

Audiotaped dialogue journals: an alternative form of speaking practice

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This article reports on a method of using audiotaped dialogue journals as a much-needed additional channel for oral communication for EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. The study reveals that this form of journal keeping offers the following language and affective benefits. (1) Students use a range of strategies to cope with associated difficulties, and thus secure a broader basis for language acquisition. (2) The process of script preparation prompts students to gain language input and activate the language for output. (3) Active thinking in English is stimulated by frequent practice in producing extended speech. (4) There is a mutually supportive relationship for students between making journal entries and classroom performance. (5) Journals make possible an element of one-to-one instruction.

Introduction

In Taiwan, a prevailing difficulty faced by students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is a serious lack of opportunities to put the language knowledge they have learned into practice in a wide environment. Normally, the only chance for speaking practice occurs in the classroom, but student numbers and the limitations of class time do not allow teachers to listen and respond to students individually. At the beginning of a communication-based English course I was to teach, I conducted an informal survey among the intending students and found that eight out of ten of them felt improving fluency to be the foremost need. Having studied the literature on audiotaped dialogue journals, and in response to the survey, I decided to add keeping such journals to the course activities, with the purpose of creating at least one out-of-class channel of spoken communication.

In the following, I first explain the nature and function of the journals and how I used them. Then, I analyze data derived from journal entries, interviews with students, and classroom observation, to see how development in oral competence is affected.

The nature and function of audiotaped dialogue journals

The audiotaped dialogue journal is a variation on the written dialogue journal. As defined by Peyton (1993: 3), the latter is 'a written conversation [in a bound notebook] in which a student and teacher communicate regularly [...]. Students write as much as they want and about whatever they choose, and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new

topics, or asking questions. The teacher is a participant in an ongoing, written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing'.

Elsewhere, Peyton and Reed (1990) list the benefits of dialogue journal writing that are most frequently mentioned by experienced teachers as follows:

- 1 There are increased opportunities for communication between students and teachers.
- 2 The teacher can individualize language and content learning.
- 3 The teacher gains information that can assist in lesson planning.
- 4 Students have the opportunity to use writing for genuine communication.
- 5 Students have an additional opportunity for reading.

Studies in EFL settings have shown that while written dialogue journals are certainly helpful in improving writing quality and reading comprehension, and in reducing writing apprehension (Song 1997), they also have positive effects on speaking skills (El-Koumy 1998).

One could say that a written dialogue journal is a form that basically aims at improving reading and writing skills, whereas an oral dialogue journal is a form which, whatever other benefits it provides, essentially challenges speaking and listening skills. As my purpose was to provide extra practice in spoken language, I chose to use the oral form. Apart from the fact that a cassette takes the place of a bound notebook as a tool for the exchanges, the written and oral forms both follow much the same guidelines. As for the outcome, Egbert (1992: 91) assumed that 'teachers and students [*using audiotaped dialogue journals*] in speaking classes derive language and affective benefits similar to those from written journals'. The study by Brown *et al.* (1996: 20) offers evidence that 'the use of [*audiotaped*] dialogue journals aids vocabulary acquisition, measures (and possibly causes) increases in grammatical accuracy, and helps develop positive relationships between students and teachers'.

In offering this means of extra speaking practice, the intention was to enable my students to communicate whatever they wanted to say, and to assure them that there was a listener who would respond, even if not immediately. The set-up—an approximation to real life communication—was as close as I could provide in the circumstances. I was interested to know how the students would react to the method, what their difficulties were, what strategies they would develop to cope and, overall of course, how their language acquisition and oral development would be affected.

The study Subjects and setting

The subjects of this audiotaped dialogue journal project were 26 intermediate level students attending my English III: Oral Communication class, which was a one-semester (18-week) elective course for non-English majors at National Tsing Hua University. We met for two hours a week. The main purpose of the course was to prepare

students for spontaneous oral communication. To that end, the contents covered conversational rules and strategies, functional language use, communicative activities and sociocultural rules, and non-verbal communication.

