

FOCUSED TOPIC DIALOGUE JOURNALING  
IN ESL WORKPLACE INSTRUCTION

by

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*To Trudy Broshears*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

From my personal experience as a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) for adults, writing remains the most challenging skill to teach and is often one area where even the most advanced learners need work. The learners I currently teach in an onsite, employer-sponsored, workplace ESL class are no exception. Typically, their language strengths lie in listening and speaking. If they have developed literacy skills in English, reading tends to be stronger than writing in most cases. This can be attributed to the fact that many entry-level positions require little reading and writing, if at all. Certainly many immigrants and refugees easily find work in the United States, however, having the skills to survive in the workplace is one thing; obtaining the language and work skills necessary to thrive on the job is quite another (Grognet, 1994).

While it is important for immigrants and refugees to have jobs, work schedules and other responsibilities make it difficult for many workers to access ESL classes outside of the workplace. Therefore, workplace ESL teachers must advocate for a well-rounded curriculum that addresses writing and reading as well as listening and speaking. It is the goal of this research to find a teaching practice that addresses immediate workplace communication needs while at the same time honing the reading and writing skills that are essential for promotion in the workplace and success in one's personal life as well. For this study, I will explore the strategy of dialogue journaling with focused topics as a technique for improving speaking skills. Workplace speaking competencies

will be incorporated into the conversations written in dialogue journals in order to see whether such practice will have a positive effect on speaking skills when measured pre- and post- on a workplace speaking test.

### Literacy in the Workplace

In a comparison of relative importance, the need for listening and speaking skills greatly outweighs the need for reading and writing skills in most of the entry-level jobs where recent immigrants and refugees find employment (Essential Skills Profile, 2003). Accordingly, many of the workplace ESL classes I have taught focused primarily on developing listening and speaking proficiency. Reading practice tended to be limited to the sight words which learners customarily encounter on the job, whereas writing practice typically consists of copying those sight words as well as filling out job-specific paperwork and forms. Well-developed reading and writing skills are essential if learners are to aspire to move beyond an entry-level status at work, as well as in order to facilitate a more complete and successful acculturation into society.

Even teachers with the best of intentions may find it difficult to incorporate quality writing lessons in their classes due to the nature of workplace ESL itself. Course sessions tend to be short, with only 10-12 meetings per term. Standardized testing must occur twice during that time: once at the beginning and again at the end of the course. An additional challenge is that of limited resources; as a result, many workplace ESL programs must place all learners together in one class, regardless of ability. Delivering a successful writing lesson is very difficult within a multi-level environment.

A promising solution that addresses both time constraints and the challenge of a multi-level class is to use *dialogue journaling* to provide writing practice. Each learner writes letters back and forth to the teacher, who in turn individualizes the response to whatever writing level is appropriate for the learner. An added benefit of this technique is that it also produces contextualized reading practice for the learner which is tailored specifically to his or her own experiences and interest.

While dialogue journaling has important merits, it too poses a unique set of challenges for the instructor. For example, in order to perform meaningful dialogue journaling, a significant investment of time is needed; with only a few short weeks of class meetings, time is precious. Further, while teachers want to put the needs of the learner first, there can be no classes without funding. Therefore, it is important to work on skills that can be tested in order to produce measurable outcomes. Since standardized writing tests are not commonly used for reporting purposes, dialogue journaling may not seem like a wise use of class time to many teachers.

Currently, teachers in my district may choose between the California Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) listening and reading tests in order to demonstrate and report progress to funding sources. The listening test is used most frequently in workplace ESL classes because it is the skill that can be improved upon the most in a short amount of time. While listening skills may produce the most significant short-term output, they are but one factor in the equation of linguistic development. Providing meaningful opportunities to develop reading and writing ability not only enhances short-term listening and speaking skills, it also serves as part of an integral basis of support for

the long-term linguistic assimilation and acculturation of immigrants and refugees into society.

With the introduction of a third assessment tool, the CASAS Workplace Speaking (WS) test, alternative teaching methods, such as dialogue journaling, could help learners to improve speaking skills through practice with reading and writing. Though there is limited research to show that dialogue journaling is such a technique, I believe the case is worth investigating because it provides the needed link between oral/aural skills and literacy skills. An example can be taken from Nagel and Kellerman (1997), who found favorable results in their study of dialogue journaling with *embedded* topics. Learners who read an entry from their dialogue journal partner that was written using a particular style, such as a personal narrative, often produced a response entry using that same style. In a similar fashion, dialogue journaling may help to show measurable improvement on a speaking test if the teacher focuses the topics of the journaling toward the competencies that are to be tested. Perhaps conversing in writing about workplace-related topics will prepare learners to talk about them come test time.

#### A Case for Dialogue Journaling

Due to the disadvantages of deemphasizing reading and writing in the workplace, methods for effectively incorporating these skills into the curriculum must be explored. Because speaking and listening are most immediately needed in the workplace, dialogue journaling may prove to be a particularly appropriate practice because this form of writing mimics speech in its informal, conversation-like nature (de Godev, 1994;

Weissberg, 1997). In contrast to traditional journaling, this method calls for the learner to engage in a *dialogue* with another writer, in many cases an expert, such as a teacher or other more proficient English speaker (Jones, 1996). Learners are not expected to write about a formal, pre-selected topic. Instead, learners can develop their writing skills using the everyday language that they hear and produce at work through a conversation on paper. Though the focus of a dialogue journal is on meaning and not form (Orem, 2001; Peyton, 1986; Staton, 1984), when reading the teacher's responses to their entries, learners benefit from the modeling of more standard language forms. By establishing personal relationships with individual learners, the teacher can work to scaffold each learner to higher levels of language proficiency through supporting them at each stage of development (Staton, 1987). Cobine (1995) calls this an apprenticeship between learner and teacher. For example, the teacher may use the dialogue journal as a means to model target language such as comparisons. When the learner reads commentary from the teacher on his or her journal entry that utilizes a comparison, the learner may later attempt that same strategy for future expression. Scaffolding of this kind, Cobine says, builds upon itself and may lead to more formal writing. While few workplace ESL learners need formal writing skills for their current jobs, more advanced writing skills are needed for many higher-level positions. Dialogue journaling is an engaging activity that provides meaningful practice of this essential skill as well as reading practice that is in context and individualized to each learner.

In the hectic first weeks of many workplace education courses, when teachers are busy with the logistics of registering, testing and placing new learners, it can be difficult

to squeeze in a meaningful language lesson in between paperwork. It is challenging for teachers to make connections with learners right away. Dialogue journaling offers a forum for the exchange of meaningful content from the very beginning. It takes almost no time to introduce the dialogue journal, and learners can work on it independently for as little as five minutes or as long as time allows. I have begun this activity with a written introduction of myself as a model, along with general questions for the learner about his or her family, hobbies, job duties, etc. This way, learners have a reading and writing exercise that is contextualized and individualized specifically to their interests right from the start. They can write as little or as much as they want, and, hopefully, the anticipation of a response from the teacher will bring them back to the next class. Journals can be waiting for them as soon as they arrive, so that they can continue with their learning without wasting time while waiting for other classmates to arrive.

### Research on Dialogue Journaling and Speaking

Few studies have explored the connection between speaking and writing in general (Takagaki, 1997). Perhaps it is easier to see the relationships between oral/aural skills: listening and speaking, and literacy skills: reading and writing. Lack of research, however, does not mean that a relationship between speaking and writing does not exist. Chapter Two will detail research from three parties that ignited my interest in the relationship between speaking and writing. One study's findings implicate further research on whether skills learned through dialogue journaling will transfer to other writing tasks (Holmes & Moulton, 1997), or in this case, another language task, such as a

speaking test. Another aforementioned study looks at how learners can learn about different writing styles through their dialogue journals when a target writing style is modeled to them by a teacher who *embeds* such a writing style into his or her own journal response (Nagel & Kellerman, 1995). Finally, a study by El-Koumy (1998) looks at dialogue journaling with university learners and its effect on speaking skills. El-Koumy's work provides a model for my own study with workplace ESL learners.

El-Koumy found that dialogue journaling is useful for improving speaking skills in general; I would like to see whether dialogue journaling can be utilized to improve speaking skills in a specific area, such as workplace communication. To do this, I will adapt Nagel and Kellerman's idea of embedding to address my own question: Will dialogue journaling with focused topics have any effect on speaking skills? Support for this hypothesis would inform ESL teachers about focused topic dialogue journaling as a valid technique to be utilized in workplace ESL classrooms to both encourage reading and writing in an otherwise oral/aural-emphasis curriculum as well as seek to improve performance on standardized testing.

Chapter Two will discuss literacy instruction in workplace ESL, and will detail research on approaches to teaching adult literacy and writing in a second language. Second language acquisition theories that inform writing instruction will also be discussed, in order to support the case for dialogue journaling. El-Koumy's research on dialogue journaling and its effect on speaking skills will be detailed, followed by information about topic embedding in workplace ESL. Chapter Three will describe the methodology used in the current study and Chapter Four will discuss the results of the

study. Finally, Chapter Five will discuss my conclusions and impressions of the study and its implications for the field of ESL, as well as relate the limitations of the research and suggest future research implications.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides relevant research for my question: Will dialogue journaling with focused topics have any effect on speaking skills? The literature review will first discuss writing in ESL instruction. Then, an overview of popular approaches to teaching adult ESL literacy will be given, followed by information about issues that learners encounter in writing in a second language. A discussion of second language acquisition theories that inform writing instruction will follow in order to make a case for dialogue journaling. Subsequently, a study on dialogue journaling and its effect on speaking skills will be detailed, and will conclude with information about topic embedding in workplace ESL.

### Literacy in Workplace ESL Instruction

Writing instruction in adult ESL literacy classes has not always received the attention it deserves. Leki (1992) explains that, historically, ESL classes sought to assist learners with acquiring skills needed to pass the citizenship test, namely reading and oral/aural skills. If gaining employment was also a goal, many immigrant workers were primed for entry-level positions that required few literacy skills, if any. Writing was usually the last skill to be learned and it was taught with an emphasis on grammar. Even

today, Leki points out, few graduate ESL programs teach courses in how to teach ESL writing. Teachers tend to view themselves as language teachers, not writing teachers.

