
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS IN IMPROVING THE SKILL IN WRITING NARRATIVE TEXTS

Ali Mukti

State Islamic High School (MAN) 3 Malang, Indonesia
(mktali@yahoo.com)

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the effectiveness of dialogue journals technique in improving students' skill in writing narrative texts. The subjects were the year-12 of IPA students of MAN 3 Malang in the academic year 2008-2009. This study involved two intact groups of students. The experimental group was given weekly journal writing, while the control group followed the regular writing. At the end of the treatment, a writing test on narrative was assigned and the students' works were scored using ESL Composition Profile. The result of analysis using ANCOVA indicated that not all of the mean score of writing components of the two groups were significantly different. However, the mean score of holistic aspects was significantly different. Besides, students' responses showed a positive evaluation on the implementation of dialogue journals technique.

Key Words: effectiveness; dialogue journals; writing skill; narrative text

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk meneliti keefektifan teknik dialogue journal dalam meningkatkan keterampilan siswa menulis teks naratif. Subyek penelitian ini adalah siswa kelas XII IPA MAN 3 Malang tahun pelajaran 2008-2009. Penelitian ini melibatkan dua kelompok siswa. Kelompok eksperimen diminta untuk menulis dan mengumpulkan jurnal tiap pekan sementara kelompok control tetap mengikuti pelajaran menulis seperti biasa. Pada akhir perlakuan, kedua kelompok siswa diminta menulis teks naratif yang kemudian dinilai menggunakan ESL Composition Profile. Setelah dianalisa menggunakan ANCOVA, hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa tidak semua nilai rerata dari tiap komponen menulis kedua kelompok berbeda secara signifikan. Akan tetapi, nilai rerata aspek secara keseluruhan berbeda secara signifikan. Disamping itu, siswa menanggapi positif terhadap penggunaan teknik dialogue journal.

Kata Kunci: keefektifan; dialogue journals; keterampilan menulis; teks naratif

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching writing for most of EFL teachers in Indonesia, especially senior high school level, is an arduous task to do. In addition to spending much time and of course energy to grade students' writing work, teachers are supposed to give much attention to prepare their students to face national exam. In this exam, writing test has only small portions in comparison to the other skills; listening, speaking and reading.

Viewed from the students' point of view, writing is in fact considered to be the most difficult skill to master. This is not quite astonishing due to the very fact that while everybody enjoys talking, not so many people regard writing as something enjoyable. White (1995, p. iv) believes that the great rise in interest in spoken communication, characteristic of the past 20 years, has challenged the status of writing. An ability to speak a foreign language has then become a more highly rated skill than an ability to write in it.

In a foreign language setting, a writing task is daunting: with relatively limited linguistic resources, learners will find it difficult to express themselves in a written genre. To make matters worse, the piece of writings produced by the students is relatively permanent, which makes mistakes

easily recognized, crossed out and corrected by the teachers. Since nobody would want their work with lots of red marks all over, this forces the students to deal with two problems at once: language, as well as psychological barriers.

Most ESL/EFL writing teachers would strongly agree with the statement that teacher correction feedback is a necessary part of any writing course. Regarding language use or grammar, most would also concur that grammar correction is essential. This belief seems to be intuitively obvious and just plain common sense. A study conducted by Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) stated that teachers tend to focus more on the use of mechanics (such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing) and language use (such as concord, tense, word order, articles, pronouns, and preposition) in their students' piece of writing than on the content (such as knowledge of subject, substance, and development of thesis) and organization (such as fluent expression, clear statement of ideas, and logical sequencing).

Gray (2004), nevertheless, reports that solid research conducted in the last 20 years has revealed it to be wrong. Numerous studies have also revealed that grammar correction to second

language writing students is actually discouraging to many students, and even harmful to their writing ability.

