

The Impact of Keeping Oral Dialogue Journals on EFL Learners' Oral Fluency

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Abstract

This study focused on investigating the impact of keeping oral dialogue journals on EFL learners' oral fluency. Sixty participants were selected out of 80 undergraduate freshmen who were studying English Translation at Sanandaj Islamic Azad University and pre-intermediate students at Passargadeh Jam Language School based on their scores on a piloted proficiency test. They were then randomly divided into two equal groups undergoing control and experimental conditions. Prior to the treatment, an oral interview was conducted for all the participants of the study. The results of a t-test demonstrated no prior significant difference between the oral fluency of the participants in the control and experimental groups. After the treatment period, during which the experimental group experienced keeping oral dialogue journals but the control group received the same instruction without the practice of dialogue journals, another oral interview was administered. The results of the comparison of the oral fluency mean ratings of the two groups revealed that the participants in the experimental group had a significantly higher oral fluency compared to the ones in the control group. It was concluded that keeping oral dialogue journals significantly affected the oral fluency of the EFL participants.

Keywords: oral dialogue journal, oral fluency, corrective feedback, planned discourse

Introduction

There have been various discussions about the issue of feedback in language learning. Such discussions usually encompass matters such as when and how to provide feedback and which errors to treat during the feedback. Although theories of learning changed from those of behaviorists, which required errors to be corrected before they turned into deviated behaviors, to the developmental hypotheses which considered errors as the

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sign of progress, the role of correction in communicative teaching has remained unclear. Giving successful feedback without intervening with the natural process of production and destroying learners' confidence is an issue which has long concerned many researchers in foreign language teaching. As Allen (1991) maintains, the question is of how teachers can encourage fluency and communication and yet offer their learners corrective feedback.

In fact, one pertinent argument is that there might be no need to interrupt an activity to correct mistakes when they can be corrected afterwards. This is the case particularly in activities that focus on fluency and when interruption for correcting the mistakes of accuracy may distract learners from their purpose and their focus on meaning and content. However, this position should not be over-justified to the extent that teachers ignore the role of correction and feedback and thus rarely offer their students the opportunity to learn through useful feedback. Indeed, there is evidence that, "Many adults would claim that feedback on errors is useful and that they are able to process it in productive ways" (Hedge, 2000, p. 288). This point is of paramount importance especially in an EFL context where the input learners receive is merely restricted to the classroom.

The added complexity is that learners have various needs, and accounting for the needs of a range of students in the classroom is an arduous task. Moreover, teachers should be cautious about the impact of their corrective feedbacks both on the individual learner and the whole class. As Hedge (2000) asserts, "Teachers need not only to think about the effect of correction on the student being corrected, but also its effect on the whole class or group who might process the feedback" (p. 288). Moreover, feedback should be provided in a manner that does not result in confusion. As put forth by Allwright (1988, cited in Hedge, 2000), inconsistency in error correction may result in such a confusion.

In addition to consistency in providing learners with feedback, it is essential for the teachers to balance between correction and encouragement. Hedge (2000) supports this idea by maintaining that, "There is always a need to balance negative feedback on errors with positive feedback on the students' attempts to produce the language" (p. 290). Likewise, Cesnick and Havranek (2001) assert that feedback may have desirable or undesirable cognitive and affective effects. Feedback that is understood should lead to improvement and feedback that is not understood should lead to confusion and frustration, so successful corrective feedback is the one that elicits corrected version of the wrong utterance although the learner merely repeats it.

Communicative classrooms impose a demand on language learners in prompting them to speak in public, though the very small public of a group of their peers. This has resulted in the association of anxiety, reluctance, and struggle for face-keeping strategies by learners with speaking tasks. Since feedback is an indispensable component of the teaching-learning process, teachers need to find ways of providing feedback that are encouraging and do not result in inhibition in learners, especially when fluency in speaking is a concern for more proficient learners. They should reach out for ways of corrective feedback that, on the contrary, result in the learning of the learner and meet the pedagogical function of feedback, i.e. providing input for learners (Ellis, 2003).

Allen (1991) explored the use of tape journals as one way of providing opportunities for error correction outside the classroom and thus, a non-threatening feedback. According to Pennington (2003), through the dialogue initiated by the feedback, it is possible to create a better condition for the receiver's understanding. Moreover, in confusing situations students try to cope with puzzlement and they attempt revision even though they do not understand the feedback.

