

## A Dialogue Journal: A Tool to Improve Classroom Interaction

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### Abstract

*'Do you have any questions?' is a common question asked by a teacher to the students in the classroom. Unfortunately, this question often does not get the expected responses from the students due to several reasons. They may be shy or reluctant to ask questions. They simply do not have questions because things are clear or they just do not know what to ask. This situation indicates less favorable interaction between a teacher and students. A good communication between a teacher and students may lead to a better learning outcome. Brown (2001) states that from the very beginning of language study, classroom should be interactive. It means interaction is essential in determining the success in a language class. Therefore, an effort should be taken to cope with the above situation. Cited from Bolton (2013) Mansor (et al. 2011) proposes that dialogue journals can provide a substitute for actual conversation. This paper elaborates 1) challenges students encounter in language learning, 2) how dialogue journal facilitates interaction between teacher and students, and 3) to what extent dialogue journal helps better learning outcome.*

**Key words:** dialog journal, interaction, learning outcome

### Background

English is inevitable to master because of its important role as one of the international languages. Therefore, English has been taught since primary to tertiary level of education. What made me pick this topic is merely due to my teaching experience to secondary school students. I was assigned to teach this class; intermediate level of teenagers class. Generally, students who are in intermediate levels have been together since they were in elementary level. This means they have been acquainted for some time. They generally learn relatively fast and forget quickly (Nunan (2002), Brown (2002) and Shin (2006) so the teacher needs to catch up with their learning attitude.

On the first meeting of the teaching when I ask questions I rarely got the expected responses from the students. For example, after I finished explaining a topic in the presentation stage, I asked whether my explanation was clear, whether my students have points that they do not comprehend, or whether they found vocabulary that was new for them. During the practice activities I also asked if the instructions in the activities were clear for them. They were just kept silent. Even if responses were given, it was made by only few of them saying 'yes', a very short response. The next meeting, I reviewed the materials by asking some students questions on vocabulary and grammatical points, only few of them were able to respond appropriately. I concluded that there was a less favorable learning interaction between the teacher and the students.

Several preliminary reasons may be the results to the above illustration. Students do not ask questions because they do not have any, they already understand what was explained, they are just reluctant to ask questions, or they do not feel comfortable to speak up their ideas in the class. Therefore, it is urgent for teacher to use methods which allow students to express what they want to convey without feeling uncomfortable. One of the solutions is by employing a dialog journal.

## Theoretical Reviews

### *Dialogue Journals*

Peyton (1993) retrieved from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/peyton01.html> defines a dialogue journal as the following:

“A dialogue journal 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 write as much as 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.”

Teachers and researchers have unearthed myriads benefits of dialogue journals. Peyton (1993) maintains that dialog journals promote communication between teachers and students. Aside to that, dialogue journals ultimately assist students to be a better writer. Hudelson (1989) focuses on the socio-affective benefit of dialog journal writing which may lead students to growing writers. Mlynarczyk (1998) employed dialogue journals in her writing class and it showed positive effect on her students' writing achievement.

Specifically, Peyton (1993) elaborates the benefits of using dialog journals. Firstly, they extend contact time with students and getting to know them in a way that may not be possible otherwise. Through the journals, students can reflect on classroom activities. Whenever they find difficulty but they feel not confident sharing it in the classroom they still can do it through dialogue journals. Secondly, dialogue journals assist managing classes with students of varying language, ability, and interest levels. No matter what their language or literacy level, all students can participate in the activity to some extent. Students' dialogue journal entries give continual feedback about what they comprehend in class as well as about their language progress so the teacher obtain information that can lead to individualized instruction for each student. Moreover, teachers are informed with what actually students need. Thirdly, they provide optimal language learning conditions. Dialogue journals weigh on meaning rather than form and on real topics and issues of interest to the student. Written responses from the teacher serve as input of the English language. They can also provide reading texts that are challenging, but that are also comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written. Eventually, students feel more confident in expressing their ideas and thoughts in writing

On the teachers' part, dialogue journals also offer opportunity to see the teaching and learning process from students' point of view. Cited from Mirhosseini(2009) Tonthong (2001) states that dialogue journals provide a space in which teachers can observe the actual performance of learners in gaining knowledge of language, provides a valuable opportunity to receive feedback from students. Peyton & Stayton, (1991) states that the major drawback that teachers experience is the time required to read and respond to student entries. However, those teachers who have been doing well with dialogue journals have worked out ways to manage the process.

