



DIALOGUE JOURNALS: A PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY TO ANALYZE STUDENTS' ENGLISH WRITING DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a small - scale research project carried out in a public school in Tunja, Boyacá, Colombia. It aims at analyzing how students' English writing was developed through dialogue journals. Data collection instruments included students' journals, interviews and teachers' observation formats. Findings revealed that students developed English writing by following models and using code switching as a communicative strategy.

Key words: Dialogue journals, writing, strategies

Resumen

Este documento reporta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación a menor escala, llevado a cabo en un colegio público en Tunja, Boyacá, Colombia. Los instrumentos que se utilizaron para recolectar información incluyeron diarios de los estudiantes, una entrevista y formatos de observación. Los resultados mostraron que la escritura en inglés de los estudiantes se desarrolló a través de seguir modelos y utilizar el cambio de código como estrategia comunicativa.

Palabras clave: Diarios de dialogo, escritura, estrategias

Introduction

Writing has been considered as a language skill that helps students improve their linguistic and communicative competences. Viáfara (2008) asserts that there are many approaches for teaching writing skills. One of them is related to controlled techniques where teachers focus on accuracy, correcting, spelling, order and grammar. Another one is known as controlled-to-free approach which allows students to develop fluency over accuracy. In most Colombian High schools, teachers focus on the controlled technique. It does not allow the fluency in students' writings because they pay too much attention to the grammar components and they do not write what they want to express. Considering the previous aspect, the researchers used dialogue journals as a pedagogical strategy to give students the opportunity to express and share their feelings, thoughts, views of the world, culture, identity, beliefs in a free-way, and at the same time to analyze how their writing was developed.

Statement of the Problem

The authors of this document have observed that in their teaching experiences at high schools students have many difficulties and problems when they write. One of them is that when students write, they pay too much attention to the grammar part and this does not allow them to express what they want to say and thus writing and English as a language become boring for them. For this reason, it is very important to implement different strategies in which they can express their thoughts while forgetting the grammar part and focusing on the message

that they want to send. Based on the abovementioned aspects, we posed the following research question for his project. What does the use of dialogue journals tell us about students' writing development?

Research Setting and Participants

Context

This study was carried out at a public school located in Tunja, Boyacá-Colombia. This public high school is located in the urban zone. This school has 4300 students from kindergarten to eleventh grade. The school is a technical school and it specializes in four areas: Business, Arts, Health and Sciences. Then, the English component is not very strong.

Participants

The population of this research project was two classes from eighth grade. The first group (8-1) is a group of 35 students, 21 girls and 14 boys, who range from 12 to 16 years old. They take two English classes per week. And the second group (8-7) is a group of 36 students, 23 girls, 13 boys who range from 12 to 17 years old. They take one hour of English Workshop class per week. For the purpose of this study, we applied all nine workshops with the 35 students, but we selected a sample of 10 students of each group.

Literature Review

In this small scale research, the main concern was to analyze what happens in terms of writing development when dialogue journals are used. In order to achieve this

goal, the following concepts were studied: writing, free writing, journals, benefits of journals, dialogue journals and benefits of dialogue journals.

Writing

Considering the fact that as Viáfara (2008, p.76) argues “a comfortable, non-threatening and supportive environment to write is considered essential in this process as it is in the communicative approach” , in this small-scale research the researchers wanted students to see writing as an instrument to reflect upon their own thought process of interpreting the world that embraces them. In this connection, learners attribute personal meaning to the social learning and use of writing as a social practice (Lerner, 2001).

Some researchers that have been interested in this free writing process and believe that this kind of writing improves not only improve students’ communicative competence but also students writing fluency. Hurtado (2010) proposed a project called *Creative Writing* as a pedagogical strategy to improve 7th graders’ written discourse competence. Creative writing is described as a chance to experiment freely with the language and helps to develop an efficient composing process in a meaningful environment. In this project, the findings revealed student’s improvements through the use of strategies to produce more coherent and cohesive texts. Furthermore, the findings indicate students’ improvement in written productions, which was characterized by the use of discourse elements throughout the body of the text.

Furthermore, Quevedo (2008) mentions in her research the need to bridge the gap between the traditional teaching practices of writing with a socio-critical dimension of this skill. The author mentions that it is after writing and exploring narratives that students are encouraged to manifest their voices, keeping in mind the social component and implications of the facts that surround them, and, hopefully, give an account of their decision and life stories in order to foster their writing as a social practice when assuming a critical view of the world around them.

