Research Paper

Dialogue Journaling in a Biology Class

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ABSTRACT

Dialogue Journaling is a written conversation between a student and teacher or a native language speaker to facilitate the discussion to give student a chance to practice expressing ideas and sometimes to learn a new language. For this study dialogue journaling was done in a science class from January to May 2012. Dialogue journals were introduced to the whole class but only three students were picked for the study. They belonged to different backgrounds and had different needs. A comparison of their abilities was done through teacher driven dialogue journals in which prompts can be divided into five distinct categories. It was noted that Claudia and Fabiola with primary language Spanish, shifted back and forth in Spanish and English or mixed (Spanglish) in her responses. Ghasak, whose primary language is Arabic, writes more in English language than Arabic. Ghasak had more opportunity of practicing English outside the school than either Claudia or Fabiola as Spanish channels are readily available in US.

Key word: Dialogue Journals, English Language Learners, Communication, conversation, Facilitate

INTRODUCTION

Peyton (1990a) provided a definition of dialogue journaling as, “A written conversation between a student and teacher to facilitate the discussion of for example, a literary work or other class material, or simply to give the student practice expressing their ideas in writing in a format where they can receive rapid personal feedback.” Bardine (1995) argued that process of dialogue journaling as a huge benefit for second language acquisition. This was why dialogue journaling was used for English Language Learners (ELLs). Bardine (1995) further stresses, “For ELLs dialogue journaling also help them to learn English language skills without fear of getting corrected as they have a chance to interact with a proficient English speaker.”

Auerbach (1999) proposes a more cognitive approach to writing which focuses on writing to express oneself and make meaning. According to Auerbach (1999) this approach focuses more on meaningful communication, with content that is easily accessible to students. Their prior knowledge and information about their lives can be used rather than having to research anything else. This type of more open writing also focuses on the process of writing while reflecting and exploring other ideas. This was why I asked question on the topics of science we covered in the class. Students were allowed to talk freely and I never corrected or explained what they did not understand. The purpose of the dialogue journaling was to practice English language skills rather mastering science concepts. Many researchers and experts believe that dialogue journals are the crucial part of the classroom. Some researchers consider dialogue journals as an interactive writing on an
individual basis. According to Bardine, B. (1995), “Dialogue journals not only open a new channel of communication, but they also provide another context for language and literacy development.” In dialogue journaling students have an opportunity to use English in a friendly environment and also to interact with proficient English speaker. Larrotta, (2009) believes that as the interaction is written, it allows students to use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing. Students, who did dialogue journals, took a great deal of interest and practice academic literacy while writing in dialogue journals.

METHODOLOGY

Population and sample size

The population size was all the students who were enrolled in my three biology classes during spring 2012. Only forty students were offered dialogue journaling on the bases of simple random sampling. Every 4th student was picked as proposed by Bitchener et al. (2005). In the beginning only thirty five students accepted to engage in dialogue journaling but later three remained persistent. The rest of the students either transferred out of the class or lost their interest because of attendance or some other reasons. The biology class had a variety of students linguistically was chosen for dialogue journaling. There are many native English speakers on one hand and also many ELLs on the other. Dialogue journaling was offered to many students including fifteen bilinguals and eleven proficient English speakers. For the convenience of these study dialogue journals of three English Language Learners (ELLs) was picked. Dialogue journaling was done between the months of January to May 2012. The students that were picked for the dialogue journaling were Claudia, Fabiola and Ghasak. Claudia was a junior and an English language learner (ELL). Her family moved to US recently. Claudia was having a huge trouble in learning and practicing English in US. She was showing really good performance academically. Claudia had a great deal of interest in dialogue journaling when the offered was made. Fabiola was an 11th grader while Ghasak was a senior. This was why process of questioning was open and depended on responses of the students. The primary language of Fabiola is Spanish while the native language of Ghasak is Arabic. Both are ELLs. The purpose of the dialogue journaling was not only to check students understanding of a biology concept but also to help them improve their English language proficiency skills. As most of the dialogue journals spelling, grammar or sentence structure was not checked or corrected. The names picked for this study are real as they are the first names of the students.

