

# The Dialogue Journal: A Tool for Building Better Writers

My 95-year-old mother-in-law, Helen, is the only person I know who still writes old-fashioned “snail mail” letters. Everyone else communicates with me through email, chat, or even more briefly with Facebook posts. Attempts to get Helen to switch to email have been unsuccessful, as she prefers the concrete nature of letters to the abstraction of electronic communication. I can’t say I blame her. I’ve been writing letters since childhood and enjoy the physical act of writing and the mental act of composing a letter to someone specific.

Despite having a quiet life where each day is much like another, Helen is a good correspondent because she follows a simple but effective technique that I remember practicing when I began writing the annual obligatory “thank you” letters to relatives for birthday or Christmas gifts. Helen uses my latest letter as a template when writing back to me. Point by point, she responds to each of my chatty pieces of news: asking questions, offering opinions, requesting clarification, voicing appreciation, or

expanding on something I wrote. In this way she creates a dialogue between us, which ensures that our communication will continue even though she has little to contribute in terms of news and events due to the quiet routine of her life now. Simply through her keen interest and attention, she keeps the conversation going, and I am motivated to write back to her because of her lively responses. We look forward to reading each other’s letters, and our correspondence is like a face-to-face conversation in real shared time, instead of one on paper traveling halfway around the globe to arrive weeks later.

This kind of writing mimics speech and is authentic communication because there is a natural and genuine information gap just as in speaking when we ask someone for information we want or need to know. Helen tells me when she does not understand something I wrote, and I explain in my next letter. She asks for more information about my sisters or her son and his children, who don’t like to write as much as I do, and I tell her more the next time I write.

The conversational writing that develops between Helen and me has a counterpart in my English language learning classroom—dialogue journals.

### Taking written conversations into the language class

Often English language learners get more practice in speaking than writing because they usually participate in daily conversations in the classroom if not outside. To get the same practice with writing, they need to be writing as frequently and regularly as they speak (Holmes and Moulton 1997). Much like the discipline of regular physical exercise or playing a musical instrument, having a “routine writing workout” (Uduma 2011, 59) is a necessity for students. Dialogue journals provide the perfect means to this end, as the format of a journal creates an interaction similar to speech where the speaker/writer continually makes adjustments in order to be understood (Linnell 2010). Proponents of using the dialogue journal in the language classroom view it as “an informal written conversation between the students and the teacher” (Larrotta 2008, 21), and just as personal letters from my mother-in-law push me to write more, dialogue journals can motivate language learners to write more in English.

The word *journal* comes from the Latin *diurnal*, from day or daily. Originally religious, journals then became secular, as in daily records of accounts. Somewhere along the line the journal transformed itself into the diary—a personal, regularly written record of an individual life. In education, journals have been used across the disciplines and age groups for students to write down their reactions and reflections to what they are reading or hearing in class. Dialogue journals go further than regular journals as they function, as the name suggests, like written conversations between two people, most usually the teacher and the student. Typically, the student writes on a topic or topics of his or her own choosing, and the teacher writes an individual response. The language in a dialogue journal is closer to speech than to academic writing, so it permits an authentic, informal, lively conversation in writing between instructors and students (Uduma 2011; Werderich 2002). When students are not surrounded by an Eng-

lish language-rich environment within which to practice, dialogue journals can provide a substitute for actual conversation (Mansor et al. 2011).

Most often, dialogue journals are employed in English-language classes where the students need to understand the concept of communicating in writing and develop their writing skills. English language learners need frequent opportunities to practice speaking English freely without fear of being corrected in order to achieve oral fluency; similarly, they also need the chance to write freely, without inhibition, to promote fluency in writing. This requires that they write as much and as often as possible. Dialogue journals achieve this goal as they provide the means of frequent regular writing without fear of censure while the writer is having a natural conversation with another human being through the written word.

The goal of a dialogue journal “varies dramatically depending on whether the focus is on language structure, language for communication or language for empowerment” (Orem 2001, 73). Journals can function as a window into the learner’s mind if the teacher reads them, but they are mainly a place for students to keep an enduring record of what they have learned. Often it is in the act of writing a response that actual learning takes place, and ideally, this is how critical thinking develops. In a reading curriculum, journal writing gives students a way to engage with texts in a meaningful way that then can lead to critical literacy (Miller 2007).

