



# International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

Journal homepage: <http://www.eltjournal.org>



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## Fostering Writing and Critical Thinking through Dialogue Journal

[PP: 71-78]

**Dr. Ravi Bhushan**

Department of English  
Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya  
Khanpur kalan, Haryana, **India**

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### ***Article History***

The paper received  
on: **10/04/2014**

Accepted after  
peer-review on:  
**09/05/2014**

Published on:  
**01/06/2014**

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#### ***Keywords:***

Dialogue Journal,  
Writing Skill,  
Critical Thinking,  
Indian ELT Context,  
ESL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

Much like the regular physical exercise, having a regular writing workout is necessary for learners of English language. Dialogue journals provide the perfect means for this. Dialogue journal in an English classroom is an informal written conversation between the students and the teacher; in fact it can motivate a learner to write more in English. The language in a dialogue journal is closer to speech than to academic writing, so it promotes authentic, informal and lively conversation between the writers. As our learners need frequent opportunities to practice speaking English freely without fear of being corrected, in order to achieve oral fluency; similarly they need the chance to write freely without inhibition to promote fluency in writing. Often it is in the act of writing a response that actual learning takes place and this is how critical thinking develops. In fact, dialogue journal is the place where students explore their thinking before classroom discussion. It enables speaking and writing, referencing each other. The main objective of using dialogue journals in the English language classroom is to give students more time and opportunities for writing so that they can experience the pleasure of communication through the written word and at the same time become better writers and thinkers in English. With this background, the aim of this paper is to discuss the role of dialogue journals in developing the skills of writing and critical thinking of English language learners.

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### **Suggested Citation:**

Ravi Bhushan (2014) Fostering Writing and Critical Thinking through Dialogue Journal. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 2(2), 71-78 Retrieved from <http://www.eltjournal.org>

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## 1. Introduction

Dialogue journal in an English language classroom is “an informal written conversation between the students and the teacher” (Larrotta 2008, 21) which can motivate learners to write more in English. Students write on a topic or topics of their own choice, and the teacher writes an individual response. The language in a dialogue journal is closer to speech than to academic writing, so it permits an authentic, informal, lively conversation in writing between the teacher and students (Uduma 2011; Werderich 2002). Dialogue journals can replace an actual conversation especially in Indian context, where learners do not get an English rich environment outside the classroom.

Most often, dialogue journals are employed in English language classes where the students need to understand the concept of communicating in writing and develop their writing skills. English language learners need frequent opportunities to practice speaking English freely without fear of being corrected in order to achieve oral fluency; similarly, they also need the chance to write freely, without inhibition, to promote fluency in writing. This requires that they write as much and as often as possible. Dialogue journals are the appropriate platform where students can go for frequent regular writing without fear of censure. And this is the topic of discussion of this paper where attempt has been made to highlight the positive aspects of the dialogue journal and their implications both for the EFL/ESL teachers and learners in the context like India.

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## 2. Pedagogical Benefits of Dialogue Journal and their Implications

The use of dialogue journal has various pedagogical advantages and

implications both for the ESL/EFL teachers and learners for teaching and developing important language skills such as Writing and Critical Thinking. Some of the advantages of dialogue journals, and their implications, for developing writing, and critical thinking skill, are discussed below.

### 2.1 Brings Insight

Of course, in large classes teachers cannot interact verbally with each of their students individually, but dialogue journals can allow insight into the issues and problems their students might be dealing with outside class as well as indicate how they are doing in class. Dialogue journal makes them feel that they are being heard, that they have a place in the class, and that they are known. Dialogue journals can also be places where students explore their thinking before classroom discussions. Having the time to interact with a topic privately gives non-native English speakers the necessary time to gather their thoughts in preparation to speak. These discussions can be followed with further reflective journal entries. In this way, speaking and writing reinforce each other.