The use of dialogue journals, on the other hand, is like a bridge that will help students to destroy or, at least, to reduce the existing barrier in writing. When the students are given the freedom to write anything they want and are told that the teacher is going to respond to their journals individually, the atmosphere becomes less threatening. This will also lead to the writing activity with a sense of purpose and a sense of audience (Peyton, 1993). Furthermore, Burniske (1994) says that since the purpose of a dialogue journal is to provide students with a real audience and thereby enhance their rhetorical awareness, the teacher would respond only to the content of the student's entry, not to grammatical and mechanical errors in the writing; instead, the teacher would lead by example, modelling grammatical and mechanical correctness in his/her own written responses.

Vygotsky (as quoted in Burton & Carroll, 2001) says that collaborative reflection—which is how dialog journals work—enables interaction between cognitive and communicative processes. Thus, learner journals read and responded to by teachers (and in some cases, by other students) are

means of collaborative learning. So even are private journals, because they incorporate writers' inner dialogues.

Research also indicates that some of reflective writings help all learners—and, in particular, language learners—make sense of their learning experiences (e.g., Mlynarczyk, 1998; Peyton & Staton, 1993, 1996 quoted in Burton & Carroll, 2001).

A dialogue journal, according to Peyton (1993), is a written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly (daily, weekly, etc., depending on the educational setting) over a semester, school year, or course. Students, he further explains, write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. This kind of writing activity makes this technique enjoyable and thus popular as a writing technique. It can be viewed from the fact that many teachers as well as lecturers have already applied this technique in their writing classes and lots of research studies have been carried out dealing with this teaching technique.

To name a few, Erin Gruwell, an English teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, America as well as the founder of

Freedom Writers Foundation, for instance, writes in her memoir that her students are enhanced in their writing ability after she utilizes this technique (Gruwell, 2007). In fact, Gruwell makes an inference that a dialog journal is not only good at improving writing skill but it can also improve students' attitudes. In EFL/ESL context, Burton and Carroll (2001) say that this technique has already been proved effective to promote the writing skill of EFL/ESL students in some countries.

In line with Gruwell's and Burton and Carroll's findings, Walker (2006) finds that journal writing assignments can benefit students by enhancing reflection, facilitating critical thought, expressing feelings, and writing focused arguments. Journal writing can be adapted into a student's clinical course to assist with bridging the gap between classroom and clinical knowledge. In addition, journals can assist athletic training students with exploring different options for handling daily experiences.

Another research study conducted by Liao and Wong (2007) also found broader benefits of implementing Dialogue Journal Writing (DJW). This technique improved the students' writing; writing fluency; writing performance on content, organization, and vocabulary; reflective

awareness of writing and self-growth, as learners; and intrinsic writing motivation. It also reduced their writing anxiety. They added that the students held positive attitudes toward the writing project and confirmed that DJW was an important tool for self-understanding and self-growth. They indicated that DJW allowed them to consider something new; enhanced their self-confidence so that they could get along better with others; matured them through sharing their ideas, feelings, and self-perceptions; consolidated their thinking when reading their journals; strengthened their confidence in English writing; and gave them the chance to reflect on their daily lives. Pedagogical implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing instruction are provided.

In Indonesian setting, some research has been carried out pertaining to the implementation of this technique. Cahyono (1997) did a research study aimed at knowing the effectiveness of providing journal writing in supporting the students' skills in writing English essay. The result of analysis using t-test indicated that journal writing scores of the students from the two groups were not significantly different. However, students' responses indicated positive evaluation on the application of journal writing. Quite similar to what Cahyono

found, El Khoiri (2006) also reports that her students enjoyed taking her writing class very much while she was employing dialogue journals technique.

In a junior high school level, Sutikno (2004) conducted a study about the use of dialog journals in teaching writing at SMP 5 Malang. He found that dialog journals could improve students' ability in writing.

