

## A POST-PROCESS APPROACH: E-MAIL DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING AND ITS IMPACT ON QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' WRITING

*Malihe Rezaei*  
*Mazandaran University, Iran*

*Elham Manzari*  
*Shiraz University, Iran*

### *Abstract*

E-mail Dialogue Journal Writing as a form of post-process approach provides students with the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with a native speaker, thus, receive authentic language input which develops their literacy skills. Despite its remarkable potentials, E-DJW practices have been rare in Asian contexts at school-level. In an attempt to bridge this gap, the present study was set out to address the impact of E-DJW on the quality and quantity of students' writing development. The findings of the study revealed that there was a lot of topic extension between the parties in the dialogue journal writing activity and the content of the writings was principally improved. A progress was also observed in the length of the entries, though not steadily. This study hopes to raise both students' and teachers' awareness of E-DJW as a writing activity which provides students with a non-threatening environment which fosters learning and makes them aware of the purpose of writing.

**Keywords:** E-mail Dialogue Journal Writing (E-DJW), writing quality, writing quantity, post-process approach

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Direct all correspondence to:

Maliheh Rezaei, [maliherezai@yahoo.com](mailto:maliherezai@yahoo.com)

First floor, red building, Opposit to the 2nd watching tower, Sarv St., Rahmat Bulvaord, Shiraz, Iran

Elham Manzari, [elham\\_manzari@yahoo.com](mailto:elham_manzari@yahoo.com)

zip code 71877-88444, Apartment Building Danesh., Lane 6, Rahbarmah St., Malliabad St., Shiraz, Iran

## **INTRODUCTION**

As in many EFL contexts, in the Iranian educational context, students are not interested and not motivated to write; they write only when they are asked to and for their exams. Specifically high school students' writing is poor in different aspects of content, organization, language and vocabularies although they pass several writing courses and learn how to develop well-developed writings. One of the main reasons for the weakness in writing is that they lack enough practice of writing which consequently hinders their progress in writing skill. Another reason is that unlike ESL students in English-speaking countries, EFL learners in Iran lack exposure to English outside the classroom.

Similarly, writing practices in EFL contexts have consistently posed major challenges to both educators and learners due to their de-contextualized nature which portrays an aimless and unrewarding view of writing (Faigly, Daly & Witte, 1981). As a result, foreign language educators have long been faced with the dilemma of what writing activities to incorporate into their courses to enhance students' written competence. Recently, however, there has been a shift towards more free writing activities such as dialogue journal writing (DJW) which is a more holistic writing practice and introducing it in EFL writing pedagogy creates both theoretical and practical practices. DJW provides the students with the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening atmosphere, interact with a proficient English speaker, use reading and writing in purposeful ways and provides a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing that are done in school (Peyton, 1987). So, DJW via email is integrated in this study because it contributes to a purposeful use of writing in school environment and researchers hope to help students improve the quality and quantity of their dialogue journals and provide them with a non-threatening learning context and exposure to authentic language by asking them to write with native speaker e-pals through email which not only increases students' willingness and motivation to write but also raises their awareness of the writing purpose.

## **DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING WITHIN POST-PROCESS APPROACH**

Growing concerns about the interactive and social nature of writing has given momentum to the emergence of post-process approach to writing which primarily focuses on the social and cultural aspects of writing rather than the process and product of the written language (Atkinson, 2003a; He,

2005). Post-process perspectives such as Sociocultural perspective, are "founded on understanding of language as a socially situated practice" (Mirhosseini, 2009). Sociocultural Theory (SCT), as its name speaks, places great emphasis on the interpersonal environment particularly the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which operates on the assumption that development occurs as the result of meaningful verbal interaction between novices and more knowledgeable interlocutors such as parents, peers, or teachers (Vygotsky, 1978) (also see Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976; Lantolf, 2000).