Teachers of large classes cannot interact verbally with each of their students individually, but dialogue journals can allow insight into the issues and problems their students might be dealing with outside class as well as indicate how they are doing in class. Students appreciate the chance to communicate with the teacher one-on-one through their journals: it makes them feel that they are being heard, that they have a place in the class, and that they are known. Additionally, the dialogue journal provides a vehicle for shy students to talk (Larrotta 2008). Journal assignments also can be individualized to the differing needs or levels of the student (Linnell 2010).

Dialogue journals can also be places where students explore their thinking before class-

room discussions. Having the time to interact with a topic privately gives non-native English speakers the necessary time to gather their thoughts in preparation to speak. These discussions can be followed with further reflective journal entries. In this way, speaking and writing reinforce each other.

### **Who is the audience—the teacher, another adult, or a peer?**

The notion of audience is an important concept in written work as it dictates the style and tone and is the foundation of appropriate academic writing. It is also a difficult concept for many English language learners to grasp. Because dialogue journals are highly interactive, they help students keep their audience in mind and expand beyond their own private written world, which is particularly important with adolescents who tend to be inward-focused (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Orem 2001).

Traditionally, the audience of students' dialogue journals is the teacher. However, Holmes and Moulton (1997) explore whether feedback from native speaker volunteers or university student peers could be equally valuable as that from the teacher. With the responsibility of correction removed and the focus on communication, the responder no longer needs extensive knowledge of English grammar and writing rules. Indeed, for Peyton (2000), a journal partner need only be someone who is able to "enter into the journal interaction as a good conversationalist, an interesting writer, an engaged listener and a colleague" (6). For example, in an EFL class at a Malaysian university, students' journal entries were read and responded to by different peers in the classroom as well as by the teacher. This approach moved away from the more usual format of a journal between just two people as well as just between teacher and student. The task of writing and responding was shared with a greater number of people (Mansor et al. 2011).

In a classroom of adult immigrants in the United States, learners read sections from their journals out loud to their peers. Although very diverse in terms of language, culture, education, and professional experience, these students discovered they had similar interests and concerns through listening

to each other's writing. By sharing their lives and cultures, they developed a community and a tolerance for diversity. The instructor used themes from their journals for discussion and exchange of ideas as well as to create "situational dialogues" to aid in using English for their everyday lives (Kim 2005). However, it is a good idea for teachers to ask students if they would be comfortable reading their journals aloud in class to their peers and allow them to refuse if they want. There needs to be a foundation of trust among the group, particularly if the entries are very personal and revealing. Sometimes this trust is developed through the process of listening to the braver students reading first.

In an advanced university ESL composition course, students wrote their dialogue journals on an email listserv so the whole class could read them. Initially some were uneasy with sharing their writing, but they eventually became comfortable, and overall the class felt more bonded through the online journal (Goetsch 2001).

### **Freedom to become fluent**

The goal of the dialogue journal first and foremost is to encourage fluency before accuracy. Fluency is developed through writing to communicate and with the absence of the pressure to be technically correct in language use (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Holmes and Moulton 1997; Orem 2001; Larrotta 2008). Giving learners the chance to write about whatever they want is important. Instead of having to follow topics and a style set by the teacher or curriculum, they can experiment and play with the language, which allows them to learn independently and mature as writers both cognitively and linguistically. For this reason, teachers must resist the urge to control the students' writing and avoid the risk of stunting their growth (Holmes and Moulton 1997; Larrotta 2008).

It is not unusual in the language classroom to see learners struggling to find something to write about an assigned topic of little relevance to their lives, but when learners can write about what they know, they find they have a lot more to say. This engagement leads them to grapple with expressing new and complex ideas in English (Holmes and Moulton 1997; Kim 2005). In addition, the permission to

write freely about whatever they want prevents writer's block and reduces fear of writing. Students gain confidence as writers, become autonomous learners, and are more motivated to express themselves in writing (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Kim 2005; Uduma 2011).

To assist in generating student-generated topics, the teacher might suggest the class brainstorm a list of topics together. For example, the class might come up with topics such as sports, food, music, likes, and dislikes, and the teacher could also add additional topics such as teachers, a family member, or problems (Alexander 2001). If the teacher chooses to assign topics, they must be relevant to learners (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Orem 2001; Miller 2007). When the students write about something they have authority on, namely themselves and their lives, they develop a sense of agency and identity. The confidence that they gain as writers can make them better learners, and even shape who they are as members in the community of school.

