

**Student-to-Student Dialogue Journals: Meaningful Interaction in the ESL and EFL Classroom**

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*I talked with my partner about all kinds of subjects in journals, including our dreams, our university life and our most important memory" (C.C.).*

*We talked about friendship, the movie, 'Dead Poets Society', circle, summer vacation, A-bombs, AU festival and family. My partner taught me many words and many expressions in writing journal. I also taught my partner many words and many expressions in writing journal. And journal accustomed us to English" (Road).*

*I could enjoy writing in journals because I could know many things about my partner. At the same time I could write many things about me. And I was looking forward to reading journal" (Grape).*

(Asia University, Level 5 Freshman English students, Level 5 commenting on their use of dialogue journals.)

These quotations are how three of my Freshman English students responded when asked to evaluate their year-long *student-to-Student Dialogue Journals (SSDJs)*. SSDJs, the on-going, written journals exchanged by my students this year in Freshman English, improved many of my students' vocabulary, writing, and critical thinking skills. The uniqueness and mysteriousness of the journals also increased the students' motivation to study English. In this article I will define SSDJs, describe the process of implementing this type of journal, discuss research on dialogue journals, and demonstrate how dialogue journals increased the language skills of my freshman Asia University students.

**Definition of SSDJs**

Dialogue journals exchanged between teachers and students were introduced to educators in 1964 by Reed (Staton, 1988). After teacher-to-student journals demonstrated their

effectiveness to Reed, many educators have frequently used them in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (Staton & Peyton, 1986; and Kreeft, 1984). Building on Reed's idea, other teacher/researchers have asked students to write to each other in student-to-student dialogue journals (Gambrell, 1985 and Dolly, 1990).

SSDJs allow students to "dialogue" with each other. I first learned about this type of journal in Professor Anne Doyle's *Teaching Composition* class at the University of Washington. Doyle had used this type of journal for her university level, ESL students. Later, my adult students used this type of journal in my corporate class of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Taipei, Taiwan. In Taiwan, my students engaged in meaningful, written discussions in their journals about politics, social issues, history, literature, and other topics of interest to them. In SSDJs, the students find it easier to discuss controversial issues because they, the students, remain anonymous, and this is the unique "twist" to the journals.

In the SSDJ classroom, each student in the class has a mysterious, year-long partner he/she keeps all year. To keep the journals anonymous, the students give themselves pseudonyms. In my class this year, for example, Madonna and Jackey, Linda and Gun, Tomato and Road, Darkness and Sonia, America and Ice Cream, Ichiro and Rome, and Plant and Tree were partners.

### **The Implementation and Orchestration of Dialogue Journals**

For SSDJs, the teacher becomes a conductor of the journal orchestra. After I explain the idea of SSDJs to the students,

they choose their pseudonyms, as exemplified in the above section. These nicknames allow the students to express their feelings better without the threat of being known and take down the affective filter some language learners possess.

Next, I assign the students to their year-long journal partners. I try to pair students from different majors, fostering the exchange of diverse opinions. This year I paired my International Relations students with my Economics students and my Business students with my Law students. In my classes with a large number of students, partners were sometimes paired with a person from his/her own major, or three partners were paired with each other.

After giving each student his/her partner's name, I ask the students to write in their journals. In the first few journal entries the students introduce themselves without revealing their identity to their partner. Each week I give the students an optional journal prompt. However, the students can write about any topic of interest to them.

The teacher must direct the entire SSDJ process. After the students write in their journals, I collect them and the next day in class distribute the journals to the students' respective partners. This is the tricky part. I have to remember all of the students' pseudonyms because the students' real names are not written on the journals. For the first few journal exchanges I keep a "cheat sheet" in hand as I pass back the journals.

For the first journal entry, to foster cooperation and motivation, I do not give the students a limit on how much to write. After the first journal entries, however, I asked the

students to write at least one page. Many students wrote more than one page for each entry and some students wrote less. In subsequent journals, student topics ranged from club activities, to social activities, to problems, to advice-seeking, to fears, and to successes. Many journal partners discussed painful and wonderful events in their lives. Some partners talked about the deaths of former teachers, the deaths of their pets, their memories from high school, their hometowns or home countries, the uniqueness of their families, their frustrations with education, and their personal problems and/or goals. Their partners became more than pen pals. These anonymous partners became listeners, advice-givers, information sharers, teachers, and English tutors. The partners were peer resources, and they shared with each other the wealth of knowledge that they brought with them to the classroom. The partners also exchanged ideas about Freshman English and ways in which each of them learned English in the class.

