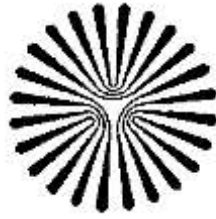# In the Name of God

The Compassionate

The Merciful

Payam -e- Noor University

Faculty of Literature and Humanities

Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign

Language

(TEFL)

A Comparison of the Effects of 'Reflective Learning Portfolio' and

'Dialogue Journal Writing' on the Writing Accuracy of the Iranian EFL

Learners

By:

Fatemeh Soltanpour

Supervisor: Dr. Fatemeh Hemmati

Reader: Dr. Gholamreza Hessamy

Tehran- Iran

June 2012

I

Abstract

This quantitative study was an attempt to compare the effects of reflective learning portfolio (RLP) and dialogue journal writing (DJW) on Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in writing as well as their overall writing performance. The participants were 60 Iranian adult EFL learners who were studying general English courses. They were selected based on their performance on Nelson English Language Test (Test 200 B). The pretest of writing was given to them. Every session, the participants in the RLP group were required to reflect on what they studied, how they learned, and how they felt in that session. They were to prepare a reflective narrative. They did self-assessment to find their problems. They had the opportunity to cooperate with the teacher and their fellow students and solve their problems. However, the participants of the DJW group were required to write to their teacher about whatever they wanted. The teacher read their notes and wrote back. After the 14-session treatment, the writing posttest was administered. Because the data collected on the posttest of grammatical accuracy did not meet the assumption of normality, the non-parametric test of Mann-Whitney U test was utilized. The test indicated that the gain in RLP group's grammatical accuracy was significantly better than that of DJW group. Based on the findings of an independent *t*-test, it was concluded that the RLP was more effective in improving the Iranian EFL learners' overall writing performance than the technique of DJW. The results could have been due to the influence of reflection with support of a mentor and collaborator as well as the efficacy of intentional learning over incidental and explicit learning over implicit. Moreover, some other factors should also be taken into consideration: (1) the use of the DJW may yield different results in EFL vs. ESL contexts and (2) individual differences may be an important factor affecting the efficacy of using DJW. The results of this study have some main implications for syllabus designers, material developers, and L2 teachers.

Keywords: Writing Accuracy, Learning portfolio, Reflection, Dialogue Journal

This paper is dedicated to my dear parents for their perfect love and wholehearted support

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

List of Abbreviations

DJW   Dialogue Journal Writing

RLP   Reflective Learning Portfolio

EFL   English as a Foreign Language

ESL   English as a Second Language

FL   Foreign Language

IELTS   International English Language Testing System

IL   Interlanguage

L1   First Language

L2   Second Language

ZPD   Zone of Proximal Development

ATP   Academic Task Portfolio

NIE   National Institute of Education

TESOL   Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

WATESOL Westralian Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

UCLA   University of California, Los Angeles

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Background

The skill of writing has special status within the communicative framework of language teaching; through writing, people can communicate a variety of messages to readers. Writing as a communicative skill which is really important in the modern world, needs to be taught and developed perfectly during the learner's study of language (Olshtain, 2001). On the other hand, writing is an important tool, probably the most efficient L2 learning tool available for learning a language (Wolff, 2000, as cited in O'Brian, 2004). By the upper elementary grades, writing becomes an essential tool for not only learning but also showing what you know. Students who do not write well cannot utilize the power of writing to support and extend learning and development; in addition, adults with inadequate writing skills can face considerable barriers in further education and employment (Harris, Graham, Brindle, & Sandmel, 2009).

Olshtain (2001) argued that linguistic accuracy, clarity of presentation, and organization of ideas are all essential in the efficacy of writing as an act of communication. Therefore, while the two perspectives of content and organization need to be focused on, it is also important to present a piece of writing which does not include problems such as numerous spelling errors, faulty punctuation, or inaccurate structure. Hyland (2003) also believed that, although writing is not only appropriate grammar and vocabulary, students obviously need to know these things. Any grammatical or lexical problems may cause the message to be unintelligible.

There are some other scholars such as Schoonen, Gelderen, Stoel, Hulstijn, & Glopper (2011) who also assured that the writer has to be fluent and efficient in using the appropriate

words and sentence structures. They argue that, proficient writers need to have sufficient knowledge of the language to be able to make the propositional content of the intended message in appropriate linguistic forms. Having a large repertoire of vocabulary and a good command of the grammar will always help the writer to be clear and concise. These are not sufficient, though; the complexity of text composition requires the writer to have metacognitive and strategic knowledge of the writing process to be able to direct cognitive resources effectively. On the other hand, Schoonen et al. pointed that in a foreign language writing context, FL/L2 writers usually don't have sufficient variety of linguistic resources available to them. Thus, a great deal of linguistic resources can provide the writer with opportunities to write accurately.

