

Dialogue Journals as an EFL Learning Strategy in the Preparatory Year Program: Learners' Attitudes and Perceptions

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Abstract—This study attempts to elicit the perceptions and attitudes of EFL learners of the Preparatory Year Program at KSU towards dialogue journal writing as an EFL learning strategy. The descriptive research design used incorporated both qualitative and quantitative instruments to accomplish the objectives of the study. A learners' attitude questionnaire and follow-up interviews with learners from a randomly selected representative sample of the participants were employed. The participants were 55 female Saudi university students in the Preparatory Year Program at King Saud University. The analysis of the results indicated that the PYP learners had highly positive attitudes towards dialogue journal writing in their EFL classes and positive perceptions of the benefits of the use of dialogue journal writing as an EFL learning strategy. The results also revealed that dialogue journals are considered an effective EFL learning strategy since they fulfill various needs for both learners and instructors. Interestingly, the analysis of the results also revealed that Saudi university level students tend to write about personal topics in their dialogue journals more than academic ones.

Keywords—Dialogue journals, EFL, learning strategy, writing.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE study attempts to elicit the perceptions and attitudes of EFL learners of the Preparatory Year Program at King Saud University towards dialogue journal writing as an EFL learning strategy. The descriptive research design used incorporated both qualitative and quantitative instruments to accomplish the objectives of the study. Interaction is an important part of everyday language classes, and thus students should practice using language on an everyday basis. Unfortunately, they do not get as much practice or opportunities to communicate as they need. In English writing classes, writing is still seen as a one-way communication in which students do not write communicatively in real world situations. Moreover, for students to be motivated and engaged in their writing, they need to have a meaningful purpose. Therefore, the use of dialogue journal writing as an EFL learning strategy was investigated and the attitudes of the female students of the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at King Saud University towards the strategy were examined. Furthermore, the topics the students tend to write about in their dialogue journals were explored.

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II. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The subjects of this study were 55 female students studying in the PYP at King Saud University, majoring in Computer Science and Business. Their native language is Arabic and their ages range between 18 and 21. A general description of students' variables is reported in Table I.

TABLE I
DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Variable	Category	No. of students	Pecent
Age	18- 19	45	81.8%
	20- 22	10	18%
Attending private schools	Yes	9	16.3%
	No	46	83.6%
Born or living in English-speaking country	Yes	4	7.3%
	No	51	92.7%
Travel to English-speaking country	Yes	15	27.2%
	No	40	72.7%

The descriptive research included both, qualitative and quantitative instruments. The data collection instruments used were (1) a learner's attitude questionnaire and (2) follow-up interviews with the learners. Dialogue journal writing was introduced to 55 students, and issues including topic selection, error correction, feedback, dates and amount of writing, etc., were discussed. The students and their teacher interacted via the dialogue journals for about four months. They were allowed to write about any topic, and the grammar and spelling were not corrected. The teacher just modeled the correct use of language in her responses. Most of the time, the students wrote in class, but when there was not enough time, they took the dialogue journals home.

III. RESULTS AND MAIN FINDINGS

The study was designed to investigate PYP female students' perceptions and attitudes toward dialogue journal writing as an EFL learning strategy. The study addressed the following questions specifically: 1) what are the learners' attitudes toward the dialogue journal writing process and experience? 2) How does written communication address individual learner (student) needs, and how does it meet course requirements (teacher needs) and 3) what topics do Saudi female students tend to write about in their dialogue journals?

The aforementioned methodology and research instruments led to the following findings:

First, the results indicated that the PYP Saudi female EFL

students have significantly positive attitudes towards dialogue journal writing, which is consistent with findings of previous studies (e.g., [1]-[3], [6], [7], [9], [10]). Also, the students of the PYP had significant positive perceptions of the benefits of dialogue journal writing. The learners agreed that dialogue journal writing is an effective tool in numerous ways. The most noted benefits were the following: its role in helping create a relationship between the teacher and students; its promotion of reading practice; learning new words and idioms; its assisting students in expressing their feelings and academic needs; the individualization of learning for students; the resulting increase in students' confidence in communicating in a foreign language; and the improvement of writing. The following are entries extracted from the students' dialogue journals about their feelings towards journaling:

Student 1: "Miss Asma I want to thank you and I am really happy about this notebook because I know you will know all of us more. Teacher I am so happy I am in this class and I wish I was here in the first semester."