### **SSDJs Increase Students' Meaningful Vocabulary**

This year, my students' vocabulary increased as a result of the dialogue journals. I use the word "meaningful" to specifically refer to students using their dictionaries on their own accord with the purpose of communicating meaning rather than being asked by the teacher to look up words in a dictionary, to write down the definition of the word, to memorize the word, and to study the word for a spelling or vocabulary test.

In my classes, because of the SSDJs, many students used dictionaries on their own accord, and the journals acted as a tool to increase the students' desire to communicate meaning.

One Freshman English student, America, said about his use of dialogue journals: "I could remember many English words in the journal. I looked up the words many times." In agreement with America, I also noticed a considerable improvement in the vocabulary of my students as the year progressed and attributed this to their journal use. When the students gave me feedback at the end of the year on their dialogue journals, many other students also stated they were using their dictionaries to learn words.

Of the 50 students who completed the dialogue journal evaluation given at the end of this academic year, 40 students said the journals improved their English. Out of the 40 students, 15 stated (on their own accord) under "General Comments" that their vocabulary and dictionary use had improved because of their journal use. In her evaluation one student, Watermelon wrote, "At first, I didn't know what to write. So I think many things and I always used a dictionary. When I didn't know words I always used a dictionary. So I knew many words and learned them." Similarly, Peach's evaluation read, "I learned how to write in English. I used my dictionary every time (for journal writing). That is a very important thing for me and my English." Another student, Mary, said, "I study vocabulary and composition when I write and read it" (the journal).

Also supporting the idea that the journals increase students' vocabulary, one student, 007, wrote to his partner that he had sprained his ankle playing basketball and was now on crutches. His partner, Lemon, wrote back, "By the way, I didn't know the word, 'crutches.' I hope you get better."

Another student, Tomato, wrote about going through a difficult time in his life. He said, "Rough patch is the days when we meet difficulty. When I meet difficulty I have an optimistic view of everything." His partner, Road, wrote back, "I didn't know the word, 'Rough Patch.' Did you learn it from Dawn's class or by yourself? I think if I have a rough patch I'm also optimistic." Students were learning vocabulary from their partners. And, through these meaningful, written conversations, students were also using their dictionaries with magical consequences--to communicate something, an idea, a thought, a feeling, a worry, an opinion. For me, the magic and wonder of SSDJs occurs when the journals become a way for students to increase and use their meaningful vocabulary.

### **SSDJs--Tools to Improve Students' Critical Thinking and Writing Skills**

Some researchers of the writing process believe that one can find thoughts, ideas, and questions by writing; the more one writes, the more ideas are generated--in a cyclical nature. With SSDJs the students write as much as they can (starting with one page), and their writing is not evaluated for spelling or grammar. In my Freshman English classes the more pages they and their partners wrote and the more they wrote to each other, the better able they were to express themselves in writing by the end of the year. One student, Darkness, who wrote an average of three pages per week for each of his journal entries and read an average of three pages per week, which his partner, Sonia wrote for her journal entries, said the journals increased his writing ability. He wrote, "It (the journals)

helped me a lot. I've never written such a lot of sentences. I think I improved my writing. Of course, my partner, too."

Many researchers have demonstrated how dialogue journals increase students' writing skills (Dolly, 1990; Peyton & Seyoum, 1989; Toombs Alejandro, 1981; Ross, Shortreed, & Robb, 1988). Peyton and Seyoum (1989) studied the interaction strategies of dialogue journals (teacher-to-student) used by one teacher in an ESL classroom and the effect of these strategies on the participation and interaction of ESL students. They discovered that personal, contribution-type responses were more effective for prompting a lengthy student response than requests for reply [direct questions] (Peyton and Seyoum, 1989). In my Freshman English students' journals, many of the students' entries were contribution-type responses rather than direct questions. And in SSDJs, students are interacting with each other. This kind of dialogue, contribution-type is effective for inspiring students to write. Much of the above research demonstrating the effectiveness of dialogue journals was conducted on the teacher-to-student type of journal. And these same researchers emphasized the importance of learning to write through interaction; SSDJs increase the opportunities for student-to-student English interaction.

