For our learn of English: Dialogue journal writing in EFL education

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ABSTRACT

English as Foreign Language (EFL) writing pedagogy continues to face the two-sided challenge of decontextualised impractical theorisations and traditional reductionist practices. This paper calls for the introduction of dialogue journal writing (DJW) into EFL education as a theoretically rich and practically feasible procedure. By briefly reviewing and critically revisiting major theoretical approaches to writing pedagogy, the paper presents a theoretical image of a contextualised and integrated understanding of writing, and explores DJW as an educational practice that provides an opportunity for implementing such an understanding. By employing DJW, EFL teachers and learners can move towards an authentic and integrated writing practice that simultaneously incorporates formal aspects of language, communicative and discursive purposes, and higher order personal and social concerns. The paper also discusses how the diverse learning opportunities and teaching benefits inherent in DJW collectively create a meaningful teaching–learning experience that may enliven the teaching of EFL writing.

Introduction

I believe that the journal can be good for our learn of English, because we can learn New words & New grammar after that, we can use them in our journals and it's good for our English, moreover we can learn the way of thinking that it's important too (Dialogue journal entry of Dadbeh, a 16-year-old Iranian EFL learner, 3 December 2001).

Writing pedagogy has consistently been a major concern in EFL education. Although writing in academic and English for specific purpose contexts is widely discussed, the practice of teaching writing in wider contexts of EFL education tends to pose a two-sided challenge. On the one hand, theoretical approaches seem to be too decontextualised and forbidding to find their way into the teaching of writing. On the other hand, the mainstream practice of EFL writing pedagogy appears to be based on loose theoretical foundations and largely confined within traditional skill-based views of language teaching.

This article is a call for the introduction of DJW into EFL education as an integrated and holistic writing practice. It explores DJW as a procedure based on sound theoretical foundations that can be very flexibly adopted, adapted and practised in almost all educational contexts. The paper does not report on a particular study but discusses DJW through a consideration of the existing literature and previous research into DJW in the Iranian context of English-language teaching (Mirhosseini 2003; Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini 2005). By employing DJW, EFL writing can move beyond a skill-based view of writing as a mechanical ability or a cognitive and communicative process to create a space where teachers and learners can experience writing as a practice that involves language with its full range of linguistic, cognitive, communicative, social and personal capacities.

Approaches to EFL writing

Product orientation

Traditionally, writing was viewed as a one-dimensional activity in which linguistic accuracy was all-important and context and self-expression were not priorities. It was a way to reinforce grammatical patterns and lexical items. Writing pedagogy was a habit-formation exercise and the writer was supposed to merely manipulate the previously learned structures into longer stretches of language. This produced a collection of words and sentence patterns not necessarily representing meaningful written language (Silva 1990).
A basic characteristic of this approach was a focus on a strongly worded, well-structured and neatly styled product. At the most sophisticated level, product-oriented views of writing were concerned with style and arrangement, or fitting sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into texts (Connor 1987). This focus on minimal mechanical writing skills was based in positivist assumptions about language that viewed language as fragmentable elements that could be linearly presented (Zamel 1987). Product-oriented approaches were also influenced by behaviourist psychology and structural linguistics (Holmes 2001). The lack of real purpose and audience resulted in artificial writing practices, with learners unable to engage in writing as persons with intellectual or emotional interests in what they wrote (Raimes 1985).

**Process orientation**

As a reaction to reductionist product-oriented models, increasing attention was paid to the cognitive process of writing. Process approaches take the nonlinearity and complexity of the writing process into account (Marefat 2001). Writing is viewed as a complex cognitive behaviour and a nonlinear process of discovery (Zamel 1987). In process approaches the focus of attention shifts from the final product of the writing activity to the process of producing a written product. From this perspective, writing is a complex and creative cognitive process and the produced text is ‘a secondary, derivative concern, whose form is a function of its content and process’ (Silva 1990: 16).