Therefore, dialogic situation is an incentive toward change, perhaps independent from the comprehensibility of the content of the dialogue in which not only is the language understood, and not only are the channels kept open in both directions, but the individual is respected in all his or her idiosyncrasy, and there is especial respect for the emotions involved in the receiving, and giving feedback (Pennington, 2003).

Feedback

In the context of teaching, feedback is the information that is given to the learner about their performance with the aim of improving that performance and correction is a form of feedback to learner on their use of language, and it is concerned with accuracy and fluency. Giving corrections, the teacher attempts to help and improve learning (Murphy, 1986).

According to Oller and Vigil (1976, cited in Brown, 2000) there are two major types of feedback: affective and cognitive feedback which can be also divided into three kinds: positive, negative, and neutral. Positive cognitive feedback is the non-corrective feedback. Negative feedback is the corrective feedback. Neutral feedback is the feedback between these two and causes the learner to adjust, alter, and try again in some new way.

The most important implication of this model is that cognitive feedback must be optimal in order to be effective. Too much negative cognitive feedback causes interruption and too much positive cognitive feedback and letting errors go uncorrected causes the reinforcement of errors and thus, fossilization of that error.

Dialogue Journals

Journal writing activities have become an accepted forum for the expression of ideas within the process of teaching development, because they can be implemented easily in a variety of forms. Most common among them are: diaries, learning logs, dialogue journals, and collaborative journals (Cole, Raffler, Rogan, & Schleicher, 1998).

According to Spack and Sadow (1983), one of the benefits of journals for teachers is the continuous feedback which helps them to adjust their teaching approaches throughout the semester. Journals also give teachers an opportunity to write informally *to* and *for* the students. Working journals also encourage students to explore their conscious and subconscious thought about other class-related writings. Therefore, journal entries themselves are a type of invention entries.

Because the fear of error and criticism is removed from journal assignment, students can become comfortable expressing their ideas in English even if the grammar is faulty. The students who are afraid to speak in class discover that they can use the journals to express and share their ideas in writing. The journal, in a sense, liberates them (Sadow & Spack, 1983).

It is also evident that in keeping journals, students are able to trace their strengths and weaknesses and they can also describe their own learning patterns and needs in regard to learning how to write for both personal expression and academic writing, so journals and diaries can be used as an introspective tool. Of course, the same applies to oral dialogue journal, as the nature of the activity is the same and only the mode of recording is oral rather than written. Nevertheless, Halbach (2000, cited in Myers, 2001, p. 93) in his case study on diary writing concludes, "Weaker students lack the strategies of self-evaluation while more successful students are able to make full use of resources and reinforce their learning with follow up activities".

Oral dialogue journals are one type of dialogue journals and benefit from the same features as the written dialogue journal except that in the former,

the dialogues are audio-recorded instead of being written. According to Allen (1991), oral dialogue journals can be a useful tool for providing delayed feedback. Her suggested procedure includes four stages. First, the student records a 10-minute talk from her notes rather than reading from a text; then the student listens and tries to note any mistakes and recording comments on them at the end of the tape. Next, the teacher listens and notes down errors for the students. These can be categorized according to Allen, to pronunciation, syntactic, or lexical errors. Finally, the teacher records comments on a representative sample of these as well as making a personal response to the content of the tape.

After commenting, the teacher or a peer gives back the tape to the first student who reacts to the feedback in a continuing dialogue during the course. The student and his/her partner should keep all of the recordings, and listen to older segments of the tape in order to monitor the improvement. Therefore, through this technique, the student gains detailed information on his/her performance (Pennington, 1996).

According to Celce-Murcia (1991) the teacher's response would primarily focus on content thus creating a real dialogue, but it could also touch on linguistic factors such as fluency, pronunciation, and grammar. Therefore, when there is limited access to native speakers, this activity can be effective as an opportunity for students to interact with teacher as a fluent speaker.

Fluency

According to Hedge (2000), fluency is the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or hesitation. Lenon (1990, cited in Chambers, 1997) points out that fluency, is different from other components of oral proficiency, syntactic complexity, and use of idioms which can be assigned to linguistic knowledge.

