

Dialogue Journal Keeping to Scaffold Five-Paragraph Writing

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Abstract:

Writing has an advantage over other skills as it provides second language users a chance to modify and polish their work before presenting it to the world. Writing seems to be the most important language skill in helping students to write their reports and assignments throughout their study in institution. A case study approach was used to examine the dialogue journal keeping techniques used by tutor in teaching five-paragraph writing to groups of Proficiency English 1 students studying in the local private institution of higher learning. It geared into the suitability of the methods used in enhancing undergraduates' ability in producing a five paragraphing essay. It was also hoped that this study could enlighten English tutors to opt for strategies in helping their students to write a good piece of essay during the assessment. The investigation was specifically conducted at the fresh SPM leavers and the dialogue journal keeping was introduced as part of the students' assignment to record their daily academic routine. The data collected and conclusions drawn were in line with the literature review and had shown that the undergraduates consistently need expert's guidance in their language learning. The goal is that English tutors will continue to learn effective methods for fostering the development of second language writing.

Key words: second language user, writing, dialogue journal keeping techniques, English.

1. Introduction

Most of the secondary school leavers would grumble when they have to write a continuous essay when attending the Proficiency English class in tertiary institution. To these students, essay writing is a task they would prefer not to do if they had the choice. They are not sure how to generate and organise their ideas, how to fluently express themselves, to punctuate correctly, to be grammatical at all times and complete the task on the time given. These requirements of course become a hindrance to the process of producing a good essay. At tertiary level students are expected to write a five paragraph essay writing of not less than 350 words in length and an article report in not less than 250 words within one and half hours. This usually comes as a shock to most of the fresh secondary students who just join university mainly for those who do not have a good command of English language. This is because at the upper secondary level (SPM) the syllabus for the writing component comprises of continuous writing in English language paper which they are required to answer one question out of five choices. They could opt for one – a narrative, descriptive, argumentative, expository/factual and open-ended essay.

Students at the tertiary level find writing the most challenging task in Proficiency English language paper (Section 2 Writing) which is similar as MUET (Malaysian University English Test) because they are required to answer both questions without any choices and this section is compulsory. The questions are divided into two genres as report (article) and argumentative essay writing. The format of the essay is of the students' choice as they have to produce pieces of five paragraph essays. Rubrics followed the MUET marking as there are six bands where the highest is Band 6 and the lowest is Band 1. The mark is awarded based on expression marking whereby the tutors will follow the standard specific MUET

marking band. Normally, these students will be in either the second or third categories and hardly have high achievers in the first two categories.

2. Statement of Problems

Writing is becoming a key determinant in the academic opportunities awarded to students beyond tertiary. Educators are currently facing the challenge of adopting and developing a wide range of methods in teaching writing in the target language. Most of the Malaysian students do not seem to be able to attain reasonable English literacy even after going through 11 years of learning English in school (Naginder 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal & Kesumawati Abu Bakar 2008 in Normazidah, Koo & Hazita 2012). The commitment to address this problem is given the utmost importance by the government. As announced in the 2011 Budget, the government is bringing in 375 native-speaking teachers to teach English in schools (Normazidah, Koo & Hazita 2012). It is more alarming to learn that many form five students inclusive those from international schools struggle with even basic English grammar.

At tertiary level, the ability to generate well organised and coherent essays is expected. Most of the course work assessments and examinations are in essay form, therefore, effective writing skills are essential to the students. In fact, mastering the basic structure of an essay with its emphasis on a clear point and well organised, logical support, will help almost every kind of writing that a person does. Thus, learning to write effectively has major significances for academic. Writing is a complex process and skills which cannot be learnt overnight. It requires practices and strategies as students need to explore ideas and thoughts as well as the language. The common complaint among tertiary English language tutors is that students are weak and unable to produce a good piece of

five paragraph essay. According to the results obtained in SPM English, MEC pointed students have lower scored obtained in their writing paper. Approximately two thirds of the students in this institution have a writing score below the proficient level based on the MUET (Malaysian University English Test) result analysis in Paper 4 (Writing) from End Year 2009 till Mid Year 2011.