The findings about the advantages of utilizing dialog journals technique mentioned above, especially those found by Cahyono (1997) and Sutikno (2004) have been the basis of this study. It will be interesting to find out how the result will be if this technique is applied towards Islamic Senior High School (henceforth MA) students.

Besides, there are some other considerations why this study was conducted. First, writing class seems to be dreary and even threatening to most of the students and arduous to most of the teachers. Students often find red marks that are not convenient to look at in their piece of writing after being corrected by the teachers. The notice written by teachers at the bottom of their composition such as "Improve your grammar!", "Do better in the next writing assignment!", "Watch your vocabulary use and mechanics!" are intended to encourage students to

improve their writing competence. Some students, however, regard these as "threats." Teachers, on the other hand, are fed up with the over-and-over again mistakes that students made—language use, vocabulary, and mechanics—and need much time and energy to do lots of corrections owing to the big number of the students.

Second, students will have a great chance of improving their English writing competence through school media such as website, monthly magazine, as well as wall magazines which provide English corner. The fact is that, nonetheless, they hardly ever make use of these three media optimally in relation to English. It is due to the very fact that they are not accustomed to or even not confident about writing their ideas or thoughts in English.

Third, according to most of English teachers at MAN 3, most of the students especially those who are in years-11 and -12 prefer doing grammar tests or tests which contain grammar questions to other tests like reading, listening and, let alone, writing. It results in students' good score in grammar tests. Yet, their grammar mastery cannot help them avoid making grammatical mistakes in writing assignments. In line with this phenomenon, Clark and Clark (as cited

in Richards, 1990), state that it is not merely the linguistic organization of written discourse that makes writing a difficult skill to acquire. The process of moving from concepts, thoughts, and ideas to written text is complex. A written text, they further explain, represents the product of a series of complicated mental operation.

Above all, however, the idea to carry out this study first struck when the writer assessed the year-12 students' pieces of writing in the School Examination (*Ujian Sekolah*) in 2007. In this exam, students were to write both narrative and descriptive texts. The writer was startled to know that some of the students were not competent enough in doing the writing test, especially dealing with a narrative text. These students got lower English writing scores than what they were expected to achieve. In fact, to my anxiety, a narrative text is one of some text types students have to learn and acquire owing to the very fact that it is included in Graduate Competence Standard (*Standar Kompetensi Lulusan*) (BSNP, 2008).

All of these facts brought about an assumption that the teaching of writing at MAN 3 Malang needed improving. To be more specific, it was essential that teachers, including the writer, needed to get introduced to a

new technique in teaching writing and then apply the technique in the teaching and learning process. The word 'new' here did not necessarily mean that it was up to date or current. So long as the teachers never utilized the technique, it could also be categorized as 'new.' The technique that at last sparkled in my mind was dialog journals.

Although the efficacy of dialog journals has been proved by some teachers and researchers as well, it still needs further investigation to find out its effectiveness when it is implemented to MA students. Thus, this study was aimed at knowing the effectiveness of providing dialogue journal writing activities in improving the students' skill in writing. Furthermore, it was also attempted to know how the students responded to the provision of dialogue journal writing.

METHOD

Design

This research study employed quasi-experimental with non-randomized control group, pretest-posttest design as recommended by Ary et al. (2002, p. 315).

Before the treatment was applied to the experimental group, some preliminary preparations were made. The preparations dealt with logistics, students, and personal staff or teacher.

In terms of the learners, before the experiment was carried out, the teacher convinced them first that they were free to write anything that came up in their mind. They did not need to be worried about the grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics very much in their piece of writing. All they needed to focus was on what they actually wanted to convey or the content. To make it more secure, they were thus suggested to use pseudonym. They were allowed to use the names of their favorite artists or other famous people.

On the teacher's part, he was aware of his role in this instructional strategy as a facilitator. Realizing his facilitating role, the teacher tried to develop his sensitivity to the needs as well as personalities of the students. He was ready to assist students with different kinds of learning styles and problems. In so doing, the teacher was ready to begin the experiment.

