

Dialogue Journal Writing: Effects on the Quality of EFL learners' Descriptive Writing

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of dialogue journal writing on descriptive writing performance of English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Turkey. Participants were 53 EFL upper-intermediate learners who were selected based on their performance on Oxford Quick Placement Test and assigned randomly to experimental and control groups. Whereas the members in the control group participated in descriptive writing pre and post-tests only, the participants in the experimental group were required to write two journals a week for one month (four weeks) in the period between the pre- and post-tests. The teacher-researcher only tried to model the correct usage of the error in her responses, but did not explicitly correct the errors or did not provide any type of explicit feedback. Results of independent sample t-test showed a significant difference between the experimental and control group regarding the overall descriptive writing performance.

Keywords: Dialogue journal writing, Descriptive writing, EFL learners

Introduction

Writing skill entails the skillful coordination of both cognitive and linguistic processes and resources (Hayes, 1996; Kellogg, 1996). It requires focusing on higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower level skills of spelling, punctuation and word choice (Alotaibi, 2019; Richards & Renandya, 2002). That's why writing is a complex process and a daunting task and second language (L2) writers usually face significant challenges in developing their writing skills (Akdemir & Eyerci, 2016; Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010).

Journal Writing (JW), as one of the approaches to practice writing, has served various pedagogical purposes such as control over the process of writing (Brown, 2004), and improving language skills (Demiray Akbulut, 2018; Foroutan, Noordin, & Hamzah, 2013b; Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012; Teimournezhad, Sotoudehnama, & Marandi, 2020). Hiemstra (2001) stated that the learning method of journal writing can help solve problems about the learner's writing ability.

A dialogue journal (DJ), as a supplementary activity (Yoshihara, 2008), is a written dialogue between a learner and an instructor who write regularly to each other over a course of study. Learners initiate writing. They make decisions about topics, length, style, and format (Peyton, 1993). The goal of this student-generated interaction is to communicate through writing, not on form (Jones, 1991). Peyton (1993) explained that the instructor does not overtly correct errors. Therefore, learners can write freely, without focusing on form. The instructor's response in the journal is used as a model of correct English usage.

Based on Jones (1991), improvement of the written forms of language and syntax via dialogue journal writing (DJW) can be made in at least two ways: First, the willingness to express the thoughts and ideas while taking part in real written conversation can encourage and lead the learners to search for the correct use of a grammatical structure, spelling, or meaning of the word. Second, based on Burling (1982) and Krashen (1982) (both cited in Jones, 1991), via participating in a communicative act through writing, learners may acquire the written linguistic structures unconsciously. Moreover, Kreeft (1984) stated that writing dialogue journal provides learners with a large number of comprehensible texts to read. Therefore, it can help learners build fluency in writing.

Literature includes various studies on the effects of dialogue journal writing (DJW) on improving (a) the L2 writers' interaction, attitudes, and motivation (Betar, 2016; Hapsari, Santosa, & Asib, 2018; Yoshihara, 2008; Yulianawati, 2017; Yulianawati, Saleh, Mujiyanto, & Sutopo, 2020), (b) students' grammar knowledge and confidence in writing (Rokni & Seifi, 2013; Voit, 2009), (c) development of writing fluency (McGrail, 1991), (d) overall writing ability (Dabbagh, 2017; Foroutan, Noordin, & Hamzah, 2013a; Johnson & Cheng, 2019; Yulianawati et al., 2020), as well as (e) writing quality, reading comprehension, and writing apprehension (Song, 1997).

Although DJW has been studied worldwide, it is an under-investigated area of research in the context of Turkey. Consequently, the researcher of the present study investigated the effect of DJW on the quality of the descriptive writing performance of the EFL learners in Turkey. The following research question was addressed.

Is there any significant difference between the descriptive writing performance of the group that experience DJW and the group that does not experience it?

Method

Participants

Seventy-eight EFL learners in Turkey, who were studying at upper-intermediate levels, were informed about the research and invited to participate. Sixty-

two of them accepted. They were given the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The score of 53 learners ranged from 40 to 46 out of 60; they were at the upper-intermediate level, based on Geranpayeh's (2003) guideline. Thus, those 53 learners (36 females and 17 males) were recruited as the participants and were assigned randomly to an experimental group, named, Dialogue Journal Writing (DJW) (19 females and 8 males) and a control one that did not receive the DJW, named No DJW (17 females and 9 males). The participants' native language was Turkish and their ages ranged from 17 to 26.

