

Dialogue Journaling in a Science Class at a High School

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Abstract

Dialogue journaling was done in a science class from January to May 2011. I introduced dialogue journals to the whole class but picked only three students for the study. They were from different backgrounds and had different needs. A comparison of their abilities was done through teacher driven dialogue journals in which prompts can be divided into five distinct categories. It was noted that student 1 and 3 whose primary language was Spanish, shifted back and forth in Spanish and English or mixed in her responses. Student 2, whose primary language is Arabic, writes more in English language than Arabic. Student 2 had more opportunity of practicing English outside the school than student 1 as Spanish channels are readily available in US.

Key words: Dialogue Journaling, English language Learners (ELLs), Second Language Acquisition

"Speak up" my 9th grade math teacher commanded me. I was really scared and I could not feel blood circulating in my legs. My heart started pounding heavily. I looked through the edges of my eyes over my

classmates. There was a pin dropped silence prevailed in the classroom. I noticed half of the students had their mouth open unknowingly and their eyes were opened widely with a similar fear as I was feeling at that time. I had to say something to my teacher who was a kind man of his late 40s. Students always felt a communication gap between themselves and their teachers.

"Speak up, Tanvir." Teacher commanded again.

"Sir, AAAAA I could not understand homework questions 20 to 22." I was barely able to say that in a feeble voice which I feared that teacher was not able to hear that. I did not want my fellow students to hear that definitely. My reputation was a good student in math class and I felt like a defeated general at that time. My classmates were scared with the thought that they might get an extra assignment because of my confession in front of the class and I was scared that what students might think about me. I wanted a system in which I can communicate with my teachers without involving other students.

Time passed quickly and now I was standing in front of a class as a teacher asking for volunteers who would do a dialogue journaling with me in my biology class. This year I asked for the volunteers for the dialogue journaling. In my opinion the dialogue journals are means of constant communication between student/s and teacher/s or between students with their peers in which the students share his or her thoughts freely. For ELLs dialogue journals also help them learn English language skills without fear of getting corrected and they have a chance to interact with a proficient English speaker or a native speaker.

1.Introduction:

Dialogue journaling as provided by Peyton, J.K. (1990a), "A written conversation between a student and teacher to facilitate the discussion of for example, a literary work or other class material, or simply to give the student practice expressing their ideas in writing in a format where they can receive rapid personal feedback." Bardine, B. (1995) related the process of dialogue journaling as a huge benefit to English Language Learners (ELLs) by saying, "For ELLs dialogue journaling also help them to learn English language skills without fear of getting corrected as they have a chance to interact with a proficient English speaker."

Auerbach (1999) proposes a more cognitive approach to writing which focuses on writing to express oneself and make meaning. Auerbach (1999) further stressed that this approach focuses more on meaningful communication, with content that is easily accessible to students. Their prior knowledge and information about their lives can be used rather than having to research anything else. This type of more open writing also focuses on the process of writing while reflecting and exploring other ideas. This was why I asked question on the topics of science we covered in the class. Students were allowed to talk freely and I never corrected or explained what they did not understand. The purpose of the dialogue journaling was to practice English language skills rather mastering science concepts. Many researchers and experts believe that dialogue journals are the crucial part of the classroom. Some researchers consider dialogue journals as an interactive writing on an individual basis. According to Bardine, B. (1995), "Dialogue journals not only open a new channel of communication, but they also provide another context for language and literacy development." In dialogue journaling students have an opportunity to use English in a friendly environment and they have an opportunity to interact proficient English speaker. Larrotta, C. (2009) believes that as the interaction is written, it allows students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing. Students, who did dialogue journals, took a great deal of interest and practice academic literacy while writing in dialogue journals.

2.Population and Sample Size:

The population size was all the students who were enrolled in my three biology classes during spring 2012. Some forty students were offered dialogue journaling on the bases of simple random sampling. Every 4th student was picked as proposed by Bitchener et al (2005). In the beginning some thirty five students accepted to engage in dialogue

journaling but later on three remained persistent. The rest of the students either transferred out of the class or lost their interest because of attendance or some other reasons. The biology class I chose for dialogue journaling has a variety of students linguistically. There are many native English speakers on one hand and also many ELLs on the other. Dialogue journaling was offered to many students including fifteen bilinguals and eleven proficient English speakers. For the convenience of this study I picked dialogue journals of three English Language Learners (ELLs). Dialogue journaling was done between the months of January to May 2012. The student I picked for the dialogue journaling were Claudia, Fabiola and Ghask. Claudia was a junior and was an English language learner (ELL). Her family moved to US recently. Claudia was having a huge trouble in learning and practicing English in US. She was showing really good performance academically. Claudia had a great deal of interest in dialogue journaling when I offered. Fabiola was an 11th grader while Ghasak was a senior. This was why process of questioning was open and depended on responses of the students. The primary language of Fabiola is Spanish while the native language of Ghasak is Arabic. Both are ELLs. The purpose of the dialogue journaling was not only to check students understanding of a biology concept but also help them improve English language proficiency skills. As most of the dialogue journals spelling, grammar or sentence structure was not checked or corrected. The names picked for this study are real as they are the first names of the students.