In the course of the treatment, each group had separate class sessions but they both had regular class and the same teaching procedure in the classroom. The difference lay only on the additional writing task given by the teacher or experimenter to the experimental group. However, the control group also had some writing exercises (homework) to be done at home. It was done in order to give the

same chance for them to practice their writing skill.

Regarding journal writing, it is categorized as co-curricular activity since students do it outside the classroom activity (Mukminatien, 1991). In this phase, the teacher asks the students to write anything of their need, interests, or concerns in the journal book given. The topics could be about the students' response to the particular lesson, daily activity, opinion on certain or current issues, hobbies, etc.

The journal was submitted once a week at the end of the English class and then given back to the students at the next meeting. The teacher read the journals and wrote back, responding to the questions and comments, introducing new topics, asking questions, or suggesting ways in which they might learn from their experiences (Caroll, 1994). However, there was a possibility that some students wanted their journal to be corrected and marked as if it were a formal assignment. If this happened, the teacher asked them to give other assignment in addition to the journal to them (Caroll, 1994).

Two teachers were assigned to teach in the two classes. The two teachers were selected on the bases of the same level of classroom instruction,

educational background, and teaching experience. One of the teachers was the researcher himself who taught in the experimental group. The treatment was carried out for 10 weeks in the second semester of the 2008-2009 academic year. It started from the first week of February up to the second week of April. The teaching of writing skill was allocated for one session of 90 minutes a week while the experiment took 1x10 weeks. The students who did not attend the class more than two meetings were excluded from the experiment.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study was the year-12 students of MAN 3 Malang in the year. Meanwhile, the accessible population was all the year-12 students of IPA program. There were five classes of IPA. Then, two of these five classes, IPA 2 and IPA 3, were purposively selected. It was done so simply because the other three classes were not comparable in terms of the number of the students and the sexes occupied the classes. Thus, by using a lottery, IPA 2 was chosen as the experimental group and IPA 3 as the control group.

The subjects in the two groups were quantitatively homogenous. The quantitative side deals with the number of the students, average age, and the

average scores of their English skills covering listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Instruments

There were two equivalent tests used for the writing tests in this study. One was given for the pre-test and the other was used for the posttest. The first test was composing a narrative text on fable and historical fiction for the second test. The students doing the tests were to write the required text type within 60 minutes.

In scoring and grading the result of the tests, the researcher collected the students' work and scored manually after administering the tests. Their work was also scored by another rater, the teacher in charge of teaching the control group. Before scoring the students' works, the teachers who taught the two groups and happened to be the raters held training on how to apply the Jacob's scoring rubric. By doing so, it was hoped that the two raters had the same procedures of scoring. For this purpose, some pieces of students' works that had been evaluated previously by the two raters were analyzed and discussed to highlight possible differences in the result of scoring. From the training, a better perspective in scoring from the two raters could be attempted.

Since the focuses of the assessment of this study were on the content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, analytic scales in ESL created by Jacobs et al. is appropriate to adopt. In analytic scoring, scripts are rated on several aspects of writing or criteria rather than given a single score. Analytic scoring schemes thus provide more detailed information about a test taker's performance in different aspects of writing.

In addition to the writing tests, one questionnaire was used to obtain some qualitative data. This questionnaire, which was given only to the experimental group, served as additional and secondary instrument for collecting the data while the primary instrument was tests. It was designed to elicit information from the subjects under study. The information gained was chiefly about their opinions and suggestions pertinent to dialogue journals.

This questionnaire comprised two parts. The first part consisted of ten questions accompanied with five options. They were (A) Very positive, (B) Positive, (C) Neither positive nor negative, (D) Negative, and (E) Very negative.