Design

The study was a pretest-treatment-posttest as well as a comparison-group one. There was an independent variable called 'DJW' and a dependent variable named, overall descriptive writing quality.

Instruments

Three tests were used in each group: Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a pretest, and a posttest of descriptive essay writing. The pre- and post-test topics are provided in Appendix A. Moreover, to evaluate the participants' essays, the human scoring rubric proposed by Khatib and Mirzaii (2016) was utilized. This scale is data-based analytic scales for rating EFL descriptive writing written by EFL learners. This rubric is available in Appendix B in order that more information can be provided.

Data Collection Procedure

At the outset, all the 53 participants were taught how to write a descriptive paragraph and a descriptive essay, during five sessions. Each session lasted for 1 and half hour. On first session, they learned about the format and organization of a descriptive paragraph and a descriptive essay. On sessions 2, 3, 4, and 5, the participants collaboratively practiced how to write an essay describing a person, a place, an object, and an experience, respectively. They received teacher-researcher's feedback. On session 6, they were given a test of writing a descriptive essay of at least 200 words. This test was used as the pretest. Then, the 53 participants were randomly assigned to two groups: DJW (the experimental group, N = 27) and No DJW (the control group, N = 26). The experimental

group experienced writing dialogue journals for eight sessions during four weeks (each week, two sessions). During one month, on Saturdays and Wednesdays, each participant in the experimental group was required to write about whatever they liked and email it to the teacher-researcher. The teacher-researcher provided them with several topics, but the learners, themselves, made decision about the topic, length, and style, as recommended by (Staton, 1991). After receiving the emails, the teacher-researcher read what the learner had written and replied. As Mirhosseini (2009) suggested, the participants had been told not to worry about grammar or spelling, and to focus on expressing their thoughts and feelings freely, yet following Peyton (1991)'s suggestion, the teacher-researcher tried to model the correct usage of the error in her responses. One week after this one-month period of intervention and control, all the 53 participants were called and given the post test, which was writing another essay of descriptive type, consisting of at least 200 words. The topics of the pre- and post-tests were different. To prevent the possibility of the researcher's bias and examining the inter-rater reliability (Mackey & Gass, 2005), the researcher of this study and a colleague, who had M.A in Applied Linguistic and was also an experienced researcher in EFL writing field, scored each essay independently out of 100 according to Khatib and Mirzaii's (2016) analytic scale for scoring EFL descriptive writing; the final score was the average score of the two raters.

Data Analysis and Results

Inter-Rater Reliability

The Cronbach alpha indices, administered to calculate the inter-rater reliability revealed a range from a high of .996 for the posttest of the No DJW group to a low of .983 for the pretest of the DJW group.

The Normality Tests

The assumption of normality was examined through both the graphic of histogram, and also some numerical ways as recommended by Larson-Hall (2010). They indicated that the data were normally distributed. The values of skewness and kurtosis statistics were within +/-1, based on Phakiti (2010); in

addition, the outcomes of the ratio of skewedness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors were within the ranges of +/-1.96, based on Field (2013). That's why the parametric t-test was used.

Ensuring the Homogeneity of the Groups

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the DJW and No DJW groups in OPT. There was no significant difference in scores for the DJW group ($M = 43.04$, $SD = 1.829$, $N = 27$) and No DJW group ($M = 42.96$, $SD = 1.865$, $N = 26$); $t(51) = .149$, $p = .882$.

Then another independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the DJW and No DJW groups in the pretest of descriptive writing. There was no significant difference in scores for the DJW group ($M = 62.48$, $SD = 7.350$, $N = 27$) and No DJW group ($M = 62.31$, $SD = 7.503$, $N = 26$); $t(51) = .085$, $p = .932$.

Finding of the Research Question

The research question explored whether there is any significant difference between the descriptive writing performance of the group that experienced DJW and the group that did not experience it. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the DJW and No DJW groups in post test of descriptive writing. There was a significant difference in scores for the DJW group ($M = 67.2778$, $SD = 6.84208$, $N = 27$) and No DJW group ($M = 62.9923$, $SD = 7.40470$, $N = 26$); $t(51) = 2.189$, $p = .033 < .05$. The magnitude of the differences in means (mean difference = 4.28547, 95% CI: .35602 to 8.21492) was above medium (Cohen's $d = 0.601$) based on Cohen (1988).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of writing dialogue journals on the improvement of EFL descriptive writing performance and found that DJW had positive effect on it. Results corroborates findings of previous studies which showed that writing dialogue journal entries can enhance writing performance (Dabbagh, 2017; Foroutan et al., 2013a; Johnson & Cheng, 2019; Tuan, 2010; Yulianawati et al., 2020).