Journals

Brown (2002) asserts that journals are very informal diaries about their own feelings and thoughts as they are studying English. Genesse & Upshur (1999) confirm journals as an important instrument to collect data, they are a way of collecting information and students are responsible of that tool because they write as they please without any control of accuracy.

Genesse & Upshur (1999) further present a number of benefits of journals:

1. They provide useful information for the individualizing instruction, which let students to create new learning strategies, attitudes, interests and expectations about themselves.
2. Journals increase opportunities for functional communication between students and teachers. It lets improve the rapport in which students and teachers have the opportunity to interact more than they usually use.
3. They give students opportunities to use

a language for genuine communication and personalized reading. Journals help students to develop their writing skill as free practice and at the same time their reading skill in a personal way.

4. They permit teachers to individualize language teaching by modeling writing in their responses to student journals. Teacher must guide students' writing by giving them examples with teachers' writings as a model.
5. They promote the development of certain writing skill. Students could develop free writing and their own style.
6. They enhance student's involvement in, and ownership of learning. Students became more conscious about their own learning.

Dialogue journals

This kind of journal, according to Peyton (2000) is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly (daily, weekly, etc., depending on the educational setting) over a semester, scholar year, or course. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back regularly, introducing new topics, responding to students' questions and comments or asking questions. The teacher is a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing.

In dialogue journals, teachers do not pay attention to the accuracy, punctuation, spelling and so on but they have to guide students by giving examples. Teachers will not grade students' productions so for these reason students are free and relaxed to write

what they feel and perceive. "Teachers do not call attention to or correct errors in dialogue journals, but rather model correct English" (Datzman, 2010, p. 13).

Benefits of dialogue journal

There have been some studies about dialogue journals and most of them show the benefits of dialogue journals. According to Garmon's research in 2001 (p. 41-45), there are six different benefits of dialogue journals:

- Facilitating learning of the course: journals seemed to facilitate students' learning of the course material. Students identified several ways in which they believed that the journal served to enhance their learning.
- Promoting self-reflection and self-understanding: students felt that, without the journal, they would not have thought about the course material as much as they did outside of class. Being required to think more deeply about the material led them to better understanding and often to new insights. Furthermore, the opportunity that the journal provided for making connections between the course material and their own beliefs and experiences was also important to some students.
- Procedural conveniences and benefits: Many of the students appreciated the fact that the journal writing was informal; they considered it advantageous that they did not have to be concerned about grammar, spelling, punctuation, or sentence structure. In addition, a few students

perceived the length requirement of the journal as appropriate and beneficial.

- Opportunity to express ideas: dialogue journals provided a regular opportunity for students to express their ideas about the issues being dealt with in the course. Some explained that, because there was never enough time during class for everyone to say all that they wanted to, the journal provided a place where they could say what they did not have the chance to say during class. Others who were less outspoken in class saw the journal as their opportunity to express ideas that they were reluctant to express orally in class.
- Getting feedback on ideas and questions: The journal was also a place where the students asked any questions they had about the material being covered. Being able to ask questions through their journal was especially helpful to students who were shy and less inclined to raise a question before the entire class.
- Improving the teacher-student relationship: students seemed to value the teacher-student interaction that took place through the journals. They felt that building a good, personal relationship between teacher and student was important and they saw their journal as one means of doing so.

Research Method

The approach that we used was qualitative. The kind of research we worked with was action research. According to Carr & Kemmis (1986, p. 30):

“...action research is a form of self-reflective inquire undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out”.

Data Collection Instruments

First, an important element was the collection students' journals. Then, as the second instrument, field notes were taken during all the writing sessions through the observations of the researchers. In that sense, they gathered information about student's attitudes to writing activities and significant moments that called the researchers' attention. Finally, a survey which contained seven questions, was taken by all of the students. This instrument helped the researchers to gather information about students' journal writing experience.

Pedagogical Design

The pedagogical design was based on Peyton (2000, p. 4-6) and followed what the author suggested in terms of the logistics that are involved in the use of journals:

- *Materials:* during the classes the students developed the work on pieces of paper to collect at the end of the class, in order to put together and obtain the final journal.
- *Frequency of writing:* Both groups wrote twice a week in their English class with the three writing stages taking two hours.
- *Length of writing:* the researchers did not give the students a specific length of

writing. All the sessions they wrote without rules of polishes pieces or determined amount of writing, all the time the extension of the text was up to them.

