

Audiotaped Dialogue Journal: A Technique to Improve Speaking Skill of Iranian EFL Learners

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This study attempted to investigate whether there was any significant difference between the speaking achievement of learners who were trained by means of audiotaped dialogue journal, dialogue journal writing, or traditional free speech. The participants, 45 male and female students aged between 21 and 32, were selected by random sampling from among free speech classes in an English teaching Institute in Tehran. On the basis of the scores obtained from an oral interview, a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed, and it was proved that the three groups were homogeneous in terms of their speaking ability. Yet, the ANOVA performed on the scores of the learners after the treatment showed that the oral proficiency of the three groups differed significantly. A follow-up Tukey test revealed that the audiotaped dialogue journal group did not have any advantage over the dialogue journal writing group, whereas there was a statistically significant difference between the audiotaped dialogue journal group and the traditional free speech group.

Keywords: Speaking Skill, Dialogue Journal Writing, Audiotaped Dialogue Journal, Traditional Free Speech.

Speaking a second language has an invaluable position in language teaching and learning and might be the first goal of many

language learners. Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammar and semantic rules. Learners must also acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use language in the context of structured interpersonal exchange. Effective oral communication requires learners to gain mastery over appropriate language use in social interactions. Moreover, the interpretation of what interlocutors intend to convey and the outcome of the encounters also need additional expertise. Learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) usually confront the problem of the lack of oral exchange and adequate exposure to spoken language. In Iran, too, a prevailing difficulty that students face is a serious lack of opportunity to practice language outside the classroom through social contact with native speakers. In fact, oral practice is limited to class hours where the number of students and time limitations do not allow teachers to listen and respond to students individually. Such constraints necessitate employing techniques and procedures which can compensate for such deficiencies. One way to overcome the problem is to use dialogue journals in classrooms for the reason that they contain many aspects of spoken language including everyday life expressions, contractions, and vocabulary choice (Lingely, 2005). Moreover, as Lingely argues, the interactional feature that is echoed in journals is more compatible with spoken than written form of language.

Review of the Related Literature

Dialogue journal writing, although almost neglected in Iran, is a popular technique which helps teachers to communicate continuously with their students on topics of interest for any of the two sides (Peyton, 2000). In this interaction, the role of a teacher is that of an active interlocutor who tries to respond authentically to the students' purposeful manuscripts and intends to establish a friendly relationship with their students. Dialogue journals constitute learning logs which can be used for students with any level of language proficiency. Garmon (2001) believes that through dialogue journals students develop self-reflection and self understanding. Hiemstra (2001) maintains that dialogue journals

help students overcome their writing problems and proceed with new views and thoughts. Journaling, as Hiemstra (2001) argues, improves the ability of the students to think critically on their learning. Garmon (2001), also, lays emphasis on the idea that dialogue journals improve higher-order thinking in learners and foster critical thinking. Furthermore, according to Fulwiler (2000), journal writing individualizes teaching; it motivates learners to express genuine ideas and encourages them to write about their emotions and observations. By getting involved in journal writing, students find it difficult to remain passive (Fulwiler, 2000). Similarly, dialogue journals help unwilling students develop a more positive attitude toward writing (Reid, 1997). It can act as a starting point for class discussion and group work activities, and can encourage students to think imaginatively (Fulwiler, 2000). Journal writing is a kind of free writing through which learners can gain enough self-confidence to develop, compose, and expand their personal ideas (Fulwiler, 1999).

Writing dialogue journals, in general, is a technique through which learners can practice writing without being concerned about criticism and evaluation. They lead to a less formal and less intimidating way of talking that students might not be able to carry out in the routine of their classes. Dialogue journals give learners the chance to negotiate with a more academically skilled adult and accordingly receive support and feedback necessary for language learning. This idea is in accordance with Vygotsky's views on the role of social interaction and presence of a more knowledgeable interlocutor in the development of language and learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Dialogue journal writing is, also, compatible with learner-centered approaches to teaching because students have more freedom to choose their topic of interest, and depict an authentic purpose for their writing (Peyton, Staton, Richardson, & Wolfram, 1990). It can bring about a closer relationship between the teacher and students; it can assist teachers in performing needs analysis, and can facilitate the process of teacher evaluation (Peyton, 1986). Research findings (Garmon, 1998; Staton, 1998; Staton & Peyton, 1988; Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, 1992 as cited in Garmon, 2001)

show that dialogue journals contribute to the understanding of the current level of learners, and support their future growth. Furthermore, research studies in Iran (e.g. Mirhosseini, 2003; Homaeian, 2006; Gholami Mehrdad, 2008) reveal that dialogue journal writing promotes writing ability of Iranian EFL learners.

