showed improvement in writing as well as improvement in vocabulary knowledge. Although there was no measure to examine the extent to which students have gained self-confidence, the amount of their journal writing could be an evidence in this regard (Birjandi and Hadidi, 2010). The students, who only wrote very few lines in their journals at the beginning of the course, could write several paragraphs at the end. The learners showed that journal writing could improve their self-confidence as well (Abdolmanafi Rokni and Seifi, 2013).

The findings of this study are in tune with those of previous researches. As Alexander (2001), Liao and Wong (2007), Holmes and Moulton (1997) hold, these findings suggest strong evidence for a close connection between experience of DJW and improving vocabulary knowledge, fluency and motivation in students. Further, the significant role of DJW can be inferred from the findings of this study. Accordingly, the major effects of DJW were categorized into vocabulary knowledge, writing fluency and self-confidence. Students reported that they could write more fluently with new vocabulary in non-threatening situations. Alexander (2001) discovered that dialog journals boosted ESL students' writing development, which fostered the students' writing confidence and it is in conformity with this study. In another study conducted by Liao and Wong (2007), they achieved that dialog journal project was effective in promoting the students' English writing proficiency such as writing fluency, writing performance on content, organization and vocabulary, increasing in motivation and reduction of anxiety. This improvement of writing fluency and vocabulary knowledge is coincident with the result of the present study. Further, Holmes and Moulton (1997) conducted a project based on DJW for second-language students, after 15 weeks, students reported that their writing fluency and motivation were developed and they could write easier and more fluently. The results received by Holmes and Moulton's study are the same as this study. An interesting research study about DJW was conducted by Morrell (2010) with seven students who were deaf and hard of hearing and had been enrolled in an educational program that taught listening and spoken language. After the project, both the participants and teachers reported that DJW motivated students to write better and share their different experiences with classmates independently and efficiently by using DJW. Moreover, DJW encouraged the deaf student to be more motivated to write in a non-threatening atmosphere that is entirely in accordance with the result of this research.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has investigated the effect of DJW on Iranian EFL students' vocabulary knowledge. After analyzing the result of this study, the major findings of the present study can be summarized as follows:

First, the DJW promoted the students' vocabulary knowledge. Significant differences were found in the students' writing performance in terms of vocabulary between the pre and posttest. When students participated in pretest, they had a lot of mistakes in choosing the correct option but they could present a better performance in posttest after ten weeks. This project was especially effective in guiding the students to generate more ideas and new vocabularies. The ranges of vocabulary in the subjects' writing showed that there was an improvement in the use of vocabulary. In addition, both female and male students confirmed that the DJW was an important tool for enhancing their vocabulary knowledge, writing fluency, self-confidence and self-growth, and consequently it promoted their ability to write a meaningful and well-organized writing. Further, DJW had the same positive effect on two genders.

Second, the dialog journal project improved the students' writing fluency helping them to write more freely. Significant differences were discovered in comparing their number of words in the first and last two journal entries. Finally, the overall result of this study revealed that the students' writing ability improved. The positive feedback received from the participants revealed that the students held positive attitudes toward the DJW project.

Based on the study's findings, some pedagogical implications for EFL instruction in second language can be derived. First, EFL instructors can improve their students' English writing proficiency, accuracy as well as fluency, a non-threatening, content-based, and interactive writing activity, encouraging students to take more risks in English writing (Liao and Wong, 2007).

Second, EFL instructors can apply a dialog journal project in order to develop second language students' vocabulary knowledge and their writing confidence. Finally, EFL instructors can promote second language students' motivation through using a DJW project. Because it is a writing activity that allows students to choose their own writing topics which causes them enjoy sharing their individual ideas and private experiences with their teacher and classmates and makes a strong entry with their readers in DJW.

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