

# Second Language Students Reflect on Their Own Dialogue Journals



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## Abstract

The use of student/teacher dialogue journals has received considerable research attention from teachers and researchers in various academic contexts. The reflective nature of dialogue journals has been extensively explored and is highly valued, especially in the area of teacher development. However, few studies have focused on learners' perceptions of their own experiences with dialogue journals in the context of second language learning. This qualitative analysis, based on L1 dialogue journal data collected from 112 first-semester, Spanish language students provides an interpretation of learners' perspectives that aims at transferability rather than generalizability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These language learners confirmed three positive benefits of dialogue journals mentioned in previous research (Peyton, 1993) by recognizing in L1 dialogue journals the potential to (1) promote good dialogue, (2) construct meaning, and (3) reduce Freire's (1970) banking model effect. Learners also highlighted the ability of these reflective dialogue journals to provide a forum in which they could handle personal issues and interact meaningfully with their teacher, explore new topics, discuss course-related themes, and express their voice as student-participants in a dialogic pedagogy.

## Introduction

Many second language (SL) teachers and students create meaningful interaction in a semi-informal genre of writing labeled 'dialogue journals,' 'language learner interactive diaries,' 'learning journals/logs,' and 'interactive writing' (Popkin, 1985; Peyton, 1993; García and Colón, 1995; Peck, 1996; Popp, 1997; Gray, 1998; Brown, Sagers and LaPorte, 1999; Lally, 2000; Nassaji and Cumming, 2000; Sanders, 2000). In various academic and study abroad contexts, the use of such journals has been found to positively influence vocabulary acquisition (Brown, Sagers and LaPorte, 1999), teacher/student interaction (Nassaji and Cumming, 2000), student participation (Sanders, 2000), writing development (García and Colón, 1995), and cultural sensitivity (Peck, 1996). Though these investigations have demonstrated that

dialogue journals provide opportunities for teachers and students to engage in collaborative reflection on the language learning experience, dialogue journals merit further study from the student perspective.

## Background

Teachers have quite accurately valued and characterized the reflective nature of dialogue journals. An essay by Hobson (1996) includes Fulwiler's (1987) claim that teachers describe students' journals in the following way:

They tend to be conversational, colloquial, first-person, informally punctuated, experimental, and expressed in the rhythms of everyday speech. They contain observations, questions, speculations, digressions, syntheses, revisions, and are full of information. They are self-aware. The entries tend to be frequent, long, self-sponsored, and chronological. These characteristics separate them from more formal assignments and make them especially fun to both write and read. (Hobson, 1996: 10-11)

The reflective nature of dialogue journals is also of great value in teacher education (Richert, 1992; Numrich, 1996; Carter, 1998; Goldsby and Cozza, 1998; Gray, 1998; Woodfield and Lazarus, 1998; B. Johnston, 2000; Bain, Mills, Ballantyne and Packer, 2002). Journals have been found to encourage new teachers to start to develop a philosophy of education and determine their own perspectives about educational issues (Goldsby and Cozza, 1998; Gray, 1998); develop connections between their personal experiences and the theory of second language learning (Woodfield and Lazarus, 1998); potentially benefit teacher educators by exposing expressed needs of beginning teachers and offer suggestions for the design of methodology and practicum courses (Numrich, 1996); and foster reflective thinking (Richert, 1992; Bain et al., 2002), helping beginning teachers evaluate the impact of their experiences as learners on their beliefs as teachers (Carter, 1998).

Several studies have focused specifically on the role of journals in fostering reflection (Carter, 1998; Black, Sileo and Prater, 2000; Todd, Mills, Palard and

Khamcharoen, 2001; Bain et al., 2002). Both learners and teachers have been encouraged to engage in the process of reflective journaling, whether it be individualized (written for only the diarist as reader and researcher) or dialogic (written for a teacher or student audience as a co-author). For example, one study (Warden, Lapkin, Swain, and Hart, 1995) focused on high school language learners studying French in Quebec. These learners did not write interactive journals with a teacher but rather composed individual learning diaries of their own experiences, exploring issues such as linguistic and cultural shock, the language learning experience, and the process of L2 acquisition. These diaries provided a written record through which researchers identified and analyzed language learners' individual differences.