Keeping the journals was a required assignment, accounting for 20% of the final grade. Other requirements were regular attendance and participation in classroom activities, and two exam assignments, the first being a 10-minute oral presentation on an own-choice topic for mid-term, and the second a student-led panel discussion followed by a short drama-based presentation on an issue of student interest for the final. Once a week, with certain exceptions, students were to make an entry in their journals by recording themselves speaking in English for about three minutes. The exceptions were the first week, mid-term, and final exam weeks, and other weeks in which competing assignments demanded extra time and effort, e.g. the preparation of a mini-play or a favorite song/movie/book presentation. So, for the practical purposes of this class, ten entries in the semester fully met the requirements. The content of the recordings could cover observations on topical events and issues, discussion of ideas and information received, or consideration of any matters related to study or daily life. Students were advised to minimize hesitation by organizing their ideas before approaching the recorder. After the entries were submitted to me, I recorded my responses and returned the tapes.

Half of the grading for this assignment depended on the number of entries submitted, and half on an evaluation of the following aspects: (1) speech delivery (whether the delivery is conversation-like or recited like read-aloud script), (2) effectiveness in conveying the message, (3) correctness of pronunciation and grammar, (4) breadth and appropriateness of vocabulary use. Since proficiency levels varied, in addition to the above aspects, individual effort and progress in carrying out the assignment were also recognized in the grading.

Teacher responses

The success or otherwise of dialogue journal exchanges relies greatly on the quality of teacher responses. Therefore, I adopted the following principles for handling them. First, I made a point of responding as fully as possible to each entry, rather than by supplying only a brief comment. I was intent on the students perceiving that they were engaged in personalized communication rather than in carrying out an assignment unaided (Staton 1983). Second, since the focus of journals is on communication, errors were corrected only when they interfered with understanding or were repeated (*ibid.*). Third, if students asked for advice—whether about language learning or any other day-to-day matter—I did my best to explain, to suggest, or to share my own experience in the related area with them. Overall, I tried to be supportive and empathic toward students and their difficulties (Brinton, Holten, and Goodwin 1993).

Database

The data for this study were gathered variously from student journal entries, from one-to-one interviews with students, and from classroom observation. The interviews took place throughout the semester to

explore students' learning characteristics, the extent to which they made use of out of class resources, what skill areas in English they most wanted to improve, and what difficulties they experienced with the journal assignment. Classroom activities were carefully observed to reveal what inter-related effects there could be between the journals and classroom activities.

Analysis and discussion

During the semester, 124 journal entries (recordings) were submitted and responded to. The following table shows the distribution.

No. of students	No. of entries	Total entries
1	12	12
1	11	11
5	10	50
1	9	9
2	6	12
2	5	10
4	3	12
4	2	8
6	0	0
Total 26	Total 58	Total 124

TABLE 1

Factors underlying the number of entries submitted

Taking into account the number of entries, as well as the regularity with which they were submitted, I found a close relationship between these factors and student motivation, learning attitudes, and self-assessed weak areas in English. All the journal extracts cited below, under surnames only, appear by express permission of the students. Two, however—'Ed' and 'In'—chose pseudonyms.

The seven students who turned in ten or more entries showed a higher degree of motivation. The first extract is from one of the top-scoring twelve entries submitted by a sophomore in the Physics Department.

Extract 1 (Chen) When I have problems in learning, I try to solve the problems by myself. I don't like to ask for help. This way, I learn a lot and my problem solving ability is improved ... I like the sense of achievement in learning independently.

She seemed to be intrinsically motivated. The inner reward from her sense of achievement brought about from learning made her dedicated to our learning activities. She was the only one to complete all listening assignments successfully, and was willing to take risks in speaking out in class.

The eleventh-entry student was a freshman majoring in English who took the course simply out of a desire to gain more opportunities for experimenting with spoken English. (In her case, the credit for the course was not recognized by the English department since it was intended for non-English majors only). In one of her entries, she made the following statement:

Extract 2 (Ho) I like English because I had a good English teacher in my senior high school years. She made English interesting by arranging various kinds of activities related to our lessons. For example, ... I want to be a successful English teacher like her.'

One of the ten-entry students had been encouraged by her experience in the United States.

Extract 3 (In) Last winter vacation, I went to the United States with some friends. ... We couldn't find our luggage, and I asked one of the attendants for help. ... I found that speaking English is not that difficult as long as you have got the environment.'

Another ten-entry student was planning to become an exchange student in the United States in the coming fall semester, and urgently wanted to improve his spoken English. Others expressed a strong desire to learn good spoken English because they realized the importance of that accomplishment for their future studies and careers.