In a cognitive process approach, which views writing as a problem-solving practice, the writer’s mental processes are the central concern (Johns 1990). Based on this approach, writing is viewed as a nonlinear, exploratory and generative activity in which writers discover and explore their ideas as they approximate meaning. In essence, as a means of expressing ideas and conveying meaning, writing is viewed as a meaningful communicative activity with real purpose and audience, providing learners with an opportunity to experiment with language and to develop efficient abilities in composition (Cummins 1989; Davies 1998).

A major characteristic of process approaches is a stage-based view of writing (Bello 1997). Going through stages from pre-writing to final editing allows writers to focus firstly on expression and communication without fear of form and style, and to later polish their writing. Involvement in a stage-based writing practice, presented in a flexible recursive framework of idea generation, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and reviewing, is believed by advocates of process-writing approaches to enable learners to become proficient writers through authentic engagement in writing (Holmes 2001).

**Post-process writing**

Growing concerns about the social nature of writing have led to the emergence of post-process views of writing pedagogy that move towards understanding writing as part of literacy in its social context (Atkinson 2003; Hayland 2003; Truesdell 2008). Close to critical literacy perspectives, post-process approaches move beyond cognitive and communicative standpoints and focus on the social, cultural and ideological situatedness of writing (Freire 1991; Kent 1999). From a post-process viewpoint, writing pedagogy can be part of critical literacy practices that involve critical explorations of social issues and ideological practices of action for transforming social life (Auerbach 1999).

The main purpose for writing from this point of view is to construct meaning; that is, to help writers shape ideas. It is not only a means of transcribing and presenting what the writer means, but also, more importantly, a process of shaping and creating what is meant. If looked at from a broader perspective, writing can be part of critical literacy practices that involve questioning received knowledge and immediate experience (Perry 1996). A post-process critical approach to writing transcends issues of form, structure, text and genre and moves beyond an understanding of writing as merely a process of communication that conveys messages through graphic symbols (Shor 1997). Writing turns out to be a socially situated act rather than a neutral communicative activity.

From a post-process perspective, writing always contributes to competing ideologies and interests in society and supports particular values, power relations and ideologies (Clark and Ivanic 1997). It ultimately, consciously or otherwise, reproduces certain ideological orientations. Therefore, in a post-process and critical approach to literacy that prioritises world over word (Freire 1991), what learners need
as they learn to write is not simply a set of skills but an awareness of a delicate sociocultural engagement and an act of meaning-making that becomes a form of social action that shapes people’s worlds.

**Revisiting writing approaches**

In product-oriented writing practices, teachers focus only on the minimal functional skills of writing, rather than on cognitive and communicative processes (Zamel 1987). The consequence of relying on a theoretical understanding of writing as a linear mechanical activity is a lack of real purpose and audience and, therefore, artificial writing practices. The major problem with product orientation is that learners cannot be engaged in writing as persons and cannot intellectually and emotionally involve themselves in their writing (Silva 1990). The activities that are directed towards a strongly worded, well-structured and neatly styled product lack consideration of the cognitive and communicative context in which learners write (Zamel 1987).

Product-oriented views and process orientations both aim to achieve communicative writing proficiency. Product-oriented approaches try to achieve this goal via controlled writing and error correction, whereas process-oriented approaches focus on context, communication and meaning. However, both approaches lack a perspective that views writing as a means of learning, beyond instrumental and functional literacy. The advantage of process-oriented approaches is that genre and discourse level features are taken into consideration but, even in such approaches, the ultimate goal seems not to transcend functional competency-based writing proficiency and a view of language as merely a means of communication (Auerbach 1999).

Post-process approaches to writing illustrate considerable improvement over the product-process dichotomy. The major contribution of post-process approaches is that they raise the issue of understanding writing as a linguistic, cognitive and communicative activity and as a practice that is part of a broader social, political and ideological context (Hayland 2003). Closely associated with critical approaches to language education, post-process writing perspectives are founded on understandings of language as a socially situated ‘practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories and their possibilities’ (Norton and Toohey 2004: 1). Such understandings of language can open windows to social awareness in EFL writing pedagogy.