Finally, Lally (2000) views teacher and learner diaries as a method of bridging the existing gap between research and teaching and "as an important mechanism of altering the traditional hierarchical flow of information from the researcher to the teacher" (224). In a study abroad context, dialogue journals were incorporated in programs with ESL students and American foreign language students studying in the United States (Miller and Ginsberg, 1995) and with adult English as a second language (ESL) students writing with their teachers (Sanders, 2000). In these studies, teachers and students used dialogue journals to engender trust, build relationships and foster genuine reflection.

## The Present Study

Though previous investigations have established that many teachers and researchers are strongly convinced of the value of dialogue journals, the perspectives of SL learners have not received similar attention. This study asked learners to analyze their own reflections within the same dialogic context in which they had interacted with their teacher throughout the semester: their journals. In this reflective forum, the learners and their teacher explored issues related to classroom goals and activities.

Rapport established through journals supports second language (SL) peda-

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gogy: while teachers and students spend considerable time together in class, many believe that they do not have opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue. Joy Kreeft Peyton (1993), a researcher who has conducted considerable research on the use of dialogue journals, states that teachers and students

... do not have regular opportunities to construct meaning and text together in a dialogue. Much of education still follows what Paulo Freire calls a “banking” model ... in which the teacher deposits knowledge into the heads of students and then checks periodically to make sure it’s there. Ironically, even language and writing teachers, whose goal it is to develop students’ sense of selfhood, confidence, and self-expressive abilities, often know very little about those students (Zamel, 1989) and give them very limited opportunities to actually express themselves (Swain, 1985). It might be that good dialogue is difficult to achieve in most classrooms, that many teachers still do not see the need for, or feel capable of, promoting good dialogue when they have so many students to work with at once and so many curricular demands, and that it will be a long time before we see dialogue as a central part of classroom practice. But it is, in fact, good dialogue — the open exchange of information, questioning to gain information and clarity, and responding to develop or support an idea — that develops thinking, language, and writing ability. In individualized, one-on-one interactions outside of the regular classroom routine, such dialogues are possible, even with students who are only beginning to learn a language. (pp. 171-172).

The present study seeks to further current research by highlighting learners’ perceptions of their experiences with reflective, L1 dialogue journals.

**Context.** This investigation is part of a larger study of L1 dialogue journals written by 129 students and their teacher in first-semester Spanish language classes (Spanish 101) in two large, midwestern universities. Spanish 101 is the first course in a series designed to fulfill the university one-to-two year language requirement. Classroom instruction and activities were primarily based on a communicative approach to language teaching. Although classes were conducted in Spanish, students completed their dialogue journals in English, their native language (L1). English was chosen as the language for the journals because, as beginning students, learners needed the L1 access in order to reflect on language learning issues, engage in genuine inter-

action with their teacher, and express complex ideas.

Though an “anti-L1 attitude” has strongly influenced SL teaching methodology (Cook, 2001: 405), recent research has questioned this stance for both ideological and pedagogical reasons (Auerbach, 1995; Cook, 2001; Turnbull, 2001). Auerbach (1995) argues that current research findings in second language acquisition cannot justify the exclusion of the students’ native language from the L2 classroom and Cook (2001, p. 402) envisions the students’ L1 as a “classroom resource”. Thus, that learners wrote their dialogue journals in English is not considered to be a limitation of this study or of the journals themselves.

**Participants.** The 129 students (54 male, 75 female) who participated in this study were enrolled in seven sections of my Spanish 101 classes over a period of two-and-one-half years. Mostly native English speakers, the students had little or no previous experience with Spanish; thus, they represented characteristics of both “true” and “false beginners.” Moreover, several students had previously studied another language and pursued a wide range of majors. In general, these were “typical,” traditionally-aged students enrolled in Spanish 101 to fulfill their university language requirement.

**Data.** For each of their five assigned journals (see Appendix A), learners were provided with suggested topics (see Appendix B). These five journals were completed as homework assignments every two to three weeks throughout the semester. In total, 573 journals were collected; 112 of these were written in response to suggested topic 5, evaluating the use of the dialogue journals themselves. Data for this investigation were taken entirely from this final journal. All journals were graded only for completion, not for content or grammar.

**Data collection.** Permission to use students’ dialogue journals was requested at the end of each course; all 129 learners gave their consent. Journals were assigned numbers (1-5) and letters (A-G), representing the journal assignment and particular class section, respectively. All data included in this study are from journal number 5.

