

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF *DIALOGUE JOURNALS* ON ACADEMIC WRITING  
SUBJECT AT ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION  
PROGRAM IN UNIVERSITAS NEGERI MEDAN**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the findings from an experiment conducted to 25 students examined the effectiveness of dialogue journals to improve students' ability in writing. The instrument of this study are: a set of questionnaire, interview, students' documents, and an observation sheet of students' activities during the lesson. The study found that Dialogue journals was effective to improve students' writing and critical thinking skill.

**Keywords: Dialogue Journals, Writing Process, Critical Thinking, Character Building**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

On the front-gate of Medan State University campus, the slogan: Universitas Negeri Medan, Character Building University is glamorously written. Reading this sign religiously every single morning presents its own burden for the researcher, because as a part of Unimed's academic community, researcher takes responsibility in the joint effort to build the students' character. They must be able to contribute to the nation and state according to the vision of the State University of Medan's mission, namely: to produce excellent graduates who are professional; having good character; have intellectual intelligence; entrepreneurial skills and nationalism. Society as one of the stakeholders will also ask for the realization

of the slogan that can be read by anyone passing through the gates of Unimed campus. Producing graduates who fit the vision of the University's mission is one of the great tasks of the English Education Study Program, whose treatment is highly individualized, unique and fundamental. Increasing the relevance and competitiveness of graduates through the implementation of KKNi which is part of Unimed's education strategy that is planned and will be implemented until 2020 as stated in Unimed Strategic Plan 2016-2020. One of them is by increasing student participation in the writing of scientific paper which is still very low. Anticipating this, the English Education course continuously maneuvers local policies as a means to meet the above objectives. One of

the most recent is combining two Language Skills courses; Writing and Speaking into Productive Language Skills in the odd semester of 2016 with the aim of encouraging students to further explore the ability to write and present it in the context of scientific work. In the even semester of 2017 the Writing course is synergized with Reading to Written Language Skills with a weight of 4 credits with the aim of improving students' writing competencies to produce more scientific work to develop Unimed as a center for learning and research innovation. The quality of education output is not only influenced by the curriculum and management of education, but also depends on the quality of educators and education personnel. With these maneuvers, it is expected that the English Education course can contribute to Unimed in order to improve the image and quality of the graduates.

A short needs analysis on the initial day of classes might not be sufficient to figure out who the students were and what they should know about academic writing. Not only was there a lack of background information, but there was not enough classroom meeting time; the writing courses met only once a week for ninety minutes. The lecturer did not have enough time to interact with the students, nor to adequately manage with their concerns and questions. Thus, the lecturer tends to

prolong the dialogue by assigning dialogue journals.

The principle objectives for using dialogue journal is to gather insights and data on the students' learning and writing processes, included learning to familiarize themselves and their awareness of the writing process and their knowledge about academic writing techniques. Writing is not only recording; it is more of a process of developing a story or an idea. It permits us to share our life experiences and claim them as our own while at the same time, giving them meaning" (Calkins, 1994, p.4). Every single student should be given the chance to see writing as an approach to "represent life encounters." To provide students this experience, educators must demonstrate the value and the joy of writing. By opening communication between them and me using dialogue journals, I would be better able to determine their concerns about writing and address them in the curriculum and lessons.

## II. LOOKING DEEPER AT DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Dialogue journals are utilized to correspond the communication between students and the teacher. Considerably similar to friends passing conversational notes to each other, these partners take turns in sending and accepting messages (Piazza, 2003). Dialogue journals are interactive,

and conversational in tone. “Most importantly, they are an original piece of writing and provide the chance for genuine communication between students or between a student and the lecturer, something that is regularly absent in regular classrooms” (Tompkins, 2000, p. 174). When the students write in their dialogue journals, they write casually to the teacher about their point of interest or daily concern, and the teacher responds. Students are in control of the topic of their choice, and they have the opportunity to bring that topic to any direction (Tompkins, 2000). The following is a list of suggestions from Staton (1987, p. 77) for teachers when responding to students’ writing:

- Recognize students’ ideas and encourage them to keep on writing about their point of interests.
- Encourage students by complimenting their progress and hard work. Add new information about the topics so that students will be eager to read the lecturer responses.
- Write shorter than the students.
- Avoid cliché comments like “good job” or “very interesting.”
- Ask further questions; or even more, encourage the students to ask questions.