Due to lack of training and resources in teaching L2 writing to ESL students, sentence level word for word translation is the most prevailing writing instruction for English learners (Tsui 2000, cited in Julie 2007). Hayashi (2004) stated researchers have identified the following problems at the secondary level. Most of the writing instruction focused on grammar with error free text and vocabulary drilling under close guidance instead of allowing students to write freely and explore writing on their own. Furthermore, teachers have not provided an environment that enables students to produce English sentences on their own. They have not established an instructional approach for ESL students to take risks with written English. Writing instruction has not been studied extensively to determine the best practices in teaching ESL students the five paragraph essay at tertiary. This research will help to fill the gap in ESL writing research by exploring effective writing methods for ESL students at tertiary. The main, practical goal of this work is to provide tutors of ESL students some concrete strategies that will improve the writing performance of their students through the use of dialogue journal approach.

3. Research Objectives

This research will try to figure out the effective teaching methods and the type, quality and impact of feedback during writing. It is hoped that the findings will contribute some apprehension into the writing processes of ESL students to

achieving high scores on the Proficiency English Paper (Section 2 Writing). It is also for English language tutors to discern and obtain insights into students' writing, their attitude and problems during the writing process.

4. Research questions

From the objectives above, two research questions were framed to help the researchers to evaluate the credibility of journal keeping in improving the students' writing ability:

1. Could the dialogue journal keeping help ESL students in developing ideas for five-paragraphing writing?
2. How effective is dialogue journal keeping help improve the writing ability of ESL tertiary students in a private institution?

5. Literature Review

Graham (2006) uses a meta-analysis to affirm strategic instruction in teaching writing in general can have a strong impact. It is maintained over a period of time in improving students' writing performance like writing quality, lengths, revisions and elements. There are a myriad of research studies on teaching writing to general English population in American schools, namely Baudrand-Aertker (in Macaro 2003), Bayer (1999), Marchisan and Alber (2001), Herter (1998) and Graves (1990, cited in Julie 2007). These empirical studies examined six major writing instructional approaches employed in American schools: dialogue journal, portfolios, writer's workshop, process writing with multiple revisions, the involvement of the writing instructor's writing and learning with the students as well as feedbacks.

Macaro (2003) concluded that dialogue journals are an effective instructional strategy for developing writing proficiency of students in high institution because it provides

ample opportunities for students to practise writing skills. To illustrate, Baudrand-Aertker (in Macaro 2003, cited in Julie 2007) used a pre-post test design, with no comparison group, to examine the effects of dialogue journal on writing of 21 junior year students in high school grades. Teachers would help students develop these skills by providing opportunities for meaningful journal writing. These diaries were then shown to the teacher who responded to the content in writing. If students misspelled words the teacher would use the correct word in his/her response, but would never marked or corrected their journals. It provides self reflection of what has happened on a particular day and students are encouraged to write freely thus encouraging the development of flow in writing. The evidence demonstrated significant effect on students writing progress over a nine month period when using dialogue journals. In other words, students responded positively over the dialogue journal writing and were less restrained because of fear of making grammatical mistakes.

One implication of Baudrand-Aertker's research seems to suggest more teaching strategies that focus more on improving students' mastery of writing content and less on teaching to the test. As Fu (2000) states learning how to write is like learning a foreign language or playing a piano; it needs to be practiced daily, should reflect comprehensive thinking processes, and possess a good grasp of language usage. However, the drawbacks to this writing are that students would not enhance their vocabularies or focus on new grammar structures. Therefore, this type of writing is not considered a learning device (Macaro 2003, cited in Julie 2007). In addition, dialogue journals do not have a specific audience in mind (Galien 2001). Therefore, students would not be able to practise writing with specific readers in mind.