SSDJs also increase students' writing ability because this type of journal increases students' "written" interaction. In my Freshman English classes this year, many students, like Darkness, responded to the SSDJ evaluations by saying the SSDJs improved their writing and thinking skills. One anonymous student wrote that the SSDJs improved his English because he

thought about many things in English. Another student, Rome, wrote that the journals improved her writing and thinking in English. Similarly, Joan said, "When I'm reading and writing (in the journals) I feel excited and learn different ideas and thoughts." Green said, "Hardly I had written in English. But, owing to the journals, I came to try to think something in English, thank you." The students were not only improving their writing skills because of the journals, but also increasing their English thinking skills and helping their partners' English writing and thinking skills to improve.

The students were also discovering and expressing their opinions in English when writing and reading in their journals. SSDJs engage the students to write and think critically about their and their partners' opinions on various issues. In Freshman English this year, the students discussed in class and wrote in their journals about friendship; the differences and similarities between American education and Japanese education; the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and their opinions of the atomic bombs; French Nuclear testing; homelessness; families in the United States and in Japan; dating in Japan and in the United States, and more. One teacher/researcher believes that using dialogue journals as critical-thinking tools improves students' writing (Severino, 1984). About the atomic bombs, one Freshman English student, Road, said the following:

*I think the U.S. was wrong to drop the atomic bomb. I know some Americans think the A-bombs finished the war. On the other hand, some Americans think the U.S. was wrong because Japan would have surrendered before long. I know the A-bombs gave us many, many victims. This is the fact. And the more many people think about the A-bombs, the more they recognize the terribleness of wars. It's very*



*important, and me, too. I was thought about wars in this class.*

In response to Road's entry, Tomato, wrote the following:

*By the way, I agree with your opinion about the A-bombs. Certainly A-bombs finished the war. But it was the fact that A-bombs killed many, many people. Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The U.S. dropped the A-bombs. I can't say which was wrong. I can say only a thing. War is wrong. I wish war never happened. So we never have to forget the sadness of war.*

Similarly, Dog wrote the following to Robotman:

*I think atomic bombs will give only sadness and destruction. They aren't creative. At any time I am writing this, somewhere, some mad scientists make experiments in atomic bombs. Though they are scientists, they may be more foolish than the babies of monkeys. I think this sometimes.*

In response to Robotman, Dog wrote:

*I think your opinion is right. A-bombs are only destroyer and sadness. I want to lose them quickly. That would be best for the world.*

These students were deciding what the atomic bombs meant to them. They were discovering their opinions on the atomic bombs by reading their partners' views and writing about their own views to their partners. Dolly (1990) discovered that ESL students who were learning composition skills benefited from writing to their peers in a dialogue journal because the students had a written audience; the writers made meaning from the writing of their peers and responded to that meaning. How Road, Tomato, Dog, and Robotman felt about the atomic bombs is evidenced in the above entries. And how they expressed themselves in English was being developed partly because of the SSDJs.

During the family unit, students talked about Japanese families, American families, and their own families in their journals. Cheese wrote to her partner Lemon:

*My thought is like yours. If I think that childrens' hearts are the important things, divorce is bad.*

Cheese and Lemon agreed that divorce was not good for children. They were exchanging ideas and developing their own meaning based somewhat on their partners' ideas. Supporting this, Severino said that dialogue journals allow students to work out their own views on social, political and cultural issues and increase students' writing ability on essays and research papers (Severino, 1984, p. 1).

Students were also able to exchange ideas about their own creative work and about movies in their journals. In response to a journal prompt to write a metaphor after a classroom lesson on learning about metaphors, Road wrote that:

*Love is water. It's cold, hot, we can't live without it, it's pure beautiful and important to us.*

Tomato said the following in his answer to Road:

*I agree with your metaphor. We can't live without love and water. By the way, I will tell you my metaphor. Life is a rice bowl. They are different because a rice bowl has many substitutes, but love has no substitutes.*

Tomato gave Road feedback on her journal and after reading her metaphor wrote his own metaphor. Both partners learned about metaphors in Freshman English. In their dialogue journals they were creating and using what they had learned in class.