Procedure

The process was simple, prompts or questions were given to the students every time they were in class. Students responded back with their free will. Though students were allowed to ask questions also but none of the students asked anything. No rules were set for dialogue journaling. Students’ responses were respected and their ideas were incorporated when teaching. They also knew that they were being heard. On many occasions students expressed that they were unable to understand presentation or presenter because of language barrier. I made sure that presentations were being translated or discussed in Spanish. For this purposes bilingual students were used to help translate out loud during or after the presentations.

In dialogue journaling students were exposed to a wide range of questioning or comments. The range of the questioning was from more personal questions to more general questions. Personal question like “How did you spend your weekend, doing homework or studying?” Example of more general question asked was, “How was the guest speaker presentation on brain development and use of alcohol?” Students responded honestly to these questions. It was made sure that discussion did not fall under too personal category that makes respondents to lose interest and quit writing journals. Questions/prompts can be categorized into several different categories. These categories are:

1-Personal questions/prompts related to students academics
2-Questions/prompts related to science topic covered a day before
3-Questions/prompts related to their attendance
4-Questions/prompts related to language ability including reading, writing, understanding and speaking
5-Questions/prompts related to skills used to improve language skills

Dialogue journaling started with academic discussion and then I asked several personal questions to make them feel comfortable. Personal questions helped to set a limit in the minds of students that questions will not cross the limit that was set in the beginning. Several questions were asked to see how the lesson or activity went. The benefit of such questions was to evaluate and assess my own teaching style. Several times teaching style was modify and adjusted in the light of students’ opinion. Questions about students’ language ability were asked in order to assess their language...
ability. Students were asked to write in their primary language and feel the difference between their ability of expression.

With students, dialogue journaling started with questioning like; how was their weekend? How was their day at the school? How did they like the computer and science laboratory? After several days of practice the topic was changed to science concepts such as the use of microscope etc. Here general communication format was followed where it was asked how people felt in order to make them comfortable and then a serious dialogue follows. Claudia and Fabiola started writing in Spanish and later on they began writing more in English than Spanish but in the class their preferred language of communication was Spanish. Ghasak wrote her dialogue journals in English language but she wrote a few sentences.

RESULTS

In order to make students feel comfortable the dialogue journaling started with simple and general questions such as,” How do you like your classes this year?” Claudia responses to question,

“Fine.”

Ghasak chose not to answer the prompt.

Since one of the purposes for dialogue journaling was to practice English language, the students were encouraged to write more in English language. When asked, “From your journal it seem like you enjoy school a lot.” Claudia expressed as,

“Yes I like coming to the computer lab because it’s a different activity and fun.”

Fabiola responded to same question as,

“Yes I like coming to the computer lab because it’s a different activity and fun.”

Ghasak responded as,

“Yes I enjoyed it because I learned a lot about all of them.”

Students also practiced science concepts during dialogue journaling. When Claudia was asked about what she knew about global warming she wrote half sentence as,

“global warming is when the weather changed and the………”

Fabiola explained concepts learned as,

“It is about the compounds of microscope, food web and environment. In the class of Biology when need to do facts about food web is the quien se come a question for example: Bird → hawk → Birds. Fish, animals → grasshopper → zooplankton and → aloris. This is the food web. About microscope when need to find the parts of the microscope and answers the question and about the environment. We need to study about animals.”

Ghasak explained the learned biology concepts as,

“People need to stop what they’re doing, because it’s bad for the biome that we live in and it affects our health too.”

For the next day lesson Claudia also had difficulty in explaining the concept of recycling and conservation. Probably she did not understand fully because of English language. So when asked, “How do you practice recycling and conservation to reduce pollution and global warming?” Claudia expressed as,

“I don’t practice recycling because in my house its too hard because we have different trash.”

When asked, ”What do you do to reduce pollution?” Claudia replied,

“I do not trash am the floor and use less the car. And increase environment plant trees, recycling the paper and the bottles of water, soda or juice.