With the introduction of competency-based education (CBE), adult ESL classes began to address learners' needs beyond citizenship. The goal of CBE courses is to teach learners the life skills needed to function in society and to have them demonstrate mastery of those skills through performance-based assessment (Savage, 1993; Parker & Taylor, cited in Auerbach, 1986). Savage heralds CBE as a method that is well suited for combination with many other popular approaches for teaching literacy. For example, the Freirean approach, a learner-centered method that poses problems about which learners discuss and come to their own conclusions (Spener, 1993), can be used with CBE to teach critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

One problem with programs that try to implement CBE, Savage points out, is that *life skills* may be interpreted too narrowly, limiting the competencies targeted in an ESL course to filling out basic forms, navigating the transportation system, etc. Savage argues that CBE actually addresses the needs of all learners at any level of proficiency with any learning goals when the definition of *life skills* is broadened to encompass whatever career, academic or personal aspirations a learner might have.

Unfortunately, when CBE is implemented in workplace ESL programs, employers often expect that content will be tailored specifically to the skills-sets most needed at that particular worksite. If the job requirements emphasize listening and speaking, then reading and writing practice may not receive its due attention in the classroom. Auerbach (as cited in Auerbach, 1986) asserts that customizing workplace

ESL courses to address only those skills needed to perform a menial job will ensure that learners will only ever qualify for low-level jobs. An employer at one worksite complimented the learners in my class on their improvement and then lamented to me in private that she dreaded having to replace those learners once their skills had advanced beyond what was required for such an entry-level position, thus allowing them to take better jobs. It is difficult to balance the expectations of the employer with CBE's true goal to help learners acculturate more successfully into society.

The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) sought to bring some continuity to competency based education programs by creating the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report. According to the report, learners need to be resourceful, work well with others, acquire and use information, understand complex inter-relationships and work with a variety of technologies. These competencies stem from groundwork in 1) basic skills, including reading and writing, listening and speaking, and mathematical proficiency, 2) thinking skills, including creative thinking, problem solving, and decision making, and 3) personal qualities, like responsibility, self-esteem and integrity.

The SCANS report addresses writing as a basic skill needed to flourish in the workplace, but the definition of basic writing skills goes far beyond what is covered in the workplace literacy curriculums I have taught. According to the SCANS report, a successful worker:

Communicates thoughts, ideas, information, and messages in writing; records information completely and accurately; composes and creates documents such as

letters, directions, manuals, reports, proposals, graphs, flow charts; uses language, style, organization, and format appropriate to the subject matter, purpose, and audience. Includes supporting documentation and attends to level of detail; checks, edits, and revises for correct information, appropriate emphasis, form, grammar, spelling, and punctuation (p.33).

In order for workers to truly thrive on the job, their reading and writing levels must exceed those required for most low-level positions. Instructors need to focus reading and writing practice on more than just the forms that a worker needs to fill out each day, such as timecards, accident reports, etc. Learners need a forum to practice writing letters and proposals. They need to understand concepts like scanning for information or having a purpose for writing. They need opportunities to edit and revise their own work, as well as work to understand nuances like emphasis and tone in writing. When the focus of a class is on the speaking and listening skills needed to survive each day on the job, there is little time for or emphasis upon reading or writing.

### Approaches to Teaching Adult ESL Literacy

There are many approaches to adult ESL literacy instruction that serve workplace ESL programs well. While a competency-based education approach (CBE) commonly forms the basis for such programs, individual teachers can enhance a CBE curriculum using elements from other teaching philosophies such as the *whole language*, *language experience*, or *learner generated writing* approaches (Savage, 1993).

### Competency-Based Education Approach

A competency-based education course focuses on the skills necessary to be successful in life and evaluates mastery of those skills through performance-based assessment (Savage, 1993; Parker & Taylor, cited in Auerbach, 1986). A CBE syllabus is organized around topics, or life skills areas, that are determined pertinent to the group being taught through learner surveys or interviews. Sub-topics within those areas form the basis for lesson plans that teach the sub-skills necessary to perform a life skill. For example, using the transportation system is a life skill. To accomplish that objective, learners must master sub-skills like reading a bus timetable or asking for a transfer ticket. The CBE approach is appropriate for learners at all levels of proficiency and can be adapted to address any learning goal.

### Whole Language Approach

The whole language approach views reading, writing, listening and speaking as skills that are linked together and should not be taught in isolation (Rigg & Kazemek, 1993). According to this philosophy, learners become literate by building upon established oral skills. Also important are each learner's unique experiences because they contribute to his or her own voice or style of using language. Whole language develops through interaction with others – listening and speaking skills through conversations with others, but also reading and writing skills through access to other writers. Whole language writing activities have a communicative purpose, such as writing a letter or composing a poem to be shared with an audience. Learners are encouraged to read and write daily, so many keep journals or read texts that are produced

as a result of actual learner or class experiences. In workplace ESL classes, learners can write requests for time off, and then discuss the request in a role-play where one partner is the boss. They can also write a list of job duties for someone to perform in their absence. Lists can be exchanged with a partner who asks questions to clarify what needs to be done while they take on the responsibilities of another worker.

### Language Experience Approach

Using actual learner or class experiences as reading texts in a whole language classroom is the basis for an instructional method all of its own called the language experience approach. Oral/aural skills, along with reading and writing skills, are incorporated into this approach, because literacy develops through the use of texts that stem from discussion between teacher and learner or groups of learners about personal experiences (Taylor, 1993). This activity can be done with a whole workplace ESL class after a field trip, or after some shared experience as simple as taking a tour of the work facility. The teacher engages the learners in conversation about the activity, all the while transcribing what is said. The teacher then reads the text back to the learners before giving them an opportunity to read the work for themselves. Learners take pride in their texts and many share them with classmates or family members. This practice appeals to learners because it is geared both to their individual interests and language abilities.

### Learner Generated Writing Approach

Yet another approach to adult ESL literacy instruction is to publish learner writing for others to read. Learners write about their own experiences or dictate their stories orally, as with the language experience approach (Peyton, 1993). While the two

approaches are similar, the goal of learner generated writing goes beyond building basic literacy skills. Learners are encouraged to find their own unique voice through the experience. Having others read what they have written gives them a purpose for writing and motivates them to write better, to articulate their ideas more clearly and in a way that the reader will find more interesting. Learners develop their creativity, but also improve their grammar and sentence structure through editing and revision. In workplace ESL classrooms, learners' writing may be published in booklets or staff newsletters or sometimes even in mainstream publications. The practice is highly motivating for writers and helps to build a healthy self-concept. It also provides an enriching experience for both the writer and those who read their work.

The approaches to adult ESL literacy instruction detailed here emphasize the need for reading and writing practice throughout the curriculum. It is critical that workplace ESL teachers find ways to incorporate those skills wherever possible.

### Writing in a Second Language

While most approaches to teaching adult ESL literacy encourage teachers to give writing its fair share of instruction time, in practice, writing instruction is often very limited. Because many immigrants come to the United States with few literacy skills, writing tends to receive less emphasis in ESL classrooms than other language skills.

When asked to write, learners have many obstacles to overcome. They can be stymied by translating from their first language to the second language, trying to think in the second language, searching for just the right word (Leki, 1992), and trying to

articulate themselves in a way that will be comprehensible to a reader who may not share much knowledge of the learner's personal and cultural background. Learners may be less intimidated by listening and speaking because those skills are often practiced with a partner or with the aid of a teacher, perhaps making them less frustrating skills for learners to learn. The written word is subject to concrete grammatical parameters, whereas greater latitude is normally given in oral communication. There exists great need to make writing practice less daunting and more meaningful for learners.

As an alternative to essays and grammar assignments, teachers in both mainstream and ESL classrooms encourage learners to write in journals. While this practice does a good job of individualizing learning, the blank page still holds many learners back. Indeed, the same problems of not knowing what to say or how to express an idea remain. Due to these and other challenges involved with traditional journaling assignments, many teachers have begun to introduce a writing partner, usually the teacher, who participates in the journaling process by carrying on a conversation or dialogue in writing within each learner's journal (Staton, 1998).

#### A Case for Dialogue Journaling

In the exercise of dialogue journaling, the partner that is so often utilized in listening and speaking practice is interjected into the writing process thereby serving as a mentor and facilitates the closest form of oral exchange in written format. This arrangement may help to ease frustration and make writing more enjoyable. Through the reading and writing of dialogue journals, learner and teacher have the opportunity to

participate in the negotiation of meaning that is so crucial for language acquisition. Meaning is negotiated by the comments, questions and clarifying questions that occur as each writer continues the conversation in turn (Staton, 1996).

### Benefits to Dialogue Journaling

Dialogue journaling is advantageous for both teacher and learner because it is a learning strategy that focuses on content rather than grammar. Learners can focus on communicative competence without pressure to be grammatically correct (Orem, 2001; Peyton, 1986; Staton, 1984). Absent the fear of making mistakes, learners hopefully produce more language altogether by taking more turns in the conversation and by writing ever-longer journal entries as interest in a particular topic dictates.

Learners can also increase their fluency through dialogue journaling, because journal keeping gives learners the option to discuss one topic step-by-step, so that their language and knowledge of the topic improves incrementally. A relationship between learner and teacher is built through the interpersonal connection established in the dialogue journal. Like that of an oral exchange, the learner gets individualized attention from the teacher and the teacher gets the benefit of learning more about the learner and hence can tailor his or her approach. The teacher guides the learner through the conversation, allowing the learner to grow in his or her knowledge of the subject as well as the vocabulary and sentence structure required to talk about it (Ho, 2003; Orem 2001). For example, a learner who is interested in gardening will grow in their knowledge of plant names, gardening tools, etc. as well as, perhaps, the future tense as he or she discusses plans for this year's garden. Teacher and learner can exchange gardening tips,

or, if the learner is the more experienced gardener, he or she can take pride in the role of expert and share advice about what to plant and when. This facilitates confidence, which is a necessary component of advancing writing ability.