- *Writing instructions and topics:* before starting each stage, the researchers informed and explained to the students what they had to do. They were always with them during all the process of writing. They were told that they had to be participating in a continuing written conversation. They could write on the particular topic related to the model of the text that was given to them. They were also told that teachers were not going to correct errors.
- *Journal partners:* From the beginning of

the research process, we asked them to choose a partner, who was their partner in the writing process during the sessions. It is important to note that all of them had the same English level.

Conditions for the Implementation

Each workshop was divided in three stages: pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing. In the first stage, students read the model text given by the teacher and after they underlined the unknown vocabulary and look for their meaning. In the next stage, students begin to write about a topic related to the reading. In the last stage, students exchanged their writings with his/her partner and each one of them wrote a comment or suggestion in his/her partner's production.

Table 1. Summary of workshops chart

| The following table summarizes the topics and the aims of each one of the journals. | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| N° Workshop | Title | Aim |
| 1 | Who I am and who my partner is | To describe who I am and who my partner is. |
| 2 | My hero | To write about a member of my family that I consider is my hero. |
| 3 | My grandmother's birthday | To describe the best birthday of my life. |
| 4 | My plans for next weekend | To write and describe what my plans are for next weekend. |
| 5 | I wonder about my future | To describe my plans for my future in four years. |
| 6 | My wonderful trip | To describe the plans of my next vacation. |
| 7 | I want to break up with my boyfriend | To write and describe a situation where I felt in trouble. |
| 8 | Let's party | To write a situation where I describe the things that I have to do if I want to go out. |
| 9 | The duties of my profession | To write and describe the duties of my profession. |

Findings

The process of data collection took six months. After reading the data and analyzing it using the grounded approach, a category

and a subcategory was found. The following chart shows the main question, the category and subcategory that emerged during the data analysis process.

Table 2. Research question, categories and subcategories

| Main question | Categories | Subcategories |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| What does the use of dialogue journals tell us about students' | Following models writing development? | • Using code switching |

First category: Following models

Answering the main question, the category that surfaced was: "following models". When students were in the while writing stage, they followed the structure of the text (Introduction, body, and conclusion). They wrote with the same vocabulary used in the text, just adding personal information. It was made clear through the instruments used.

During the analysis of the journals, the following example was found which shows the model text and the students writing production. The next text was given by the researchers:

Hi again! My name is Alejo. I am in eighth grade of high school and I was wondering about my future in four years. The first question on my mind is what will I do when I finish my school? And my plans are: I will study medicine at the university. I will be the best doctor in the world. I will save people and I will help them when they will heal diseases (Journal N. 1).

The next examples were found in the student's journals:

Hi! My name is xxxx. I am in eighth grade of high school, and I was wondering about my future in four years. My plans are I will study veterinary in the university. I will be the best veterinary. I will cure the animals and I help the animals [sic] (S1, Journal. 1).

My name is: xxxx. I am in eighth grade of high school and I was wondering about my future in four years. The first question on my mind is what will I do when I finish my school? And my plans are: I will study medicine at the university. I will be the best doctora in the world. I will work hard because medicine is a profession that requires time and dedication [sic] (S3, Journal. 1).

As one could see in both texts written by the students, they follow most of the lines that the model texts have. They copy the same structure of the sentences, the same vocabulary changing some words related to their lives and experiences depending on

the topic of the model text, the punctuation that appear in the example text, and also the same structure of the text: introduction, body and conclusion.

During the analysis of the surveys, we found some answers which affirm that students used model texts as a tool that help them to write with more fluency. The following answers in the survey found that most of students answered that they followed the model in their textual production. This can be observed in the following question:

¿Los ejemplos dados le sirvieron como herramienta facilitadora para su producción escrita? (Second question of the survey).

“Gracias a esa herramienta pude guiarme y realizar los textos indicados y pude escribir mas.”

(S5, s1).

“Gracias a ellos tuvimos una mejor idea de que era un escrito y como se compone.” (S7,s1).

In the previous answers, we could realize that there are some key words which guided us. On the one hand, that in the first answer the example text was a resource that helped them as a guide while they were writing their texts. On the other hand, in the second answer, we realized that students could know more about how a text is written. They began to recognize a whole text and identify the parts that composed it which helped them to begin, continue and finish their writing productions.