In CLT, the word fluency is often used in contrast to accuracy and it is about effectiveness of language use within the constraints of limited linguistic knowledge (Chambers, 1997). Faerch, Hasstrup, and Philipson (1984, cited in Hedge, 2000) include fluency as:

A component of communicative competence and they distinguish it from strategic competence in this way: Whereas strategic competence presupposes a lack of [accessible] knowledge, fluency

covers speaker's ability to make use of whatever linguistic and pragmatic competence they have. (p. 168)

They also list three types of fluency; semantic fluency as linking together proposition and speech acts, lexical syntactic fluency as linking together syntactic constituents and words, and articulatory fluency as linking together speech segments.

Consequently, with respect to the role of feedback and the procedure of providing corrective feedback through oral dialogue journal and the fact that evidence exists in the literature that such journals affect learners' focus on form and thus, accuracy in production, the researchers intended to investigate their impact on learners oral fluency. Thus, the following null hypothesis was stated:

H₀: Using oral dialogue journal technique does not have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' oral fluency.

Method

Participants

A total of 80 Iranian EFL students were given a general proficiency test from among whom 60 were selected based on the fact that their scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the sample mean on that test. These students were selected from undergraduate first-year students who were studying English Translation at Sanandaj Islamic Azad University and pre-intermediate students at Passargadeh Jam Language School. The selected 60 students were randomly divided into experimental and control groups (30 students in each group).

Instrumentations

In order to come up with reliable results, several sets of tasks and tests were utilized in this study. First of all, a Nelson test, including 33 items on structure and written expression and 12 items on vocabulary, and a 32 multiple choice item reading test with four passages, were used. The tests were administered

in a pilot study to 30 junior students who were similar to the target sample of the study.

Based on the obtained scores, the process of item analysis was performed and the items that had poor facility and discrimination indices were excluded from the tests. The reliability of the test was estimated using the KR-21 method. The piloted test was later presented to the target sample to ensure homogeneity of the participants. The allocated time for the test was 80 minutes.

Moreover, an oral interview was used both prior and after the instructional period to measure the oral fluency of the participants. Prior to the instructional period, the oral interview was administered to homogenize the participants. As the posttest, the oral interview was used to compare the two groups' oral fluency, that is, to test the null hypothesis of the study. During the interview, the learners had to answer questions about themselves such as job, residence, family, etc. Each participant was interviewed for five minutes and their speech was recorded.

Finally, a rating scale was used to rate the candidates' performance on the interview in terms of oral fluency. This scale, which has four levels for fluency from 1.5 to 6, was taken from the fluency section of the 'Interview Scoring Profile' (Khabiri, 2003), which is an analytic scale designed and validated based on the analytic assessment criteria for Cambridge Speaking Test (UCLES Common Scale for Speaking, 1999, cited in Khabiri, 2003). Therefore, the researchers only used the 'fluency' section of this scale.

Procedure

Prior to the administration of the proficiency test for homogenizing the subjects, the researchers had to be assured of the reliability of the test. To this end, 30 students who were similar to those of the target sample took the proficiency test. The results were analyzed and items showing poor facility and discrimination indices were discarded. Then the KR-21 method was applied to estimate the reliability of the test. Finally, it was revealed that the test had a satisfactory level of reliability and face validity.

Then, the piloted proficiency test was administered to 80 English language students at Islamic Azad University and Passargadeh Jam Language School, and only 60 subjects whose scores fell within the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean were considered as

homogeneous subjects with respect to their language proficiency and were selected to participate in the study. Then, they were randomly assigned to the experimental and the control group.

One week prior to the onset of the treatment, an oral interview test was conducted to rate the oral fluency of the participants in both groups. The interview took five minutes for each candidate. All oral productions were tape recorded to be marked later by two raters. After the ratings, in order to find out the degree of consistency between the ratings of the raters, the inter-rater consistency of the scores was estimated using correlation. The results indicated high inter-rater consistency and thus, the average rating of the two raters was used as the final score for each candidate.

To make sure that the participants of both groups had approximately the same level of oral fluency prior to the treatment, an independent samples *t*-test was run between the mean ratings of both groups, the results of which indicated no significant difference.

During the instructional period, the students in both groups practiced all four skills. However, for the speaking, free discussion and story telling were the main tasks used in both groups. Students would receive teacher and peer feedbacks on their oral performances either orally or in the form of written notes. The students in the experimental group had to make a five-minute recording from their oral production on different subjects like sport, movie, fashion, job, etc. As this was a homework exercise, it did not interfere with class work. Each student made ten recordings during the semester which lasted for about four months. Students were asked to speak as freely as possible without writing down and reading out what they wanted to say. However, they were encouraged to do some readings that were related to their topics before recording their oral performances.