I would argue that content-based teaching, where the content is literally the content of the students' lives and their perspectives, constitutes a pedagogy of voice that opens up the possibility for students to *be someone* in school and to learn. (Miller 2007, 27)

What happens in the classroom can also be a topic for dialogue journals (Werderich 2002), and what happens in dialogue journals can be sources of student-generated materials and themes for the classroom (Orem 2001). In this way the class and the journals inform and build on each other.

### **Building teacher-student relationships**

Dialogue journals are not only a way to improve student writing, but also a means for teachers to get to know their students and their learning processes, which helps teachers to better serve their learners' needs (Miller 2007; Hansen-Thomas 2003). In their turn, students are empowered by the relationship of trust and sense of autonomy that develops with their teacher through the dialogue journals (Yoshihara 2008). This strengthening of teacher-student relationships using dialogue journals similarly supports positive behavior and aids in achieving academic and social

success among at-risk and special needs populations (Regan 2003; Anderson et al. 2011).

### **Empowering learners through dialogue journals**

Too often, learners come to school only to be confronted with information and knowledge that appears devoid of context. They struggle to absorb facts and details that have no apparent relevance to their lives. Generally, knowledge is created through the connection between what is already known and new information that is being presented. Dialogue journals help to bridge that gap, as they are a place where learners draw on their personal funds of knowledge and make connections between what they know and what they are learning in class (Uduma 2011).

Dialogue journals are a way of bringing students' outside lives into the classroom, providing meaningful and rich material with which to work and consequently acting as a natural motivator. In a study implementing dialogue journals with Hispanic adults in an ESL community literacy program, Larrotta (2008) sought to find a way to link the classroom with students' lives outside as their language competency developed. Through the authentic communication of dialogue journals, she and her students learned more about each other's lives than would have been possible in a regular classroom. By experimenting in writing about themselves in their journals, the students moved towards literacy and the ability to use English successfully outside the classroom as well as in it. Forming these connections between life outside and inside class is especially important for adults who need to learn to have agency in all aspects of their daily lives as they adjust to a new culture and language.

Through exploration and reflection, learners construct identity and develop a sense of ownership of their lives. Journals give the space for learners to make meaning, represent and negotiate their identities, show agency, and examine relationships (Miller 2007; Kim 2005). Dialogue journals can help students become aware of their learning process and as a result learn better (Carroll and Mchawala 2001; Trites 2001). Journals can also be a place for learners to write about their problems and in the process find solutions. Young

and Crow (1992) advocate posting problem-solving steps on the walls of the classroom to keep these goals in their students' minds. These steps include identifying the problem, listing possible solutions and forecasting their consequences, selecting the best solution, making action plans, and coming up with alternative solutions. In participatory learning classrooms, this learner empowerment can be a goal of journal writing (Orem 2001).

### **Dislodging writer's block with dialogue journals**

Non-native speakers (and many native speakers) come to grief in writing because they employ their internal editor, or *monitor*, as Krashen (1992) termed it in his Monitor Hypothesis, too early in the writing process. This internal monitor judges the writing for technical accuracy. The monitor is exceedingly useful once text needs to be reviewed and revised, but if it steps in too soon, it paralyzes writers before they even begin and is often the cause of writer's block. Teachers use brainstorming before writing an essay in an attempt to bypass the monitor and dislodge the block; often, however, once the student begins to write an outline or first draft, the monitor is firmly back in place blocking the flow of ideas and opinions, resulting in writing that is stiff, artificial, and boring to read. Dialogue journals are the perfect antidote to writer's block as they are a place for students to write for fun, experimentation, and communication. Knowing they will not be corrected or graded allows learners to enjoy writing free from censorship or critique from their internal editors.

In class in front of their peers, it is easy for young learners to make superficial or limited responses to the teacher's questions. Having an audience of classmates, particularly adolescents who can be so critical of themselves or each other, creates self-consciousness and inhibition, and students resist thinking out loud for fear of making mistakes. However, in the privacy of the dialogue journal, students are willing to reflect more and let teachers gently push them to go deeper in analysis and make progress towards critical thinking through thoughtful questioning (Mizokawa and Hansen-Krening 2000; Kim 2005).

### **Responding to dialogue journals**

Instead of judging form as in other student written work, teachers respond to the content or message in their students' dialogue journals. Just as my mother-in-law uses gentle prompts that get me to write more, teachers can employ simple techniques to encourage students to write: paraphrasing, asking questions for clarification, or commenting on passages that are particularly moving or striking in some way. Furthermore, the students can be given the choice to select which entries they want the teacher to read and in this way gain greater autonomy (Vanette and Jurich 1990).