### *Teacher-Students Interaction*

One of important elements in the success of language learning is a good interaction between teachers and students. Brown (2001) defines interaction as the collaborative exchange thoughts, feelings or ideas between two or more people, resulting a reciprocal effect on each other. Balanced mutual communication help teachers indicate what students need and students share what they really need in the teaching and learning process so that the goal can be achieved. He also added foundation of the

theory of interaction: automaticity, intrinsic motivation, strategic investment, risk-taking, the language-culture connection, interlanguage, communicative competence.

In order to maintain favorable interaction, teacher should smoothly play different roles in the classroom. Their roles are as controller, director, manager, facilitator, and resource. Another important factor in building interactive learning is questioning strategies. Cited from Brown (2001) Christenbury & Kelly (1983) and Kinsella (1991) propose that appropriate questioning in an interactive classroom can fulfill a different number of functions:

- Give students the impetus and opportunity to produce language comfortably without having to risk initiating language themselves.
- Can serve to initiate a chain reaction of student interaction among them.
- Give the instructor immediate feedback about students' comprehension.
- Provide students with opportunities to find out what they think by hearing what they say.

It can be concluded that there are elements to be taken into consideration in reaching a good interaction in the classroom. Once favorable communication is maintained then the objective of the teaching and learning may be accomplished.

### ***Challenges Students Encounter in Language Learning***

Teaching English to teenagers need special approaches because in terms of age they are no longer in childhood stage but they are not yet entering adulthood. Psychologically, they are about to leave their 'children attribute' but are not ready yet becoming adult. Teens are the age of transition, confusion, self-consciousness, growing and changing bodies and mind. Therefore, they have their own learning characteristics. Brown (2001) explains that, in learning, teenagers are able to cope with abstract concepts; have longer concentration spans; need less expose to nature appealing to their five senses; are highly influenced by surrounding ego, self image, and self-esteem; and are able to extend from the 'here and now' concept.

Good learners are needed to make the teaching and learning successful. Harmer (2002) characterizes a good learner as having the following qualities: 1. is willing and accurate guesser, 2. tries to get a message across even if specific language knowledge is lacking, 3. is willing to make mistakes, 4. constantly looks for patterns in the language, 5. practices as often as possible, 6. analysis her or his own speech and the speech of others, 7. attend to whether her or his performance meets the standards she or he has learned, 8. enjoys grammar exercises, 9. begins learning in childhood, 10. has an above average IQ, 11. has a good academic skill, 12. has a good self-image and lots of confidence.

Stern (1994) affirms that in learning language, in terms of cognitive qualities, students need to have the ability to cope with the sound system and its system representation, the ability to absorb its grammatical rule systems, and verbal memory skills.

English is a foreign language in Indonesia. Its usage is quite limited. Students get the opportunity of using and being exposed to English only in certain settings, for examples, in the classroom during English subject and in the English courses. Asides from that, they just use their national or local language. Little occasion of practicing the language in real life situation becomes one challenge that students face in learning English. The second challenge lies on the pronunciation. The way English words are written as opposed to the way the words are pronounced (Mustafa: 2002). English words are spelled and pronounced differently from those of Bahasa Indonesia. Thirdly, the challenge lies in the grammatical pattern. Bahasa Indonesia has no change of verb form when using third person singular subject when talking about present or daily activities, but there is in English. Moreover, to indicate activities or states carried out in the present time, past time, future time, or perfect time, in Bahasa Indonesia we just need to add time marker without

having confusingly choose the right verb forms. The fourth challenge is in the word pattern and vocabulary. Word pattern used in English is also different from that of Bahasa Indonesia. This may confuse students who are used to Indonesian word pattern. In Indonesian people say a *doll cutewhile* in English a *cute doll*. Of course to do this, students will need sometime to comprehend the switch of word position when they are dealing with English pattern.

### Applying Dialogue Journals

The dialogue journals came into applications in the second meeting when I found that students seem to be less interactive. First, I asked them to write the reasons why they learned English, how long they have been studying English, and from what level they started studying. This information is important because it give me input on their motivation to learn, is the drive from intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. This really determines the achievement of the goal of learning (Brown: 2001). The result shows that most of the students have been learning English in our English Institution since in the first year of secondary school. It means that they have been learning for almost two years. While for the reasons they study, most students said that they want to be able to speak English fluently only one student responded that he comes to study because his parents make him so. From their first writing in the dialogue journals then it can conclude that actually the teacher is dealing with students who have motivation to learn. This is a good start.