The accuracy of L2 writing, according to Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger (2010) may be influenced by a number of variables such as the learning environment, learner differences, and instructional methodologies. Among all the mentioned variables, they pointed to the weaknesses in instructional methodologies which may play a significant role in preventing EFL/ESL learners from maximizing their ability to write more accurately.

Harklau (2002, as cited in O' Brian, 2004) wrote about classroom-based studies which have focused on how students learn a second language through writing. He pointed out that in 1985, Swain proposed that, learners' efforts to produce *comprehensible output* in a second language in tasks such as written composition, might make them use cognitive processes necessary to their acquisition of the language. Writing, in Cumming's opinion (1990, as cited in O' Brian, 2004), might function as a "psycholinguistic output condition" in which learners analyze and consolidate second language knowledge that they have previously acquired, but is not fully-grown. Cumming mentioned two versions of the "comprehensible output hypothesis": the strong version and the weak one. The strong version suggests that self-

monitoring during language production is necessary to attaining full proficiency in the second language. The weak version suggests that reflective thinking during writing helps students gain some control over their language production processes.

Research findings, as Mojica (2010) stated, stress the usefulness of tools such as dialogue journals, learning logs, and diaries which include students' oral or written output. Jones (1991), among all the benefits that mentioned for the dialogue journals, argued that dialogue journals can promote improvements of second language writing skills, and may help learners acquire the written forms and syntax of a foreign language. Such improvements can be achieved by the interactive writing in two ways. First, the learner's desire to communicate or to maintain the dialogue motivates the learners to ask for and study the correct forms of the foreign language. Second, based on some researchers such as Burling (1982) and Krashan (1982) (both cited in Jones, 1991), and also Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed, and Morroy (1984), the act of communicating in writing can help learners acquire the written grammatical structures unconsciously. Moreover, as Olshtain (2001) stated, viewing writing as a communicative act suggests an interactive process which takes place between the writer and the reader through the text. Thus, the two aspects of such an act – the goal of writing and the perceived reader – are of vital importance. In setting writing tasks through dialogue journal writing, the teacher tries to teach and encourage learners to pay attention to the message they want to convey and the reader who will receive it. As Jones (1991) believed and also cited from (Kreeft, 1984; Peyton, Staton, Richardson, & Wolfram, 1990; Vanett & Jurich, 1990), dialogue journal writing can help learners begin to develop the skills such as expanding on a topic or considering the audience, which are useful and necessary in formal academic writing.

On the other hand, as Sidhu & Kaur (2010) assured, learners must find within themselves what they need to do. This can only be achieved through critical reflection (Brookfield 1990; Zubizarreta 2004, as cited in Sidhu & Kaur, 2010). Reflection enables

learners to become consciously aware of the learning process – what they are learning, how they are learning, and the value of their learning (Fink 2004, as cited in Kathpalia & Heah, 2009). Dialogue journals, according to Shaaban (2001), can be good sources of information about each learner's strengths and weaknesses; through dialogue journals, the learners are given the opportunity to show how they think and learn; thus, dialogue journals can be useful for learners as well as their teachers.

As Zubizarreta (2009) stated, learners may not have the skills of reflection and do not automatically know how to reflect. Some of the learners aren't able to identify their areas of strength, challenge, and growth, as well as strategies to continue developing. This fact is argued by Jones and Shelton, (2006, as cited in Kathpalia & Heah, 2009); they believed that the capacity to reflect is not automatic and need to be consciously developed over time. There are some people who never develop this capacity, and some who do not use it consistently in their lives. The only way to develop and promote this capacity is through constant use and by means of learning strategies like modeling, mentoring, and specific instruction. Therefore, it is necessary that learning centers and language schools equip their learners with the required knowledge and skills that would encourage such reflection.

Writing, according to Brookfield (1995, as cited in Sidhu & Kaur, 2010), is by nature personal and allows learners to use their own words to express their own thoughts and feelings. Written materials such as diaries and learning journals, based on Oxford's belief (1990, as cited in Sidhu & Kaur, 2010) are forms of self-report which allow learners to keep record of their thoughts, feelings, achievements and problems as well as their impressions of the people around them such as their teachers and classmates. Sidhu and Kaur also cited from Brock et al. (1992, 1995) that the above-mentioned materials are excellent tools for reflection because they are easy to conduct and promote development of reflective

teaching and learning. Reflective writing provides the opportunity for learners to think critically about what they do and why they do something.