Another benefit to dialogue journaling is that teachers can individualize writing instruction by working with learners within their *zone of proximal development* (Vgotsky, as cited in Staton, 1987). The nature of the dialogue journals allows the teacher to target the language level at which a learner is individually operating comfortably, and then tailor the conversation to a level that is just beyond what the learner can do alone. Through this one-on-one exchange, teachers can establish personal relationships with individual learners, and work to scaffold each learner to higher levels of language proficiency through supporting them at each stage of development (Ho, 2003; Weissberg, 1997; Staton, 1987).

#### Language Acquisition Theories that Support Dialogue Journaling

The process by which linguistic skills are developed has served as a field of study for numerous academic scholars. Some of the primary components analyzed include the importance of oral/aural acquisition, social interaction, and building upon knowledge incrementally, as well as the notion of whether language is something that is learned, or rather, acquired. Dialogue journaling is a technique that can be successfully woven into the approaches advocated by a number of theorists. An examination of pertinent theories on this subject matter and the relevance of dialogue journaling therein follows.

### Interactionism

The *interactionist* position for language acquisition is described by Lightbown and Spada (1999) as one where “language develops as a result of the complex interplay between the uniquely human characteristics of the child and the environment in which the child develops” (p.22). Both a child’s innate abilities and his or her interactions with adults who adapt their speech to meet the child’s developmental level are the key factors leading to language acquisition. One could argue that oral/aural interactions are more important than reading and writing at the beginning stages of ESL instruction because, just as children learn to speak long before they learn to write, adult ESL learners, especially those with low native language literacy skills, follow suit. That said, in order for children or adult learners to develop their writing skills beyond an elementary level, writing instruction needs to be introduced early on in their schooling and requires liberal opportunities for practice.

Vygotsky’s (as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) interactionist viewpoint proposes that this social interaction between child and adult or child and peers is essential for language development. Such interaction provides the support a child needs to gain knowledge and to master increasingly more difficult skills. Children acquire skills when they are operating in what Vygotsky refers to as the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). The ZPD defines a spectrum between what the child is able to do with help and what he or she can do alone. Writing back and forth with a partner in a dialogue journal provides an authentic, communicative purpose for writing. Through such interaction, children are able to move toward independence at their own speed.

Many teachers apply Vygotsky's theory in the classroom through scaffolding. Scaffolding is a technique used to help learners move from one end of the ZPD to the other, from not being able to perform some function or speech act, to being able to do it with the help of peers or the teacher, to, finally, being able to accomplish the task independently. Dialogue journaling is a technique that appeals to the interactionist position because through it, learners are exposed to language that is modified to their individual level; multiple echelons of scaffolding are constructed throughout the journal exchanges.

#### Dialogue Journaling and Krashen's Model for Second Language Acquisition

Krashen (1982) describes five hypotheses that provide a model for second language acquisition; three of these hypotheses are helpful when evaluating the validity of dialogue journaling as a technique for language learning. *The Learning Acquisition Hypothesis* distinguishes learning a language from acquiring a language. Learning involves studying the actual rules of a language, whereas acquisition occurs when learners use real language for real communication. According to Krashen, since most languages are too complicated to learn all of the rules, most of what learners can do with a language is the result of acquisition. Krashen argues that when children learn their first language, parents and other caretakers spend little time correcting their grammar and teaching them the rules. Despite so little feedback on their grammar, children do learn to speak grammatically. Dialogue journaling provides a place for learners to experiment with language for the purpose of real communication and calls for a focus on content rather than grammaticality.

While grammar rules do have their place in language learning, Krashen's *Monitor Hypothesis* calls for certain conditions in which those rules will be useful. First, the language task at hand must provide time for the learner to apply a rule. In addition, the learner must be concentrating on being correct and must also have learned a rule that will aid them in being correct. In classrooms where the emphasis is on meaning and not form, there are few opportunities for the monitor to be applied. Though dialogue journal writing does not usually emphasize correctness, a learner who wants to focus on form has ample time to apply a rule he or she has learned due to the time lapse between turns in the dialogue journal conversation. The learner may even take time to look back through previous journal entries to see how a particular structure is formed, as there may be examples in the teacher's writing.

Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* is particularly pertinent to success in acquisition through dialogue journaling. This hypothesis states that learners acquire language when they are performing speech acts where the exchange is just beyond the level of what they can do unassisted. The teacher or expert speaker modifies his or her input so that it is comprehensible to the learner. *Comprehensible input*, expressed by the equation  $i+1$ , is provided by modifying one's speech, e.g. slowing down, repeating, rephrasing, and simplifying complex ideas.

Because writing calls for little comprehensible input, Krashen dismisses its usefulness for language acquisition except for when exchanging letters or notes with someone. Dialogue journals are very much the same as writing notes and letters back and forth between learner and another more expert speaker who modifies input and feedback

to make it comprehensible to each individual learner. The content of the exchanges are tailored to individual learner needs and interests providing excellent conditions for language acquisition.

### A Study on Comprehensible Output

The role of the teacher is crucial to Krashen's comprehensible input theory because he or she must constantly monitor his or her speech to make it understandable to a learner. Krashen asserts that learner output is not as important for acquisition as is comprehensible input. Swain (cited in Qi & Lapkin, 2001) however, argues that *comprehensible output* is just as important as Krashen's *comprehensible input* because actually producing the language forces the learner to pay attention to, or to notice, some of their linguistic errors. Qi and Lapkin (2001) see a need for teacher feedback, or input, to facilitate the comprehensible output that learners need to produce in order to improve their writing. Dialogue journaling satisfies this requirement. Because learner and teacher write back and forth, the learner receives constant feedback. The teacher encourages comprehensible output by introducing topics of interest to the learner or by asking follow-up questions to continue the conversation, as well as by asking important clarifying questions (Dolly, 1990) when necessary.

In addition to addressing confusion with content in written work, Qi and Lapkin assert that learners need feedback from teachers when they make grammar or syntax errors in their writing. Unfortunately, they say that much written feedback from the teacher is unproductive because it does not succeed in helping learners to notice their errors. James (cited in Qi & Lapkin 1998) suggests that when learners notice a difference

between what they have produced and the feedback that the teacher has given them, they are engaging in *error analysis*. Qi and Lapkin sought to find out whether a learner could notice errors in their own draft when given an opportunity to compare their draft with one that had been reformulated by the teacher. And, if so, Qi and Lapkin wanted to see how having noticed such errors would affect their output on subsequent drafting.

In Qi and Lapkin's study, learners were given a picture as a prompt for writing an essay. They were instructed to edit their draft before turning it in. Learners were asked to think aloud during their revisions. They were able to correctly resolve about half of the language issues that they noticed on their own in their drafts. The researcher then rewrote each draft to make it more accurate and native-like. The learners were then asked to compare their original draft the reformulated one. They thought aloud as they compared and were interviewed and asked what it was they noticed about the difference between the two drafts. The researchers recorded what was noticed and whether the learner simply made note of the correction without questioning it, or whether the learner thought aloud about the reasons for the correction. Learners noticed many more errors in their writing when they compared it to the revised version provided to them than when they just looked for errors in their own writing before handing it in. Later, the learners were asked to revise their first draft.

The researchers state two interesting findings. Most of the time, when learners noticed a difference between their own writing and the reformulated version and could give a reason for accepting the correction, the error was resolved in a subsequent draft. However, errors that were simply noticed and accepted without stating a reason for them

were significantly less likely to be resolved in the next draft. Qi and Lapkin concluded that simply noticing an error without understanding why it was wrong did not have the same effect on writing revision as did noticing an error and being able to see why it was wrong.

Qi and Lapkin champion error correction while Krashen and other proponents of dialogue journaling insist that the focus be on content, not form (Orem, 2001; Peyton, 1986; Staton, 1984). Dialogue journaling, however, does allow for error correction through modeling, recasting and the asking of clarifying questions that will bring such errors to the attention of the learner when they are ready to notice them and thereby acquire new language through meaningful communication.

### Connections between Speaking and Writing

Oral and written conversation share many similarities. Dolly (1990) points out that, whether conversing orally or in writing, each partner must take his or her turn, and in each turn must continue the discussion by adding more information about a topic or branching off into a similar area. He or she must also fix any communication breakdowns by explaining or clarifying what's not understood. Both spoken and written exchanges involve *repairs*, which are used to interrupt advancement of the conversation in order to prevent or resolve a problem in the exchange.

Dolly points out that one difference between spoken and written conversation is that each dialogue journal partner responds to an entire entry at once. This makes it much easier to introduce, or *initiate*, a new topic simply by changing the subject, and

thereby ignore some comments and questions. In the classroom, learners are more likely to respond to topics initiated by their teacher rather than introducing new topics themselves (Scarcella & Higa, as cited in Dolly, 1990). Dolly found the opposite to be true in dialogue journal conversation where learners initiated new topics 57% of the time compared with the teacher 43% of the time. Having more control over topic initiation puts learner and teacher on a more equal plane (Kreeft et al., as cited in Dolly, 1990; Jones, 1996).

### Dialogue Journaling and Speaking

Writing in a dialogue journaling can also help learners to overcome obstacles that often hinder the writing process. Shuy (as cited in Staton, Shuy, Peyton & Reed, 1988) says that, absent a conversation partner, a writer must anticipate confusion in his or her writing and compensate for any potential misunderstandings by being very clear and by explaining anything that might raise questions for a reader. There is no one to stop the writer to ask for clarification. This is no easy task for a beginning writer.