Students appreciate reading their teachers' comments in their dialogue journals, and indeed this enjoyment motivates them to continue communicating. However, while the teacher's written responses are meaningful for the journal writer and therefore read closely and with great interest, it is important that the teacher be careful not to write more than the student does; this can overwhelm the student's voice instead of encouraging it to grow (Young and Crow 1992). Teacher responses that only ask a lot of questions or just repeat what the learner says do not promote conversation but suffocate it (Peyton 2000).

When writing responses, teachers should be informal and share opinions without preaching. The teacher's thoughtful responses help learners to focus on their writing rather than simply providing answers. Teachers should also explore ways to stimulate conversation by other means than questioning. One way this can be done is for the teacher to tell brief personal anecdotes that might parallel a situation the student is experiencing and include some self-reflection. Another method is to paraphrase what the student is expressing to show understanding and empathy. In this way, teachers can model the kind of writing they expect from their students. Teacher's responses should be natural as in conversation. As Quirke (2001, 15) states, "I spend no time dwelling on what to write. If a response does not come to me immediately, it is not something I would want to say." When teachers' writing shows a lack of formality or artifice, it creates a relaxed atmosphere in which students feel more comfortable expressing themselves.

The student should be writing to me as a person, not as a teacher who is looking for errors and wanting to correct. This way of writing and responding is much easier said than done and takes some getting used to. However, it is worth the effort because correction time drops to a minimum, and the students respond more naturally and enthusiastically. (Quirke 2001, 15)

The atmosphere of intimacy and safety provided by the dialogue journal can cause some learners to reveal matters of a very personal or sensitive nature, and teachers need to be ready for this and reply quickly and confidentially (Orem 2001; Young and Crow 1992). For the day-to-day problems that face young people, such as difficulties with peer and family relationships, as well as self-doubt and social awkwardness, just having a sympathetic adult listen to, empathize with, and encourage them, or make suggestions, can be of great help. Young and Crow (1992) advocate using acceptance, validation, and encouragement and helping students identify outside resources; they also advise using *bibliotherapy*, or specifically the use of children's literature, for students to identify with those with similar problems and find ways to resolve them. Journals are a safe way for adolescents to develop a supportive relationship with an adult, and to express their feelings and resolve issues without the embarrassment of the classroom (Alexander 2001). Obviously, if the student discloses issues of danger or threat, it is up to the instructor to see that the right people are notified.

### **Using dialogue journals to focus on structure**

One of the teacher's roles in responding to student dialogue journal entries is to model correct language structure as well as demonstrate more complex language to challenge the learners to extend themselves. Following Krashen's (1992) Comprehensible Input theory, teachers' entries can provide input slightly above learners' proficiency level to help them improve their language skills (Linnell 2010; Larrotta 2008).

Even though dialogue journals are about content, not structure, the teacher can give mini-lessons on recurring grammatical errors

in students' journals, even showing anonymous sentences from journals in class to demonstrate correct usage, so long as the sentences are unidentifiable. Students can be trained, through paying attention, to self-correct their grammar mistakes in their dialogue journals (Alexander 2001).

Linnell (2010) feels strongly that since journals are such a rich source of language errors, including some attention to form in dialogue journals is beneficial to English language learners. She is aware, however, that it is a challenge to correct "without compromising the meaningful and authentic interaction that is so fundamental to dialogue journals" (Linnell 2010, 25). She emphasizes that correction not be introduced until the dialogue journal writing routine is well established, and when corrections are done they should be a natural part of the dialogue. She also advises to let students initiate the correction. As many learners want feedback on their errors, especially adults, getting input on mistakes could actually make them write more. Some students may choose to keep a written record of their mistakes with corrections in the back of their journals.

A more direct approach to focusing on form would be to pre-teach vocabulary or grammar that learners then incorporate into their journal entries. Alternatively, samples of journal entries could be used in the whole class to highlight parts of speech or vocabulary, and students then write a new journal entry using these items (Linnell 2010). Students could be told to use only past tense forms and time words to tell a story that happened in the past, or employ imperatives to give instructions on how to do something. They could be tasked with using a certain number of adjectives to describe a family member or recycling new vocabulary from their reading in an entry about school. These approaches have to be used sparingly, though, or they might suffocate the students' self-expression. Indeed, simply through the written dialogue process, learners acquire new vocabulary without realizing it (Larrotta 2008).