During the observations, we also realized that students continued following the models. It is evident in the notes that we

took in the observations of the students' behavior in the classroom activities during all the writing sessions. The following paragraph shows us a description taken from the researcher's field notes (April 11th, 2013) about students writing based on models:

Students began to write about themselves, their description (physical and as a human beings. Some of them write taking into account the model of the reading; it means the structure and what the external part of it involves. Some of them are concentrated in writing about them, taking into account the pre-reading activity [sic] (FN, R1).

In this sense, some authors have stated some of the benefits of writing using models, an example of this are Maley and Duff (1989), who affirm that developing a writing using models, as opposed to purely expository writing, offers advantages for students. It builds learner confidence. Once the students have realized that they can produce successful writings, there is a qualitative leap in their motivation. The reader can see that one of the students mentioned he wanted to write more.

By changing students from observers, looking in, into participants, looking out, it helps give them a feel for what is involved in the constructions of texts. This direct experience of writing gives access to a kind of understanding of the writing process which no amount of indirect description can offer.

The next lines describe the subcategory that was found from the first category in the

analysis data. It is presented with support from student's journals, students' answers in the surveys and finally with researchers' observations.

Using code switching

Code switching strategies were used by students in their writings in order to communicate their ideas in a successful way. When students follow the models, they used to include some words in their mother tongue, because they did not want to stop their fluency or lost their idea thinking about how to say a word in English. During the analysis of the journals, we found the following examples which show how students use vocabulary of their mother tongue in their written productions. The next example was taken from a class activity in which students were asked to write about a person they considered they hero.

"She is my hero because he loves me and defends me to a pesar de scolding or punishment taught meto be a person of wind ell I love and is my hero" [sic] (J3, s7).

In the same way, another student used code-switching as a strategy while writing about her plans for future vacation time.

"My plans for nex vacation to to everyday with my family cousin uncle and sobrinos to travel to Bogota or Moniquira to go to picina." [sic] (J3, s10).

During the analysis of the surveys, we found some answers which affirm that students use vocabulary in their mother tongue, because they felt the necessity to include

these Spanish words to communicate fluently. This can be observed in the following question:

Durante sus producciones escritas, ¿se vio en la necesidad de incluir palabras en español para darse a entender?"

"Si porque a veces no me podían entender bien" (S3, S3).

"Algunas veces me toca con palabras en español porque lo que yo quiero es escribir lo que yo pienso" (S3, S1).

Trudgill (2000, p. 105) says that "speakers switch to manipulate influence or define situation as they wish. Also, they switch to convey nuances of meaning and personal intention." It is to say that code-switching is another way that students use to communicate without paying attention to the obstacles that could be presented during the writing process.

Conclusions

The results of data analysis showed that journals are a useful tool to know some strategies the students use when they write and to show their writing development. Students prefer to follow a model when they write as it has many benefits which help them realize their own English level and what they are able to write. It increases their confidence when they write. Students are also more involved in the class with this model. It provides them a guide to follow the structure of the text (introduction, body, and conclusion) and it facilitates the vocabulary when they are writing. Following models is seen as a strategy to

implement writing since students begin this process.

The use of code switching happens when students want to communicate something and in order to avoid breaking their ideas. They write the word in their mother tongue while they look for the meaning of the word that they do not know. The use of code switching enables students' imagination to fly without the obstacle of stopping and looking for what they want to reflect in their journal.

Considering pedagogical implications, it can be stated that writing has been considered as a language skill that helps students to improve their linguistic and communicative competences and this skill should be promoted based not only on the technical technique but also from a free writing perspective. Then, writing practices allow learners express their needs, opinions, thoughts, feelings, and expectations about their real world that is around them in order to be critical and take an active role in the transformation of their reality.

Journals allow teachers to recognize students' writing development which involves strategies, tools, resources that they use to support their productions. Journals allow students to find the possibility to write without paying attention to accuracy. The use of journals gives students the chance to communicate and achieve fluency in writing and to share what they want to say to their classmates. It is an innovative source not only to develop writing skills.

Usually code switching is seen by the teachers as a writing problem as the mother tongue could be interference in the English learning. In this small-scale research project it was found that the use of Spanish words into the English writings allows students to write fluently without breaking the idea that they want to say while they look for a word that they need. Therefore, code switching is a strategy used by students to successfully communicate and avoid obstacles that could be presented during all the writing process.

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