DJW is one of the methods of providing students with collaborative learning in writing classes. Dialogue journals are defined as "written conversations in which a learner and teacher or other writing partners communicate daily, weekly or on a schedule that fits the educational setting over a semester, school year or course" (Razak & Asmawi, 2004, p. 19). So, students are not restricted by teacher or curriculum-established topics or genres that must be covered in sequence. They can write on important topics happen to them in their daily lives (Peyton, 1987). During the DJW process, teachers or more capable peers regularly comment on different aspects of a learner's writing, responding or posing questions and might introduce their own dialogue topics. Thus, DJW "supports the writing process by providing an authentic two-way written interaction between writing partners" (Liao & Wong, 2010, pp. 141-142). In DJW, as emphasized by SCT, the process of interaction between two or more participants allows the negotiation and communication of meaning through written messages so the two parties construct knowledge together. The other benefits of DJW reported by many researchers in the field include development of accuracy and linguistic competence (Pi, 2002), development of writing fluency (Holmes & Moulton, 1997), reduction of writing apprehension (Liao & Wong, 2010), language function development (Nassaji & Cumming, 2000), and increase in students' motivation (Liao & Wong, 2010; Lucas, 1990).

## **E-MAIL DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING**

The social activity on which SCT centers has now expanded to not only classroom interactions, but also Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) context (Warschauer, 1995, 1997). Barnard and Campbell (2005) state that in writing classrooms, writing process "is mediated both by the available cultural tools such as pen and paper and electronic media" (p. 89). Thus computers can be used to scaffold writing development by writing easier, writing more, writing differently, and writing better (Pennington, 1996). Due to the growing use of computer technology, students may prefer to record their insights or reflections in some electronic form. Of the

electronic media, e-mail makes writing a purposeful learning experience and offers better opportunities for interaction. It specifically makes it possible to write communicatively and collaboratively with a native speaker so the language input received is authentic.

Email Dialogue Journal Writing (E-DJW) is a form of DJW done via email. Several studies have been conducted to examine the efficacy of E-DJW on students' writing. Stapa and Al-Bakri (2001) conducted a study to four male and female Malaysian university students to see the effectiveness of email as a tool in DJW. The findings of the study revealed an all around improvement including content, language and vocabulary in students' writing. In her study, Wang (1994) observed the additional advantages of E-DJW over the traditional DJW. Findings of this his study showed that the ESL students in the E-DJW group asked more questions, used more language functions and adapted more conversational tone in their language than did the traditional group.

Another group of studies have been involved in exchanges between L2 learners and native speakers of the given language. Conducting a study on E-DJW on her Spanish students, Gonzales-Bueno (1998) found that students used E-DJW as a tool to practice English language and communicate without the fear of making mistakes since mistakes are tolerated and emphasis is on content and development of ideas than linguistic form. This experience improved the overall quality of the students' writing. Pi (2002) examined the effect of email interaction on students' English DJW. The interaction of three Taiwanese elementary students with native English speakers in America revealed a great development in syntactic and lexical complexity and sentence length in students' writing.

DJW also motivates students to write more. Some researchers have examined the influence of DJW on writing fluency (see for example, Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Lin & Yang, 2010; Yoshihara, 2008). However, as discussed by Yoshihara (2008), the connection is usually taken for granted and there have been few quantitative studies.

Besides its advantages, DJW practices may pose some problems on students. To cite an example, in Othman et al.'s study (2007), some of the participants expressed email writing activity as a burdensome and time-consuming activity. The results also indicated that the students did not take these activities seriously and as important as the assignments in core academic subjects. So, the experience led to little progress in their writing ability. Technical difficulties and lack of typing skills (Othman et al, 2007; Wang, 1994), among the other things, are reported as other sources of difficulty in E-DJW.

To sum up, the studies reviewed above highlight the significance of E-DJW in generating a positive learning experience which leads to writing improvement in different aspects of writing such as content, language, organization and vocabulary. However, the problem with some of these studies is that they have viewed dialogue journals as an instructional strategy in teaching literacy skills such as writing. According to Staton (1987), this view is limited in the sense that it treats DJW as a de-contextualized practice rather than a complex strategy deeply embedded in the social context in which it occurs. Additionally, most of these studies are conducted to university-level students. So, the present study intends to use E-DJW as a holistic approach and investigates improvements that may occur in the Iranian educational context at school-level. More research in E-DJW will deepen our understanding of the effect of E-DJW on students' writing improvement. In particular, this study was set out to see the effect of E-DJW on quality and quantity of the students' dialogue journals. To put simply, the researchers try to answer the following questions:

1. Does E-DJW contribute to an improvement in students' writing skill concerning the writing qualities?
2. Does E-DJW contribute to an improvement in students' writing skill concerning the writing quantity?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