However, it is necessary to critically reflect on post-process approaches if they are to be employed practically in writing pedagogy (Enos and Miller 2002). A simple pitfall in introducing post-process perspectives into EFL classrooms is focusing on the social and cultural loading of written language at the expense of process and product. Advocating a post-process and critical understanding of writing pedagogy must not be interpreted as abandoning the mechanics of writing or cognitive and communicative processes, but should lead to viewing techniques and processes as socially situated. Too much concentration on the social and political load of writing, when learning to write in a foreign language, risks adopting a depersonalised practice, which is overly concerned with outward critique rather than inward reflection. It may hardly go beyond a desire for critical writing ability and may hardly move towards a writing-for-learning and writing-for-living perspective. Learning in general and literacy practices in particular need to be personally relevant, engaging and meaningful, as well as socially informed (Fasheh 2002).

A further concern with implementing post-process and critical understandings of writing pedagogy is the overly abstract presentations of the theoretical underpinnings of such approaches. Practising EFL teachers may find the discourse of post-process and critical accounts of writing too academic and forbidding to be approached as feasible classroom practices. In this vacuum of practical consideration and in a context of loose theory–practice interconnection, introducing DJW into EFL writing pedagogy may create theoretically vibrant and, at the same time, practically meaningful practices.

**Dialogue journal writing**

DJW is the practice of regular learner–teacher written dialogue in which initial decisions about topics, length, style, format and so on are made by learners. Teachers regularly write their side of the dialogue, commenting on any aspect of a learner’s writings, responding to questions, posing questions and challenges, and initiating their own dialogue topics (Peyton 2000). DJW, as a very flexible and potentially
rich educational practice, can be employed for teaching at almost all EFL proficiency levels and in almost all educational contexts. DJW creates the possibility of an integrative approach to writing that may involve lower-level linguistic and stylistic concerns of a product-focused view and cognitive and communicative considerations of process orientations, as well as the social, critical and personal concerns of a post-process perspective. The valuable feature of DJW is that it allows teachers to focus on any of these aspects at any given time without losing sight of writing as a whole (Peyton and Reed 1990; Peyton and Staton 1996).

DJW may appear to be a purely process approach but the capacity for simultaneous care for parts and whole is its point of departure from strictly process-oriented views. The part–whole integrated functioning creates the potential for this type of educational practice to include complementary and compensatory practices that may appear contradictory in other approaches. The practice of DJW is flexible enough to present the mechanics of writing at the same time that it takes care of the cognitive processes of writing and the social and political contexts in which the practice of writing occurs.

The inclusive nature of DJW and its simultaneous defiance to be subordinated to any single writing approach is a challenge to traditional understandings of genre theory in writing pedagogy. DJW appears to be based on a single genre type called the journal genre. However, it is the context-based autonomous decisions by learners and teachers about the focus of writing, in terms of content and form, that determine the actual writing practices rather than predefined conceptions of genre types. DJW can be very conveniently adjusted to meet a diversity of writing styles for a variety of purposes. The integration of forms, contents, contexts, needs and purposes, in an atmosphere of autonomous but negotiated teacher–learner interaction, is the most prominent feature of DJW, which can be seen as a truly holistic approach. This is elaborated in the following sections and specifically depicted in the two seven-item sets of student and teacher writing features.

**DJW in practice**

The flexibility of DJW in practice allows learners and teachers to negotiate and decide on the frequency of writing, topics, length and the focus of attention in EFL writing pedagogy. That is why the practical realisation of DJW may take various shapes. A special capacity of DJW is its adaptability for web-based and computer-aided educational practices, for example in the shape of email (Wang 1998; Razak and Asmawi 2004).

A prototypical DJW practice, which can be flexibly exercised in many different forms, is introduced to EFL learners as part of their writing activities at the beginning of an educational period. Learners write journal entries on a weekly basis and have two journal notebooks so that every week they have one to write in and one for the teacher to read and respond to. Learners are told that there is no limitation in choosing journal topics. They are told not to worry about grammar or spelling and to focus on expressing their thoughts and feelings freely on paper (or screen). Involved in such a practice, learners can write journal entries on a wide range of topics, including reflections on classroom activities and very personal concerns.