Bayer (1999, in Julie 2007) addressed the practice of writer's workshop in a study that conducted with first grade students. The purpose of the study was to compare effects on

the first grade students' writing attitude and writing related self efficacy at the beginning and ending of participation in a writer's workshop programme. Three major findings were reported: significant, positive increase in students' perception of writing, doubling in the number of students waiting for writing time, and a forty six percent increase in students reporting a liking for writing. Bayer (1999) contends that teachers who use writer's workshops with first grade students can reap substantial academic rewards.

6. Research Methodology

This study was conducted as a mixed-mode research comprises sample observation and effectiveness testing. The experimental group was pre-tested in the beginning of the research and the respondents were assigned with the treatment (dialogue journal writing). The respondents were then post tested in the final-term examination. Meanwhile, the control group, which comprises of thirty one students, was not assigned with similar treatment but they were treated through everyday writing lessons. However, they were pre-tested and post tested in similar way as the experimental group. A document of students' final exam scripts was collected as a source to provide valuable information in helping the researchers to determine the effectiveness of the writing approach that have been taught to help students master their writing of five paragraph essay. Samples were collected and rated by another rater to identify the differences in students' writing.

7. Sampling Methodology

The setting of the research is a local private higher institution in Selangor, Malaysia. The institution consists of two campuses with whole population approximately 9000 students from different courses. The students' population was made up of

90% Malay, 2% Chinese, 5% Indian and the remaining 3% from other ethnic group. This institute is located in the suburban area near Kuala Selangor, Malaysia, with a majority of the students come from well-educated family of high income group.

This research site was chosen based on the availability of the samples and with the convenience of gathering of data as the researchers was teaching at the institution. Besides, the institution is offering numerous courses in which all students are compulsory to attend Proficiency English classes without referring to the result obtained in their SPM English paper. Samples of this study were selected based on the researchers' knowledge of the population as the sample groups were easily accessible and were familiar to the researchers.

This research site was chosen with an intention to examine the teaching of using dialogue journal in generating the students' writing skills at this university in term of organisation and arrangement of ideas in a piece of writing. It looked into the formality of guidance given in enhancing undergraduates' ability in mastering the five paragraph essay writing. It was hoped that this study will enlighten English tutors in guiding fresh SPM students the proper strategies in writing a good piece of five paragraph essay for formal assessment.

Two groups of students namely the experimental group (DPPS G1) which comprised of forty-two students while the control group (DPPS G2) comprised of thirty-one students. Both groups were taking similar field of studies in Diploma of Education in Pre-school Studies. In the first semester of their tertiary education, both groups were assigned to take up Proficiency English 1 as a university compulsory course.

8. Procedures

The researchers administered Pre-test 1 on the target group at the beginning of the research. The students were asked to write

a free essay entitled “Myself”. Here, the students were asked to write about themselves and about their family members. Besides that, the students’ writing were observed and marked. This was to enable the researchers to identify the strengths and weaknesses among the students and to enable the researchers to identify the students’ writing ability within a stipulated time. The essay was collected immediately at the end of the lesson and they were assessed to determine their level of proficiency.

Pre-test 2 was assigned to the students’ writing ability after certain chapters taught in class. The students were required to write another free essay entitled “Dreams”. The students work were collected and marked before returning to them. The students were notified on what their main weaknesses were and they were asked to do more practice on the subject matter. The students were introduced with dialogue journal writing as the treatment after the pre-tests in order to identify the effectiveness of journal keeping in improving students’ writing ability.

Post-test was used to identify the students’ progress after they had been assigned with the treatment. In post-test, the students were asked to write story starting with: “I finally realized my dream” during the final-term examination. The students were required to write more than three hundred and fifty words in forty-five minutes. The students were not allowed to bring the test home and they will be sitting in an examination setting.