Besides motivation, these students shared two other characteristics: they all placed spoken fluency as their first learning priority, and had made occasional or frequent use of more than three types of outside classroom resources. Their journal entries were of satisfactory length, and showed a good command of the language. However, not all of them were equally forthcoming as speakers in classroom activities. Three were rather shy, and admitted to apprehension often deterring them from displaying their spoken competence.

The above analysis reveals that it was the highly motivated learners seeking ways to improve spoken fluency who tended to make good use of oral journals. Some timid performers found the privacy of recording provided a stress-free environment for speaking-aloud practice.

What were the reasons holding back those who took no part at all in the journals exercise? Among them, it appeared were the claims of club activities or homework from other courses, the lack of a tape recorder, the inconvenience of using a recorder for those living in dorms, and the general impression of having no idea what to talk about, or a lifestyle that encouraged a pattern of simple laziness.

These defaulters shared a common characteristic, in their high frequency of absence. Two were relatively competent speakers who, when they turned up, performed well in classroom activities. One claimed that taped journals were not real face-to-face communication, and suggested using telephone conversation instead. The other felt that speaking to a recorder was artificial. For them, since taped practice of this sort had no appeal, other opportunities for spontaneous communication practice should be considered for the future.

On the other hand, four of the 0-entry students showed limited language ability. They claimed that they needed more work on basic structures of the language. Their language deficiency scared them away both from class and from tape practice, suggesting once again that encouraging more involvement from such students is a matter for serious future attention.

Learning strategies Typically, the process of preparation for entries involves finding a topic, composing a script, rehearsing, and then recording. The prevailing difficulty, as expected, was language deficiency. One student explained her ways of coping with this:

Extract 4 (Chen) When I prepare for my talk, I first decide on a topic. Then I think about what I am going to say about that topic. After that, I write a draft. I check grammar books and dictionaries very often so my vocabulary and grammar are improved.

This student used such metacognitive strategies as advance preparation and self-monitoring, and certain cognitive strategies, for example, resourcing, organizing ideas, and composing the script (O'Malley *et al.* 1985). Many students employed their entries to ask for help with particular areas of language, or made suggestions about what to emphasize in class, which manifested the use of social-affective strategies (*ibid.*). The repeated use of these strategies could be observed across journal entries, and I believe that they made an effective contribution to learning.

Getting language input and opportunities for output

Having little or no idea of what to talk about was another common complaint. In the search for topics, students tested the resources of a range of English language media: *Studio Classroom* (a prestigious English teaching program on radio in Taiwan), *Time Express* (a bilingual study guide to *Time* magazine), and the Web, among other sources. The process provided language input either through reading or listening. Many entries sought to share received information. For example:

Extract 5 (Lee) I learned a good way to lose weight from *Time* magazine and I would like to share with you ...

Extract 6 (Hsu) I went to see *The Prince of Egypt* with my girl friend. I like that ...

Extract 7 (Huang) Studio classroom introduced seven strategies to put the spring back in your step ...

Retelling whatever has been heard or read requires students to reorganize the material and activate the language learned. This is a valuable process for promoting communicative competence.

Mutually sustaining journal and classroom activities

Journals give some students freedom to express what they dare not or do not get a chance to say in class.

Extract 8 (In) Last time when we talked about *Dead Poets Society*, I didn't have the courage to speak out in class. Here I would like to share with you my opinions about the movie ...

It is only natural for students to suffer apprehension about speaking in class or, given the pressures of time or language difficulty, simply about not being able to fully express themselves. But in dialogue journals, they felt more prepared, and more comfortable with articulating what they had in mind.

It was also apparent that after discussing certain topics in class, some students used journals to elaborate on the discussion. For example, a class discussion on city problems resulted in journal entries touching on air pollution, garbage disposal, traffic problems, or banning gun dealing. Naturally, classroom discussion generates ideas, and ideas lead to more talking. In-depth exploration of a topic is a challenge to students' capacity to use language.

Journals also contributed to classroom performance. For example, one student in his first journal entry talked about baseball watching as one of his hobbies. In a later journal entry, he continued with the topic by talking about an exciting baseball game between the Chiao Tung and Tsing Hua University teams in the annual Mei-Chu Games. These two entries prepared him well for his warmly acclaimed oral presentation to the class on the history of baseball development, and the rules of the game. Journal-keeping had led him to take the topic step-by-step from the simple to the more complex, naturally raising the language challenge at each step.