The concept of the student portfolio has been widely known and implemented in English and some other academic fields. One of the applications for the learning portfolio as Burch (1997, as cited in Zubizarreta, 2009) suggested is that the learning portfolios can provide valuable insights into what students know and how they construct that knowledge. Thus, an intentional focus is given to learning via learning portfolio. The crucial element of reflection is the key for the learning portfolio to be effective. In learning portfolio, the power of writing is used for the practice of reflection. In other words, reflective writing is an instrument and the important feature of effective learning portfolios. It must be noted that students must not be left alone in thinking about their learning; such reflection is facilitated by using the advantages of collaboration and mentoring. The learning portfolio, as Zubizarreta (2009) described, consists of written narrative sections in which the students reflect critically about questions of what, when, how, and why learning has occurred. Thus, the primary motive for learning portfolio is both to improve student learning by providing a structure for them to reflect systematically over time on their learning process, and to develop the aptitudes, skills, and habits that come from critical reflection.

The two above mentioned strategies are consistent with Lev Vygotsky's work on learning in social contexts. Vygotsky considered that social interaction is a crucial aspect of successful cognitive and intellectual growth. He put considerable emphasis on dialogue and other interactions between the learner and another more knowledgeable person. The idea of promoting collaborative learning is also based on the social constructivist rationale which argues that learning and understanding is a socially constructed concept (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010).

Extending his theory to second language acquisition, Vygotsky supported the belief of a "More Knowledgeable Other" (Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995, as cited in Voit, 2009) which refers to anyone who has a better understanding or higher ability level than the learner. As Lightbown & Spada (1999) described, when language learners collaborate and interact with others who are more competent in the second language, such as a teacher or more advanced student, they will be able to improve their linguistic knowledge and ability to higher levels. Moreover, Vygotsky believed in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); that is the distance between the learner's ability to perform a task under guidance (with interaction with a more knowledgeable speaker) and their ability to be successful independently. Based on the above-mentioned explanations and as Voit (2009) assured about the dialogue journal, it could provide such a social opportunity for great linguistic achievements. On the other hand, learning portfolio that requires reflection with support and under the guidance of a collaborator and mentor can be helpful for learner's acquisition of language. Considering these well-known beliefs, it seems logical to explore writing instruction based on social interaction, especially the one provided via writing dialogue journals and keeping learning portfolios, to maximize the learner's opportunities to learn or acquire the L2 writing skill.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Many learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) have problems with producing writing that is accurate. The majority of Iranian students are unable to produce a comprehensive written English text. This is a challenge for not only the students enrolled in English programs, but for many university students as well. As it was argued by Evans et al, the weaknesses in instructional methodologies can be an important reason for preventing EFL/ESL learners from maximizing their ability to write more accurately.

Different methods have been suggested in literature to be used for teaching writing skill to ESL/EFL learners. Two techniques of keeping the *reflective learning portfolios* (RLP)

and *dialogue journal writing* (DJW) are among the techniques that claim to be effective in helping the learners to acquire the language skills, and among all the skills and components of the language, they have special focus on improving writing skills. Both techniques try to develop the reflective practice through social interactions. The primary concern for the researcher in this study was to see how such an opportunity to write reflectively via writing dialogue journals as well as the opportunity for critical reflection and self-assessment of learning under the guidance and with support of a collaborator and mentor via technique of using learning portfolio is effective in helping the learners improve their writing accuracy as well as their grammatical accuracy in writing.

Thus, there were two independent variables in this study; the researcher selected these variables, i.e., DJW and RLP to investigate the effectiveness of each experimental variable in comparison with the other one with regard to students' writing accuracy as well as grammatical accuracy in writing.

1.3. Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the RLP and DJW in improving Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in writing?

2. Is there any significant difference between the RLP and DJW in improving Iranian EFL learners' overall writing performance?

1.4. Research Hypotheses

In order to investigate the above mentioned primary research question, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is no significant difference between the RLP and DJW in improving Iranian EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in writing.

2. There is no significant difference between the RLP and DJW in improving Iranian EFL learners' overall writing performance.

1.5. Significance of the Study

Language programs – like all other scientific endeavors – would not be effective if not monitored and evaluated through adequate research aimed at identifying their strengths and/or deficiencies. The researcher's main motive and purpose for doing this research is that it can be used for encouraging the techniques of DJW and RLP in Iran to help the learners master the accuracy of their writing papers, and thus, helping the existing system of teaching writing to be more effective. These two techniques can be used in English classes, if the use of these two techniques is effective in helping the learners improve the accuracy of their essays. This research can thus lead to development of certain guidelines for teachers who are teaching English and doing their best to help the learners improve their writing skill.

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

Writing: As Sokolic (2003) explained, writing can be defined by a series of contrasts:

- It is not only a *physical* but also a *mental* act. Writing is a mental work because writers think to invent ideas and think about how to express them. It is also a physical act because words are used to organize ideas, and then ideas are organized into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader.

- Writing's purpose is both to *express* and *impress*. Writers express their *own* ideas or feelings, but they express them in a way to be intelligible to readers or audience.