9. Data Analysis

The data for the students’ performance and test scores were presented in the form of tables through the tabulation of figures by using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The data presented helped the researchers to find out if the scores for the tests could be improved through dialogue journal

keeping which would encourage them to write more in the target language as aimed.

10. Research Findings

10.1 Findings for DPPS G1

10.1.1 Pre-test 1

		Statistic	Std. Error	
Pretest 1	Mean	55.17	2.474	
	95% Lower Bound			
	Confidence Interval for Mean	50.17		
	Upper Bound	60.16		
	5% Trimmed Mean	54.94		
	Median	51.50		
	Variance	257.020		
	Std. Deviation	16.032		
	Minimum	27		
	Maximum	86		
	Range	59		
	Interquartile Range	28		
	Skewness	.202		.365
	Kurtosis	-1.120		.717

Table 10.1(a): Description of Statistic for Pre-test 1 (DPPS G1)

From Table 10.1(a), the researchers found that the maximum mark scored by the students of DPPS G1 is 86 while the lowest is 27 marks. The different range of marks scored by these students is 59. The level of proficiency among the students is lower intermediate where the percentage of passes based on the SPM English paper is only 29%. The mean of this pre-test is 55.17 while the standard deviation is only 16.032.

			Case Number	Value
Pretest 1	Highest	1	30	86
		2	41	83
		3	27	80
		4	39	80
		5	5	77(a)
	Lowest	1	9	27
		2	12	33
		3	3	33
		4	37	37
		5	28	37(b)

Table 10.1 (b): Extreme Values

a Only a partial list of cases with the value 77 are shown in the table of upper extremes.

b Only a partial list of cases with the value 37 are shown in the table of lower extremes.

10.1.2 Pre-test 2

The mean shown in Table 10.1 (c) is around 44.17 which is lower than the previous pre-test. The standard deviation is 13.438. The majority of the students scored above 40, which was set as the passing marks for the students in their writing test (refer to Appendix 1). Fifteen students scored between 50 to 55 marks while another eighteen students failed in this pre-test.

		Statistic	Std. Error
Pretest 2	Mean	44.17	2.074
	95% Lower Bound		
	Confidence Interval for Mean	39.98	
	Upper Bound		
		48.35	
	5% Trimmed Mean	44.24	
	Median	50.00	
	Variance	180.581	
	Std. Deviation	13.438	
	Minimum	16	
	Maximum	70	
	Range	54	

Interquartile Range	21	
Skewness	-.288	.365
Kurtosis	-.904	.717

Table 10.1 (c): Description of Statistic for Pre-test 2 (DPPS G1)

10.1.3 Post-test

The researchers identified that the score was inconsistent or irregular. One of the reasons could be due to some respondents who did not practise journal writing. While the extreme cases which have a higher score could be due to the ability to apply their previous knowledge into writing.

		Statistic	Std. Error
Posttest	Mean	52.24	3.033
	95% Lower Bound		
	Confidence Interval for Mean	46.11	
	Upper Bound	58.36	
	5% Trimmed Mean	51.78	
	Median	57.00	
	Variance	386.479	
	Std. Deviation	19.659	
	Minimum	17	
	Maximum	93	
	Range	76	
	Interquartile Range	35	
	Skewness	.067	.365
	Kurtosis	-.740	.717

Table 10.1 (d): Description of Statistic for Post-test (DPPS G1)

Hence, the ability to write in the target language improved tremendously because students could write longer essay compared to the previous tests. In the previous tests, the students could only write between 150 and 175 words, however, in the post-test, the students were able to elaborate the main ideas using their own words in the continuous writing. The mean score for the post test shows 52.24 and the standard deviation for the test of this experimental group is 19.659 as shown in the table.

10.2 Findings for DPPS G2

The students in the control groups (DPPS G2) had been given the pre and post-tests without the treatment (dialogue journal). The control groups were assigned with only daily English lessons writing approach where the tutor had used different approaches in teaching. The analyses of the data from the pre-tests and post-tests administered are shown below.