### **Making the connection to academic writing**

A criticism of personal and creative writing in English language learning classes is that it bears little relation to the academic writing in

which students may be required to become competent. Some educators believe anything other than academic writing is not useful. However, an argument can be made in favor of dialogue journal writing as a preparation for the rigors of academic writing. For one thing, before students can write academic essays, they need to be comfortable with their writing abilities, and writing in dialogue journals certainly builds learner confidence.

Through having the liberty to write about a range of issues and engage with mature concepts in their dialogue journals, students are given “a way to see beyond the surface conventions of academic writing to their fundamental purpose” (Carroll and Mchawala 2001, 58). This type of inductive learning lays the foundation for understanding the reason why one or another rhetorical form is used, and that knowledge makes it easier for the writer to use the correct form. Rhetorical forms also arise naturally out of the student-generated content of dialogue journals.

To give more practice with these forms, teachers can assign writing tasks where learners use rhetorical patterns informally before writing formal essays. For example, argumentation, narrative, and comparison/contrast can all be practiced when writers write a dialogue between two people with opposing views, tell stories, or make comparisons about different places or events in their lives. Getting practice with writing the detailed description needed for research can also be done in a journal. Furthermore, after writing a narrative, the student can write a new entry, rewriting the story from another point of view. In this way students can learn how to report objectively and develop the important awareness of audience and purpose (Vanette and Jurich 1990). In the shared listserv journaling described earlier, university students most often reported improvement in “the ability to summarize and analyze others’ remarks, to argue critically and to express agreement and disagreement effectively” (Goetsch 2001, 79). These skills are crucial to successful academic writing.

Another way dialogue journals provide a foundation for academic writing is in making learners aware of how they learn. If learners know how to learn, they can learn whatever they wish. Through using dialogue journals, students can take ownership of their learning (Carroll and Mchawala 2001) and become

aware of their own learning processes (Trites 2001). This is particularly important for academic studies that increasingly demand that learners be self-directed. Giving students the ability to respond to their peers’ writing can prepare them for academic group work where they are expected to give and receive thoughtful feedback (Goetsch 2001).

### **How to begin using dialogue journals in your English language class**

The following seven steps will help you institute dialogue journal writing in your classroom:

1. Choose what kind of notebook or binder you want your students to use for their dialogue journals. The advantage to a three-ring binder is that papers can be added or detached in any order; however, a simple notebook, whether spiral, soft, or hard cover, is cheaper and more mobile. In settings where technology is readily available, the dialogue journal might take an electronic form and be emailed to the teacher.
2. Decide where the journals will be kept, taking into account the need for confidentiality. Will the students take the journals home, or will they be locked up in the classroom? This decision will depend upon where the journal writing is going to take place. Allowing students to take their journals home gives them the chance to continue writing into the weekend or at night and more easily get into the habit of writing.
3. Plan a writing routine ahead of time. When and how often will the students write? Some students write daily, others only two or three times a week, still others only on weekends. How long should in-class journal writing be? Fifteen or twenty minutes is a good guideline for in-class journal writing, but for a variation, *freewriting*—students write nonstop on a prompt without thinking about grammar or spelling—can be assigned for as little as five minutes. Obviously, the more frequently students write, the better, but it depends upon what will work best for your students.
4. Choose how often you will respond to students’ entries. Some teachers

respond to every entry, and some to every third entry, while others collect journals once a week and respond to everything written that week. Another variation is for teachers to respond only to entries selected by students for a response.

5. Consider whether you want the journal entries to follow a particular format. Teachers will often begin the process with a letter to their students, to which the students respond individually in the form of a letter, but after this, entries are usually shorter and more informal. Decide if you want student journal entries to be any particular length and if you will assign topics or let the students choose their own.
6. Strategize how you will help your students understand that dialogue journals, although ungraded, are an important part of their course. Students tend to use grades as a way to value their work, but you will want to create a stress-free environment for journal writing. One way to balance these two contradictions is to allot a percentage of the final course grade to a certain number of pages in the dialogue journal and require students to make entries of a certain length, perhaps at least half a page, on a regular basis. If you collect journals and respond regularly during the course, it will be clear that the student has been writing for the entire course and not just handing in pages and pages of last-minute scribble at the end. What you are assessing is whether the student has used the journal in the way you had intended: to explore thoughts and communicate through regular writing. Vanette and Jurich (1990) suggest ensuring that due dates for journals differ from those of other formal writing assignments in order to convey the message that both types of writing are of equal importance and to give learners the chance to devote sufficient time to their writing.
7. Carefully plan how you will introduce dialogue journals to your class. How you present dialogue journals will set the tone for the entire course and influence your students' degree of involve-

ment. Explain the reason for dialogue journal writing as a way for them to get more practice and have a place to explore and experiment without worrying about form. Tell them you want them to write informally and have fun. Set up rules of confidentiality and respect since this will be personal writing. (Special attention should be given to explaining to young students at the beginning where the rules of confidentiality do not apply to avoid having them feel that their confidences have been betrayed.) This is a good time to lay down any other ground rules; for example, if you will use peer responses, students need to know they should ask respectful questions and have the right to refuse to answer unwanted questions, offering alternate topics instead (Larrotta 2008).