In this study, the participants were four female high school students. The participants of the study volunteered to take part in the study since they had experience of communicating with email, thus, using email did not pose any problem for them. Of the four participants, two (Shadi & Saye) were non-native speakers of English (Native speakers of Farsi) (NNS), studying at a bilingual school in Shiraz, Iran and two (Sara & Mana) were Iranian but native speakers (NS) of English studying at a high school in Canada. The four participants formed two pairs each containing a NNS and a NS student; to illustrate: Shadi and Sara (pair 1) and Saye and Mana (pair 2). The purpose for choosing these native students was that, though grown up in Canada, they had studied in the same bilingual school that the NNS students studied for a few years and had a close relationship with them, thus, were willing to communicate with them. The participants' willingness to participate was particularly important since it ensured their commitment to the experiment under investigation. As for the proficiency level, the NNS participants were at higher intermediate level.

## Data collection Procedure

As the first major step in conducting the study, an informal session was held between the researchers and the NNS students in which the NNS students were explained and briefed about the concept of E-DJW and what they were expected to do throughout the experimental period, the duration of which was 7 weeks. The students were supposed to write at least three times a week to their e-pals. A major significance of the study was that, this study was done during the summer break so any improvement on the part of the students could not be attributed to the writing classes they normally attend during the school semesters.

As E-DJW is a free-writing activity, the students were allowed to write on self-generated topics of interest. They were also informed that the focus would rather be on the fluency than accuracy. Once the NNS students started writing to their NS e-pals, they were asked to mail the messages not only to their e-pals but also to the researchers. So, the researchers could keep track of the messages and save them for future analysis and retrieval. The turn-taking EDJW sessions continued for eight weeks and a total of 50 messages were collected.

## Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed by two raters (researchers) using an adapted Qualitative Writing Scale developed by Wong (1989), also known as Wong Scale, which allowed examination of writings across six band scores of *Good* (5-6), *Fair* (3-4), and *Weak* (1-2) at four important levels of writing qualities, namely, overall effectiveness, content, language and vocabulary. The overall effectiveness shows the quality of presenting ideas to the reader; the content reflects the development of the areas of interest; the language reflects the control of sentence structures and grammar and finally the vocabulary reflects the development of simple words to complex words.

The raw scores were then subjected to descriptive statistics so the mean for the dialogue journal entries showed the degree to which the NNS students' writings had developed qualitatively and quantitatively.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Writing Quality

Table 1 shows the NNSs raw scores regarding the overall writing effectiveness.

**TABLE 1**  
 Overall effectiveness of the NNS students' writing skill

Journal entries	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Shadi	3	3	3	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	4	4	4	4.5	4.5	4	4.5	4.5	4.5	5	5	5
Saye	3	2.5	3	3	3	3	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	4	3.5	4	4	4	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	5

Based on Wong Sscale (1989), the data reveals an improvement in overall effectiveness of the participants' writing skill. The scores increased gradually from the initial to the final dialogue journal entries for both NNS students. The Mean for entries showed that Shadi had more improvement (M=4) than Saye (M=3.7). After that, the data was analyzed regarding all writing qualities, that is, overall effectiveness, content, language and vocabulary the results of which is presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
 Mean for the writing qualities

Participants	Mean			
	Overall Effectiveness	Content	Language	Vocabulary
Shadi	4	5	3.6	4.1
Saye	3.7	4	3	3.8

As shown in table 2, the Mean for the NNS students had the highest improvement in the content of the writings (Shadi 1=5 / Saye 2=4). On the other hand, the least improvement was seen in the category of Language (Shadi 1=3.6 / Saye 2=3) because it is argued that lack of overt error correction is an essential characteristic of DJW (Peyton, 1987; Gonzales-Bueno, 1998). Yet, the improvement was significant enough. Though the students' errors were not corrected explicitly, the authentic language that the NNS students exposed to was served as a model of correct language use. But it is worth mentioning that special features of CMC context, the use of special abbreviations and acronyms such as 'lol' and informal language (how r u?) and features of speaking (Warschauer, 2007; Lingley, 2005) caused the language produced to be informal. Stapa and Al-Bakri (2001) argue that authenticity of language signifies that the "writing activity is truly

communicative", thus, the students "are communicating because they need to and want to communicate" (p. 34).