While it can take a long time for lectures to respond to all students on a daily basis, the

teacher can choose to respond to the journal entries on a rotating basis. Perhaps they might respond to one group of students one week and another group the next week (Tompkins, 2000). It is important for the teacher to keep in mind that writing conventions should not be a concern when using dialogue journals (Piazza, 2003).

### III. BENEFITS

“Dialogue journals employments has been examined for the positive effect on children’s individual adjustment, improvements of awareness for audience, understanding others, increased inspiration to purposeful writing, better skill in conversing, and overall growth as writers” (Nistler, 1998, p. 203). *Success for English Language Learners*

Dialogue journals promotes successful writing skill particularly in the development of students learning English as a second language. Researchers have stated that these students have the most success when they have the chance to pick their own topics and when their teachers contribute to the discussion by requesting a reply, statements or other comments (Peyton & Seyoum, 1989; Reyes, 1991). Staton (1993), states that learning to read and write for non English speaker, as well as native speakers, can be a procedure of much like the natural, practical process of oral language acquisition as it happens

between parents and children. Dialogue journals, as written conversations, resemble in 24 many ways the types of interactions characteristic of first language acquisition. Reyes also found that students who are English Language Learners (ELL) were more successful in writing dialogue journal entries than in writing in response to books they have read.

#### **IV. REFLECTION THROUGH DIALOGUE JOURNALS**

##### **a) The Lecturers**

Reflective teaching requires the lecturers to acknowledge micro-level classroom problems and try to solve them with suitable teaching practices. The teaching also requires to recognize cultural considerations and personal values (Zeichner and Liston 1996). Having an awareness of theoretical trends in second language acquisition is essential to good teaching practice, but it is only through critical reflection that a teacher can really effect change in her particular classroom.

##### **b) The Dialogue Journals**

Previously, there have been plenty of studies on dialogue journal writing (e.g., Peyton and Staton 1996, 1993; Peyton 1990; Peyton and Reed 1990). Teachers and researchers alike have found varied benefits of journals. Mlynarczyk's (1998) account of reflective journals in the community college ESL writing class shows the positive effects journals had on her

students' achievement; Hudelson (1989) emphasizes the socio-affective benefits journal writing can bring to emergent writers; and Shuy (1993) and Peyton (1993) maintain that dialogue journals promote communication between teacher and student and ultimately assist students in becoming better writers.

##### **c) Method and participants**

The primary source of data for this research came from the dialogue journals collected during the first semester of the learning year. Secondary data came from in-class notes written by the students as well as a needs analysis, questionnaire, and the students' actual writing assignments. The researcher included in the study only 25 students who were enrolled in the class that semesters. That way, the researcher would be able to consider all forms of data produced by each student.

The writing class is a requirement subject for all students pursuing a degree English Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Medan. The students ranged in age from 18 to 20 and all were native speakers of Bahasa Indonesia.

##### **d) The study**

The researcher assigned dialogue journal and required that the students make weekly entries. There were no certain topics discussed; rather, the researcher instructed the students to write personal concerns about their performance in writing and

reading, the curriculum, the lectures, and anything else related to academic writing. The students were told that the dialogue journals would be informal, journal type writing, and they would not be graded on mechanics or accuracy. To receive full credit for each journal, they had to fill a minimum of half an A4 size sheet with their writing. The dialogue journals were collected, responded to, and graded monthly. This was carried out for a full semester.

On the first day of teaching, the researcher conducted an open-ended needs assessment and had the students fill out a questionnaire dealing with their attitudes about Dialogue Journals and their prior instruction in writing (for both English and Indonesian). The questionnaire was developed as a way to collect further information from the students on topics commonly addressed in the original dialogue journal. Due to the heavy curricular assignments they need to fulfill on each semester (6 tasks, including routine assignment, critical book review, journal report papers, mini research and project), the researcher chose to assign in-class journals on an intermittent basis.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the following section the researcher analyzed the students' responses in their dialogue journals, including their

most important concerns, and further discuss their responses to the questionnaire, which addressed the concerns they spoke about in their journals.

### a) Insights gained from the dialogue journal

The writer investigated 25 dialogue journals to discover what topics and concerns were most significant to the students and what their attitudes were in keeping a dialogue journal. Their biggest concerns would be on how to compose reflectively; writing on given topics; feedback from their classmates during peer review sessions; being informed of the evaluation criteria; and having to speak in front of the class as a presenter of their writing or in an argument.