Audiotaped dialogue journal is an alternative form of written dialogue journals, and has almost the same characteristics except that the dialogues are recorded on an audiocassette tape instead of being written on the paper (Brown, Garver, & Sagers, 1996). According to Ho (2003), audiotaped dialogue journals are useful practices for oral communication in EFL situations. In his study, Ho (2003) proves that audiotaped dialogue journals are useful sources for language input, and facilitate appropriate output. Regular language production in audiotaped dialogue journals gives learners the ability to think in English, and hence conduct a supportive role for their performance in the classroom (Ho, 2003). A study carried out by Egbert (1992) shows that audiotaped dialogue journals possess the same patterns of oral communication in the structure and role of the participants. Brown et al. (1996) maintain that by using audiotaped dialogue journals in classes, a useful practice in listening and speaking is provided for the learners. The technique helps students improve their pronunciation, and aids teachers to keep a record of language development of their students.

The purpose of the present study was to find out whether audiotaped dialogue journals could be beneficial for EFL learners, and thus find a convincing answer to the following research question:

Which of the three methods of dialogue journal writing, audiotaped dialogue journal, or traditional free speech better contribute to the improvement of the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners?

Method

Participants

The participants of the present study were 45 advanced level adult male and female learners (20 males and 25 females) aged between 21 and 32, who were studying English as a foreign language in an Institute in Tehran. Initially 60 learners participated in a pre-test and 45 of them who scored 6, 7, and 8 were chosen. The participants fell into the three groups of dialogue journal writing group (6 males, 9 females), audiotaped dialogue journal group (7 males, 8 females), and traditional free speech group (8 males, 7 females).

Instrumentation

At the very outset of the research, an interview was conducted by the researchers as a homogenizing test. The interview was exactly a sample interview of the IELTS exam and consisted of three main parts. Each part took about 5 to 7 minutes, and the whole interview took about 10 to 15 minutes. In the first part of the interview, the interviewees were asked about their personal information such as name, family name, description of the family, marital status, educational background, and the like. In this part, the interviewers asked and answered questions, and sometimes contributed to the discussion to extract whatever they needed to know about the knowledge of the interviewees. In the second part of the interview, the participants were given a topic. Then, they were asked to think about the topic for 1 minute, and talk about it for 2 minutes. The topics were generally tangible enough to extract some grammatical knowledge and accuracy of the participants. Mostly, the students were asked to describe one topic such as friends, cities, family members, and the like. The third part of the interview was in line with the IELTS exam, and entailed talking about an abstract topic. They were chiefly general topics and the interviewees were asked about the global issues and their suggestions to resolve them. Topics such as poverty, hunger,

marriage, divorce, and others of this ilk are some examples to name.

After the treatment, another interview was conducted as the post-test. The second interview was exactly a version of the first interview. This interview, too, consisted of three parts, and was in line with the first interview in the form and content. The interviews before and after the treatment were all tape recorded, and later rated by two raters who used the rating scale of the Certificate of Advanced English (CAE) exam.

Procedure

In order to determine the extent to which dialogue journal writing, audiotaped dialogue journal, or traditional free speech could enhance the speaking ability of the students, 45 EFL learners whose scores in an oral interview fell above 6 were selected. This was to prove that all of the participants were at the same level of oral competency at the beginning of the study. The participants were randomly divided into three groups, each containing 15 students. Two groups were considered as the experimental groups, and one group as the control group. All the three groups were instructed by the same teacher. The treatment took 6 weeks, each week 3 sessions, and each session 90 minutes.

The participants of the dialogue journal writing group were supposed to write one journal each session on a topic, and hand it in, or if possible send it via e-mail to the teacher. The teacher was supposed to answer them accordingly. Each session a new topic was raised, and this was continued to the subsequent sessions. Errors were not corrected directly; however, they were mentioned in the teacher's responses in an indirect way. The teacher wrote sentences that were pertinent to the student's errors.

The members of the audiotaped dialogue journal group were asked to talk about a topic for some minutes, record their voice, and finally hand audiocassettes or compact discs (CD) to the teacher. Afterward, the audiocassettes or CDs were answered orally by the teacher (as opposed to journal writing). The teacher's oral answers were either recorded on the same tape or CD or sent

to them via e-mails. The students could talk about the topics of interest. If they had problems with choosing a topic to talk about, the teacher would introduce some ideas to them.

The last group participated in the traditional way of free speech classes. In this class, the topics similar to the topics of the two other groups were raised, and then the members of the group talked about them; they would take sides, justify their views, and convince their classmates. The teacher, also, gave them some supplementary reading materials which were related to the topics of the discussion. At the end of the discussion, they were given enough time to draw conclusions. The next session, the students would embark on a discussion with a new topic which was chosen the previous session. Additionally, the members of this group were free to give as many lectures as they wished on the related topics all through the course. The student errors were corrected at the end of the lectures. After the treatment, the three groups were orally interviewed, and the interviews were scored by CAE rating scale.