10.2.1 Pre-test 1

In this pre-test, the students were assigned with similar writing test as in the second pre-test of the experimental groups. The students of this control group were asked to write an essay entitled “Dreams”. The students’ writing was marked by the teacher teaching both the controlled groups with the assistance of the researchers. The progress of the students is illustrated in Table 10.2 (a). The table shows the mean of scores which is 58.52 and the median is at 60. The highest mark scored by the students in this class is 91 while the lowest mark scored by the students is 0. The standard deviation shown above is at 17.899 and the percentage of passes in this pre-test is around 97% with thirty students scoring above the passing marks.

		Statistic	Std. Error
Pretest 1	Mean	58.52	3.215
	95% Lower Bound		
	Confidence Interval for Mean	51.95	
	Upper Bound	65.08	
	5% Trimmed Mean	59.15	
	Median	60.00	
	Variance	320.391	
	Std. Deviation	17.899	
	Minimum	0	
	Maximum	91	
	Range	91	
	Interquartile Range	20	
	Skewness	-.653	.421
	Kurtosis	2.742	.821

Table 10.2 (a): Description of Statistic for Pre-test 1 (DPPS G2)

10.2.2 Post-test

In the post test, the students of DPPS G2 were post-tested based on the final-term examination. The students were given similar essay title as of the experimental group to write in about three hundred and fifty words. The students had sat for the test in an examination setting during the final-term examination and the students’ achievements were marked as follow:

		Statistic	Std. Error
Posttest	Mean	49.10	2.481
	95% Lower Bound Confidence Interval for Mean	44.03	
	Upper Bound	54.16	
	5% Trimmed Mean	49.70	
	Median	48.00	
	Variance	190.890	
	Std. Deviation	13.816	
	Minimum	0	
	Maximum	76	
	Range	76	
	Interquartile Range	8	
	Skewness	-.862	.421
	Kurtosis	4.710	.821

Table 10.2 (b): Description of Statistic for Post Test (DPPS G2)

The mean of this post test decreased compared to the previous pre-test. The mean score is at 49.10 while the highest mark is 76 while the minimum score is 0. The standard deviation for this post test is about 13.816 and there were about two students who failed in the post test.

10.3 Paired Samples Test Results

10.3.1 DPPS G1

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Pretest2 Posttest	-8.071	10.593	1.635	-11.372	-4.770	-4.938	41	.000

Table 10.3 (a): Paired Sample Test for Pre-test and Post-test for DPPS G1

Paired Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 Pretest2 & Posttest	42	.861	.000

Table 10.3 (b): Paired Samples Correlations for DPPS G1

Table 10.3 (a) showed the paired differences and the results were also indicating a significant difference between the means score of -8.071 which was smaller as to compare to the control group. The results indicated a significant difference in an overall writing performance in both pre-test and post-test at .05 level, $t(df = 41) = -4.938, p = .000 < .05$.

10.3.2 DPPS G2

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Pretest Posttest	9.419	17.449	3.134	3.019	15.820	3.006	30	.005

Table 10.3 (c): Paired Sample Test for Pre-test and Post-test for DPPS G2

Paired Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 Pretest & Posttest	31	.418	.019

Table 10.3 (d): Paired Samples Correlations for DPPS G2

Table 10.3 (c) showed the paired differences and the results were also indicating a significant difference between the means score of 9.419 which was bigger as to compare to the experimental group. The results indicated a significant difference in an overall writing performance in both pre-test and post-test at .05 level, $t(df = 30) = 3.006, p = .005 < .05$.