The writer noticed that the students used the dialogue journals for different purposes. The most common included complaining, clarifying, asking questions, and telling personal anecdotes. Some students were so unaccustomed to, or adverse to, this type of teacher-student communication that they simply summarized what occurred in the lesson or in the readings for that particular day. Whenever I felt it was necessary and appropriate, I addressed their concerns either in writing in dialogue journal or

orally in class.

**b) Learning how to write**

Learning how to write was a concern addressed in the dialogue journal by almost half of the students. Some of their specific concerns included insufficient explicit instruction in writing (both in Indonesian and in English), having a different voice in the two languages because the style of writing was different, and the usefulness of the process approach to writing. One student wrote this about her experience writing in English:

- I know that writing is important. Unfortunately, my high school teachers did not give too much emphasize on writing, so when it's time for me to learn how to express myself correctly in the written language. Sometimes I feel embarrassed when I realize that I understand an English book or film but I would not be able to create those sentences on my own.

Considering her views on language learning and writing, a student reflected:

- I made a general opinion on learning and speaking a language. Somehow it crossed my mind that when a person is learning and using a language which is not his/her first language, it is about acting or about playing a drama role. Maybe this happened because I noticed that when other people use a totally different style in English, and a

different style when writing, actually in Bahasa Indonesia...I'm doing it too, but when I'm writing in English, my style becomes unnatural, because I don't know how to express what words I want to say.

From the questionnaire, the students noticed that their style was different in English, some students found out that writing in English was harder due to the lack of vocabulary and also because English was "rather formal." A student said that he was not sure if his voice was different when writing in English because he had never been asked to write in Bahasa Indonesia.

Holliday (1994) agrees on the argument that non-English speakers tend to struggle in dealing with the conventions of English writing, although he also claims that this argument is heard too often and considered as over generalized within culture realm. He admits that non-native writers partake this problem, but finds it also existing with native English-speaking writers.

Ivanic and Simpson (1992) acknowledge that finding ones' own opinion is always harder in writing than in speaking since written language is very formal. They declare that finding one's voice is "a question of creating choices...in academic writing...which are most in accordance with a sense of ourselves"

(1992:142).

With concern to learn the process of writing, students' opinions were differed. Some implied that they were glad to learn about writing because it made their assignment much simpler. Some found it stimulating. In an entry, a student wrote: ...If you questioned people on how to write an article or another piece of writing, I think in many cases the answer would be: "Just sit and write, but look out for the grammar use." Unfortunately, it is not really that simple. Our first writing task is the exam at the age of 18, which is fairly late...Nobody taught us about the process which could possibly have made our tasks much easier.

Other students, nonetheless, felt that reviewing the process approach in the class was pointless. One student was herself differed on this issue. She said that studying about the writing process was thought-provoking, but sensed that there was no necessity to go over the process.

Numerous authors and researchers have investigated the process approach that leaves some issues related to writing in a second language. Reid (1984) said that the process approach does not reflect dissimilarity among people, specifically, in linguistic, cognitive development and academic discourse styles. Zamel (1983) evaluates the process approach in the situations in which meaning is neglected. She discards the idea that process can be

trained in a systematic way, but allows that the teaching of writing can be done more effectively when educators are conscious of their students' writing processes. Campbell (1998) maintains that while writers experience a process that includes planning, gathering information, drafting, revising, and editing, this process is not sequential, but recursive. She relates the process approach to writing to playing pinball because writers must frequently change and organize their writing plan. Using the dialogue journals certainly helped me to understand more about my writing strategies.

### c) **Keeping a learning journals**

Another main concern was having to keep a journal to uncover on one's learning phase. Many students showed that they had never kept a journal for a class previously. In the first journal entry of the semester, a student reveals on having to write a weekly journal: the journal is started with great anxiety. It's a like writing to Santa because after giving out the letter you're expecting for some response.

She further described that while she did know what she was about to do in the assignment, she was curious to see if she was on the right track. Indeed, the writer responded that she was.

An advantage of writing the dialogue journal was seen in one student's note. She told the writer that she had

develop so much more self-confident with her writing in general as a result of having to write the weekly dialogue journal. She described that having to write habitually made doing the classroom assignments easier.