**Data analysis.** This study is rooted in its own particular setting. That is, I did not aim to produce generalizable findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) but rather to produce a persuasive and stimulating interpretation (Johnston et al., 1998) of these data, gathered in a “thickly” described context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The analysis offered is therefore selective and

exploratory (Johnston, Juhász, Marken, and Ruiz, 1998). Rather than attempting to provide an overall account of every theme explored in the learners’ journals, in their comments I sought confirmation and rejection of benefits previously attributed to dialogue journals. To that end, I used a tripartite coding scheme based on three categories of journal effectiveness suggested by Peyton’s previous work (1993: 171-172): (1) promoting good dialogue; (2) constructing meaning; and, (3) reducing the ‘banking model’ effect. The onus then, is on the reader, who is invited to accept my interpretation and to transfer these findings to his or her own context.

## Learners’ Perspectives

The learners generally supported the use of L1 dialogue journals in their SL classrooms. In a previous study, 97% of them expressed positive reactions to the use of L1 dialogue journals in their SL classrooms; furthermore, they approved of the number of journals required and the topics suggested, valued the freedom to write about other course-related topics, and highlighted the importance of teacher feedback (Ewald, 2003). In the present study, recurring themes in learners’ comments also confirm three interconnected categories of journal effectiveness (Peyton, 1993). These learners recognized in dialogue journals the potential to (1) promote good dialogue, (2) construct meaning, and (3) reduce Freire’s banking model effect.<sup>1</sup> Shedding light on language pedagogy, these three interrelated categories form a useful scaffolding in which learners’ comments will be addressed.

This term, “scaffolding” itself provides a helpful analogy: an architect’s evaluation of a scaffolding’s strength depends on the appropriateness of its positioning, the quality of its material, and the necessary overlap within its design — not on the distinct nature of its various parts. Similarly, Peyton’s (1993) three categories work together to demonstrate the effectiveness of dialogue journals. Though these themes necessarily overlap at times (i.e., one might understandably argue that good dialogue by its very nature must necessarily reduce Freire’s banking model effect), they each support areas of pedagogy which together undergird the language teaching process as a whole. Thus, though care will be taken to deal separately with each area, the reader is reminded that the three categories are collaboratively supporting a shared goal and are therefore unavoidably interrelated.

### 1. Promote good dialogue

Good dialogue, characterized by an open exchange of information through ques-

tions and answers (Peyton, 1993), is built on at least two supporting conditions. First, a teacher must know something about learners as individuals. Second, as a prerequisite, the teacher must provide learners with opportunities to express themselves. These learners recognize that achieving good dialogue is a serious challenge in an often busy, crowded, and stressful language classroom — an observation also noted in language teaching research (Peyton, 1993). Learners identified dialogue journals as a context conducive to “good dialogue.” Two students explained,

In my journals, this kind of atmosphere (one in which I could relax and say what I really felt) resulted in some great written “dialogue” between the instructor and myself that I found very refreshing and intriguing. Gordon (E)

Students and instructors are so busy that there isn’t enough time before or after class to really get to visit, talk or ask questions of a more personal or complex nature. Writing the journals was a great way to get to know one another better. Patricia (A)

Constrained by busy schedules and classroom atmospheres that do not easily lend themselves to communication, learners in this study valued the use of dialogue journals. Some shy, quiet learners may feel inhibited to speak face to face with the instructor; they also claimed that good dialogue would not have been achieved without the journals. For example,

With my shy personality, I feel more comfortable writing and communicating one on one with my instructors. Jason (D)

I feel that the journals were helpful for this course. I feel that it gave me the opportunity to express my thoughts and feelings about things that I may not have actually brought up in class. Melanie (A)

Clearly perceiving dialogue as positive, these learners desired to interact meaningfully with their instructor and valued this opportunity to express themselves. One reflected,

I think the first journal ... allow[ed] me to communicate with the instructor and allowed me to convey my concerns and my expectations of the course. Sandy (A)

In addition to identifying a forum to express themselves in the journals, learners also recognized the resulting opportunity for the instructor to get to know them better as individuals, a positive effect that might not be realized without

journals. In this sense, the journals were beneficial to both participants in the dialogue. For example,

I feel the journals are a good avenue for the students to communicate with you and ask questions or make statements they might not feel comfortable stating in class.... I am sure this lets you learn more about the students and how they think and questions they might have regarding their individual studies. You probably would not get any of this information from class, or if so, very little. Theresa (D)