Shuy describes a pattern of *topic recycling* in conversation in which one topic is introduced and is discussed back and forth between partners. The topic may or may not be resolved to satisfaction, but often, even after a new topic has been introduced, the previous topic is reintroduced and the partners try once again to resolve it. This form of topic recycling will be helpful in achieving results with the experimental group in my study. Through dialogue journaling, topics of focus can be discussed, dropped, and reintroduced as many times as necessary until they are properly resolved, i.e. a learner can convey his or her meaning clearly and concisely. Once a learner can resolve topics

satisfactorily in writing, a speaking test can determine if those skills learned in writing transfer to better speaking skills.

Shuy asserts that there are four conditions for learning to read and write in any language and that those conditions are all met through the practice of dialogue journaling. First, when we learn to read or speak, we must have many opportunities to use those skills. Dialogue journal partners may take many turns writing back and forth to each other over an extended period of time. Second, those language tasks must occur in a purposeful way. Because dialogue journaling is tailored to individual learners, it promotes purposeful use of language in natural, meaningful contexts. Third, the learner must be able to monitor what he or she has written to check for accuracy and clarity. The dialogue journal is a written account of what has been said over the course of many weeks, so there is ample opportunity to look back over what has been written by either partner. This allows for Shuy's fourth condition, in which the language task must give learners a chance to compare and contrast their work with their teacher. The teacher's cumulative writing provides a model for learners to compare and improve their own work.

#### Research That Supports Dialogue Journaling and Its Effect on Speaking

Given dialogue journaling's similarities to spoken conversation, El-Koumy (1998) developed a study that looks at the transfer of skills, namely, whether practice with dialogue journaling translates into improved speaking skills. He looked at 136 university students to find whether emphasizing dialogue journal writing in the classroom

would lead to improved speaking skills as measured on a test developed specifically for his study.

El-Koumy used a quasi-experimental research paradigm for this study. Participants in the study were scored in five areas: pronunciation, open-ended sentence completion, telling a story about a picture, free-response questions, and description of a television schedule. All learners were pre-tested at the start of the study. Half the learners were assigned to a control group and received instruction from the course textbook throughout the six-month course. The other half of the class was designated to the control group. They participated in dialogue journaling in addition to instruction from the textbook. After the experimental period, all learners were post-tested. While the study found no statistical significance between the scores of the two groups on the speaking pre-test, the experimental group scored significantly higher on the post-test than did the control group. According to El-Koumy, there are many possible explanations for the favorable result, including increased motivation resulting from better learner-teacher rapport, an open forum for expressing oneself free of embarrassment about one's comments or speaking ability, and increased opportunities for interaction with the teacher.

While El-Koumy does provide convincing findings that dialogue journaling positively affects learners' speaking skills, his research was done with Egyptian university students. There is little research that looks into how dialogue journaling can be used as a tool to improve learners' speaking skills in adult ESL programs here in the

U.S. The implication is that practice with written conversation will raise learners' consciousness of certain speech acts, thus translating into improved speaking skills.

### Topic Embedding in a Workplace ESL Setting

A promising method by which to improve speaking skills in workplace ESL settings can be found in the incorporation of dialogue journaling into the curriculum. When dialogue journals are used to discuss topics that pertain specifically to workplace competencies, the benefits to speaking skills may transfer into measurable outcomes on standardized testing.

CASAS has recently designed a new test especially for the workplace. The Workplace Speaking Test (WS) looks at oral skills with regard to the workplace and contains both pre- and post-test forms. Learners respond to general questions posed by the proctor and are asked to refer to some pictures depicting various workplace situations and problems. These competencies are relevant to a variety of content-based education courses, especially workplace ESL settings, and would fit well into many existing curricula.

While most proponents of dialogue journaling agree that learners should be allowed to write about any topic of their choosing (Orem, 2001; Peyton, 1986; Staton, 1984), some researchers have used the dialogue journal to promote specific learning outcomes. Nagel and Kellerman (1997) did a study with fifth-graders involving *topic embedding*, where the expert writer modeled a certain style of writing, such as a poem or a personal narrative, in his or her entry with the hope of eliciting a similar attempt in the

learner's response. Nagel and Kellerman reported that, when the expert writers modeled narrative structures in their dialogue journal entries, children were likely to respond using that same structure. However, it is unclear whether the embedding of other styles had any positive influence on the style of the learners' subsequent journal entries.

The concept of embedding is central to my question about dialogue journaling and its place in workplace ESL classes. Specifically, this study will look at how the embedding of topics related to competencies on the CASAS Workplace Speaking pre-test in dialogue journaling will affect the outcome of learners' scores on the post-test. A positive outcome would inform teachers about a useful technique connecting both a reading and writing emphasis in the workplace ESL classroom with measurable progress on a CASAS test and encourage them to use the Workplace Speaking test in place of either the Reading or Listening forms.

### Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter substantiates exploring the case for the use of dialogue journaling in workplace ESL classrooms. The technique promotes reading and writing that is contextualized and relevant to individual learners who have learning goals beyond merely sustaining their entry-level positions. The results of this study have the objective of demonstrating the connection between dialogue journaling and speaking skills to determine the potential benefit of more broadly implementing the technique throughout workplace ESL. The conversation-like quality of dialogue journaling allows learners the freedom to practice on-the-job communication skills in writing, and gives

them feedback in a growth-oriented and constructive manner. Incorporation of topic embedding allows the teacher to focus learners' attention on topics that are relevant to the competencies that are tested on the CASAS Workplace Speaking test, thereby achieving the objective of demonstrable added value to funding sources. Dialogue journaling with focused topics will also likely help learners to improve their speaking skills and to demonstrate that progress on the Workplace Speaking test. The next section, Chapter Three, will outline the methodology used to explore this research question.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

Chapter One suggested that reading and writing do not receive the focus that they should in many workplace ESL classrooms. Due to the immediate need to improve listening and speaking skills to meet the on-the-job communication demands of most entry-level positions, oral/aural skills receive much attention during class time while reading and writing is often deemphasized. Making reading and writing a less of a priority all but ensures that participants in these classes will only ever be qualified for entry-level positions (Auerbach, as cited in Auerbach, 1986). This study aims to provide evidence for the use of dialogue journaling in workplace ESL classrooms as a technique for developing crucial reading and writing skills while simultaneously working to improve the speaking skills of immediate need for communication at work.

The review of the literature made a case for implementing dialogue journaling in workplace ESL classrooms to strengthen reading and writing skills through practice with writing that is informal and very much like speech. Chapter Two highlighted dialogue journaling as an effective strategy for language learning that allows participants to experiment with language in a non-threatening format. Since the focus is on content and not form (Orem, 2001; Peyton, 1986; Staton, 1984), writers can focus on conveying meaning, which is more important than being correct in a fast-paced workplace setting. It

is possible that, by focusing on work-related topics in writing, and by receiving feedback on the language used by an expert dialogue journal partner, participants will benefit from both the practice and the modeling from their teacher and will transfer skills learned to the speech acts they perform everyday at work.

This chapter will explain the research paradigms that best describe the study and discuss the procedure for carrying out the research. Information about the setting and participants will follow. Finally, the data collection methods and analysis thereof will be outlined.

### Research Paradigm and Methods

This study is best described using two research paradigms: classroom-based and quasi-experimental. While the class from which the participants were taken was not my own, it was a group very similar to the workplace ESL courses I have taught before. I saw a need to address the absence of reading and writing practice in workplace ESL classrooms and sought a rationale to balance the emphasis on aural skills through dialogue journaling, a reading and writing technique.

As with many experiments using human subjects, this study could not be truly experimental because the participants were not chosen at random (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). However, while participants were drawn from an existing group, they were randomly assigned to the control and experimental groups, making this study quasi-experimental in addition to a classroom-based study. Participants in each group were pre-tested using both a speaking and a reading test. Testing was followed by a period of dialogue journaling for both groups, with one difference in treatment, namely, that the

experimental group was encouraged to write about topics prescribed by the teacher, whereas the control was free to write about whatever topics they chose. The period of dialogue journaling was followed up by post-testing and careful analysis of the results.

The participants in this study followed a procedure similar to that of El-Koumy's (1998) research on the effect of dialogue journaling on speaking skills. Participants first took two language tests. One was the CASAS Employability Skills Reading test. The other was the CASAS Workplace Speaking (WS) test, an oral pre-test that established their current speaking level and determined which competencies they most needed to work on. Next, a period of dialogue journaling followed. Half the participants were randomly assigned to the control group and wrote about topics of their own choosing. The experimental group also did dialogue journaling, but the researcher attempted to steer the conversation toward topics that pertain to material that is tested on the CASAS Workplace Speaking test. Following Nagel & Kellerman's (1997) example, the researcher embedded special workplace speaking-related topics into the dialogue journal entries exchanged with the participants. Then, a reading post-test and an oral post-test were given to all participants and results were compared to see whether dialogue journaling with focused topics had had any impact on test results compared to the control group that did not receive the treatment. To provide further insight into using dialogue journaling as a strategy for improving speaking skills in the classroom, participants were asked to respond to one final journal question that queried each individual's opinions about the dialogue journaling process specifically and whether they thought it was a helpful strategy for improving speaking. Finally, to further analyze the connection

between speaking and dialogue journaling in general, i.e. without using focused topics, the entire study group's test results were compared to a similar group that did not participate in dialogue journaling. This chapter will outline the study setting and its participants as well as the data collection tools used and how the results were analyzed.

### Setting and Participants

Participants in the study were all members of a workplace ESL program offered in cooperation with their building maintenance company and a large urban school district. Attendance was voluntary and took place off-site during non-working hours. While the workers were offered classes at three different levels, only those in the highest-level class, which was also reserved for current managers, were considered for the study. The language ability of the workers in the lower level classes were determined too low to benefit from participation in the study.