Student 2: "This is the first time I write in a dialogue journal or write to my teacher. This is a great suggestion for improving my writing."

Student 3: "Miss Asma, I really feel exited when I am reading your entry. I read it and I have a smile on my face."

Student 4: "I am sorry if I had a lot of spelling mistakes because I am writing fast, and I am sorry for my long journal."

Student 5: "Teacher Asma, thank you for the idea [dialogue journals] it's really a good idea that I want to tell you before. Really you are a good teacher. I will be thankful for Allah that you are our teacher."

Student 6: "In real life I can't write or talk, I just keep it in my heart. But in this journal I will try to write everything I want"

Moreover, an overwhelming majority of participants expressed their feelings that the dialogue journal provides them with the opportunity to express themselves in private, without worrying about peer pressure or being embarrassed by the nature of their topics. A big majority of the students agreed that dialogue journals allow their teacher to know more about students' interests, learning styles, needs, and frustrations, and therefore, cater for their individual needs. Although the learners who engaged in dialogue journal writing started writing about academic topics at the beginning, participants began to write more about personal topics later on. The participants wrote about topics such as exams, studying and education, classroom issues, weddings, family, childhood problems, feelings, hobbies and interests, friends, personal information, weekends and travelling. The participants have significant positive feelings towards the teacher in dialogue journal writing and a more collaborative relationship with her. They felt that their teacher was a friend, advisor and consultant. This made them comfortable enough to ask the teacher about personal information. They also asked for help and advice from the teacher. Moreover, learners of the PYP learned to trust their teacher to keep the information in their dialogue journals confidential. Learners preferred that their

dialogue journals would not be marked. They only showed interest in feedback when they had frequent grammar and spelling mistakes. A majority of the students suggested that dialogue journal writing should be compulsory in all classes. Although the students showed positive attitudes towards dialogue journal writing, they also noted two drawbacks, which are time and topics. Learners are generally overwhelmed with assignments, quizzes and deadlines, so finding time to write can be difficult. Likewise, it is easy to run out of topics to write about.

Dialogue journals are considered an effective EFL learning strategy, since they fulfill various needs for the learner and the teacher alike. Dialogue journals in this study provided a great context for learning; individualized learning and instruction; afforded opportunities for writing and reading practice; open an ongoing honest channels of communication; created strong ties and relationships between students and the teacher; allowed learners to voice their academic, emotional, and personal concerns; supported learner autonomy; encouraged critical thinking and reflection; aided lesson planning and served as a means for resolving difficult classroom situations.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Written Communication in Dialogue Journals Fulfilling Individual Needs, and Teacher's Needs

According to [5]-[8], oral and written language development, as well as learning, grow out of personal knowledge and interests [8]. Second-language learners write about topics they are interested in and are familiar with. Written communication and various features of interaction promote students' learning and writing development. In written communication, students are motivated to use clear and effective language. They want their messages to be understood because they are writing about topics they like and also because they have an audience who they want a response from. Therefore, since learning grows out of interests and experience and occurs through communicating and interacting with others, then dialogue journals can provide a rich and excellent context for learning a foreign language. The written communication in dialogue journals fulfills both the learner's needs and the teacher's needs.

1. The Learner's Needs

The results of the current study reveal that dialogue journal writing fulfills various needs that are vital for learning a foreign language. In dialogue journals, learners practice writing and interacting in a more communicative style. They do not get the type of writing practice they are used to in schools. Learners in this context are used to having topics chosen for them by the teacher, and there is a big chance that these topics are of no interest to them. Sometimes topics have little or no relation at all to the learner's background. Therefore, they do not have an audience or a communicative purpose. But when students are writing in dialogue journals, they are struggling to be understood and to communicate their message to the audience, which mimics oral communication.

Moreover, in dialogue journals, students interact with their teacher and they both cooperate to be clear, relevant, and informative. The more proficient writer (i.e. the teacher) encourages the participation of the less proficient writer (i.e. the student) by simplifying language, asking questions, requesting clarification, and providing correct language for the student to model. Therefore, the learner is urged to answer the teacher's questions and to restate ideas to be understood. The student is receiving comprehensible input, and the instructor encourages the learner to produce language that can be understood. They have to convey correct, appropriate, and coherent messages.