To sum up, the members of the dialogue journal writing group were involved mostly in writing journals, the members of the audiotaped dialogue journal group in recording their voices on an audiocassette or a CD, and the participants in the traditional free speech group in talking about topics, giving lectures and reading some supplementary materials. It should be noted that the topics used in all of the three groups were almost the same, including subjects such as marriage, advantages of higher education in Iran, use of the Internet in today world and the like.

Results

The collected data from the pre-interview facilitated selecting 45 homogeneous students whose scores fell above 6 in the applied speaking rating scale. Since two raters scored the interviews, an inter-rater reliability was computed to examine whether there was a consistency between the two sets of scores. The calculated correlation between the two sets of scores exceeded the critical value ($N= 15$, $r = 0.51$) for Pearson Product-moment correlation (Table 1).

Table 1
Inter-rater reliability, pre-test

Dialogue journal writing	0.54 > 0.51
Audiotaped dialogue journal	0.59 > 0.51
Traditional Free Speech	0.55 > 0.51

Subsequently, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to display whether there was any significant difference between the three groups. The results showed that there was not a significant difference between the means of the three groups of the study, and therefore, it was concluded that the three groups were homogeneous (Table 2).

Table 2
One-way ANOVA, pre-test

Pre	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F-value	Significance (p)
Between groups	4.809	2	2.405	9.543	0.061
Within groups	10.570	42	0.252		
Total	15.379	44			

$P < 0.05$

After the treatment, in order to determine whether the speaking ability of the learners had improved, an oral interview was conducted as the post test. All the oral productions were recorded and marked by the two raters who scored the interviews at the pre-test. The final score of each participant was the average of the two sets of scores.

In order to calculate the inter-rater reliability between the two sets of the scores, Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation was used. The correlation coefficient calculated between the two sets of scores for each group exceeded the critical value. The calculated correlations (0.52, 0.53, 0.57) exceeded the

critical value ($N= 15$, $r = 0.51$) for the Pearson product-moment correlation (Table 3).

Table 3
Inter-rater reliability, post-test

Dialogue journal writing	0.52 > 0.51
Audiotaped dialogue journal	0.53 > 0.51
Traditional Free Speech	0.57 > 0.51

Eventually, to examine whether the means of the three groups were significantly different another ANOVA was employed. The results showed that there was a difference between the means of the three groups (Table 4). Hence, a follow-up Tukey test was performed to examine whether the difference was significant or it was just due to the amount of uncalculated error (Table 5). The pair-wise comparisons via Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) test showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the audiotaped dialogue journal and traditional free speech groups (Table 6).

Table 4
One-way ANOVA, post-test

Post	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F-value	Significance (p)
Between groups	6.156	2	3.078	8.241	0.001
Within groups	15.678	42	0.373		
Total	21.843	44			

$P < 0.05$

Table 5
Calculated amount of Tukey test

	Significance level	Calculated amount
HSD	0.05	0.54
HSD	0.01	0.69

Table 6
Pair-wise comparisons via Tukey HSD test

	B	C
A	N/S	N/S
B		S

N/S= NON-SIGNIFICANT

S= SIGNIFICAN

However, the means of the two groups of dialogue journal writing and audiotaped dialogue journal did not significantly differ.

Discussion and Conclusions

As stated previously, the present study attempted to examine which of the three classroom techniques of dialogue journal writing, audiotaped dialogue journal, or traditional free speech could be more useful in improving the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners. The findings of this study show the pre-eminence of audiotaped dialogue journal and dialogue journal writing over the traditional practices of speaking although the two techniques seem to equally affect the speaking ability of the learners. Although it might seem unexpected, this finding shows the interrelatedness of language skills, and the fact that ability in one skill can be transferred to other language skills. Through audiotaped dialogue journals and dialogue journal writing learners work on language skills independently, and try to take the responsibility for their own learning. Thus, they carefully pay attention to and reflect upon what they produce. This embraces both the content and form of their production. Furthermore, the feedback from the teacher functions as comprehensible input, and fosters the learners' output.

These two techniques help learners engage in a meaningful communication, and therefore, compensate for lack of enough exposure to the spoken language. Audiotaped dialogue journals and dialogue journal writing individualize instruction (Fulwiller, 2000), and hence endow learners the metacognitive awareness they need for language learning.

Furthermore, the study shows that communicating with someone who is superior in terms of language knowledge and world knowledge can be of great help in motivating language learners. Choosing topics of interests and developing a sense of intimacy with teachers signify the importance of affective factors in learning language skills. In general, as stated before, the main problem in EFL situations is deficiency of language learners in oral skills due to lack of enough exposure to the spoken language and scarcity of interaction with native speakers of the language. Audiotaped and written dialogue journals can be considered as two useful techniques which can enhance oral proficiency of language learners. Teachers who value independent thinking and autonomous learning are suggested to consider these two techniques as part of their classroom activities.

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