3.Methodology:

The process was simple in which I wrote prompts or questions to the students every time I see them in my classes. Students responded back with their free will. Though students were allowed to ask me questions also but none of the students asked anything from me. I never set any rules for dialogue journaling. I respected students' responses and

incorporated their ideas in my teaching. They also knew that they were being heard. On many occasions students expressed that they were unable to understand presentation or presenter because of language barrier. I made sure that presentations were being translated or discussed in Spanish. For that purposes I used bilingual students help to translate out loud during or after the presentations.

In dialogue journals students were exposed to a wide range of questioning or comments. The range of the questioning was from more personal questions to more general questions. I asked personal question like "How did you spend your weekend, doing homework or studying?" You need to use the first person when you talk about these questions; I asked questions like.....Otherwise the reader doesn't know who is asking the questions. The example of more general question I asked was, "How was the guest speaker presentation on brain development and use of alcohol?" Students responded honestly to these questions. It was made sure that discussion should not fall under too personal category that makes respondents to lose interest and quit writing journals. Questions/prompts can be categorized into several different categories. What are these categories? These categories can be classified as:

- 1- Personal questions/prompts related to students academics
- 2- Questions/prompts related to science topic covered a day before
- 3- Questions/prompts related to their attendance
- 4- Questions/prompts related to language ability including reading, writing, understanding and speaking
- 5- Questions/prompts related to skills used to improve language skills

Dialogue journaling started with academic discussion and then I asked several personal questions to make them feel comfortable. Personal questions helped me to set a limit in the minds of students that questions will not

cross that limit I set in the beginning. Several questions were asked to see how the lesson or activity went. The benefit of such questions was to evaluate and assess my own teaching style. I modified several times my teaching and adjusted in the light of students' opinion. I also asked questions about students' language ability in order to assess their language ability. I asked students to write in their primary language and feel the difference between their ability of expression.

With students, dialogue journaling started with questioning that how did they do on a weekend and how their day was at the school, how did they like in the computer labs and science lab. After several days of practice the topic was changed to science concepts such as the use of microscope etc. Here general communication format was followed where it was asked how people felt in order to make them comfortable and then a serious dialogue was followed. Claudia and Fabiola started writing in Spanish and later on they began writing more in English than Spanish but in the class their preferred language of communication was Spanish. Ghasak wrote her dialogue journals in English language but she wrote a few sentences.

3.1 Some Writing Samples (The Original Writing at the End of the Paper):

In order to make students feel comfortable the dialogue journaling started with simple and general questions such as," How do you like your classes this year?" Claudia responded question as,

"Los clases que me dieron este ano son las que necesito para graduarme y aunque algunas no me gustan las necesito pero yo esperaba que me dieran como gobierno, economia, salud, ingles 12, pero yo pensaba que iba a ser mas facil y no es asi ya que la mayoria de los clases son igles y aunque a veces me dejan escribir en espanol, no le entiendo a muchas cosas de las que hoblan y por lo demas es lo que yo esperaba y queria y tratare de hacer el trabajo de mis clases lo major posible."

Fabiola responded as,

"A mi me encanta esta clase pa que me gusta hacer posters, dibujar y mas. Tambien me gusta hacer tareas de esta clase. Esta clase es muy importante por que puede aprender cosas nuevas sobre la salud por eso me gustaria hacer mas poster sobre la salud."

Ghasak chose not to answer the prompt.

Since one of the purposes for dialogue journaling was to practice English language so the students were encouraged to write more in English language. When asked, "From your journal it seem like you enjoy school a lot."

"Yes I like coming to the computer lab because it's a different activity and fun."

Fabiola responded to same question as,

"Yes I like coming to the computer lab because it's a different activity and fun."

Ghasak responded as,

"Yes I enjoyed it because I learned a lot about all of them."

Students also practiced science concepts during dialogue journaling. When Claudia was asked about what she knew about global warming she wrote half sentence as,

"global warming is when the wheater changed and the....."