In the learners' present experiences with written communication, the learners participated in a learning activity with a more mature member of society (i.e. the teacher) and exchanged genuine information with her. Writing in dialogue journals provides students with crucial opportunities for meaningful language use as well as opportunities to develop their writing and reading skills. Dialogue journals allow students to engage in writing and reading in a natural way and to communicate with their teacher in a non-threatening environment. Dialogue journals involve written language that has the structure and the conversational characteristics of everyday face-to-face communication, which makes the content of the journals different from traditional school essays or reading texts. The present study advocates dialogue journal writing as an effective component in improving, developing and polishing writing and reading competence. In this study of dialogue journal interaction, the learners used all functions of language in their writing and were offered ample avenues for writing in most styles, including descriptive, argumentative, and narrative. Additionally, in dialogue journals, students were writing at text level and practicing using text cohesion devices such as transitional words and phrases. Furthermore, since the teacher's written language in dialogue journals is considered as input that is beyond the student's level of proficiency, the teacher's entries served as reading texts that were challenging yet comprehensible because they related to what the student had written. When students were reading what their teacher's comments they were continuously exposed to the thought, style and manner of expression of a proficient English writer. In addition, as students were in the process of writing and reading the teacher's responses, they developed confidence in their own ability to communicate and to express themselves in writing. Dialogue journals provide the two basic necessities for learning to read: (1) interesting material for the learners, (2) and a proficient guide (i.e. the teacher).

The student participants in this study also indicated that dialogue journals provide a vehicle for real communication with their instructor, and served as a continuous channel of communication, open throughout the academic semester. As a result, the students bond with their teacher and gain a better understanding. Indeed, dialogue journals give students a non-threatening place to voice personal concerns and queries. Since students do not have to worry about speaking in public or about grammar and spelling errors, they feel more comfortable to communicate their inner thoughts and

problems. In response, even the most reluctant learners who seldom interacted with the teacher were active during the dialogue journal experience. Moreover, in traditional education, students rarely have opportunities to express their beliefs and feelings whereas in dialogue journals, student participants expressed themselves freely. They wrote about topics that were beyond academic topics and classroom matters.

Furthermore, dialogue journals in the current study promoted autonomy and encouraged the students to take more responsibility for their own learning. The freedom to have the choice to write about the topics they wanted, while at the same time initiating those topics for discussion with the teacher, urges students to be more autonomous. In addition, dialogue journal writing encourages learners to think critically and to reflect on their learning and life with a more mature person. Through the medium of written communication, students developed the ability to reflect on their educational and childhood experiences in the past and their hopes for the future.

2. Teacher's Needs

Dialogue journal writing helps teachers gain information that can assist in lesson planning. When a teacher sits down to do journals and reads what the students have written, she can see if what she sensed as a teacher came through to them as students. It then becomes clear in lesson planning what was successful and what points need to be handled from a different point of view. Furthermore, in dialogue journals teachers usually discover areas that students are interested in, and thus, adapt or plan lessons to fulfill those interests. Teachers can encourage students to provide feedback by commenting, criticizing and evaluating lessons. Students write about various topics and ask questions that can be used as input for planning future lessons. The students' dialogue journals are an ongoing record of their performance during the year and this can help the instructor plan based on students' errors and weaknesses. Teachers can use dialogue journals as a source of feedback on their teaching. They can also learn a lot from the learners' responses and thus, gain new insights into teaching English as a foreign language.

In the current study, dialogue journals also played a vital role in individualizing instruction. The teacher had opportunities to give students one-on-one advice and discuss students' weaknesses and strengths in private. In dialogue journal writing, teachers assist and counsel learners and cater to their academic, personal, and emotional needs. Dialogue journals are a rich source of information about students' needs and backgrounds. Teachers can also keep track of students' progress and frustrations. Dialogue journal writing fulfills teachers' needs, such as knowing what areas are problematic for students, what trouble students have in class, and what backgrounds and special skills they bring to class. The only way of maintaining this kind of communication with each learner individually is through dialogue journal writing. Moreover, the use of dialogue journal writing in this study was a means for resolving difficult classroom situations and gave a

clearer picture of why certain students behave the way they did. Dialogue journaling can also assist the teacher in resolving the problem of demotivated students. Students usually only write when teachers ask them to or in writing exams. They are not interested or motivated to write outside the classroom. Therefore, dialogue journals can motivate students to write because they will be writing to the authentic other about topics and matters they can relate to and understand.