A teacher may think that learners do not want to engage in good dialogue. This situation is, perhaps, especially relevant to general education, language courses in which students are obligated to enroll. Or, limited by a lack of L2 proficiency and occupied with the challenging task of SL learning, learners and teachers can become busy, overwhelmed by the task at hand, and miss opportunities to express themselves as individuals. While fulfilling their university language requirement, the students in this study, some reportedly shy and anxious, valued and benefited from journal interaction with their SL teacher. Through this dialogue, learners communicated their ideas and concerns as well as asked questions — interaction that they claimed would probably not have taken place without the journals. Learners’ positive evaluations often highlighted the journals’ potential to promote good dialogue, a valuable feature to learners genuinely interested in communication with their teacher. Dialogue journals provided learners with the opportunity to articulate their ideas, opinions, and concerns and to express themselves as individuals. In turn, journals provided the instructor with the opportunity to know and respond to these issues.

## 2. Construct meaning

Secondly, Peyton (1993: 171-172) claims that teachers and students do not benefit from “regular opportunities to construct meaning” together in a dialogic setting. The result is an educational system, criticized by Freire (1970), in which students are viewed as empty accounts and teachers as depositors of knowledge. In contrast, Freire (1970) promotes a view of education as problem-posing, that is, he supports pedagogy that emphasizes the social construction of meaning, developed by both teacher and student participants. Constructing meaning is, of course, defined differently. In the present context, “meaning” refers to the role, purposeful or not, that learners attribute to dialogue journals. Learners perceived the meaning of dialogue journals (i.e., their

analyses of the dialogue journal forum) to be socially constructed by the learners and their teacher writing collaboratively. Thus, the emphasis in this section of the data analysis is on the learners’ perceptions and their evaluations of the dialogue journal forum rather than on specific examples of the co-construction of meaning taking place throughout the course.

In asking learners to reflect on this forum, the instructor’s goal was to provide learners with an opportunity to evaluate and construct meaning for the journals through which they had interacted with her throughout the course. Rather than revisiting the detailed content of the journals, most learners explored the influence of the journals on their learning experience. Perhaps most interesting was that some learners reflected on their initial apprehension of the use of dialogue journals. However, without exception, each of these learners expressed a change in feeling during the sequence of the five journal assignments. Upon reflecting, they recognized positive benefits resulting from the dialogue journal interaction. Though initially concerned that the assignment constituted pointless “busy work,” these learners constructed a meaningful purpose for the journals.

When you first mentioned the journals, I honestly thought that there was no point to them and that they were designed for “busy work”.... Now I really appreciate them as a means of communication with you. It helps me to feel connected. Melissa (G)

At first I groaned inwardly about utilizing the journaling process with this class.... [A]s time passed this tool [journals] has become a major source of communication. Gina (C)

The situation of one particular student best demonstrates the potential in dialogue journals to construct meaning through reflection. Tim is not convinced that there is any value in writing dialogue journals. He began journal 5,

To be honest, the writing of these journals has not held a very high spot on my priority list. Tim (E)

However, evaluating his entire course experience, including homework and journal assignments, he continued,

I can see how the journals help to provide a media with which the students can more effectively communicate with the teacher, but I would rather spend my time studying vocabulary. Tim (E)

Still unconvinced, Tim complained of having had little time to devote to classes,

several homework assignments and one previous journal due to his full schedule. Struggling, he explained,

In my case, the journal has only added extra work to a schedule that was already full. Even so, in other cases the journals may have significantly helped someone to succeed in this course. With this in mind, it is hard to weigh the value of the journals against the hassle they create. Tim (E)

As his reflection continued, he used this open forum to express concerns regarding his course grade, wondering what “impact the assignments not turned in and the classes missed” would have on his grade. He then implored his instructor,

... so please don't be disappointed if I don't get many of the assignments done between now and the end of the semester. Tim (E)

Finally, he concluded his journal 5 with this significant discovery:

I am noticing that I have found a need for these journals. I'm sure it is easier for me to address the homework issue on paper than in person! Perhaps there is some real merit in these journals, even for an insanely busy person like me. I guess my personal opinion would be to keep doing the journals. Tim (E)

Almost reluctantly, but with relief over having addressed his incomplete assignments, Tim reached a personal conclusion that the journals were a valuable component of the course, one that he would recommend. The interactive, dialogic setting of journal 5 provided an opportunity for Tim and his teacher to construct meaning together.