Fabiola explained concepts learned as,

"It is about the compounds of microscope, food web and environment. In the class of Biology when need to do facts about food web is the quien se come a question for example : Bird → hawk → Birds. Fish, animals → grasshopper → zooplankton and → aloris. This is the food web. About microscope when need to find the parts of the microscope and answers the question and about the environment. We need to study about animals."

Ghasak explained the learned biology concepts as,

"People need to stop what they're doing, because its bad for the biome that we live in and it effect our health too."

For the next day lesson Claudia also had a difficulty in explaining the concept of recycling and conservation. Probably she did not understand fully because of English language. So when asked, "How do you practice

recycling and conservation to reduce pollution and global warming?" Claudia expressed as, *"I don't practice recycling because in my house its too hard because we haved different trash."*

When asked, "What do you do to reduce pollution and increase environment?" Claudia replied,

I do not thash am the floor and use less the car. And increase environment plant trees, recycling the paper and the bottles of water, soda or juice.

Fabiola also had a difficulty explaining the concepts as,

"Global warming is the world is hot. When in the morning the sun come out to the morning be hot. The sun is the thing who have hot the world."

And

"What I know about global warming is when is December the sun is not come out because the snow it the thing that come out from the sky."

Ghasak explained learned biology concepts as, *"The human role in this environment is to take care of everything around us, watch out to our body, stay away from disseassis."*

I don't know but I think you tell me with one special camera.

Many questions about students' language ability particularly how much chance students get at home to speak and practice English at home. These questions were asked after the discussion of benefits of dialogue journaling. Claudia replied that she never gets a chance to speak or practice English at home as her family does not know English. Claudia in response to one question, "What do you watch at home, English Channels or Spanish channels and which one do you like more" replied,

"In my house I see both of the channels because I like more in Spanish but I +6have to lear english and see TV channels on english its helping to me for understanding more."

I asked questions about her friends whether they help Claudia with her English language proficiency or not. Claudia replied as,

"My kind of friends I like its in the school because we see all the days did them help me when I have problems with the english"

Fabiola responded to same question as,

"In my house my, my dad, and my sister speak a little of English. My father knows more English than me and my sister. We don't speak all the time in the house nuestio speakis Spanish my mom and my little brother don't know English. My mom like to speak English, but she say is so hard and difficult."

Ghasak explained as,

"We all speak Arabic at my house, but sometimes I speak a little English with my old brother."

Then I asked, "How do you practice English."

Ghasak replied,

"I practice English while I'm texting and talking to my friend and by paying attention in class."

4.Evaluation and Assessments:

The dialogue journals of the students were evaluated for the content, understanding of the science concepts, their progress in learning, as a tool of assessment, language ability, and their improvement in reading, writing, speaking and understanding skills. Dialogue journaling was also available as a school wide option for literacy strategy. Students were provided with a feedback to guide and improve their literacy and communication skills. As a part of dialogue journaling it was expected that students would read other students' journals and comment if they wanted to. None of these three students accepted that practice as they were shy in sharing their journals with any other students. So that aspect was not evaluated. Grammatical errors were taken into consideration either. Students were exposed to many questions about different topics. It was assessed that how comfortable students were to respond to a question and how well they could write. Their fluency in English language was also assessed. Whenever it was noticed that Claudia and Fabiola were going back to Spanish, they were reminded of coming back to English conversation as that was one the goals of the dialogue journaling.

5.Result:

Many things were learned from this experience of dialogue journaling. Many similarities or differences that exit between their ability to learn a second language were also observed. Both of the students were of different age but are from same levels of exposure to the new language. Ghasak was Arabic speaking girl from Iraq which was a fastest growing population at our school. Five year ago the population of our school had only one student from Arabic speaking community and now we have 45 Arabic speaking students. Most of these students were classified as ELLs. Some of them were able to speak English better than the other. Ghasak was one of those students who were able to communicate in English better than her peers. While Claudia has been immigrated to USA recently with her family and she had a little exposure to English language. Claudia was not able to speak English fluently.

During dialogue journaling many interesting things were being noticed such as language shift between English to Spanish or Spanglish (sentences that had words from both of the languages). claudia moved from English to Spanish and Spanglish frequently. Sometime Claudia was prompted to write only in English but she went back to Spanish again and again. During dialogue journaling Claudia mixed both languages while writing her responses. It was hard to figure out that she was shifting back and forth in Spanish or English purposefully or unknowingly. She was never being asked in order to respect her free will to write. Claudia was shy during class discussion as she never participated but her turning in work was really great. She loved to write and read but rarely talked to her friends. Ghasak, on the other hand, participated well in the discussion. Most of the time Ghasak had a great difficulty in expressing herself in English but she was not shy to participate. Her turning in work was excellent too. Like Claudia, Ghasak was also knew how to read or write in her native language which was Arabic. Fabiola

had the similar habits as Claudia in switching back and forth between English and Spanish. Fabiola also wrote mixed sentences containing English and Spanish words in one sentence.