#### **Responding to students' dialogue journals**

The prospect of being faced with greater volumes of student writing is daunting to most teachers, already overwhelmed with correcting their students' work. The usual way of responding to student writing is to evaluate form, not simply respond to the content (Vanette and Jurich 1990; Orem 2001). Correcting English language class writing assignments involves a significant time commitment as it can require going over student texts with a fine-toothed comb, word by word, sentence by sentence, to catch all the grammatical and spelling errors, awkward expressions, and illogical or confusing language. Even if a teacher does not correct student mistakes but simply marks them with editing symbols to enable the learner to become a stronger self-editor, it still demands a lot of effort and careful attention to each student paper. No wonder then that writing remains the most neglected skill in many English language classrooms. It is not surprising that most teachers recoil at the thought of evaluating large quantities of student writings.

The good news is that dialogue journals differ from regular class writing assignments in that they are typically not assessed for spelling mistakes or errors in structure, which means that time spent on dialogue journals is much shorter. Larrotta (2008) explains that

she treats her students' dialogue journals as if they were written messages from friends or colleagues whom she would not dream of correcting. However, she notes that changing from the automatic "teacher habit" of correcting student writing takes time. In replying to her students' journal entries, she writes her responses directly on the page, right under their last entry, commenting on what they said, responding openly to their questions, and ending each of her entries with her first name.

### Using dialogue journals with young learners

Dialogue journals can be adapted to be suitable for any age group at any level. Teachers will need to take time with preparing younger children for journal writing. They will have to model journal entries more and provide greater guidance in choosing topics. Notebooks for young children's journals should contain blank, line-free pages as children will create more drawings than text. Even very young children respond positively to engaging with the teacher in dialogue journals.

When Hannon (1999) introduced her kindergarten class to writing personal journals, she did not see changes in her learners' writing, but when she moved on to dialogue journals, some children were motivated to write more because they got replies from the teacher. "Dialogue added a new dimension and purpose for those students ready to embrace it" (Hannon 1999, 203). The dialogue journal helps young learners to understand the connection between reading and writing and the importance and value of discussion in exploring literature. When dialogue journals were used for teachers and students to talk to one another about reading literature in a first grade class, students were able to tap into their funds of knowledge and began "to see reading and writing less as isolated, individualistic activities and more as interrelated social engagements" (Bintz and Dillard 1990, 146).

### Conclusion

According to teachers who have worked with dialogue journals, there are multiple student benefits to using them in the English language class. Some of these benefits are the increased motivation to write, greater fluency

in writing, increased confidence as writers, and the ability to use writing as a means to communicate and express complex ideas. Students report decreased dependence on the dictionary and a move away from mental translation to thinking in English. Developing a daily habit of writing and finding writing as "easy as speaking" means that learners are becoming more comfortable with the act of writing. Other advantages are that students develop critical literacy skills, gain autonomy and empowerment as learners, and build communities of learning within the classroom. Furthermore, dialogue journals form a bridge for English language learners from personal writing to formal academic essays.

Teachers can also benefit from dialogue journal writing because it allows them to connect with individual students in large classes and learn more about what their learners think and need. Reading student writings is a way to reinvigorate a jaded teacher and bring more life and meaning to the classroom routine.

I encourage teachers to try dialogue journals in their classrooms, if they have not done so already. It must be emphasized that this tool can be implemented in a myriad of ways with greater or less teacher effort and involvement. As teachers experiment to find the way that best suits them and their classes, they might just find dialogue journals becoming a high point of their teaching week and begin to look forward to reading students' entries with enjoyment.

The main objective of using dialogue journals in the English language classroom is to give students more time and opportunities for writing so they can experience the pleasure of communication through the written word and at the same time become better writers in English. Rather than drudgery or torture, writing will become something to look forward to, and learners will open their notebooks with the same eager anticipation that my mother-in-law and I feel upon opening our letters to each other.

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