After the recording was over, the participants had to hand it in for feedback and recorded commentary. Teacher's feedbacks focused on meaning and fluency rather than form. After commenting, the teacher gave back the audio dialogue journal along with the recorded comments to the students.

However, the students in the control group were not required to keep dialogue journals. As homework assignment, they were only asked to find a topic, read about it, and prepare an oral presentation for the next session. It was emphasized that they practice the presentation at home and prepare an outline for their peers. After presentations, time was allocated for peer and teacher feedback in class. Therefore, the only difference with the

experimental group was that the participants in the control group did not record their performances and thus, did not keep a dialogue journal.

Finally, at the end of the instructional period, in order to investigate the impact of the treatment, i.e. keeping dialogue journals, on the oral fluency of the participants, the experimental and control group took part in an oral interview as a posttest. Each candidate's performance was recorded and rated subsequently with a focus on oral fluency based on the same rating scale that was used for the pretest.

Results

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the obtained data from the proficiency tests and the two oral interviews.

Pilot Study of the Proficiency Test and Homogenization

As mentioned before, a 45-item Nelson test (33 items on structure and written expression, and 12 items on vocabulary), and a 32-item reading test that were supposed to be used for homogenizing the participants, were first piloted with 30 subjects who were at the same level as the target sample. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for this pilot study.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics for proficiency test: Pilot study

No of items	Reliability	Mean	Variance
77	.537	47.5	34.2

The results of the item analysis revealed that seven items out of the 33 grammar items, one item out of the 12 vocabulary items, and two items out of the 32 reading comprehension items demonstrated unacceptable facility and discrimination indices and were discarded.

At the next stage, the piloted test was administered to a group of 80 subjects who were undergraduate students of English Translation and also intermediate students at Passargadeh Jam Language School in Sanandaj. Table 2 below illustrates the descriptive statistics for the main administration of this test.

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics for the proficiency test: Homogenization

	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
N Valid N (listwise)	80	28.00	36.1750	6.72945	45.285

Based on the results, the subjects whose scores fell one standard deviation above or below the mean (between 29 and 43) were those who participated in the main study.

Results of the Oral Interview Prior to the Treatment

After having homogenous groups, the next step was administering an oral interview to members of both groups, the performances of whom were rated by the two researchers. In order to find out whether the two raters rated the interview consistently, the inter-rater reliability was estimated (Table 3 below).

Table 3 – Inter-rater consistency between R1 and R2 for the rating of the oral test prior to treatment

	Rater 1	Rater 2
Rater 1	1	.74**
Rater 2	.74**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
N	66	66

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As table 3 shows, the correlation between the two ratings was significant at the 0.01 level (0.74); thus, the researchers legitimately computed the mean of the two ratings as the scores of the oral fluency of the participants. Table 4 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for both groups on the oral interview.

Table 4 – Descriptive Statistics for the control and experimental groups: Oral interview prior to the treatment

Group	No.	Mean	S _x	SEM	Skewness	Std. error of skewness
Exp	30	2.175	.66	.122	.383	.427
Cont	30	2.275	.75	.137	.596	.427

Comparing the means of the two groups as illustrated in Table 4 easily reveals that prior to the treatment, there appeared to be little difference between the two groups in terms of their oral fluency. However, an independent samples *t*-test would determine whether or not there existed any significant difference between the oral fluency of the two groups prior to the treatment.

Making use of Table 4, the results of the skewness analysis demonstrated that the assumption of normality was observed in both distributions of scores (0.89 for the experimental and 1.39 for the control group; both indices falling within the range of -1.96 and +1.96), thus legitimizing running a *t*-test. Table 5 shows the results of Levene's test and the *t*-test.

Table 5 – Comparison between the variances and the means of the control and experimental groups prior to the treatment

	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.175	.677	-.547	58	.586	-.10000	.18277
Equal variances not assumed			-.547	57.16	.586	-.10000	.18277

As the table shows, the two distributions had equal variances ($F = 0.175$, $p = 0.677 > 0.05$) and there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups on the pretest ($t = -0.547$, $df = 58$, $p = 0.586 > 0.05$). Consequently, any further difference among the experimental and control groups at the end of the instruction could be attributed to the treatment.

Testing the Null Hypothesis

After the treatment period, the participants in both groups were given another oral interview as the posttest. The descriptive statistics for the oral interview posttest is reported in Table 6.