Depending on the language proficiency level of the learners, their writings may display different kinds of mistakes. Learners may also code-switch to a mother tongue in their writing if they need to express particular ideas that they cannot readily express in English. Teachers need to make students aware that DJW is not simply a matter of practising grammar, vocabulary or sentence writing but a practice of experiencing EFL with its full range of capacities and challenges.

Teachers read and respond to journal entries every week, primarily as letters that initiate real dialogues (not as language learner writings). Teachers comment on the points students make, answer their questions and ask questions, as in any meaningful dialogue. When appropriate, however, teachers can directly or indirectly draw learner attention to the role of formal linguistic aspects, the mechanics of writing and style (as in a product-oriented approach), comment on the communicative and discursive aspects of student writings (as in a process approach), and critically focus on the social and personal content (as in a post-process approach). None of these focuses reduces writing to any one of these aspects and none sacrifices an integrated personally engaging sense of writing.
Student DJW

From the point of view of EFL learners, DJW can be a place to express themselves, make sense of their experiences, reflect their internal thoughts and emotions, and think critically about whatever is relevant to their social lives. They can genuinely and meaningfully communicate and express concepts of interest and expect their writings to be read and commented on by a real and interested audience. They enjoy the company of the teacher as a participating conversation partner in an ongoing process of authentic dialogue (Peyton 2000). At the same time, learners can experience different linguistic and communicative aspects of writing in a foreign language. The following are the major opportunities offered to students by DJW in EFL writing pedagogy.

1. Expressing thoughts through writing and employing linguistic tools for this purpose helps learners improve their lexical and grammatical knowledge of language. Studies show that as learners continue DJW, their grammatical errors decrease (Peyton 1986; Crumley 1998). Moreover, EFL learners can use this approach to directly ask for grammatical correction or to communicate with the teacher about formal aspects of language.

2. With continuous practice and using description, narration and argumentation, as the purpose dictates, learners gain greater fluency in discursive and communicative aspects of writing. Over time, learner writing becomes more fluent and this provides a basis for other EFL writing activities (Peyton et al 1990; Peyton 2000). Learners can also use teacher responses as models of language use.

3. Exchanging written messages is inspiring and creates or increases willingness to write. The authentic activity of DJW intrinsically inspires learners and develops positive attitudes towards EFL learning (Tonthong 2001). Since learners do not have to worry about marks, the anxiety associated with writing decreases and learners gain confidence in their own abilities.

4. When learners talk to their teachers through DJW, they find the opportunity to maintain a discussion with the teachers and to express their views about other activities in the classroom context. They can actively participate in teaching–learning practices through their comments and reflections (Crumley 1998).

5. When engaged in the process of DJW, learners move towards self-initiation and independence and take responsibility for their own learning. They can discover their weak points, evaluate and analyse their learning process, and learn by themselves (Tonthong 2001). Providing a space for learners to rely on their own self-reflective and expressive ability in writing, DJW promotes autonomous language learning and encourages EFL learners to generate their own ideas (Marefat 2001).

6. Through DJW, EFL learners can gain a voice and have an opportunity to freely express themselves. Because DJW is a private correspondence, it helps learners reflect their internal beliefs and this leads them to reflect on their own ideas (Isserlis 1996). Legitimising personal narratives, DJW creates interactions that extend beyond classroom topics and help learners express thoughts, an opportunity which is usually lost in traditional education.

7. DJW helps learners to critically think about and read their world and the words they encounter (Freire 1991). EFL learners develop an ability to reflect on their experiences in the past, their situations in the present and their hopes for the future. It can shape a critical literacy environment in which EFL learners and teachers can explore and discuss social issues of immediate concern (Mirhosseini 2003; Ghahremani-Ghajar and Mirhosseini 2005).

Teacher DJW

DJW is not only a novel learning experience for learners but also helps EFL teachers go beyond their traditional teacher role and participate in a meaningful dialogue with learners. Through DJW, teachers can put their responsibility for teaching a foreign language in the context of real interaction with people who possess a diversity of life experiences. Developing a genuine and intimate relationship between teachers and learners, DJW provides teachers with a valuable opportunity to see their teaching practices through
the eyes of the learners (Peyton 2000; Marefat 2001). This is perhaps the major overall benefit of DJW for EFL teachers, and not only contributes to their teaching of writing but to their wider classroom life. The following are the main opportunities provided by DJW for EFL teachers.