The students were then required to choose one of the options which they

thought best in their opinion. Every option had the same weighting. Then, their responses were analyzed in order to find the central tendency. The ten questions are as follows:

1. Do you feel happy with dialogue journals as an additional activity besides regular writing?
2. Do you feel relaxed when expressing your ideas or feeling in a journal? activity carried out in class?
3. Do you feel happy to know that your journal is read and responded by a teacher?
4. Do you feel happy to know that your journal is read and responded by a classmate?
5. Do you feel motivated to write using dialogue journals technique?
6. Do you think dialogue journals technique helps you write with better content?
7. Do you think dialogue journals technique helps you write with better organization?
8. Do you think dialogue journals technique helps you write with better vocabulary?
9. Do you think dialogue journals technique helps you write with better language use?

10. Do you think dialogue journals technique helps you write with better mechanics?

The second part was one open-ended question. It was supplied in the questionnaire for any comments and suggestions the students wanted to convey regarding the application of dialogue journals.

Another preparation dealing with implementing dialog journals that also needed considering was, beside tests and questionnaire, the notebooks which were going to be used as journals and writing prompts. The notebooks were the same notebook for each student. They were not very thick since they were used only for few weeks. Moreover, the students made use of the computers available at MAN 3 Malang to type their work. Due to their literacy in the internet, once in a while they sent their piece of writing via e-mail to the teacher.

The writing prompts or journal topics were also quite important. It was quite natural that not all students were highly motivated or had ideas to write especially when they had freedom to write anything they were interested in. In order to stimulate the students who were less enthusiastic or who had "I

don't know what to write" problem, writing prompts or journal topics were very helpful. The topics could be formulated by the teacher (experimenter) or downloaded from the internet. Some other accompanying equipment, which needed to be available as well, was instructional materials like textbooks and dictionaries.

Data analysis

The data were analysed by using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to answer the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Using the ESL Composition profile by Jacobs et al. (1981), the researcher then calculated the result of the pretest and posttest means of the two groups as displayed in Table 1.

The scores above were then computed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). The results of the comparison is presented in Table 2 below.

The finding regarding the students' responses to the items in the questionnaire can be seen in the following Table 3.

Table 1. Performance on Analytically-Scored Writing Assignments of Control and Experimental Group Students

Writing Aspects	Control		Experimental		Maximum Score
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	
Content	23.00	23.82	23.65	24.41	30
Organization	14.82	15.18	14.91	15.71	20
Vocabulary	13.50	13.94	13.56	14.85	20
Language use	14.26	14.18	12.74	16.88	25
Mechanics	3.32	3.85	3.00	3.91	5
Holistic Score	68.91	70.97	67.85	75.76	100

Table 2. The Result of ANCOVA

Writing Aspect	F ratio	F table	Sig.	Level of Sig.	Meaning
Content	0.071	3.988	0.790	0.050	Not Significant
Organization	0.669	3.988	0.416	0.050	Not Significant
Vocabulary	4.595	3.988	0.036	0.050	Significant
Language Use	27.548	3.988	0.000	0.050	Significant
Mechanics	3.755	3.988	0.057	0.050	Not Significant
Holistic Sore	8.580	3.988	0.005	0.050	Significant

Table 3. Questions and Percentage of Students' Responses to the Questionnaire

Item no.	A	B	C	D	E
1.	44.12	50.00	5.88	0.00	0.00
2.	32.35	50.00	11.76	5.88	0.00
3.	58.82	29.41	11.76	0.00	0.00
4.	5.88	17.65	17.65	47.06	11.76
5.	32.35	52.94	8.82	5.88	0.00
6.	61.76	20.59	14.71	2.94	0.00
7.	41.18	26.47	20.59	11.76	0.00
8.	64.71	23.53	5.88	5.88	0.00
9.	41.18	23.53	11.76	23.53	0.00
10.	41.18	8.82	20.59	29.41	0.00

Most of the topics the students wrote in their journals were about their personal problems like love and hatred towards their peers of different sex, as well as feelings like being sad, happy and confused, problems at home like disagreement between them and their parent(s) especially dealing with their

plans after they graduate. The biggest number of them was, however, very concerned about the national exam that they were about to go through.