### 2.2 Instills Confidence

The style, tone and structure of academic writing is governed by the target audience. Since dialogue journals are highly interactive, they help students keep their audience in mind and expand beyond their own private written world, which is particularly important with adolescents who tend to be inward-focused (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Orem 2001). Traditionally, the audience of students' dialogue journals is the teacher. With the responsibility of correction removed and the focus on communication, the responder no longer needs extensive knowledge of English grammar and writing rules. Indeed, for Peyton (2000), a journal partner need only be someone who is able to enter into the journal interaction as a good



conversationalist, an interesting writer, an engaged listener and a colleague. It is a good idea for teachers to ask students if they would be comfortable reading their journals aloud in class to their peers. There needs to be a foundation of trust among the group, particularly if the entries are very personal and revealing. Sometimes this trust is developed through the process of listening to the braver students reading first.

### **2.3 Encourages Fluency**

The goal of dialogue journal is to encourage fluency before accuracy. Fluency is developed through writing to communicate and with the absence of the pressure to be technically correct in language use (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Holmes and Moulton 1997; Orem 2001; Larrotta 2008). Giving learners the chance to write about whatever they want is important. Instead of having to follow topics and a style set by the teacher or curriculum, they can experiment and play with the language, which allows them to learn independently and develop as writers both cognitively and linguistically. For this reason, teachers must resist the urge to control the students' writing and avoid the risk of stunting their growth (Holmes and Moulton 1997; Larrotta 2008).

### **2.4 Facilitates Class**

It is not unusual in the language classroom to see learners struggling to find something to write about an assigned topic of little relevance to their lives; in order to generate topics of students' interest, the teacher shall engage the class in a brain storming session on topics like sports, food, music, likes, and dislikes, a family member, or problems (Alexander 2001). If the teacher chooses to assign topics, they must be relevant to learners (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Orem 2001; Miller 2007). When the students write about something they have authority on, namely themselves and their

lives, they develop a sense of agency and identity. In fact, what happens in the classroom can also be a topic for dialogue journals (Werderich 2002), and what happens in dialogue journals can be source of student-generated materials and themes for the classroom (Orem 2001). In this way the class and the journals inform and build on each other.

### **2.5 Strengthens Teacher-Student Harmony**

Dialogue journals are not only a way to improve student writing, but also a means for teachers to get to know their students and their learning processes, (Miller 2007; Hansen-Thomas 2003). In their turn, students are empowered by the relationship of trust and sense of autonomy that develops with their teacher through the dialogue journals (Yoshihara 2008). This strengthening of teacher-student relationship using dialogue journals similarly supports positive behavior and aids in achieving academic and social success, especially in case of students with special needs (Regan 2003; Anderson et al. 2011).

### **2.6 Ensures Learner Autonomy**

The use of dialogue journal also ensures learner autonomy. Generally learners are given information and knowledge that appears devoid of context. They struggle to absorb facts and details that have no apparent relevance to their lives. Dialogue journals help to bridge that gap, as they are a place where learners draw on their personal funds of knowledge and make connections between what they know and what they are learning in class (Uduma 2011).

In a way, dialogue journals are a mean of bringing students' outside world into the classroom. Through exploration and reflection, learners construct identity and develop a sense of ownership of their lives. Journals give the space for learners to make meaning, represent and negotiate their



identities, show agency, and examine relationships (Miller 2007; Kim 2005). Journals can also be a place for learners to write about their problems and in the process find solutions. Young and Crow (1992) advocate posting problem-solving steps on the walls of the classroom to keep these goals in their students' minds. These steps include identifying the problem, listing possible solutions and forecasting their consequences, selecting the best solution, making action plans, and coming up with alternative solutions. In participatory learning classrooms, this learner empowerment can be a goal of journal writing (Orem 2001).

### **2.7 ESL/EFL Writing Skill, Krashen's Model, and Dialogue Journal**

Non-native speakers face problem in writing because they employ their internal editor, or monitor, as Krashen (1992) termed it in his Monitor Hypothesis, too early in the writing process. This internal monitor judges the writing for technical accuracy. The monitor is exceedingly useful once text needs to be reviewed and revised, but if it steps in too soon, it paralyzes writers before they even begin and is often the cause of writer's block. Dialogue journals are the appropriate place to overcome this problem as there students write for fun, experimentation, and communication. Knowing they will not be corrected or graded allows learners to enjoy writing free from censorship or critique from their internal editors.