Because so many students stated on whether the dialogue journal was a positive or negative experience, the writer elicited further understandings about this in the questionnaire. From all the students who responded the questionnaire, only two showed that they had written a journal for class before. When examined how they felt about having to do them, some students considered it was a boring task and some thought it wasn't really useful. Some students implied that they didn't like the assignment, but did it because they had to. However, some students who weren't happy about having to write the dialogue journals regularly admitted that it helped them to memorize what went on in class, collect their thoughts, communicate with the teacher, and ask questions.

#### **d) Topics**

In choosing the topics to write about in the students' dialogue journals, Silva (1997:361) believes that it is both "rational and encouraging" to let the students to select their personal topics and that when students are given this freedom, their work became more successful. Hudelson (1989) discovered that the quality of writing was

improved when students were allowed to make choices about their topics. Ivanic and Simpson (1992:146) depict the teacher, or "assignment setter," as one who handholds the power and control and it is an intimidation to the student. By allowing students to arranged their own assignments, the threat is reduced.

Of the six major assignments compulsory during the academic year, students had some option in all of them. The curriculum stated that the students comprehensive descriptive, narrative, and argumentative essays in the initial term, and empirical and theoretical research papers in the next term. Only the topic of the first assignment, the descriptive essay, was limited in scope; students were asked to write about a place. The specifics about that place were left for them to choose. The criterion for the second assignment, the narrative essay, was that it should come from the student's personal experience. The topics were open for the remaining assignments.

Almost all of the students submitted the subject of topics. In accordance with the first essay topic, most comments showed that this assignment was suitable and gave the writers adequate freedom. Almost all the descriptive compositions were about student's home or village (in varied Medan area or in one of the Batakese communities in North Sumatera) or a place they had been on vacation. The topic for the



narrative essay appeared to be tougher for them to choose. Comparing the narrative essay with the other essays, one student wrote: ...describing a place with pleasant adjectives, mostly if the place means a lot to us, or bringing up opinions in an argumentative essay seems to be easier than writing a narrative essay...finding an enjoyable story is hard...Lately I am walking around with eyes wide open and trying to find a story which is suitable.

The students positively brought their own experience into play while writing their narrative essays. There were a wide-ranging topics, including a music concert in Samosir Island, Paropo site-camp, and studying IT skills .

Some of the students noted in their dialogue journals that the argumentative essay would be the trickiest. The topics included global warming, asylum seekers, and shopping malls. Because these topics were later to be debated in the class, the students worked in pairs; one covered the pro side of the argument in his or her essay and the other dealt with the con. In fact, a student who selected the con side of the argument confessed that her manner actually changed after writing her essay. Other students confessed in their journals to being influenced by their peers' moving arguments in their oral debates. Overall, it seemed that using the dialogue journals helped the students broaden topics for

writing.

#### e) Peer review

Certain characteristics of communicative and cooperative teaching were somewhat unusual to the students. Peer editing was something that struck most students as uncommon. While peer review is a technique frequently used in cooperative classrooms, most of the students had never done it before. Some teacher-centered classes do not integrate this type of learning collaboration, since the teacher is hesitant to abandon control, which is essential for peer review. Some students accepted the opportunity with remarks such as the following:

- I am sure it will be good for us if we discuss the mistakes and help each other to do our best.
- (My partner) gave me valuable advice...When I read throughout my essay I hadn't detected that mistake...I never realized peer-editing could be so significant and effective.
- I believe peer evaluation is a helpful thing to do. It's very efficient to learn from other student's errors and missteps.

Of course, several students brought up mainstream criticisms of peer review:

- I do not know whether it's beneficial or not... because how could I spot on

somebody's mistake in an essay if I'm on the same level as he/she is.

- I don't get the idea ...I think if somebody wants to be a peer-reader, he or she must know how to write flawlessly. But if a person knows how to write perfectly, he or she doesn't need a peer reader.

After reading these statements, the writer always tried to address the students' anxieties either in class or in a written feedback. In class, we reviewed about how and why peer editing could be beneficial. In their dialogue journals, one benefit mentioned by students was that peer reading could help writers recognize how others approach writing. Others stated that it helped them see things they had not themselves seen. Finally, many students said that it helped them with revising. It was well-defined this was quite an essential topic, perhaps because the majority of the learners had never experienced peer review in their classes before.