Finally, another learner very specifically touched on the issue of constructing meaning within a dialogic forum. Having reread her own previous journals before writing journal 5, she wrote,

[In Journal 2], I was concerned with the lack of respect of today's young people for language, and would not have looked at the topic in any other way if I had not your response. Now I have to think about the evolution of languages over longer periods of time, about slang and its effects, and even the more timely topic of ebonics, (a relatively new word itself, and not in my dictionary, and possibly misspelled!). My point here is that I think journals are important for the enhancement of a course topic in a personalized way, that there is simply is not enough class time to do otherwise. Lucy (E)

Lucy valued dialogue journals for their ability to enhance basic class topics by creating a more individualized forum in which interaction took place.

To summarize, these learners claimed that dialogue journals provide an individualized forum in which teachers and students can communicate and explore topics in a personalized way, and in this dialogic setting, both teachers and students are able to construct meaning together (Peyton, 1993: 171-172). In this sense, dialogue journals can be seen to counteract some effects of the much-criticized banking model: the development of passive learners who act in a record/playback mode, discouraged from creative thinking and personalized knowledge. Learners are expected to safely guard, and return upon demand, teachers' deposits of knowledge. The construction of meaning in this particular context focused on the evaluation and justification of a particular course component, dialogue journals.

### 3. Reduce the “banking model” effect

The banking model of education has also been highly criticized for the weighty significance it attributes to the role and power of the teacher (Freire, 1970). This overemphasis results in neglect of both the learners' role and the important knowledge they already possess. In contrast, recognizing learners' prior knowledge, along with the opportunity to share it, enables the teacher and the learners to reduce this banking model effect (see Freire, 1970, and Schleppegrell, 1997).

Education which encourages the dialogic construction of meaning acknowledges learners' prior knowledge, confirms the richness of varying perspectives as well as provides opportunity for the expression of voice, the sharing of previous experience, and the incorporation of new knowledge. Moreover, a dialogic pedagogy is based not only on the idea that learners have knowledge, but also that their points of view should be heard, curriculum decisions should be affected by the learners' voice, teachers' assumptions should be examined based on learners' beliefs, a personal connection should be made between a learner and a teacher, a class activity should be meaningful and not require a predetermined outcome, and, perhaps most importantly, learners should be given an opportunity to express their voice (see Schleppegrell, 1997 for a discussion of these issues). Though several of these issues are relevant to the present study, it is this final area that learners emphatically highlighted as a reason for their positive reactions to the dialogue journals: the expression of voice.

Learners recognized in dialogue journals a forum in which to express their own voice, and their comments explored this issue from five different perspectives, each centered on the notion of a dialogic pedagogy. First, learners viewed dialogue journals as an opportunity for them to communicate with their teacher and for the teacher to learn what they expect from the course. This view of voice relates to the two conditions necessary for ‘good dialogue’ that were previously mentioned by learners — that learners have opportunity to express themselves and that teachers get to know their learners — but additionally reflects a degree of empowerment. To illustrate, the following learner implied a desire that her teacher be aware of her expectations for the course and saw the journals as an effective means of expressing her voice:

I feel that the journals are a very effective means of communication between students and professors. I felt that our journals were very helpful to us because it gave us a chance to communicate and let you know what we expected to learn from the class. Carla (B)

Rather than being a passive receptor of knowledge, Carla takes an active role as she communicates her class expectations to her teacher; through her dialogue journals, Carla recognizes that she is empowered to express her voice.

Learners' second perspective on the issue of voice relates to an issue already mentioned, that of working with a suggested topic in an open forum. This learner, attributing to her “free spirit” the need to have options when expressing her voice in writing, commented,

I like being able to communicate with you and share my concerns without having to take time outside of class. I did not really write on any of the assigned topics because I am better at just expressing my feelings as opposed to concentrating on what someone else would like me to write about. I think having the option available to write about whatever is beneficial to those of us who are free spirits and do not like being trapped by someone else's ideas. Lisa (C)

Though Lisa did not write about the suggested journal topics in journals 2-4, her journals always related to the class and dealt with interesting, valuable themes including her fear of failure based on unsuccessful past experiences in a language class, the pressure of a language requirement with graduation dependent on its successful completion, the issue of addressing grammar in class, the positive

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characteristics of enrolling in Spanish in a summer course sequence versus a regular semester sequence, and the frustration resulting from pressure to learn material presented at a rapid pace. On one occasion, Lisa also reacted specifically to a particular quiz exercise:

I really hate those fill in the word sections in which one must guess what people we don't know are going to say next and in Spanish for that matter. Lisa (C)

She also noted the ability of the journal to

change my attitude because it led me to believe that you care about teaching and ... students. Lisa (C)

Therefore, though the issues Lisa explored were beyond the scope of the topics suggested for journal 2, 3 and 4, she used the journal forum to engage in dialogue with her instructor regarding issues that affected her learning. It is quite likely that the important issues Lisa chose to explore would not have been addressed were it not for the dialogue journals.