The purpose of the managers' course was to help prepare them for further promotion within the company. All participants were managers who performed full- or part-time janitorial duties for the company. Most had been in the U.S. for five years or more and had likely developed good functional work English skills because they were in charge of other janitors. Their country of origin, first language, years of schooling in their home countries, and English language level are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Information

| Group        | Student | Country of Origin | First Language | Years of Schooling | English Language Level |
|--------------|---------|-------------------|----------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Experimental | Jose    | El Salvado        | Spanish        | 3                  | Low Advanced ESL       |
| Experimental | Ali     | Ethiopia          | Oromo          | 12+                | High Intermediate ESL  |
| Control      | Roberto | Mexico            | Spanish        | 10                 | High Intermediate ESL  |
| Control      | Oswardo | Puerto Rico       | Spanish        | 12+                | Low Advanced ESL       |

## Data Collection and Analysis

For this study I used three instruments to collect data: the CASAS Workplace Speaking (WS) test, the CASAS Employability Skills Reading test and a survey used with participants' supervisors to collect data on individual communication skills. The analysis that follows will include: CASAS Workplace Speaking Pre-test, Pre-test Results and Identification of Focused Topics, Dialogue Journaling Procedure, CASAS Workplace Speaking Post-test, Comparison of Pre-and Post-test Results, Learner Perceptions of Dialogue Journaling, CASAS Employability Skills Reading Test, Supervisors' Evaluation, and a comparison of Dialogue Journaling vs. No Dialogue Journaling and its effect on reading and speaking skills.

### CASAS Workplace Speaking Pre-test

The Workplace Speaking (WS) test is a 10-15 minute interview that focuses on the participant's ability to talk about job skills and job information, social language and workplace safety and customer service. Each question is scored as the participant responds on a point scale of 0-1-2. A 0 is given if the participant doesn't understand the question, is incomprehensible or if no response is given. A 1 is given for a correct answer that contains grammar mistakes that distort the meaning. To receive a 2, the answer must be clearly spoken and relatively grammatically correct. (CASAS Web site, n.d. Workplace Speaking section, para. 1-3).

All interviews must be given by a CASAS certified tester, in this case, the researcher. Each question may be read twice, but only if the participant asks for it to be repeated. Testers may not clarify any questions or repeat them more than once.

### Pre-test Results and Identification of Focused Topics

In order to determine topics for the embedded journaling technique, items from the pre-test were chosen that correspond with the post-test. On the WS, only ten of the twenty-five questions on the pre-test are identical to the post-test. Also, identical questions are not always asked in the same order. For example, pre-test Question 10 is the same as post-test Question 9, “Tell me about what kind of work you would like to do in the future.” While the remaining 15 pre-test questions have no corresponding question on the post-test, there is, in all but one case, a post-test question that tests the same competency area. For example, Table 2 shows that pre-test Question 8, “Tell me some things your supervisor does” belongs to the same competency area as post-test Question 7, “What equipment do you use?” The competency area is 4.5.6 – *Select and analyze work-related information and communicate it to others orally* (CASAS, 2003, p. 6).

Table 2: Sample Workplace Speaking Questions

| <b>Workplace Speaking Question</b>        | <b>Pre-test #</b> | <b>Post-test #</b> | <b>Competency Area</b>   |
|---|-------------------|--------------------|--|
| How did you get this job?                 | 3                 | NA                 | 4.1.5 - The participant will demonstrate the ability to identify procedures involved in interviewing for a job, including selection of appropriate questions and responses |
| Which days and hours do you work?         | NA                | 3                  |  |
| Tell me some things your supervisor does. | 8                 | NA                 | 4.5.6 - Select and analyze work-related information and communicate it to others orally  |
| What equipment do you use?                | NA                | 7                  |  |

Another example is Question 3 on the pre-test, “How did you get this job?” It measures competency 4.1.5-*The participant will demonstrate the ability to identify procedures involved in interviewing for a job, including selection of appropriate questions and*

*responses* (CASAS, 2003, p. 6). Question 3 on the post-test corresponds to the same competency, however, the question is different: “Which days and hours do you work?”

Theoretically, any classroom instruction that offers practice with the competency area should lead to more proficient performance on the post-test. However, due to the limited amount of time we had to do dialogue journaling, I decided to make the connection to the test more explicit. Instead of writing about the targeted competencies in general, I chose to direct the written conversation to the specific test questions that I wanted to address. For example, for pre-test Question 10, “What kind of work would you like to do in the future?”, I focused one dialogue journal entry on job goals and asked participants to write to me about theirs. I did not use the exact wording of the test questions to maintain test integrity.

In addition to inconsistencies between pre- and post-test questions on the WS, another problem can be found in the last part of the test where participants are asked to respond to questions about a series of pictures. The pictures are mostly the same for the pre- and post-test, however not all of the questions are identical. Table 3 shows three sections to the Workplace Speaking test: 1) job skills and job information, 2) social language and 3) workplace safety and customer service.

Table 3: Comparison of Pre/Post Workplace Speaking Questions

| Section                                  | Question |          |  |
|--|----------|----------|--|
| 1. Job Skills and Job Information        | 1        | Pre/Post | Tell me some things you like or don't like about your job.   |
|  | 2        | Pre/Post | Tell me about what kind of work you would like to do in the future.  |
| 2. Social Language                       | 3        | Pre/Post | What is something special you like to do on the weekend?   |
|  | 4        | Pre/Post | Tell me some things you like about a friend.   |
|  | 5        | Pre/Post | If you could take a vacation, where would you go and why?  |
|  | 6        | Pre/Post | What advice would you give to someone from the United States who is going to live in your country? / What advice would you give to someone from your country who is coming to live in the United States? |
| 3. Workplace Safety and Customer Service | 7        | Pre/Post | Picture A Hospital: Please look at the picture of the hospital. What's the problem in the picture?   |
|  | 8        | Pre/Post | Picture B Workshop: Please look at the picture of the workshop. What are some problems in the picture?   |
|  | 9a       | Pre      | Picture C Warehouse: Please look at the picture of the warehouse. What's the problem in the picture?   |
|  | 9b       | Post     | Picture D Factory: Please look at the picture of the factory. What's happening in this picture?  |
|  | 10a      | Pre      | Picture E Restaurant: Please look at the picture of the restaurant. Why are the customers angry?   |
|  | 10b      | Post     | Picture F Clothing Store: Please look at the picture of the clothing store. Why is the customer angry?   |
|  | 11a      | Pre      | Picture E Restaurant: You are the boss. What do you say to the employees?  |
|  | 11b      | Post     | Picture F Clothing Store: The manager wants to give good customer service. What does she say?  |
|  | 12a      | Pre      | Picture F Clothing Store: Please look at the picture of the clothing store. What's happening in the picture?   |
|  | 12b      | Post     | Picture E Restaurant: Please look at the picture of the restaurant. What's happening in the picture?   |
|  | 13a      | Pre      | Picture F Clothing Store: What's the manager saying to this customer?  |
|  | 13b      | Post     | Picture E Restaurant: Is this good customer service? Why or why not?   |

Two questions in section 1 that are identical on the pre- and post-tests and four questions that are identical, or nearly identical from section 2 were chosen to be focused topics for dialogue journaling. They are:

1. Tell me some things you like or don't like about your job.
2. Tell me about what kind of work you would like to do in the future.
3. What is something special you like to do on the weekend?

4. Tell me some things you like about a friend.
5. If you could take a vacation, where would you go and why?
6. What advice would you give to someone from the United States who is going to live in your country? / What advice would you give to someone from your country who is coming to live in the United States?

Section 3 uses pictures as prompts for a series of seven questions. There are six pictures, A-F. A, B, C, E and F are used for the pre-test, and A, B, D, E and F, are used for the post-test. The pictures are the same in both the pre- and post-tests, however, only the first two questions are identical. They are:

7. Picture A Hospital: Please look at the picture of the hospital. What's the problem in the picture?
8. Picture B Workshop: Please look at the picture of the workshop. What are some problems in the picture?

One test item uses picture C on the pre-test and picture D on the post-test. The pictures depict a similar situation involving workplace safety. The questions are not identical, but are designed to test the same competency area. The questions are:

9. Pre-test/Picture C Warehouse: Please look at the picture of the warehouse. What's the problem in the picture?  
  
Post-test/Picture D Factory: Please look at the picture of the factory. What's happening in this picture?

Four questions are similar and are designed to measure the same competency area. They are:

10. Pre-test/Picture E Restaurant: Please look at the picture of the restaurant. Why are the customers angry?

Post-test/Picture F Clothing Store: Please look at the picture of the clothing store. Why is the customer angry?

11. Pre-test/ Picture E Restaurant: You are the boss. What do you say to the employees?

Post-test/ Picture F Clothing Store: The manager wants to give good customer service. What does she say?

12. Pre-test/ Picture F Clothing Store: Please look at the picture of the clothing store. What's happening in the picture?

Post-test/ Picture E Restaurant: Please look at the picture of the restaurant. What's happening in the picture?

13. Pre-test/ Picture F Clothing Store: What's the manager saying to this customer?

Post-test/ Picture E Restaurant: Is this good customer service? Why or why not?

Because all the questions measure knowledge of job safety and customer service skills, all seven questions were grouped together to form four focused topics for dialogue journaling with the experimental group.

#### Dialogue Journaling Procedure

The focus period for the dialogue journaling treatment was ten weeks. Researcher and participant wrote back and forth to one another once a week in a spiral-bound notebook. The first 15-25 minutes of each class was dedicated to dialogue journaling. In journaling with the control group, the researcher continued on with any conversation that

was sparked by the participant, discussing work-related topics usually only when initiated by the participant. With the experimental group, conversation was always directed and re-directed back toward the pre-selected focused topics. The focused topics were not worded exactly as they are on the WS (see Table 4).