Dealing with the result of the pre-test and post-test as shown in Table 1, it indicates that the experimental group

performed better in writing narrative texts almost in all aspects of writing. However, based on the statistical data of ANCOVA, of five writing aspects analysed, only two aspects yielded significant difference, namely vocabulary and language use whereas the other three aspects, namely content, organization, and mechanics, were not significantly different.

Yet, holistically speaking, the mean of the experimental group was significantly higher than that of the control group. It is simply because the obtained F-ratio was 8.580. The critical value of F for the level of significance .05 was 3.988. Thus, the obtained F-ratio (8.580) was higher than the value of F in the table (3.988). In other words, it is due to the fact that the significance score $0.005 < 0.05$ while the F-ratio $(8.580) > F$ table (3.988). It indicates that writing dialogue journals was effective to promote students' skill in writing narrative texts. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

The above findings were in line with what the students chose and wrote in the questionnaire. Table 3 shows that dialogue journals helped them write with better content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Dealing with item number 4, when they were asked whether they felt happy if their journals were read and responded by their classmate, 16

respondents (47.06%) showed their displeasure. This response was not surprising due to fact that students' unwillingness to get their journals read and responded by their peers or classmates could probably be resulted from the topics they mostly wrote. Most of the topics, as stated earlier, were quite personal. Hence, they may have thought that these were private. They would feel embarrassed if these matters were revealed or known by other people, especially classmates. Telling these matters to the teacher indicated that, as Penafiora (2002, P.350) assures, there was a trust between the students and the teacher in dialog journal interaction.

When they were asked to write their comments and suggestions about the implementation of dialogue journals as an additional writing activity, most of the students stated that they were excited and relaxed to have this writing technique and that this technique helped them write better. There were also students who wrote that writing in dialogue journals helped them solve their problems and alleviate their burden. It was because they usually expressed their feelings in their own personal journal and thus nobody helped them find solution to their problems.

Pertaining to the suggestions given by the students, one student suggested that this activity should be continued to the next generation or following class (their juniors). In fact, she recommended that this activity should be given since the first year. A student said that this activity needed to be prolonged, not only three months but one semester or even the whole year. Nonetheless, another student wrote that writing journals should not be applied to the year-12 students since they had lots of assignments to do. Another student suggested that teacher give corrections to the mistakes they made, not only give responses.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the research findings presented and discussed, conclusions are then drawn as the following. First, the descriptive characteristics of the data showed that the means of the five writing aspects of the experimental group taught using dialogue journals as an additional activity were better than those of the control group taught without using dialogue journals. Hence, the dialogue journals technique employed in the experimental group as an additional activity helped improve students' skill in writing narrative texts.

Second, the result of statistical analysis revealed that there were two writing aspects—vocabulary and language use—that showed significant differences, the other three writing aspects—content, organization, and mechanics—were not significantly different. Holistically speaking, however, the mean of the experimental group taught using dialogue journals as an additional activity was significantly different from that of the control group taught without using dialogue journals. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

In concordance with the findings of the research, some suggestions could be given. First, dialogue journal is a good technique that is worth implementing in teaching writing. In fact, this technique should be given since year-10. Second, in addition to content, organization, and vocabulary, teachers should give more attention to language use and mechanics in teaching writing because these two aspects got very little attention in dialogue journals response. At last, further research on the application of dialogue journals should be conducted. The experimentation can be conducted more than 10 meetings and to year-10 and -11 students. The subjects could be classes or programs with low cognitive development and/or affective problems. It is because one of the

benefits of this activity was that it could motivate students to both write and attend classes, and give more spirit to study. Furthermore, for the sake of neutrality, the future research should not involve the researcher in teaching but assign one teacher or two different teachers to teach in the two groups.

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