Lisa's connection between dialogue journals and an instructor who "cares about teaching and students" relates to learners' third perspective on voice. In the opinion of many learners, dialogue journals create an opportunity in a large institution for busy, perhaps intimidated, learners to interact with the instructor, a communication partner who is sometimes viewed as one who doesn't "care to hear." For example, Donna wrote,

I have found journals to be very helpful. They have allowed you and me to keep a running dialogue about this class. Since I work, I don't always have time to call my professor(s) and comment on class or give my opinions on class format (some don't care to hear these things). Journals have allowed me to develop a sort of relationship and rapport with you and that makes me much more comfortable in class. Donna (C)

Additionally,

I feel that the journal writing for this class is a good idea. It gives the students an opportunity to express their concerns and ideas about how the class is going and what is working for them and what is not. Often times at a university that is this big people just feel like they are a number and that they cannot communicate with the instructor or ask for help. The students become intimidated by the instructor and think that the instructor has better

things to do than answer their questions. Kim (G)

Both of these learners positively reacted to journals, recognizing their potential to foster communication and develop a relationship between the learner and the teacher. They report that in turn, this dialogue leads to a higher level of comfort in class and reduces potential feelings of intimidation.

As a fourth perspective on the expression of voice, learners recognized the obvious fact that there is a role for both of these two dialogic partners — students and teachers — to play. Though teachers may use dialogue journals as an opportunity to get to know students and answer questions, students also desire opportunities to express their voices as students. For example, this learner wrote,

I found the journals helpful because **they allowed us to express ourselves as the students in the course.** I feel it is a good way to communicate our feelings, concerns, and opinions about certain issues such as the oral portfolios and the chapter exams and just generally how we are doing in the class. I wish all teachers would be this open minded to suggestions on how to learn the material better in other courses. [emphasis added] Carl (B)

Affirming the importance of the expression of voice, Carl stresses whose voice it is that he desires to express: his own. Relating the expression of the student voice to effective learning, Carl highlights the difference between a banking model of education and a dialogic pedagogy, thus confirming the need for the student voice to be expressed.

Carl's final statement regarding "all teachers" hints at the fifth perspective on voice raised by the learners: the expression of voice prompts change. These learners perceived dialogue journals not only as a good forum in which to express their voice but also perceived the expression of their voice to be effective, that is, the learners believed that what they wrote in the journals could and did promote change. For example, Mark explained,

The journals are also a good way for the students to interact with the instructor. They allow for a forum of communication and feedback that can be beneficial for the students. The students gain constructive criticism that can instill ideas that they may not have thought of before. It also allows them a voice for their opinions, which can affect how the class is taught. A class that is tailored to the student will have a much greater influence on the student than a class where the instructor does not listen to their students. Mark (G)

This learner claims that dialogue journals provide students with a voice that promotes change. Moreover, in Mark's opinion, a class "tailored to the student" greatly influences learners and communicates the message that the teacher listens.

Another learner also perceived that dialogue journal interaction affected how "classes worked." Stephen commented,

The journal topics did affect my attitude toward the class because they asked my opinion on the class, and I was able to give my input on the structure. I feel as if my input made a difference when it came to how the classes worked. Stephen (G)

Stephen connected the expression of his opinions to his attitude toward the class. Furthermore, he believed that his voice made a difference in the classroom itself. Thus, true expression of voice, like good dialogue, involves two supporting conditions: (1) the opportunity for the expression of opinions, ideas and concerns as well as (2) the perception that this expression receives attention and produces change. Therefore, good dialogue, which requires that a teacher know something about individual learners who have opportunity to express their voice, will inspire meaningful interaction and effect positive change.

## Discussion of the Teacher's Role

Though the focus of this investigation is on learners' perspectives, this brief section highlights the voice of the teacher, the learners' dialogic partner. In these journals, the teacher engaged in dialogue with her students, addressed evolving attitudes and received suggestions for course revisions.