Table 4: Workplace Speaking Focused Topic Questions

| Section                                  | Focused Topic Question |  |
|--|------------------------|--|
| 1. Job Skills and Job Information        | 1                      | What do you like best about your job? What do you like least?  |
|  | 2                      | What are your job goals?   |
| 2. Social Language                       | 3                      | What do you like to do in your free time?  |
|  | 4                      | Describe a good friend.  |
|  | 5                      | How will you spend your next vacation/time off?  |
|  | 6                      | If I get the chance to visit your country some day, what should I bring/do/see/eat? Are there any dangers I should know about? |
| 3. Workplace Safety and Customer Service | 7                      | What things do you do to stay safe at work?  |
|  | 8                      | Do you know someone who has been hurt at work? What happened?  |
|  | 9                      | Has anyone ever complained to you at work? What did they say? What did you say? What did you do?                               |
|  | 10                     | What qualities make a good manager? What skills do you most need to work on?   |

The focused topics for the first test section on job skills and job information were:

1. What do you like best about your job? What do you like least?
2. What are your job goals?

The focused topics for the second test section on social language were:

3. What do you like to do in your free time?
4. Describe a good friend.
5. How will you spend your next vacation/time off?
6. If I get the chance to visit your country some day, what should I bring/do/see/eat?  
Are there any dangers I should know about?

The focused topics for the third test section with pictures about workplace safety and customer service were:

7. What things do you do to stay safe at work?
8. Do you know someone who has been hurt at work? What happened?
9. Has anyone ever complained to you at work? What did they say? What did you say? What did you do?
10. What qualities make a good manager? What skills do you most need to work on?

#### CASAS Workplace Speaking Post-test

Once the ten-week focus period was completed, all participants in both the control and experimental groups took the Workplace Speaking Post-test. This test covers the same competencies as the pre-test, however some questions differ slightly in content. Post-test data was recorded in both a raw score and on the CASAS scale. Pre- and post-test data were compared for overall improvement as well as improvement in the focused topic questions specifically. The experimental and control groups were also compared for overall improvement as well as improvement in the focused topic questions specifically. Chapter Four will detail each individual participant's pre- and post-test scores. It will also look specifically at the focused topic questions to show what improvement was made. Most interesting will be a comparison of the pre- and post-test results for the ten focused topic questions for both the control and experimental groups individually. This will help to show whether dialogue journaling with focused topics has had any impact on the speaking skills of the participants in the experimental group.

### Learner Perceptions of Dialogue Journaling

Objective data regarding the success of dialogue journaling as a strategy to improve speaking skills is evident in the comparison of pre-and post-test scores on the CASAS Workplace Speaking test. To provide another perspective on the effectiveness of dialogue journaling, participants were asked to respond to one final question in their dialogue journals: *What do you think about dialogue journaling as a technique for improving speaking skills?* Chapter Four will detail the responses of both the control and experimental groups to provide insight into the dialogue journaling process and how its impact on speaking skills is perceived.

### CASAS Employability Skills Reading Test

While not the primary focus of this research, data on participants' reading skills was readily available through pre- and post-tests of the CASAS Employability Skills Reading test. Dialogue journaling is a good technique for practicing reading because the material is individualized and relevant to each participant. Reading skills develop as participants work to continue meaningful conversation. Participants can read and re-read their own entries as well as their partner's and refer back to them as they write new entries. Because the reading test assesses reading for the workplace, the test scores of the control and experimental group were compared to see what effect dialogue journaling with focused topics had on reading skills. Perhaps, contextualized reading about workplace specific topics, like those that were discussed with the experimental group, could lead to better performance on the test.

### Supervisors' Evaluation

To provide another viewpoint on dialogue journaling and its effect on speaking skills and communication skills in general, each participant's supervisor was interviewed by phone at the beginning of the course. The supervisors were asked to evaluate each participant on a Likert scale in five areas: *demonstrates good listening skills, demonstrates good speaking skills, demonstrates good written communication skills, communicates professionally with customers, and communicates safety concerns and/or reports accidents*. They were asked to rate each area on a scale of 5 to 1 where 5 is *outstanding*, 4 is *very good*, 3 is *good*, 2 is *fair*, 1 is *poor* and NA is *not applicable*. These five areas represent the goals of the course as a whole. Dialogue journaling with focused topics is one learning technique that aims to improve skills in all these areas.

### Dialogue Journaling vs. No Dialogue Journaling

One final perspective on the usefulness of dialogue journaling in workplace ESL classrooms could be seen when the study group as a whole was compared to another similar group that did not receive any dialogue journaling treatment. This group was from the same company and studied the same curriculum as the research group. They also had the same instructor. For this comparison, the participants from the study in both the control and experimental groups were looked at as a whole. They became the experimental group. The group that received no dialogue journaling at all became the control group. Reading and speaking test scores from both groups were compared to see

if any further insight on the impact of dialogue journaling on speaking skills could be seen.

This chapter has described the methodology to be implemented to explore how the use of focused topic dialogue journaling in workplace ESL affects speaking skills. Chapter Four will detail the results of the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to discover whether dialogue journaling is a useful technique for improving speaking skills. Because many workplace ESL classes focus more on the listening and speaking skills necessary to perform most entry-level jobs, writing practice is minimal and often overlooked entirely. When writing assignments are given, they can be few and far between because of the amount of time it takes to give good feedback on writing. Because dialogue journaling is a technique that is said to mimic speaking because of its informal, conversation-like quality, it is possible that practice with dialogue journaling could improve speaking skills. In particular, this study tests a method slightly different from traditional dialogue journaling, where the topics are not freely chosen by the participant, but are instead guided toward specific workplace speaking competencies, e.g. interviewing for a job or reporting a workplace safety concern. This type of dialogue journaling is here called *focused topic dialogue journaling*. This chapter will present the pre- and post-test data for speaking and reading tests and discuss their results. It will also show the results of two workplace communication skills evaluations collected during interviews with participants' supervisors at the start and end of the study.

Chapter Three described an urban workplace literacy class of adult participants from Spanish and Somali language backgrounds. All participants work as managers in a janitorial company. Each participant was administered a reading pre-test, the CASAS

Employability Skills Reading test and an oral pre-test, an interview, called the CASAS Workplace Speaking (WS) test. 13 of the 25 test items, or 26 of the possible 50 points, on the WS were chosen to be the focused topics of a study with workplace ESL participants on the effect of focused topic dialogue journaling on speaking skills. All participants did dialogue journaling over a 10-week session with the researcher. The researcher embedded workplace-related topics from the WS into the journal entries written to half the participants. These participants made up the experimental group. The other half of the participants wrote about any topic they chose, without any specific topic embedding by the researcher. To gather information about participants' performance from a different perspective, supervisors were interviewed and asked to evaluate workplace communication skills for each participant.

At the end of the course, participants were administered the reading and WS post-tests. Pre- and post-test scores were compared between the experimental and control groups to see whether had any effect on their speaking skills. The reading test was also analyzed to see if dialogue journaling with focused topics had an impact on reading test scores. Finally, supervisors were interviewed once more and asked to evaluate each participant's workplace communication skills.

#### CASAS Scoring: Raw Score vs. Scale Score

CASAS offers a variety of tests and for any CASAS test, the Raw Score, or number of test items answered correctly, translates to a Scale Score on a master scale for

all tests. Table 5 shows the scale that ranges from 165 to 250 and covers six student performance levels (SPL).

Table 5: CASAS Scale

|         |         |                        |       |             |                       |
|---------|---------|------------------------|-------|-------------|-----------------------|
| SPL 0-1 | 165-180 | Beginning Literacy ESL | SPL 4 | 211-220     | High Intermediate ESL |
| SPL 2   | 181-200 | Beginning ESL          | SPL 5 | 221-235     | Advanced ESL          |
| SPL 3   | 201-210 | Low Intermediate ESL   | SPL 6 | 236 & above | Adult Secondary       |

### CASAS Workplace Speaking Test

On the first day of class, each participant was interviewed for 10-15 minutes on the CASAS Workplace Speaking test (WS). This 25-question, 50-point test measures the ability to talk about life and work, social language and workplace safety and customer service. Pre-test results showed that the participants ranged from raw score 23-44, or 201-220 on the CASAS scale, which translates into the lower end of SPL 3, Low Intermediate ESL to the top of the SPL 4, High Intermediate ESL. A participant reading at SPL 4, High Intermediate ESL, for example, “can read and interpret simplified and some authentic material on familiar subjects. Can write messages or notes related to basic needs. Can fill out basic medical forms and job applications” (CASAS Web site, n.d. Skill Level Descriptors for ESL section). Regarding “Employability: Can handle jobs and/or training that involve following basic oral and written instructions and diagrams if they can be clarified orally” (CASAS Web site, n.d. Skill Level Descriptors for ESL section).

Table 6: CASAS Workplace Speaking Test - Overall Improvement

| Group        | Students | Pre-Test<br>(Raw Score) | Post-Test<br>(Raw Score) | Improvement<br>(Raw Score) | Improvement<br>Per Group<br>(Raw Score) |
|--------------|----------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Experimental | Jose     | 40                      | 42                       | 2                          | 16                                      |
| Experimental | Ali      | 26                      | 40                       | 14                         |   |
| Control      | Roberto  | 23                      | 41                       | 18                         | 19                                      |
| Control      | Oswardo  | 44                      | 45                       | 1                          |   |

  

| Group        | Students | Pre-Test<br>(Scale Score) | Post-Test<br>(Scale Score) | Improvement<br>(Scale Score) | Improvement<br>Per Group<br>(Scale Score) |
|--------------|----------|---------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Experimental | Jose     | 214                       | 215                        | 1                            | 13  |
| Experimental | Ali      | 201                       | 213                        | 12                           |   |
| Control      | Roberto  | 198                       | 214                        | 16                           | 16  |
| Control      | Oswardo  | 220                       | 220                        | 0                            |   |

Table 6 shows that all participants improved on the WS post-test. Post-test results showed that the participants' scores ranged from raw score 40-45, or 213-221 on the CASAS scale, which translates into the top of the SPL 4, High Intermediate ESL to the lower end of SPL 5, Advanced ESL. The raw score improvement was 16 points for the experimental group and 19 points for the control group. The scale score improvement was 13 points for the experimental group and 16 points for the control group. Due to the more straightforward nature of the raw score, from this point on, only the raw scores will be compared and discussed. Scale scores will continue to be shown in each table.