To sum up, dialogue journal writing is an aid to lesson planning; a rich source of information about learners' background, activities, cultures, and needs; a private channel for honest communication between the teacher and students; and a wonderful way to individualize instruction. Teachers can discover areas that are of great interest to students and areas where students may need help and clarification. One of the joys of dialogue journal writing is that it does not get boring like reading traditional written essays produced by more than 20 students on the same topic. Learners write about different topics that are interesting and worth reading and responding to. The written communication that results promotes the special one-on-one relationship between teacher and student. Teachers become closer to their students and the ties become stronger. This friendly classroom atmosphere, according to [4], leads to more productive instruction. Acquiring a second or foreign language requires interaction and communication in the target language that feels natural. The learners need to be concerned with the messages they are trying to convey to their teacher. Therefore, it is safe to say that the best situations for learning are those that are anxiety free and contain messages that students want to read. Certainly, dialogue journal writing fulfills such requirements for successful language learning, instruction, and practice.

B. Topics Saudi Female Students Tend to Write about in their Journals

In dialogue journals, the discourse is comprehensive and the turns are multiple. Topics change and merge; one topic changes into another, which makes the discrete categorizing of topics difficult. Unfortunately, there are no fixed boundaries for such categorization because the topics are dynamic in nature, self-generated, and large in scope. However, in the present study the topics were categorized into three main categories: academic, personal and interpersonal. General topics were also included. Student participants discussed various academic topics related to their present and past academic lives such as exams, classroom problems, education, and their first day at the university. The following are extracts from the participants' journals:

Student 7: "On Monday I have a math exam and I am not happy because it is very difficult but I hope I get the full mark."

Student 8: "Dear Miss Asma, I have a problem in my English language. I can write but I can't speak in class. When you ask us anything and you want us to answer and discuss with you, I understand you but I can't speak it in English."

Student 9: "My computer exam was very bad but I sent a letter to the dean. I asked him if I can do the exam again."

Student 10: "I am very sorry teacher for being late to class on Wednesday. I know you don't like late students but I promise I don't do it again."

Student 11: "On the weekend I studied hard but I don't know what happen? I cannot answer the questions although they are easy. I know I'm not good at reading and listening, so I'll improve myself in these skills. Please teacher can you help me and tell me how I answer the reading and listening questions."

Student 12: "Teacher in this week I was very happy because my results were good and I want to tell you that I got 92 in English. I hope that you will be my teacher forever."

Students also discussed personal topics related to their own lives such as family, hobbies, sports, professions, and individual problems. Likewise, they discussed interpersonal topics related to asking the teacher and requesting advice. The following are extracts from the students' journal entries:

Student 13: "Today I am sad because I left my son at home and I hope I finish school and go see him."

Student 14: "In primary school I was the leader of my class, but when I was in elementary I became shy. Day by day, I became so quiet. I have many words but I can't tell anyone I know. But I am so happy. My life makes me smile"

Student 15: "I really can't describe to you how I feel when he is beside me. I wish he knows how I am grateful because he is my father. My father is the most precious thing in my life."

Student 16: "Teacher do you think I hate you? No my teacher. I like your personality. When you say no it means no, when you say yes, it means yes. Everybody respects you."

Additionally, they wrote about general topics of interest but not necessarily directly related to them such as sports, health, birthdays, holidays, and travelling. The following entries serve as examples of the aforementioned:

Student 17: "I read an article about colors and that men can't tell the difference between red, pink, fuchsia, and purple. They just see red but women can see every color."

Student 18: "First, Hilal won last Thursday but yesterday they lost the game and I was very upset."

Student 19: "I decided that I will try using braces for my teeth. I hope it will work. I'm not sure I will look good, but I have to fix my teeth."

Personal and interpersonal topics ranked first with a percentage of 48, general and miscellaneous ranked second with a percentage of 29.3, and academic topics ranked last with 22.5%. Because dialogue journals are personal and private, the students of this study moved from general safe topics of an academic nature to more personal or individual ones. One of the most interesting findings in the current study is that Saudi female students write about personal and interpersonal topics more than they write about academic and general ones. The topics that the students tend to write about in their dialogue journals are reported in Table II in frequencies and percentages.