For example, in her first course journal, one student described her fears of taking Spanish, experiences of intimidation and "negative feelings and concerns" regarding the language learning process. Lynn wrote,

Don't hate me because I'm being honest! I was this close to taking sign language because it was a non-speaking language. I do have a fear of speaking a different language in front of others because I always feel as though I'm messing up and that everyone else knows. Lynn (E)

Responding to dialogue journal 1, the teacher picked up Lynn's topic,

I'm glad you expressed all of this. You're very articulate and I truly appreciate your honesty. You have several good points here. I think it would probably be most helpful to set aside the

past experiences you've had and focus on the "asset" idea. You may even come to like it, the idea and Spanish itself. It takes work, time and effort (and courage as we said last Monday) but you can get through it. Let me know how I can help. Teacher

A few weeks later, once panic-stricken, now calmer, Lynn continued the dialogue in journal 2,

This journal is kind of a follow up on the last one I did. In my last journal entry, I talked a lot about my fears of learning a new language. I still have some of those fears, but they are diminishing quickly. Lynn (E)

And, in her newly-developed confidence (and continued honesty), Lynn suggested,

I think that talking one on one with other classmates more often would be quite beneficial. I think that asking questions and being able to comprehend what others are saying is very important. It helps me out a lot when we go over the homework with other students (one on one). This way we can explain to each other why we got the answers we got. I would feel a lot more comfortable and confident if we were more verbal in class. Not that I don't think we are, but that is definitely what helps me the most! Lynn (E)

Informed by their previous dialogue in journal 1, the teacher responded to Lynn's journal 2,

Good. They [fears] do go away as time passes and you gain more experience with the language. [Fluency] will come with time. One day you'll be talking in Spanish and suddenly you'll realize you're not intimidated any more. [...] Yes! This kind of [group] work is extremely valuable! I'm glad to know this helps you and I'll try to fit in as much pair work as possible. Ok? Teacher

In the succeeding journal dialogue between Lynn and her teacher, they continued to pursue topics related to Lynn's struggles with language learning anxiety, suggestions for pedagogical improvements and the classroom use of Spanish. Together they developed this forum for good dialogue in which Lynn expressed her voice as a student, explored course-related topics of her choice, discussed the class format, prompted change in her teachers' practices and discovered that her teacher sincerely cared about her learning. Evaluating the dialogue journals, Lynn wrote in journal 5,

The journals that we did this semester had an extremely good effect on my

proficiency and attitude toward this course and toward the instructor. I felt good about knowing that I could rely to you all of my thoughts and concerns about learning Spanish. The journals also showed me how much you cared about what we thought about the course and about the Spanish language. [...] I think it really came through not only in your journal responses, but also in your classes that you genuinely did care if we understood what you were teaching us. Lynn (E)

Clearly, the teacher's role as a dialogic partner proved to have a positive, though unmeasurable, effect on Lynn's experience as a language student. This series of interactions further confirms Peyton's (1993) three interconnected categories. Lynn and her teacher engaged in good dialogue through this forum for which they together constructed meaning. Furthermore, in this forum of dialogic pedagogy, Lynn discovered that her teacher "cared about what [she] thought."

## Conclusion

This study focused primarily on learners' perceptions of their experiences with dialogue journals rather than on specific examples of the actual reflection and interaction which took place, an obvious focus for future research. These learners perceived in L1 dialogue journals the potential to promote good dialogue, construct meaning and reduce Freire's (1970) banking model effect. Specifically, learners acknowledged in journals the ability to express themselves in order that the teacher might know them better individually. Given the demanding nature of the SL classroom, learners found dialogue journals to be a useful forum of communication, especially for shy, quiet students who otherwise might not engage in meaningful interaction with their teacher. Furthermore, in this individualized, dialogic setting, learners claimed that they were able to explore new topics, discuss course-related themes and handle personal issues with their teacher. Reflecting on the use of the journals, many learners described their now positive evaluations and constructed a meaningful purpose for the journals. Finally, these learners related journals to the expression of voice in a dialogic pedagogy; rather than depositing knowledge in a hierarchical relationship, dialogue journals provided them with an opportunity to express their voices as students, engage in interaction with their teacher, and prompt change in their learning environments. Learners associated these positive characteristics of dialogue journals with providing insight to the teacher, avoiding

feelings of intimidation, developing relationships, and promoting individualized teaching and effective learning.