During the year I showed the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. In their journals, the students critically thought about the movie. Green wrote the following about the main character in the movie:

*I think George was a very lucky man. Without that experience, he couldn't have noticed how happy he was. I learned that a person's life concerns other people. A person's existence isn't meaningless at all.*

The students shared their reactions to the movie with their journal partners. Human related to the main character and wrote the following:

*He (George) got a debt because he built houses for the poor. If I were him, I couldn't bear. An angel took him to that world that doesn't exist. And he experienced that he knows everyone, but everyone doesn't know him. Finally he wished, 'I don't want to die.' George seems to be happy, even if he has a debt. Everyone helps George. I want to have a life that has many joy and sadnesses. And I want to have good friends and a good family, like George.*

These students were sharing their experiences of the movie with their partners. McGuire (1990) asked students to relate assigned literature to their own lives in their journals. After the use of dialogue journals (teacher-to-student), McGuire concluded that the students' attitudes about writing changed from rebelliousness and belligerence to cohesiveness and unity. Like McGuire's journals, SSDJs give students the opportunity to relate and share their thoughts and ideas about creative works, including works authored by the students (the metaphors), and other works, such as literature and movies.

### **Journals as Motivators**

Many of my students this year expressed an interest in reading their journals. Some students would anxiously wait for their journals as I was handing back other students' journals. When they received their journals, many students in the class would quickly open and read their journals. Peach wrote the following evaluation about SSDJs:

I think the journal is a very good idea. We never know who we write to. This is very unique. Every time I read my partner's journal I think about my partner. Who is he? What does he look like? I enjoyed the journal.

According to Peach, the anonymity of the journal increased her interest in it. Mary and John Lennon carried on a written conversation about Mongolia. John said:

*Your circle enjoy studying Mongolia. I was interested in your circle.*

Mary said the following in her next entry in which she lent John some photographs of Mongolia:

*These are pictures of Mongolia. What a beautiful sky it is. A quarter of the population of Mongolia isn't a nomad. Mongolians use Mongol and Russian. But they are studying Japanese.*

In the subsequent entry John wrote:

*This picture is beautiful and pure, isn't it? I feel clear, I want to go there.*

Mary was teaching John about something that interested them both, which could have increased their motivation to read and write in their journals. About his journals, Monkey said his experience was unique and interesting:

*I talked with my partner about many things: "What food do you like?", "What sports do you play?", "What did you do in vacation?", etc... It was very fun. I had never written a letter to stranger. It was a strange experience.*

Monkey and his partner, Kity, wrote a total of 24 journal letters to each other in the course of the year. In one of her letters to Human, C.C. wrote:

*It's raining, but it's pleasant to write the journals to you.*

C.C. also wrote in another journal:

*When I read your journal, I felt it was interesting.*

The journals were interesting to the students because they were communicating with a real person for a real purpose in ungraded, non-threatening letters.

### **Conclusion**

From reading my students' journals and seeing their thought patterns develop in English, I have come to see SSDJs as a path between the students and the meaning the students want to convey. Several researchers have demonstrated that dialogue journals (teacher-to-student) give students a way to practice their higher-order thinking skills, such as synthesis material, creativity, critical thinking skills, and formation of ideas (Browning, 1986; Jeffery, 1981; Kelly, 1981; Latta, 1991; McGuire, 1990; Pearson Casanave, 1995; Peyton and Seyoum, 1989).

By writing in their SSDJs once each week to an anonymous partner, students can concentrate more on the content of their message and the arguments they are making, than on their lower-order skills, such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Kity supported this idea when she wrote that the journals increased "how I express my ideas and feelings in English." Similarly, I also noticed an improvement in the content of my students' writing over the course of the year. They felt more at ease writing and debating about controversial topics.

During the peace unit many partners, like Road and Tomato, and Robotman and Dog, debated in their journals whether it was right or wrong for the United States to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Students also debated whether or not

that question should be asked at all today. Mary demonstrated the following critical thinking skills in her letter to John Lennon:

*It's difficult for me to talk about. I don't choose whether America's decision is right or wrong. If bombs prevented Japan from keeping WWII, I say the drop of the bombs is justifiable. But the bombs killed innocent citizens, and people have suffered from the aftereffects of the bombs.*

Mary was deciding how she felt about the bombs as she was writing. Mary was discovering her own meaning of the atomic bombs and how she felt about them in her journals.

In this way the journals act as a "meaning developer." SSDJs spark students' interest in writing to a real person and nudge the students to examine their own ideas in English about political and social issues presented in the EFL and ESL classroom. They are a window through which we, as language teachers, can see into the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of our students.

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