Fabiola also difficulty explaining the concepts as,

“Global warming is the world is hot. When in the morning the sun come out to the morning be hot. The sun is the thing who have hot the world.”

And

“What I know about global warming is when is December the sun is not come out because the snow it the thing that come out from the sky.”

Ghasak explained learned biology concepts as,

“The human role in this environment is to take care of everything around us, watch out to our body, stay away from diseaissi.”

Many questions about students' language ability were
asked particularly how much chance students get at home to speak and practice English. These questions were asked after the discussion on benefits of dialogue journaling. Claudia replied that she never gets a chance to speak or practice English at home as her family does not know English. Claudia in response to one question, “What do you watch at home, English Channels or Spanish channels and which one do you like more” replied,

“In my house I see both of the channels because I like more in Spanish but I +6 have to learn English and see TV channels on English it’s helping me for understanding more.”

Questions about whether Claudia friends help her with her English language proficiency or not were asked. Claudia replied,

“My kind of friends I like its in the school because we see all the days did them help me when I have problems with the English.”

Fabiola responded to same question as,

“In my house my, my dad, and my sister speak a little of English. My father knows more English than me and my sister. We don’t speak all the time in the house nuestra speakis Spanish my mom and my little brother don’t know English. My mom like to speak English, but she say is so hard and difficult.”

Ghasak explained as,

“We all speak Arabic at my house, but sometimes I speak a little English with my older brother.”

The next question was “How do you practice English.” Ghasak replied,

“I practice English while I’m texting and talking to my friend and by paying attention in class.”

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evaluation and assessments

The dialogue journals of the students were evaluated for the content, understanding of science concepts, their progress in learning and also as a tool of assessment, language ability, and their improvement in reading, writing, speaking and understanding skills. Dialogue journaling was also available as a school wide option for literacy strategy.

Students were provided with a feedback to guide and improve their literacy and communication skills. As a part of dialogue journaling it was expected that students would read other students’ journals and comment if they wanted to. None of these three students accepted that practice as they were shy in sharing their journals with any other students. So that aspect was not evaluated. Grammatical errors were taken into consideration. Students were exposed to many questions about different topics. How comfortable students respond to a question and how well they could write was assessed. Their fluency in English language was also assessed. Whenever it was noticed that Claudia and Fabiola were going back to Spanish, they were reminded of coming back to English conversation as that was one the goals of the dialogue journaling.

Findings

Many things were learned from this experience of dialogue journaling. Many similarities or differences that exist between students ability to learn a second language were also observed. Both of the students were of different age but from the same level of exposure to the new language. as noted by Larrotta, C. (2009) in her study. Ghasak was an Arabic speaking girl from Iraq (a fast growing population at the studied school). Five year ago the population of the studied school had only one student from Arabic speaking community but now over 45 Arabic speaking students. Most of these students were classified as ELLs. Some of them were able to speak English better than the other. Ghasak was one of those students who were able to communicate in English better than her peers. Claudia had a little exposure to English language. She was not able to speak English fluently.

During dialogue journaling many interesting things were being noticed such as language shift between English to Spanish or Spanglish (sentences that had words from both of the languages). Claudia moved from English to Spanish and Spanglish frequently as noted by Bardine, B. (1995). Sometime Claudia was prompted to write only in English but she went back to Spanish again and again. During dialogue journaling Claudia mixed both languages while writing her responses. It was hard to figure out that she was shifting back and forth in Spanish or English purposefully or unknowingly. She was never being asked in order to respect her free will to write. Claudia was shy during class discussion as she never participated but her turning in work was really great. She loved to write and read but rarely talked to her friends. Ghasak, on the other hand, participated well in the discussion. Most of the time Ghasak had a great difficulty in expressing herself in English but she was not shy to participate. Her turning in work was excellent too. Like Claudia, Ghasak also knew how
Another interesting thing noticed was the length of their responses. All the three students produced more sentences while writing in their native language than in English as described Larrotta, C. (2009) in her study. All the three students also wrote more when ask prompts relating to their personal or general life than in science. A few cases Fabiola wrote a paragraph or more when explaining science concepts particularly late into the semester when she had enough practice writing in English. Sometimes, Claudia and Fabiola left their sentence unfinished or incomplete when writing in English. In Spanish sometimes they wrote a paragraph or more. Ghasak, on the other hand, wrote one sentence or two in response to several prompts. On a few occasions Ghasak was asked to explain the same response more the next day. This trend was noticed in almost all of the categories of dialogue journaling with Ghasak. Still an improvement was observed in English writing and in explaining science concepts. Claudia and Fabiola had more grammatical and spelling errors than Ghasak.