The control group showed more improvement on the post-test overall than did the group receiving the treatment. Even when the focused topic questions were analyzed in isolation, participants in both groups showed equal gain.

Table 7: CASAS Workplace Speaking Test - Focused Topic Improvement

| Group        | Students | Focused Topic Pre-Test (Raw Score) | Focused Topic Post-Test (Raw Score) | Focused Topic Improvement (Raw Score) | Focused Topic Improvement Per Group |
|--------------|----------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Experimental | Jose     | 19                                 | 22                                  | 3                                     | 11                                  |
|              | Ali      | 12                                 | 20                                  | 8                                     |                                     |
| Control      | Roberto  | 12                                 | 22                                  | 10                                    | 11                                  |
|              | Oswardo  | 22                                 | 23                                  | 1                                     |                                     |

While the study is comprised of only four participants, they are evenly divided in terms of ability. Table 7 shows that Ali and Roberto both pre-tested at the High Beginning ESL and Low Intermediate ESL levels on the WS. Jose and Oswardo both pre-tested at the High Intermediate ESL level. Random assignment led to Jose and Ali in the experimental group and Roberto and Oswardo in the control group. All four participants attended class regularly and can be described as dedicated participants.

Table 8: CASAS Workplace Speaking Test - Average Focused topic Improvement Per Group

| Group        | Students | Focused Topic Pre-Test (Raw Score) | Focused Topic Improvement (Raw Score) | Improvement (Raw Score) | Percentage Focused Topic Improvement | Focused Topic Improvement as a % of Total Improvement | Average Focused Topic Improvement Per Group | Average Focused Topic Improvement as a % of Total Improvement Per Group |
|--------------|----------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Experimental | Jose     | 19                                 | 3                                     | 2                       | 16%                                  | 150%  | 41%   | 104%  |
| Experimental | Ali      | 12                                 | 8                                     | 14                      | 67%                                  | 57%   |   |   |
| Control      | Roberto  | 12                                 | 10                                    | 18                      | 83%                                  | 56%   | 44%   | 78%   |
| Control      | Oswardo  | 22                                 | 1                                     | 1                       | 5%                                   | 100%  |   |   |

Table 8 shows that the average focused topic improvement per group once again slightly favors the control group at 44% over the experimental group at 41%. Ali and Roberto, the two lower-level participants, showed the greatest progress on the WS. Roberto, from the control group, improved more on the focused topic questions than did Ali. When scores are analyzed as a percent of total improvement, Ali's gain on the

focused topic questions is higher, but only by 1 percent. In Ali's case, his raw score improved 14 points overall on the post-test. On the pre-test focused topic questions specifically, Ali scored 12 of the possible 26 points. His post-test focused topic raw score improved 8 points or 67%. Compared with his total improvement on the WS, Ali's focused topic improvement accounts for 57% of the total points gained. Roberto's success can be described similarly. His raw score improved 18 points overall on the post-test. On the pre-test focused topic questions specifically, Roberto scored 12 of the possible 26 points. His post-test focused topic raw score improved 10 points or 83%. Compared with his total improvement on the WS, Roberto's focused topic improvement accounts for 56% of the total points gained.

When the two higher-level participants are compared, the results are more interesting. Jose, from the experimental group, showed a gain three times greater than Oswardo in the control group. Oswardo's raw score improved 1 point overall on the post-test. On the pre-test focused topic questions specifically, Oswardo scored 22 of the possible 26 points. His post-test focused topic raw score improved 1 point or 5%. Compared with his total improvement on the WS, Oswardo's focused topic improvement accounts for 100% of the total points gained. Jose's raw score improved 2 points overall on the post-test. On the pre-test focused topic questions specifically, Jose scored 19 of the possible 26 points. His post-test focused topic raw score improved 3 points or 16%. Jose's performance on the non-focused topic questions declined by one point, which accounts for the surprising 150% improvement in focused topic questions compared to total improvement. This also explains the seemingly impressive difference between the

average focused topic improvements of the two groups as a percent of total improvement. The experimental group bettered their performance on the focused topic questions by 104% compared to the control group's 78%.

Nagel and Kellerman's (1995) success with topic embedding was not repeated in this study. Nagel and Kellerman found that, when the expert writer wrote an entry using a narrative style, students were likely to use that same style in their journal response. At least at first glance, this study shows that embedding focused topic related to workplace speaking competencies into dialogue journaling does not produce measurable results on the WS. However, upon closer analysis, the technique does show some potential for improving skills with higher-level participants. Jose and Oswaldo scored fairly high on the WS to begin with. Since there was not much room for gain, it is noteworthy that Jose, who received the dialogue journaling with focused topics treatment, improved on those corresponding test items at a rate three times higher than Oswaldo, who did not receive the treatment. Perhaps, when working with high-level participants, or participants who are on the border between two levels but are not making the test progress necessary to advance to the next level, dialogue journaling with focused topics can be utilized to help address those target areas that need practice in order to produce measurable improvements in participant competence.

### CASAS Reading Pre- and Post-Test Results

While this study initially set out to look at gains in speaking, the researcher decided to analyze changes in reading performance as well. Analysis of the CASAS

Employability Skills Reading test shows more promise for dialogue journaling with focused topics as a technique for improving reading skills than it does speaking skills.

During the first class, participants completed the CASAS Employability Skills Reading test 16C. Pre-test results showed that the participants' raw scores ranged from 18-28 out of a possible 38 points, or 218-230 on the CASAS scale, which translates into the top of the CASAS SPL 4, High Intermediate ESL, to the middle of SPL 5, Advanced ESL.

During the final class, participants completed the CASAS Employability Skills Reading test 16D. All participants improved their reading scores. Post-test results showed that the participants' raw scores ranged from 20-33, or 221-240 on the CASAS scale, which translates into the lower end of SPL 6, Advanced ESL, to the middle of the SPL 7, Adult Secondary.

Table 9: CASAS Employability Skills Reading Test - Overall Improvement

| Group        | Student | Pre-Test (Raw Score) | Post-Test (Raw Score) | Improvement (Raw Score) | Percent Improvement (Raw Score) | Average Improvement Per Group (Raw Score) |
|--------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Experimental | Jose    | 23                   | 24                    | 1                       | 3%                              | 9%  |
| Experimental | Ali     | 20                   | 26                    | 6                       | 16%                             |   |
| Control      | Roberto | 18                   | 20                    | 2                       | 5%                              | 9%  |
| Control      | Oswaldo | 28                   | 33                    | 5                       | 13%                             |   |

| Group        | Student | Pre-Test (Scale Score) | Post-Test (Scale Score) | Improvement (Scale Score) | Percent Improvement (Scale Score) | Improvement Per Group (Scale Score) | Percent Improvement Per Group (Scale Score) |
|--------------|---------|------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Experimental | Jose    | 224                    | 226                     | 2                         | 1%                                | 10                                  | 4%  |
| Experimental | Ali     | 220                    | 228                     | 8                         | 3%                                |                                     |   |
| Control      | Roberto | 218                    | 221                     | 3                         | 1%                                | 13                                  | 5%  |
| Control      | Oswaldo | 230                    | 240                     | 10                        | 4%                                |                                     |   |

Unlike the WS test, participants with similar ability do not show similar gains on the reading test. Table 9 shows Jose's pre-test raw score was 23 and his post-test raw score was 24 for a total improvement of 1 point or 2%. Ali showed better progress with a pre-test raw score of 20 and a post-test score of 26 for a 6-point, or 12%, total improvement. The experimental group's average improvement of 7% is equal to that of the control group. Roberto scored 18 on the pre-test and 20 on the post-test for a total improvement of 2 points or 4%. Oswaldo improved his score 5 points, or 10%, going from 28 points on the pre-test to 33 points on the post-test.

Once again, dialogue journaling with focused topics does not seem to make a difference in reading skills until the focused topic areas themselves are analyzed. Because improving reading skills was not the focus of this study, no specific questions from the reading test were addressed in the dialogue journal writing. However, both the WS and the Employability Skills tests have common themes that can be seen when the CASAS competencies that they address are examined.

CASAS uses a series of numbers to indicate what each test item on any test attempts to assess. For example, question 10 on the CASAS Employability Skills Reading pre-test, Form 15 C, corresponds to CASAS competency 4.1.8 (CASAS, 2003, p. 6). The number 4 represents the content area, *employment*. The number 1 represents the competency area, *understand basic principles of getting a job*, and the number 8 represents the competency statement, in this case, *identify common occupations and the skills an education required for them*. Both the speaking test and the reading test assess competencies related to various areas of employment. There two common employment

sub-categories that are addressed are 4.1, *understand basic principles of getting a job* and 4.4, *understand concepts and materials related to job performance and training*. These themes were discussed with the experimental group in their dialogue journals. 25 of the 38 questions on the reading tests belong to competency areas 4.1 or .4.4. Those questions are grouped together as focused topic questions and the control and experimental groups' scores were compared accordingly.

Table 10: CASAS Employability Skills Reading Test - Focused topic Improvement

| Group        | Student | Pre-Test Focused Topic (Raw Score) | Post-Test Focused Topic (Raw Score) | Focused Topic Improvement (Raw Score) | Percent Focused Topic Improvement (Raw Score) | Focused Topic Improvement as a % of Total Improvement |
|--------------|---------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Experimental | Jose    | 15                                 | 18                                  | 3                                     | 20%   | 300%  |
| Experimental | Ali     | 11                                 | 18                                  | 7                                     | 64%   | 117%  |
| Control      | Roberto | 12                                 | 16                                  | 4                                     | 33%   | 200%  |
| Control      | Oswaldo | 17                                 | 21                                  | 4                                     | 24%   | 80%   |

| Group        | Students | Improvement Per Group (Raw Score) | Percent Improvement (Raw Score) | Focused Topic Improvement Per Group (Raw Score) | Average Focused Topic Improvement Per Group | Average Focused Topic Improvement as a % of Total Improvement Per Group |
|--------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Experimental | Jose     | 7                                 | 14%                             | 10  | 42%   | 208%  |
|              | Ali      |                                   |                                 |   |   |   |
| Control      | Roberto  | 7                                 | 14%                             | 8   | 28%   | 140%  |
|              | Oswaldo  |                                   |                                 |   |   |   |

All participants improved their scores on the focused topic questions. Table 10 shows Jose got 15 of the possible 25 focused topic questions correct on the pre-test. He improved his score by 3 points, or 20% on the post-test with 18 points. Ali scored 11 points on the pre-test and got 18 correct on the post-test for a gain of 7 points, or 64 %. Roberto's pre-test score was 12 and his post-test score was 16, for a gain of 4 points, or

33%. Oswaldo started with 17 points on the pre-test and got 21 points on the post-test for a gain of 4 points, or 24%.