#### **f) Knowing the Grading Criteria**

As a lecturer who encourages student-centered learning, the writer believes in telling the students the criteria by which they will be evaluated. However, although this was not generally common

practice in higher education in Indonesia. As a result, the majority of the students mentioned this in their dialogue journals. In fact, all who remarked on this showed that they were pleased to know how they would be graded. Several students said that this was the first time they had ever been told how their work would be graded.

- I have never had the scoring scale and the criteria in my hand and it gives me the feeling of assurance to know what they await from me.
- Knowing about the marking criteria is really helpful for us. This way we recognize what we should and should not do to get a good score...
- We could learn how educators mark the learners' essays, which I had always been curious about. I never thought this could be such a complicated and difficult task. My teachers at the primary or even secondary school did not tell us why our essays were good or bad, they just gave us a score.

#### **g) Speaking Aloud**

Some students having the idea to speak aloud in the class. Most of the writing students had gone to public schools, which emphasize oral proficiency, so I presumed that most of them had done a rational amount of speaking aloud in front of their classes. Turned out that this was not the case.

Since an old-fashioned debate was part of the students' activity, they addressed this type of public speaking in their dialogue journal. Those who had been educated in big city like Medan or Jakarta were comfortable and even enthusiastic about debating, but the others were seems nervous and somewhat frightened. Several students said that they had this stage fright and didn't enjoy public speaking, while the others remarked that they were afraid of having to speak in English. The writer was interested about an analogy drawn by two of the students. They associated debating to quarreling and had problems managing an oral debate with somebody that they had no particular problems with over an issue they felt was pointless to discuss in public.

#### **h) Uses of the dialogue journals**

The students used their dialogue journals for many different reasons. Some wrote to clarify perceptions or to confirm they comprehended what the researcher wanted concerning to an assignment. "Is that is precisely what you want?" was asked in numerous entries. Some students decided to use the dialogue journals to file complaints about a lecture or assignment. The complaints and criticisms were frequently in the form of opinions, for example:

- I hate presentations and I don't like talking in front of other students.

- I didn't like the idea of writing a descriptive essay for a place. I think it's a very boring topic. Some writers chose to be bold in their complaints:

- I got very disappointed...I was certain I wrote a good descriptive essay, and what do I get? A 3? That gave me an unpleasant feeling!

Questions also occurred in the notes. General questions, varying from peculiar questions about the writer, to questions about the lesson content, to detailed grammar issues were raised. Normally these questions were so specific that I focused them directly to that person in my written answer.

In some notes students told stories and anecdotes. Many of the personal stories related to their experiences in learning. I learned about students' homes, favorite music, and personal problems.

Finally, some students used their dialogue journals only to summarize what was reviewed in the class or in the assigned text in the reading class. Although I was dissatisfied, I appreciated that at least the log helped them to recollect what was learned and reviewed in the lessons. Those who decided to merely summarize usually did so in a more formal style than those who wrote on personal topics. Perhaps these students gained from producing a greater

quantity of academic writing.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Overall, the use of dialogue journal was a way to enhance the students' character, insights and their writing needs. It was also a method they could participate in the learning and teaching process by letting the lecturer know their interests and questions. The writer found that as the semester went by, quiet students were telling peculiar anecdotes, asking for explanation, and sharing their opinions and insights. It was obvious that as the student writers became more comfortable with the dialogue journals, writing became easier for them.

The students learned that they could make positive transformations in their learning activity by using the dialogue journals to focus and to reflect on their own writing processes and work out difficulties and stumbling blocks on their own. In some entries the students were actually writing to themselves in the form of a diary. Although these were dialogue journals done with the lecturer, it was obvious that the lecturer was not being addressed; instead the journal was used for personal reflection.

The students' journal writing exceeded the writer's expectations, acquired responses to all the inquiries wanted to be answered, learned their feelings about writing, and gained insights

about their attitudes and capabilities.

The learning had limitations, however. Many students, especially at the beginning, wrote what they thought I wanted to hear. They concentrated on positive issues and were less inclined to criticize. This was a problem at the beginning of the year, but it decreased as students became more familiar with the format of the written dialogue and with me.

An insightful statement on teaching and learning made in 1967 by Corder (cited by Zamel 1983:169) still holds true: "We will never be able to improve our ability to help our students until we learn more about how and what they learn." One very effective way to do this is through reflective dialogue journals.

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