TABLE II
TOPICS THAT STUDENTS WRITE ABOUT IN THEIR DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Topic Categories	Frequency
Exams	30
Class problems	15
Education, studying, and homework	7
First day at university	7
Total of academic topics	59 – (22.5%)
Personal information	26
Friends, best friends, and friendship	18
Family	15
Feelings	14
Hobbies and interests	7
Childhood problems	6
Questions to the teacher	34
Asking for help/ advice	6
Total of personal & interpersonal topics	126 – (48%)
Holidays, vacations, and travelling	23
Weddings	7
Weekends	24
Health issues	4
Birthdays	3
Sports	3
Miscellaneous topics	13
Total of general & miscellaneous topics	77 – (29.3%)
Total of all topics	262

V.CONCLUSION

Interaction is an important part of language classes, thus, students should practice using language on an everyday basis. Unfortunately, students do not generally get enough practice or opportunities to communicate. This study investigated the use of dialogue journal writing as an EFL learning strategy, addressing both the perceptions and attitudes of female students of a university preparatory-year program (PYP) toward dialogue journal writing. Moreover, the study investigated the topics that students tend to write about in their dialogue journals.

The current study sought to answer the following research questions: (a) what are the learners' attitudes toward dialogue journal writing process and experience? (b) How does this form of written communication fulfill individual learner needs while meeting course requirements, which can be considered teacher needs? (c) What topics do Saudi female students tend to write about in their journals? It was hoped that the findings of this study would provide useful information about dialogue journal writing as an EFL learning strategy for PYP language classes, which may help in guiding institutions and instructors towards integrating dialogue journals in their language teaching courses and including them as a part of their teaching agendas.

The students of the PYP have highly positive perceptions of the benefits of dialogue journal writing. The students agreed that the following points are advantages of dialogue journal writing: (a) dialogue journal writing helped them practice

writing, (b) increased their knowledge of new words and idioms, (c) enhanced their relationships with their teacher, (d) introduced them to how English is used in real communication, (e) increased their interest in EFL and writing, (f) allowed them to express their feelings and fulfill their needs, and (g) individualized learning and increased their confidence in communicating in a foreign language. Furthermore, the student participants found writing in their dialogue journals interesting because they were able to do the following: (a) write about real things; (b) read the teacher's responses, experiences and stories; (c) learn new points of view from the teacher; and (d) have an opportunity to think with an adult about choices, problems and ideas. However, the student participants indicated that they faced two difficulties while writing in their journals: lack of time and lack of topics.

In reference to error correction in dialogue journals, the student participants preferred that their dialogue journals would not be marked by the teacher. They also acknowledged checking the teacher's entries for correct grammar and spelling, writing styles and new vocabulary. Interestingly, although most of the students preferred that their dialogue journals not be marked, they did not have strong feelings against error correction, and it did not hinder their motivation to write in their dialogue journals.

The results of the current study revealed that dialogue journals are considered a useful EFL learning strategy since they fulfilled various needs for the learners and teacher. In this study, dialogue journals provided a great context for learning; individualized learning and instruction; provided writing and reading practice; opened an ongoing, honest channel of communication; created strong ties and relationships among the students; allowed learners to voice their academic, emotional, and personal concerns; supported learner autonomy, encouraged critical thinking and reflection; aided lesson planning; and, finally, served as a means for resolving difficult classroom situations.

As for the topics that Saudi female students tended to write about in their journals, they were categorized into the following three main categories: academic, personal and interpersonal, and general and miscellaneous topics. The student participants discussed various academic topics related to their own academic lives, both past and present. Topics included issues such as exams, classroom problems, education, and their first day at the university. They also discussed personal topics related to the students' own lives such as family, hobbies, sports, profession, and individual problems as well as interpersonal topics related to asking the teacher personal information and requesting advice. Additionally, they wrote about general topics of interest, not necessarily directly related to them such as sports, health, birthdays, holidays, and travelling. Interestingly, personal and interpersonal topics ranked first with 48% learners choosing to write about these topics, while general and miscellaneous ranked second with 29.3%, and academic topics ranked last with only 22.5%. Furthermore, because dialogue journals are personal and private, the students in this study generally

seemed to move from safe, general topics of an academic nature to more personal, individual ones.

The most rewarding part of journaling to the researcher was the channel of communication that opened with learners. Connecting with them and being able to understand their concerns and feelings definitely led to a better EFL learning atmosphere.

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