The positive effect of DJW can be because of fundamental features of dialogue journal writing: (a) the freedom in choosing the content to write about, (b) writing a lot about those interested topics in a stress-free environment, and (c) the dialogic individual feedback by the teacher (Mlynarczyk, 1998). Moreover, interaction via DJW is in line with Halliday and Hasan's (1985) emphasis on learning as a social process. Halliday's 'social-semiotic perspective' (Lingley, 2005) is relevant to studies of interaction including the interaction in the DJW. This technique is consistent with Lev Vygotsky's 'sociocultural theory', assuming that language develops as a result of social interaction. He asserted that learning takes place through the learner's participation in completing tasks with a more experienced partner, such as a teacher (Kumpulainen & Wray, 2002; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2010). Additionally, the DJW confirms Swain's (2000) output hypothesis. Swain stated that successful second language acquisition depends on learners producing language. She believed that through collaborative dialogue, which is a cognitive and social activity, language use mediates language learning.

In brief, the finding of this study indicates the importance of DJW in EFL writing instruction; in other words, the orderly regular writing practice on their topic of interest, provided with DJW, can lead second language writers to make connections to what they are writing about through writing and as a result can result in the improvement of learners' writing performance (Dabbagh, 2017).

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Appendix A Descriptive Writing Topics

Pretest

Write about a happy experience you can remember clearly. What made this experience happy? What happened? Who else was there? Describe them please.

Posttest

Describe a place you loved as a child. How did this place look? What did you do at this place? Was anyone else at this there? How did you feel about the area?

Appendix B Analytic Rating Scale for EFL Descriptive Writing (Khatib & Mirzaii, 2016)

Criterion	Band Score	Descriptor
Genre-Related Elements	25-34	Creative and inviting title and introductory sentences closely addressing topic; inclusion of concrete, precise details given through descriptive, vivid vocabulary, figurative language, and sensory imagery; adoption of a personal, unique voice or style
Genre-Related Elements	17-25	Typical title and introductory sentences closely addressing topic; inclusion of adequate details given through descriptive vocabulary; adoption of a typical voice or style
	8-17	Title and/or introductory sentences missing, or if present, off topic or not related to body content; inclusion of inadequate details given through non-descriptive vocabulary; adoption of an inappropriate voice or style

Language-Related Elements	22-28	Well-constructed and varied structures; accurate and effective use of prepositional phrases, pronouns, and determiners; accurate and elaborate use of tenses in active/passive voice; sufficient and appropriate inclusion of cohesive devices (substitution, conjunction, ellipsis, reference, collocation); use of a wide range of accurately formed vocabulary of appropriate register.
	17-22	Well-constructed but limited structures; accurate use of prepositional phrases, pronouns, and determiners; accurate use of tenses in active/passive voice; appropriate inclusion of cohesive devices (substitution, conjunction, ellipsis, reference, collocation); use of a narrow range of accurately formed vocabulary of appropriate register.
	12-17	Minor problems in structural accuracy; structures of very limited variety; few problems in use of prepositional phrases, pronouns, and determiners; minor problems in use of tenses in active/passive voice; insufficient and in some cases inappropriate inclusion of cohesive devices (substitution, conjunction, ellipsis, reference, collocation); very limited lexical variety; minor problems in vocabulary formation and register appropriateness
	7-12	Major problems in structural accuracy; structures of very limited variety; major problems in use of prepositional phrases, pronouns, and determiners; major problems in use of tenses in active/passive voice; insufficient and inappropriate inclusion of cohesive devices (substitution, conjunction, ellipsis, reference, collocation); very limited lexical variety; major problems in vocabulary formation and register appropriateness
Content & Organization	15-20	Richly descriptive body content paragraphed and/or organized in spatial or other logical order; elaborate body content closely addressing topic and introductory sentences
	10-15	descriptive body content paragraphed and/or organized in spatial or other logical order; body content closely addressing topic and introductory sentences
	5-10	Inadequate body content not completely related to, or totally off topic
Mechanics	14-18	Correct spelling and capitalization of words; accurate use of punctuation marks
	9-14	Minor problems in spelling and capitalization of words; few problems of punctuation
	4-9	Major problems in spelling and capitalization of words; major problems of punctuation

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