11. Discussion of the Findings

The results of this study suggest that the tutors should be aware of the approaches to be applied into teaching writing at tertiary level. The importance of five paragraphing essay writing is to enable writers to deliver their messages successfully. A variety of approaches could be applied on students in mixed ability groups. Massive practices on textual organisation and writing style could be emphasised. Tutors could encourage students to write longer text gradually after a series of practices assigned. On the other hand, students could also work in group to modify as well as lengthen their writing after their language proficiency improved. Most of the students would not like to see their essays to be underlined or to be changed to the teachers' point of view. Therefore, in journal writing, students must be assured that their journal will not be corrected based on word-to-word marking. The teacher needs to look at the overall problems highlighted and provide comments at the bottom of each piece of work. Chitavelu (1995, 194) views that besides correcting errors, a teacher should also respond to the pupils' writing as a piece of communication. Chitavelu adds that providing support for thinking by asking question, and making comments will be far a positive approach to highlight the students' errors rather than correcting each word. Correction must always be a two-way communication or the students will never know what their mistakes are and how to correct them.

12. Implication of the Study

As mentioned by Graham and Perin (2007), there is no single approach to writing instruction will meet the needs of all students. Moreover, they substantiate that to some extent these techniques may be effective but have not yet been studied rigorously. Therefore, there is a need for more research on a larger group of students in either other tertiary or adult second language learners. As carried in this research, two strategies namely process writing and collaborative writing were identified. Therefore, some other strategies could also be applied in the future research as mentioned by Graham and Perin. An eclectic approach should be used by tutors and practitioners today in order to help tertiary second language learners in improving their writing skills.

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Appendix 1

Data Analysis of DPPS G1

Comparative English Language paper results of DPPS G1

Name	Pre-test 1	Pre-test 2	Post-test
S1M 1	47	50	63
S1M 2	70	50	60
S1M 3	33	24	50
S1M 4	63	56	60
S1M 5	77	64	83
S1M 6	63	40	50
S1M 7	47	38	30
S1M 8	40	44	57
S1M 9	27	22	23
S1M 10	67	52	57
S1M 11	43	32	27
S1M 12	33	16	17
S1M 13	63	50	67
S1M 14	47	32	53
S1M 15	67	52	40
S1M 16	43	32	30
S1M 17	37	28	40
S1M 18	63	56	50
S1M 19	50	50	60
S1M 20	70	52	67
S1M 21	53	34	43
S1M 22	37	50	60
S1M 23	60	54	70
S1F 1	60	58	77

S1F 2	37	28	30
S1F 3	43	32	27
S1F 4	80	52	60
S1F 5	37	26	27
S1F 6	40	26	23
S1F 7	86	70	93
S1F 8	77	58	67
S1F 9	70	52	60
S1F 10	50	34	40
S1F 11	67	56	73
S1F 12	50	24	33
S1F 13	73	56	70
S1F 14	37	50	73
S1F 15	47	50	27
S1F 16	80	66	93
S1F 17	60	52	67
S1F 18	83	50	57
S1F 19	40	37	40

*S=Student; 1=Group 1; M=Male; F=Female

Appendix 2

Data Analysis of DPPS G2

Comparative English Language paper results of DPPS G2

Name	Pre-test 1	Post-test
S2M 1	43	40
S2M 2	91	38
S2M 3	54	44
S2M 4	43	48
S2M 5	66	70
S2M 6	51	52
S2M 7	0	0
S2M 8	89	76
S2M 9	51	70
S2M 10	63	50
S2M 11	60	70
S2M 12	43	70
S2M 13	43	52
S2F 1	80	44

S2F 2	63	48
S2F 3	60	44
S2F 4	63	50
S2F 5	60	48
S2F 6	54	64
S2F 7	51	40
S2F 8	46	52
S2F 9	69	46
S2F 10	60	42
S2F 11	69	48
S2F 12	49	44
S2F 13	83	48
S2F 14	51	44
S2F 15	49	40
S2F 16	86	48
S2F 17	77	48
S2F 18	47	44

***S=Student; R=Rasional; M=Male; F=Female**