In order to achieve good dialogue, construct meaning, and avoid the banking model, learners and teachers need to interact in ways that support an effective learning process. Though "good dialogue is difficult to achieve" (Peyton, 1993: 172-173), educators must explore and discover forums in which learners can express their voices. These learners found journals to be a comfortable forum through which they were able to establish good dialogue with their teacher. Perhaps then, it is best to conclude with the journal reflections of one learner whose thoughts summarize this discussion and whose final recommendation should be our guide:

The journals that we did [affected] my thoughts on this class. My attitude at first was that I had to take the class, but over time the class became real enjoyable. I felt these journals gave the instructor a closer look to get to know students better. The journals gave us the opportunity to give you our options [opinions?] and several teachers do not want their students' options. They just want us to show up and do what they say. The topics chosen for this course or journal topics were very appropriate. Once again they gave us a way to express our feelings and ideas. The journals were helpful, if we had a problem or concern it allowed us to tell you about them and the suggestions you gave were reassuring. I believe journals are a good thing and you should keep on doing them in future classes. Colin (A)

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I sincerely thank the students whose interactions with me throughout these journals both enriched our collaborative learning experience as well as made this study possible. I also thank the anonymous reviewers whose insights were extremely valuable. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2002 annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics in Salt Lake City, Utah. Thanks to my fellow language teachers and researchers there who provided very useful feedback. Finally, a special thanks to Joy Kreeft Peyton whose previous research was instrumental in the development of this paper.

## Note

1 Freire (1970) criticizes what he terms the "banking model" of education in which a teacher, viewed as the pos-

sensor of knowledge, deposits information into students, viewed as blank slates. Thus, the result, or effect, of the banking model is the neglect both of the students' previous knowledge and the students' role in their own learning. This effect is reduced through a recognition of students' prior knowledge as well as the inclusion of the learners themselves in a dialogic pedagogy.

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## Appendix A

### Journal information sheet

#### Journals

- Between half a page and one page is probably a good amount, though if you want to write more you are welcome to.
- Typed, double-spaced.
- Required. Journals are not given specific grades although not completing them will definitely negatively affect your class participation and / or homework grade.

Journals are intended to be a method of communication between you and me. The

purpose of the journal is to give you an opportunity to reflect on the content and form of this course, to express your reflections and to get some feedback.

There is no set format for the journal except for the items mentioned above. Journals will usually be required once every other week; but again, if you wish to write more often, please do so. The journal's effectiveness for you depends on you.

The only restriction on content is that the journals should be related to this course. Other than that, you are free to explore any aspect of the course. You might use the journal to react to an activity we've done in class, to analyze any issue relating to language or language learning that has either come up in class or that you think of on your own, to suggest something you would find useful for us to do in class, to analyze a particular exercise from the textbook or workbook (or any source) that you believe has helped you learn Spanish, to reflect on your own language learning experiences and development, to raise any relevant questions.

Usually I will suggest a possible topic for your journal. However, you are strongly encouraged to select your own topics.

Furthermore, you are also urged to pursue topics over more than one week so that your reflections and questioning are given more room to develop.

## **Appendix B**

### **Suggested journal topics**

Journal 1. What concerns, if any, do you have about studying Spanish? and/or Whatever you want to write about.

Journal 2. Do you view "grammar" or "fluency" as most important? What does each term mean? Do errors affect both equally? and/or Whatever you want to write about.

Journal 3. How do you learn Spanish? Pronunciation? Grammar? Vocabulary? Fluency? What do you find most effective? and/or Whatever you want to write about.

Journal 4. What classroom expressions do you need to know/would be helpful to know to use Spanish in the classroom? What do you think about using Spanish in the classroom? and/or Whatever you want to write about.

Journal 5. For final journal 5, I would like you to write about the journals themselves. Again, this is a suggested topic, feel free to answer any or all of the questions below and/or to write about whatever you want to write about.

- Did the journals have any effect on your proficiency in and/or attitude toward this course or instructor? If so, what role did they play?
- Were the above topics appropriate for the course? Do you have any topic suggestions?
- Generally, were writing the journals and communicating with your instructor through them helpful? Why or why not?
- Did your instructor comment on the content of your journals? If so, what effect did this have?
- Would you have liked there to be more / less journals or was the number about right? Do you have any suggestions about the format of the journals in terms of whatever?
- What is your overall (general and specific) reaction to journal writing in this course?