Then the teacher gave explanation to the students that they would have to write in the media which is called a dialogue journal, and she also explained what a dialogue journal is, its functions, and what they could write on it. They could write what they felt, thought and experienced during the teaching and learning process. They could ask questions and make requests. Finally, the teacher and the students made an agreement that they would write in the dialogue journal once a week. They had fifteen to twenty minutes to write on the dialogue journals. The teacher guided the topic to write so that students can be more focus on what they wanted to write, for example, T: *"On the dialogue journals please write your comments on the topic discussed about our favorite books, the grammar focus (the use compound adjective). If you find parts that you do not understand, do not hesitate to express it in your writing."*

The responses given by students were unbelievable. They were a lot more expressive than when they orally express ideas, comments, or opinion in the class. Here are some clippings of the students' writing:

- *Miss, I think I understand what you explain today. It's about compound adjective. The adjective has more than one word. I think that's all.*
- *I was absent yesterday miss, so I don't know about compound adjectives. Can you explain again, miss?*
- *I think you explain clearly, miss, I understand compound adjective, like page-turning, etc.*
- *Miss, today is very fun because you give us paper blowing game. I like it very much. Give more game, miss.*
- *I understand a little miss, please explain again.*
- *Miss, I will absent next week because will go to Yogyakarta for study tour.*

From the above clippings, it can be indicated that students are actually quite expressive. They are willing to share what they have learned, what they understand what they do not or have not understood about the subject discussed, or even share their future plans. Teacher can know more about what students need and want in the teaching and learning. What their feelings are towards the learning. As stated earlier on the characteristics of teenagers' learning that they are in a transitional stage of children and adults, they still seek for fun and hilarious activities, like games. Knowing this from their dialogue journals then the teacher can insert games relevant to the topic in

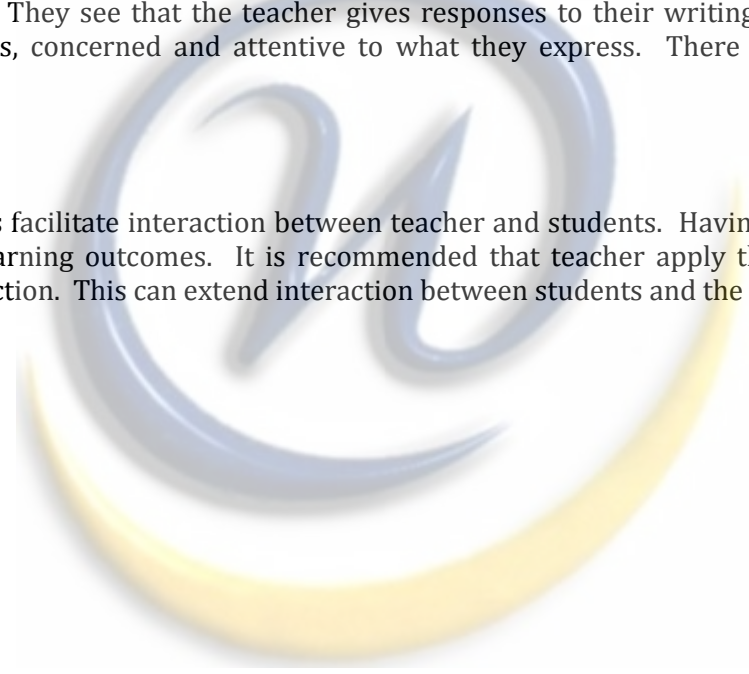
her teaching. Teacher can explain again the topic which students still do not understand even though reviewing is part of the routines in teaching, special time can be set to especially explain to students who were absent. It expected that the students can catch up with others. From the elaboration above it is obvious that communication between teacher and students is progressing to improvement. Therefore, better interaction may be obtained.

When students' needs can be fulfilled though good interactions; better learning outcomes may be achieved. This can be demonstrated through students' dialogue journals writing. In the journals students are asked to tell what they have learned by giving short explanation and some examples. Through their brief explanation and examples given, then the teacher can witness whether or not students reached the objective of the learning. Then, the teacher can decide on what to be followed-up.

Last but not least, because dialogue journal writing is conducted regularly; weekly, students writing skills are developing. At the beginning they tended to write briefly. Gradually, they started to write more and more. They see that the teacher gives responses to their writings. They think that the teacher is serious, concerned and attentive to what they express. There is a reciprocal written interaction.

### **Conclusion**

Dialogue journals facilitate interaction between teacher and students. Having good interaction may lead to better learning outcomes. It is recommended that teacher apply this method to improve classroom interaction. This can extend interaction between students and the teacher.





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