DJW is a free writing activity, thus, focus on form is not emphasized. If the novice writers care too much about grammar accuracy, they feel frustrated and E-DJW may not be as effective as expected. As it was observed in the result of this study, when focus on form reduced, an additional effort was made to enrich the content and development of the ideas. Unlike the results found by others (see for example Lin & Yang, 2010), there was a lot of topic extension between the two parties in DJW. Additionally, not only more ideas were presented by the participants over a period of time but also they talked about more complicated issues (Appendix 1). For instance, Shadi's first and second entries were limited to the way she spends her summer vacation whereas her final entry dealt with her answer to her NS partner about her idea about the new fashion, famous brands and cell phones. The writing topics revealed that through dialogue journals students tend to write on topics that are important to them as they occur in their lives. Here, the participants started with writing about personal interests but steadily moved towards writing on general matters and world issues (Stapa & Al-Bakri, 2001).

Table 2 also shows that vocabulary is the second writing quality improved during the DJW practices (Shadi:  $M=4.1$ / Saye:  $M=3.8$ ). Both participants revealed a sufficient range of vocabulary which was gradually developed as they wrote more on complicated and advanced topics. Both the NNS students grasped the words they encountered in their NS partners' writings and tried to use them in their next writings.

### **Writing Quantity**

The data on the length of the NNS students' dialogue journal entries is shown in Appendix 1. An improvement was observed in participant's ability to write longer entries over time. The mean for the length of the dialogue journal entries for Shadi and Saye is 282 and 279.85, respectively. In general, this finding is line with the results found by other researchers (Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Lin & Yang, 2010; Yoshihara, 2008) and supports the idea that, concerning written fluency, DJW motivates students to write more.

Although the number of words in all the journal entries indicated an overall improvement, the improvement was not steady. For instance, Shadi's journal entry No. 16 contained 432 words whereas her journal entry No. 17 was limited to 327 words but it gradually increased to 402 words in the last



entry. The number of words in the students' dialogue journals does not increase steadily from the first to the last entry and this finding can be attributed to the writing topics. The data showed that the subjects wrote more on the current concerns in their lives such as school and university than world issues. So, it can be concluded that student write more when the topics are related to their concern; the topics that talking about them may have some consequences on their lives.

## CONCLUSION

E-DJW as a post-process approach to teaching and learning writing was implemented in this study and provided an interactive Sociocultural framework for student learning. Based on the results, the conclusion was drawn that email correspondence with native speaker pals, tolerance of the NNS students' mistakes and the topic of the students' interest could positively influence the NNS students' writing development qualitatively and quantitatively, in that, the students' writing proficiency improved in the aspects of content, language, and vocabulary as well as the length of the entries. So, this study provides useful insights for L2 writing instruction. The social aspect of writing is the key concept in post-process writing classrooms (He, 2005). It makes writing a contextualized and purposeful communicative activity. Teachers should be aware of these potentials. By setting up post-process writing classrooms, not only they help students to development their writing skill but also they increase students' social and cultural awareness of the world. The social and cultural awareness of a language is achieved via exposure to authentic language and results in "language appropriateness" (He, 2005; p. 38). Although the findings of this study suggest the application and the positive influence of E-DJW, due to the limited scope and sample size of the study, there is a need to conduct more post-process research to investigate whether E-DJW is suitable for L2 writing learners.

## THE AUTHORS

**Maliheh Rezaei** received her MA in TEFL in 2009 from Mazandaran University, Babolsar, Iran. She has been teaching EFL courses in different academic centers. She is currently working as a lecturer in different colleges in Shiraz, Iran. Her areas of interest include applied linguistics, sociocultural theory and particularly application of technology in EFL writing classes. She can be reached at [maliherezai@yahoo.com](mailto:maliherezai@yahoo.com); mobile number: 0917-706-2256; phone number:+98-711-7388521.

**Elham Manzari** received her MA in TEFL from Shiraz University in Shiraz, Iran in 2010. She has been teaching English for more than 15 years in different English institutes. She is currently working as a lecturer in Shiraz University, Iran. Her areas of interest include Computer-Mediated Communication and application of technology in writing classes specifically at high-school level. She can be reached at [elham\\_manzari@yahoo.com](mailto:elham_manzari@yahoo.com); mobile number: 0917-304-3404.

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