Another interesting thing noticed was the length of their responses. All the three students produced more sentences while writing in their native language than in English. All the three students also wrote more when she was writing about prompts related to their personal or general life than in science. A few cases Fabiola wrote a paragraph or more when explaining science concepts particularly late into the semester when she had enough practice writing in English. Sometimes, Claudia and Fabiola left their sentence unfinished or incomplete when writing in English. In Spanish sometimes they wrote a paragraph or more. Ghasak, on the other hand, wrote one sentence or two in response to several prompts. On a few occasions Ghasak was asked to explain the same response more the next day. This trend was noticed in almost all of the categories of dialogue journaling with Ghasak. Still there was an improvement was observed in English writing and explaining science concepts. Claudia and Fabiola had more grammatical and spelling errors than Ghasak.

Another interesting thing noticed, was that Ghasak had more opportunity to speak and practice English language at home and outside the school than Claudia and Fabiola. Ghasak had an opportunity to watch more English TV channels than Arabic while Claudia and Fabiola watched more Spanish TV channels than English though they liked to watch more English TV channels. It was due to the availability of the Spanish TV channels at lower cost than Arabic ones. Most of the local Spanish TV channels are free while one Arabic TV Channel cost \$ 20.00 a month. That provided Ghasak an opportunity to watch more English channels and practice English language. Ghasak also had some friends to practice English outside the school while Claudia and Fabiola had a few friends. Both of the students like to come to the school and

learn and both had many friends. All the three students expressed their satisfaction for involvement in dialogue journaling.

Discussion:

Cumming, A., & Riazi, A. (2000) described that dialogue journaling was a wonderful tool for the second language acquisition. It was noticed that students who were engaged in dialogue journaling showed an improvement in their literacy skills than those who refused to write journals. Students showed a confidence in dialogue journals and they felt that they were being heard. Many students asked them to write a request for me to see.

Their communication was also respected as many assignments were planned and modified on the bases of students' dialogue journals. When it was felt that students were having difficulty in a topic more time was allocated to that particular topic. On the whole dialogue journaling was a wonderful experience for the students and teacher.

Suggestions for Future Researches:

For future researches it is suggested that ELLs should be engaged with English proficient students also along with teachers. That would provide an opportunity to ELLs to practice English with their fellow students. That would also provide them with an opportunity to become friends with their peers.

Dialogue journaling should become a norm in the classroom and more and more students should be involved. That might help in bell to bell teaching and might build a confidence in teaching learning process.

A comparison between students' dialogue journals of one semester with the students of other semester should be done and then see the difference in the performance of two different types of the students sample.

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My week was pretty good
~~and I did have a lot of~~
and I did have a lot of
work to do it

I talk freely with my friend, and I
don't think that I would get shy
because they are my friend, and there
is nothing would make me shy to
talk about because nothing bad.

Fabiola

how was your weekend and what did
you do for your studies. Did you come to
open house

My weekend is so fun because I go
to the fair with my family and I have
fun in all the games is so fun. The
another 2 days I go to the party
the party is so fun too because we
dance and have great time.

I cannot go to the open house
because the teacher of english don't
give me the paper in that day

I don't ^{know} when and what time era
la hora I think the open house was
in thursday but is in thuesday and I
cannot come because in that time
I don't know the time and when.
I like to come to the open house to
see my grades but I cannot come.

Las clases que me dieron este año son las que necesito para graduarme y aunque algunos no me gusten las necesito pero yo esperaba que me dieran como gobierno, economía, salud, inglés 12, pero yo pensaba que iba a ser más fácil y no es así ya que la mayoría de las clases son inglés y aunque a veces me dejan escribir en español, no le entiendo a muchas cosas de las que hablan y por eso es que se me hace más difícil pero por lo demás es lo que yo esperaba y quería y trataré de hacer el trabajo de mis clases lo mejor posible.

How was your weekend and what did you do?
Lo que hice en mi fin de semana fue buscar un tema para escribir sobre el ya que en la clase de inglés 11 es lo que me pidieron para hablar sobre el y lo que hice fue buscar en la internet y sacar las ideas principales para después escribir más sobre ello y el tema que yo elegí para hablar fue sobre problemas familiares.

How was your day "yesterday" at school?
Mi día ayer en la escuela fue bien, hice todo lo que me pidieron hacer y me dejaron tarea.