### **2.8 Dialogue Journal and Critical Thinking**

Learners generally make superficial or limited responses to the teacher's questions. Having an audience of classmates, particularly adolescents who can be so critical of themselves or each other, creates self-consciousness and inhibition, and student resists thinking out loud for fear of making mistakes. However, in the privacy of the dialogue journal, students are willing to

reflect more and let teachers gently push them to go deeper in analysis and make progress towards critical thinking through thoughtful questioning (Mizokawa and Hansen-Krening 2000; Kim 2005). The goal of a dialogue journal varies dramatically depending on whether the focus is on language for empowerment (Orem 2011, 73). Journals can function as a window into the learner's mind if the teacher reads them, but they are mainly a place for students to keep record of what they have learned. Often it is in the act of writing a response that actual learning takes place, and ideally, this is how critical thinking develops. In a reading curriculum, journal writing gives students a way to engage with texts in a meaningful way that then can lead to critical literacy (Miller 2007).

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### **3. Dialogue Journal and Teacher's Role in Encouraging Writing**

Teachers can employ simple techniques to encourage students to write such as: paraphrasing, asking questions for clarification, or commenting on passages that are particularly moving or striking in some way. Furthermore, the students can be given the choice to select which entries they want the teacher to read and in this way gain greater autonomy (Vanette and Jurich 1990). Students appreciate reading their teachers' comments in their dialogue journals, and indeed this enjoyment motivates them to continue communicating. However, while the teacher's written responses are meaningful for the journal writer and therefore read closely and with great interest, it is important that the teacher be careful not to write more than the student does; this can overwhelm the student's voice instead of encouraging it to grow (Young and Crow 1992). Teacher asking lot of questions or just repeating what



the learner says do not promote conversation but suffocate it (Peyton 2000).

When writing responses, teachers should be informal and share opinions without preaching. The teacher's thoughtful responses help learners to focus on their writing rather than simply providing answers. Teachers should also explore ways to stimulate conversation by other means than questioning. One way this can be done is for the teacher to tell brief personal anecdotes that might parallel a situation the student is experiencing and include some self-reflection. Another method is to paraphrase what the student is expressing to show understanding and empathy. In this way, teachers can model the kind of writing they expect from their students. Teacher's responses should be natural as in conversation. As Quirke (2001) states, "I spend no time dwelling on what to write. If a response does not come to me immediately, it is not something I would want to say" (P.15). When teachers' writing shows a lack of formality or artifice, it creates a relaxed atmosphere in which students feel more comfortable expressing themselves.

The atmosphere of intimacy and safety, provided by the dialogue journal, can cause some learners to reveal matters of a very personal or sensitive nature, and teachers need to be ready for this and reply quickly and confidentially (Orem 2001; Young and Crow 1992). Young and Crow (1992) advocate using acceptance, validation, and encouragement and helping students identify outside resources; they also advise using bibliotherapy, or specifically the use of children's literature, for students to identify with those with similar problems and find ways to resolve them. Journals are a safe way for adolescents to develop a supportive relationship with an adult, and to express their feelings and resolve issues without the

embarrassment of the classroom (Alexander 2001).

### 3.1 Language Structure

One of the teacher's roles in responding to student dialogue journal entries is to model correct language structure as well as demonstrate more complex language to challenge the learners to extend themselves. Following Krashen's (1992) Comprehensible Input theory, teachers' entries can provide input slightly above learners' proficiency level to help them improve their language skills (Linnell 2010; Larrotta 2008).

Even though dialogue journals are about content, not structure, the teacher can give mini-lessons on recurring grammatical errors in students' journals, even showing anonymous sentences from journals in class to demonstrate correct usage, so long as the sentences are unidentifiable. Dialogue Journals are a rich source of language errors, including some attention to form in dialogue journals is beneficial to English language learners. It is a challenge to correct "without compromising the meaningful and authentic interaction that is so fundamental to dialogue journals" (Linnell 2010). She emphasizes that correction not be introduced until the dialogue journal writing routine is well established, and when corrections are done they should be a natural part of the dialogue. She also advises to let students initiate the correction. As many learners want feedback on their errors, especially adults, getting input on mistakes could actually make them write more. Some students may choose to keep a written record of their mistakes with corrections in the back of their journals.