Table 6 – Descriptive statistics for the oral interview posttest

Group	No.	Mean	Sx	SEM	Skewness	Std. error of skewness
Exp	30	3.025	.696	.127	-.069	.427
Cont	30	2.375	.739	.132	.070	.427

As it is illustrated in Table 6, the mean of the experimental group (3.025) came out to be higher than that of the control group (2.375). However, in order to see whether the difference was significant or not, that is, to be able to test the null hypothesis of the study, an independent samples *t*-test had to be run. Therefore, as the first step, the normality of the distributions of scores for the two groups was checked. The result of checking the skewness against the standard error of skewness came out to be -0.16 for the experimental group and 0.16 for the control group. Since both indices fell within the acceptable range of -1.96 and 1.96, running the *t*-test was legitimized.

The second assumption for running a *t*-test is the equality of variances of the two distributions of scores that are to be compared. Table 8 demonstrates the results of test of Levene ($F = 3.056, \rho = 0.086 > 0.05$), which indicated that the two distributions had homogeneous variances.

Table 7 – Comparing variances and means of the control and experimental groups on the posttest

	Levene's test for equality of variances		<i>t</i> -test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	3.056	.086	3.507	58	.001	.65000	.18535
Equal variances not assumed			3.507	57.79	.001	.65000	.18535

According to Table 8, the differences between the two mean ratings came out to be significant ($t = 3.507, df = 58, \rho = 0.001 < 0.05$). This result indicated that the mean score of the experimental group who practiced keeping dialogue journals was significantly higher than that of the control group. Therefore, the researchers were able to reject the null hypothesis of the study.

Conclusions

The results of this study showed that using oral dialogue journals had a statistically significant impact on the oral fluency of EFL learners. The findings of this study are in accordance with those of Allen (1991) who examined the impact of tape journals on communication and correction. In her study, she found that there was a general tendency from a very slow and halting delivery in the first tapes to more spontaneous and less hesitant delivery in the last tape of the dialogue journals.

In addition, Kluge and Taylor (2000) in their research on the impact of partner taping on oral fluency concluded that this technique offers a simple practical method of getting students to develop more fluency in L2 and take responsibility for their language practice. Moreover, Payne and Whitney (2002) who examined the impact of oral dialogue journal on critical thinking, found that oral dialogue journal activities increase self-monitoring and critical thinking, so students develop self-monitoring to ensure that new and existing knowledge structures are integrated into their language.

The findings of this study can definitely bear implications for classroom teachers, particularly those involved in teaching speaking courses. Through this practice, teachers can encourage shy students who do not speak in class to practice speaking. In addition to fostering oral communication skills, the use of spoken journals can allow for more spontaneity and free expression on the part of the learner. Oral dialogue journals have been used for providing feedback on students' oral skills (Allen, 1991) and for building teacher-student rapport (Egbert, 1992, cited in Payne & Whitney, 2002). Klug and Taylor (2000) describe the following merits for dialogue journals:

1. Students develop real fluency and ease in using English.
2. Students nearly always stay in English while taping, as they are conscious of a listener.
3. Students get hours of extra practice and a concrete record of their progress.
4. Students gain a sense of responsibility for their progress beyond the classroom.
5. Teachers gain a better sense of who the students are and what their language problems may be.
6. Most students enjoy the taping and recognize its value.

Moreover, Buton and Carrol (2001, cited in Payne & Whitney, 2002) contended that journal reflection can foster student autonomy by shifting the responsibility "from teacher-directed courses to a negotiated curriculum" (p.

3), where students can define their learning needs and choose appropriate strategies to fulfill these needs. Oral dialogue journals encourage self-direction and self-awareness.

Although journals are beneficial learning tool by enhancing critical thinking, the question whether critical reflection via spoken journals contributes to oral language acquisition still remains. Further studies should investigate the role of audio taped journals in the acquisition of oral language skills (Payne & Whitney, 2002).

Finally, although tape journals provide both opportunities for students to practice spoken English, and at the same time to receive corrective feedback in a non-threatening way, they do not provide the complete answer to the question of how to provide effective feedback because the tapes allow for planned rather than unplanned discourse. Allen (1991) also pinpoints the limitations of the oral dialogue journals for large classes, and in terms of communication, and justifies the latter due to dialogue journals being planned discourse. But she also argues that since it boosts confidence, learners will progress from speaking with reduced anxiety in class activities, which gives them planning time, to speaking in activities which demand more spontaneous production.

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