Another interesting thing noticed, was that Ghasak had more opportunity to speak and practice English language at home and outside the school than Claudia and Fabiola. Ghasak had an opportunity to watch more English TV channels than Arabic while Claudia and Fabiola watched more Spanish TV channels than English though they liked to watch more English TV channels. It was due to the availability of the Spanish TV channels at lower cost than Arabic ones. Most of the local Spanish TV channels are free while one Arabic TV Channel cast $ 20.00 a month. That provided Ghasak an opportunity to watch more English channels and practice English language. Ghasak also had some friends to practice English outside the school while Claudia and Fabiola had a few friends. Both of the students like to come to the school and learn and both had many friends. All the three students expressed their satisfaction for involvement in dialogue journaling.

Their communication was also respected as many assignments were planned and modified on the bases of students’ dialogue journals. When it was felt that students were having difficulty in a topic more time was allocated to that particular topic. On the whole dialogue journaling was a wonderful experience for the students and teacher.

**Suggestions for future researches**

For future researches it is suggested that ELLs should be engaged with English proficient students and teachers. That would provide an opportunity to ELLs to practice English with their fellow students. It would also provide them with an opportunity to become friends with their peers.

Dialogue journaling should become a norm in the classroom and more and more students should be involved. That might help in bell to bell teaching and might build a confidence in teaching learning process.

A comparison between students’ dialogue journals of one semester with the students of other semester should be done and then see the difference in the performance of two different types of the students sample.

**REFERENCES**


**Conclusion**

Larrotta, C. (2009) described that dialogue journaling was a wonderful tool for the second language acquisition. It was noticed that students who were engaged in dialogue journaling showed an improvement in their literacy skills than those who refused to write journals. Students showed confidence in dialogue journals and felt that they were being heard. Many students asked them to write a request for me to see.
Appendix 1. Ghasak - Fabiola writing.

My week went bully good. I did have a lot of work to do. I talk freely with my friend, and I don't think that I would get shy because they are my friend, and there is nothing would make me shy to talk about because nothing bad.

My weekend is so fun because I go to the fair with my family and I have fun in all the games is so fun. The next 2 days I go to the party the party is so fun too because we dance and have great time.

I cannot go to the open house because the teacher of English don't give me the paper in that day. I don't know and what time era.

In here I think the open house was in the day but is in thursday and I cannot come because in that time I don't know the time and what I like to come to the open house to see my grades but I cannot come.
Appendix 2. Claudia sample writing.

Las clases que me dieron este año son las que necesito para graduarme y aunque algunas no me gustan, las necesito pero yo esperaba que me dieran como gobierno, economía, salud, inglés II, pero yo pensaba que iba a ser más fácil y no es así ya que la mayoría de las clases son en inglés y aunque a veces me dejan escribir en español, no lo entiendo a muchas cosas de las que hablan y por eso es que se me hace más difícil pero por lo demás es lo que yo esperaba y quería y trataré de hacer el trabajo de mis clases lo mejor posible.

How was your week end and what did you do? lo que hice en mi fin de semana fue buscar un tema para escribir sobre el ya que en la clase de inglés II es lo que me pidieron para hablar sobre el y lo que hice fue buscar en la internet y sacar las ideas principales para después escribir más sobre ello y el tema que yo elegí para hablar fue sobre problemas familiares.

How was your day “yesterday” at school? Mi día ayer en la escuela fue bien, hice todo lo que me pidieron hacer y me dieron tarea.