A more direct approach to focusing on form would be to pre-teach vocabulary or grammar that learners then incorporate into their journal entries. Alternatively, samples of journal entries could be used in the whole



class to highlight parts of speech or vocabulary, and students then write a new journal entry using these items. Students could be told to use only past tense forms and time words to tell a story that happened in the past, or employ imperatives to give instructions on how to do something. They could be tasked with using a certain number of adjectives to describe a family member or recycling new vocabulary from their reading in an entry about school. These approaches have to be used sparingly, though, or they might suffocate the students' self-expression. Indeed, simply through the written dialogue process, learners acquire new vocabulary without realizing it (Larrotta 2008).

### 3.2 Teacher's Response

The prospect of being faced with greater volumes of student writing is daunting to most teachers, already overwhelmed with correcting their students' work. The usual way of responding to student writing is to evaluate form, not simply respond to the content. Correcting English language class writing assignments involves a significant time commitment as it can require going over student texts word by word, sentence by sentence, to catch all the grammatical and spelling errors, awkward expressions, and illogical or confusing language. Even if a teacher does not correct student mistakes but simply marks them with editing symbols to enable the learner to become a stronger self-editor, it still demands a lot of effort and careful attention to each student paper. No wonder then that writing remains the most neglected skill in many English language classrooms. It is not surprising that most teachers recoil at the thought of evaluating large quantities of student writings. The good thing about dialogue journals is that they differ from regular class writing assignments in that they are typically not assessed for spelling mistakes or errors in structure, which

means that time spent on dialogue journals is much shorter.

### 4. Dialogue Journal and Academic Writing

A criticism of personal and creative writing in English language learning classes is that it bears little relation to the academic writing in which students may be required to become competent. Some educators believe anything other than academic writing is not useful. However, an argument can be made in favor of dialogue journal writing as a preparation for academic writing. For one thing, before students can write academic essays, they need to be comfortable with their writing abilities, and writing in dialogue journals certainly builds learner confidence. This type of inductive learning lays the foundation for understanding the reason why one or another rhetorical form is used, and that knowledge makes it easier for the writer to use the correct form. Rhetorical forms also arise naturally out of the student generated content of dialogue journals.

To give more practice with these forms, teachers can assign writing tasks where learners use rhetorical patterns informally before writing formal essays. For example, argumentation, narrative, and comparison/contrast can all be practiced when writers write a dialogue between two people with opposing views, tell stories, or make comparisons about different places or events in their lives. Getting practice with writing the detailed description needed for research can also be done in a journal. Furthermore, after writing a narrative, the student can write a new entry, rewriting the story from another point of view. In this way students can learn how to report objectively and develop the important awareness of audience and purpose (Vanette and Jurich 1990).



Another way dialogue journal provides a foundation for academic writing is in making learners aware of how they learn. If learners know how to learn, they can learn whatever they wish. Through using dialogue journals, students can take ownership of their learning and become aware of their own learning processes. This is particularly important for academic studies that increasingly demand that learners be self-directed.

## 5. Conclusion

There are multiple benefits of using a dialogue journal in an English language classroom. Some of these benefits are the increased motivation to write, greater fluency in writing, increased confidence as writers, and the ability to use writing as a means to communicate and express complex ideas, students' decreased dependence on dictionary and moving away from mental translation to thinking in English. Other advantages are that students develop critical literacy skills, gain autonomy and empowerment as learners, and build communities of learning within the classroom. Furthermore, dialogue journals initiate a learner into academic writing.

Teachers can also benefit from dialogue journal writing as it allows them to connect with individual students in large classes and learn more about what their learners think and need. Reading student writings are a way to reinvigorate a teacher and bring more life and meaning to the classroom teaching. Rather than drudgery or torture, writing shall become something very interesting.

### About the Author:

**Ravi Bhushan** holds Ph. D in English Literature and has been working as an Assistant Professor with Department of English of Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Khanpur Kalan,

Haryana, India. He has been teaching literary theories (Indian & Western), applied linguistics and communication skills to post graduates and undergraduates for nine years. His areas of teaching and research interest include: English language teaching, oral literature and communication skills on which he has written and published in various national and international journals. He has also participated and presented papers in various national and international workshops, seminars and conferences.

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**Cite this article as:** Ravi Bhushan (2014) Fostering Writing and Critical Thinking through Dialogue Journal. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 2(2), 71-78 Retrieved from <http://www.eltjournal.org>



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