Individual help

Journals were used as a means to enjoy one-to-one tutoring. Students on an individual basis sought help with particular points of language. For example:

Extract 9 (Ed) I memorize lists of new vocabulary everyday, but my English does not improve. What do you think is the problem?

Extract 10 (Tsai) I hated English classes in high school because the teacher made us memorize too many new words. But I know vocabulary is important, and I think I don't speak well because I don't have enough vocabulary. Can you tell me how to increase vocabulary?

Extract 11 (Chen) Before I record my journals, I try to make sure the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. But even though I pronounce each word correctly, the whole sentence does not sound right. Why dont you let us practice more in intonation?

Extract 12 (Lee) My high school teacher often said that we should learn to think in English. I just don't understand how. Would you please teach us how to think in English?

Questions like these were impressive in their number, and I used my responding entries as a teaching tool to provide instruction or broadened a response by including it in classroom instruction.

Self-created talk environment

A further benefit that journals provided for learning is described in the following entry.

Extract 13 (In): These days, because I have to make up several of my journal, I kept thinking about what to say and how to say it in English and then I record my journals again and again. All day long, I am thinking in English and speaking English. It seems that I am in the United States again.

To create an environment for students to learn from doing was precisely what recorded dialogue journals were originally intended to achieve. In

preparing themselves for recordings, students need to explore and organize ideas, and at the same time activate language to verbalize thoughts. Accordingly, language and ideas stimulate mutual growth. In addition, while transferring information, advancing an argument, or making an explanation, students get adequate practice in producing transactional long turns in communication, which, according to Brown and Yule (1983: 19) is an ability that needs 'adequate models, adequate practice and feedback' even for native speakers.

A teacher/student bridge

What dialogue journals did for me as a teacher was to allow me insights concerning students' learning goals, language levels, learning styles, motivation, interests and needs, and learning problems. As well as raising issues concerning learning English, students also talked about making friends, dating, club activities, pets, and so on—in short, about anything that interested them. To all these topics of personal concern, I responded by sharing opinions or experience, or by providing support.

Feedback was valuable. At the end of the semester, some students expressed their appreciation; others offered suggestions for teaching, including the provision of more of the following:

- 1 practice with basic skills such as pronunciation and intonation;
- 2 error correction, both on tape recordings and in classroom talks;
- 3 discussion of current affairs;
- 4 discussion of movies.

These will be incorporated into the future syllabus.

A limitation

The journals provide extra opportunities for speaking practice, and students gain satisfaction from exploring ideas and new avenues of self-expression, but they are not used to spontaneous face-to-face communication. The metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies used in preparing journal entries do enhance language production, but since students prepare and rehearse what they want to say, they seldom need to use such communication strategies as paraphrasing or circumlocution to compensate for a lack of language. They can resort to the dictionary for whatever vocabulary they need, and if all else fails, they can simply switch to Chinese. But in real life communication, we do not—we cannot—run to the dictionary, and there are times when just switching codes is not an option. Lack of communication strategies results in frustrated communication. Therefore, activities that provide particular training and practice in these strategies still need to be emphasized in classroom activities.

Conclusion

I am not able to quantify the extent to which the students' oral competence improved, because progress in this area in the short term is not easy to measure. However, for teachers who seek ways of providing practice in the spoken language, and for students motivated to improve their spoken fluency, these talking journals hold promise, and are a valuable option with a number of benefits. The strategies used in preparation for recording ensure language acquisition. In the course of

script preparation, students can test a variety of input and then reconstruct the material and language for output. Retelling what has been learned, or presenting personal ideas, opens the way to active thinking in English, and to adequate practice for producing long turns in communication. In addition, oral journals provide chances for elaborating on topics initiated during classroom talks, and journal entries in turn can be more fully developed as subsequent presentations in class. So journals and classroom performance are mutually beneficial. Journals also facilitate extra, individualized instruction and counseling. They make it possible for the teacher to understand student interests and needs, and to highlight problems needing more attention. However, the main strategy students employ in this exercise is to be hyper-prepared before talking. What is required is to transform this form of 'canned' talk into face-to-face communication, where spontaneous response is the norm. Oral journals are a step along the road, but the aim and emphasis in our classrooms should continue to be on dealing with communication problems that arise in unprepared situations.

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Note

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