1. DJW provides a space in which teachers can observe the actual performance of learners in gaining knowledge of language (Tonthong 2001). EFL teachers can take the opportunity to help learners with the linguistic and communicative aspects of their language learning. In their comments on student writings, teachers can give indirect hints or even provide direct instruction and correction on the grammatical structure of sentences or the use of vocabulary.

2. Through DJW, teachers can assess what EFL learners need to learn. DJW can shape an ongoing process of needs analysis, which teachers may find helpful in the design and modification of the EFL syllabus, teaching materials, and teaching activities and strategies (Genesee and Upshur 1996).

3. Providing information about learners’ knowledge of language and their writing abilities, DJW can be a non-threatening means of assessment and formative evaluation of learning progress (Peyton and Seyoum 1989). DJW gives teachers valuable information about learner achievements, as well as about their learning problems. After negotiations with learners, specific journal entries can also be included in a portfolio to demonstrate progress and to illustrate the EFL learning process (Peyton 2000).

4. DJW extends the time that teachers can spend with individual learners. It helps teachers know and understand the backgrounds and life experiences of their students (Staton 1987; Peyton 2000). This may help teachers take steps towards aspects of individualised teaching that can address the needs of individual learners.

5. DJW can help teachers become involved in teacher research (Tonthong 2001), as it provides qualitative data that is difficult to gain through formal research instruments. An ongoing informal action research is the outcome of a research view of DJW (Nunan 1990).

6. DJW provides EFL teachers with a valuable opportunity to receive feedback from learners. Teachers can even take the opportunity to directly ask for student comments on teaching activities (Peyton and Staton 1996). Learner reflections on teacher performance provided through DJW is genuine feedback that can be a valuable asset in a reflective teaching process (Tonthong 2001; Jay and Johnson 2002).

7. The process of engagement in DJW provides EFL teachers with a very flexible and constantly emerging practice that allows for changes in teaching strategies as the situation demands (Wilson and I’Anson 2006). It is a meaningful context for practising teacher autonomy, since it is the teacher who decides what aspect of student writing to focus on, what kind of feedback to provide and how to situate the whole practice in the overall context of EFL teaching.

**Conclusion**

Through DJW, EFL learners may decide to take the opportunity to experience the mechanical and formal challenges of writing in a foreign language or they may involve themselves in a more process-oriented writing practice that creates chances for interaction and autonomy. They may also experience writing as a meaning-making act in a social context. Ideally, journal entries may integrate all these aspects of product, process and post-process approaches into a unified whole. Teachers who become involved in DJW may also find that similarly multifaceted teaching opportunities are available to them.

Introducing DJW into EFL writing pedagogy may provide teachers and learners with a practical, flexible and theoretically rich opportunity for engagement in writing as an integrated and holistic practice. It creates possibilities for EFL literacy practices through which learners can engage with the linguistic and communicative challenges of writing in a foreign language, while they experience written language as a socially relevant and personally meaningful activity. While many mainstream EFL writing activities are based on the fragmentation of skills and components of language, DJW can defragment EFL writing practices into a meaningfully unified and integrated whole.
Far from the ivory tower of academic theorisations about writing models, this defragmentation of writing pedagogy may be realised by DJW in the context of authentic EFL writing by:

- providing a space to integrate the concerns of product, process and post-process approaches into a contextualised view of writing as a whole
- creating learning experiences that are not simply confined to writing but can be easily and coherently integrated with reading and even oral language learning experiences in the wider context of EFL education
- providing a learning practice that can be meaningfully related to the lives of EFL learners beyond the classroom.

DJW might be the all-in-one missing practice that many EFL writing teachers are looking for in order to simultaneously teach the mechanics of writing, meaningful written communication, socially and personally aware writing practices, and learning for a more meaningful life.

References