While both the control and experimental groups showed the same average gain on the reading test overall, the focused topic gains for the two groups are quite different. The experimental group's average gain on focused topic questions on the post-test was 42%, or 14% higher than that of the control group at 28%. This may be a result of extra practice in reading comprehension pertaining to the specific workplace topics that were embedded in their dialogue journals, thereby providing support for Nagel and Kellerman's (1995) findings.

Each participant's focused topic improvement as a percent of total improvement is even more interesting. Jose improved his reading test score by 1 point overall, but he improved 3 points on the focused topic questions. In other words, 300% of his gain was on focused topic questions. Ali's score improved 6 points over all, but he gained 7 points in the focused topic questions for 117% gain in that area compared to his overall gain. The experimental group's average focused topic improvement as a percent of total improvement was 208%. That is 68% higher than the control group. Roberto's overall post-test improvement was 2 points, but he gained 4 points on the focused topic questions for a 200% improvement compared to his overall gain. Oswaldo's 4-point gain on focused topic questions was 80% of his overall improvement of 5 points. The control group's average gain on focused topic questions as a percent of total improvement is 140%. In this case, the difference between the two groups is noteworthy and suggests

that dialogue journaling with focused topics may be good practice for improving reading test scores.

### Dialogue Journaling vs. No Dialogue Journaling

Since all participants in the control and the experimental groups improved both their reading and speaking test scores, it is relevant to compare their performance with a similar group that did not receive any kind of dialogue journaling treatment. In the term subsequent to that of my study, a new group of managers from the same company began an identical workplace ESL course. The teacher did not change and she used the same curriculum that she used with the study group. The same speaking and reading assessments were used to measure participant progress. What follows is a comparison of reading and speaking test scores that show how dialogue journaling in general, that is, without considering the impact of focused topics, affected skills in those areas. All participants from the original study group now form the experimental group labeled *dialogue journal*. The participants from the subsequent class are considered the control group.

Table 11: CASAS Workplace Speaking Test - Dialogue Journaling vs. No Dialogue Journaling

| Group            | Students | Pre-Test<br>(Raw Score) | Post-Test<br>(Raw Score) | Improvement<br>(Raw Score) | Percent<br>Improvement<br>(Raw Score) | Average<br>Improvement<br>Per Group<br>(Raw Score) |
|------------------|----------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Dialogue Journal | Jose     | 40                      | 42                       | 2                          | 4%                                    | 18%  |
| Dialogue Journal | Ali      | 26                      | 40                       | 14                         | 28%                                   |  |
| Dialogue Journal | Roberto  | 23                      | 41                       | 18                         | 36%                                   |  |
| Dialogue Journal | Oswardo  | 44                      | 45                       | 1                          | 2%                                    |  |
| Control          | Luis     | 37                      | 42                       | 5                          | 10%                                   | 6%   |
| Control          | Anna     | 42                      | 46                       | 4                          | 8%                                    |  |
| Control          | Lisa     | 46                      | 46                       | 0                          | 0%                                    |  |

Table 12: CASAS Employability Skills Reading Test - Dialogue Journaling vs. No Dialogue Journaling

| Group            | Student | Pre-Test<br>(Raw Score) | Post-Test<br>(Raw Score) | Improvement<br>(Raw Score) | Percent<br>Improvement<br>(Raw Score) | Average<br>Improvement<br>Per Group<br>(Raw Score) |
|------------------|---------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Dialogue Journal | Jose    | 23                      | 24                       | 1                          | 3%                                    | 9%   |
| Dialogue Journal | Ali     | 20                      | 26                       | 6                          | 16%                                   |  |
| Dialogue Journal | Roberto | 18                      | 20                       | 2                          | 5%                                    |  |
| Dialogue Journal | Oswardo | 28                      | 33                       | 5                          | 13%                                   |  |
| Control          | Luis    | 9                       | 16                       | 7                          | 18%                                   | 13%  |
| Control          | Anna    | 14                      | 16                       | 2                          | 5%                                    |  |
| Control          | Lisa    | 27                      | 33                       | 6                          | 16%                                   |  |

Table 11 shows that the workplace speaking test raw scores of the dialogue journal (experimental) group improved on average 18%, or three times that of the control group at 6%. The data do not show, however, that general dialogue journaling helps to improve reading skills. On the reading test, the control group performed better. Table 12 shows that the control group's raw scores improved 13% on average, compared with 9% in the dialogue journal group. The difference between the two groups tests scores is minimal, however, these results contradict the findings of the original study, where participants who participated in dialogue journaling with focused topics improved their reading scores more than those who participated in dialogue journaling with no focused topics. Because the groups in both comparisons are so small, the results regarding reading scores are inconclusive. The improvement for speaking was much greater overall (18% vs. 6%), and while this difference may not be statistically significant, it agrees with previous findings by El-Koumy (1998) and suggests that general dialogue journaling is a

strategy worth considering for use in workplace ESL classrooms as a technique for improving speaking skills.

### Supervisors' Evaluation

Each participant's supervisor was interviewed at the start of the course for the purpose of evaluating general workplace communication skills. The supervisors were asked to rate each participant on a Likert scale of 5 to 1 (5 - *outstanding*, 4 - *very good*, 3 - *good*, 2 - *fair*, 1 - *poor* and NA - *not applicable*) in five areas: *demonstrates good listening skills, demonstrates good speaking skills, demonstrates good written communication skills, communicates professionally with customers, and communicates safety concerns and/or reports accidents*. The supervisors were asked to explain any score of 2 or lower. Not all participants consented to this portion of the study. Data for two participants, both from the experimental group, show 3's and 4's for all areas except *demonstrates good written communication skills* (see Table 13). One supervisor said not applicable and the other scored a 2, stating that the participant's reports were sketchy and hard to read with poor spelling.

Table 13: Supervisors' Evaluation of Communication Skills

| <i>5-Outstanding 4-Very Good 3-Good 2-Fair 1-Poor NA-Not Applicable</i> |         |                 |               |             |
|---|---------|-----------------|---------------|-------------|
| Group   | Student | Starting Rating | Ending Rating | Improvement |
| Experimental  | Jose    | 3.0             | 3.2           | 0.2         |
| Experimental  | Ali     | 3.5             | 4.1           | 0.6         |

Each participant's supervisor received a follow-up phone call from the researcher to discuss the general workplace communication skills of the two consenting participants. The supervisors were again asked to rate each participant and explain any score of 2 or

lower. Table 13 shows that both participants' overall ratings improved. Jose received one point higher (4) for both demonstration of good listening skills and for communication of safety concerns and/or reports accidents. He was rated one point lower (3) for communicating professionally with customers. His low rating (2) for written communication skills remained. His supervisor said he struggles with writing memos, but that he hadn't seen many reports from Jose since the study began. Overall, Jose's average communication skills rating improved by .2 points, up from 3.0 at the first evaluation.

Ali's rating also improved. He was rated one point higher (5) for demonstration of good listening skills, .5 points higher (3.5) for demonstration of good speaking skills, and one point higher (4) for communication of safety concerns and/or accidents. His average rating was 4.1, which is a .6 improvement over the first evaluation.

Because neither participant from the control group consented to the supervisor's interview, there is no data with which to compare these results. However, not only is it encouraging to see participants improving their job performance as a result of dialogue journaling and other classroom activities, but, according to Judy Mortrude, the coordinator of the workplace education program in this study, the supervisors' ratings are more meaningful to her than participant test data. She claims it is, in fact, the ultimate measure to have supervisors identify behavioral changes as a result of training. Indeed, as workplace ESL learners grow in both their confidence and skills, so will their opportunities for advancement in their careers and growth in their personal lives (Grognet, 1994).

## Conclusion

It cannot be said, conclusively, that embedding focused topic into dialogue journaling is effective for improving the workplace speaking skills of all learners. For learners at higher levels of language proficiency, however, the technique does show some promise. The study also supports previous findings that speaking skills can be improved through the practice of dialogue journaling in general, with or without focused topics.

Chapter Five will further investigate these results, giving my impressions of the study and sharing what I learned. It will also discuss the limitations of the study and suggest its implications both for the field and for further research. Chapter Five will also share comments from participants on their perceptions of dialogue journaling.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Many workplace ESL classrooms focus primarily on improving listening and speaking skills so that participants will be better prepared to handle entry-level job duties. Deemphasizing reading and writing in favor of other, more urgent, skills is a reality of workplace training, but need not be. Workplace ESL learners require well-rounded language skills if they are to succeed in their personal lives as well as advance their professional careers. It does them a disservice to emphasize listening and speaking at the expense of reading and writing. This study sought to find a way to make the traditionally reading-and-writing-based practice of dialogue journaling more enticing by showing how it can be used to improve speaking skills. In this chapter, I give my impression of the study and describe its limitations. I also suggest implications both for the field and for further study. In addition, I share what I learned from the research as well as how participants reported to have benefited from the practice of dialogue journaling.

### Impressions

The most striking impression left on me from this study is that the best-laid plans cannot account for participant participation. I could not have anticipated such a disappointing turnout by the end of my study. Consequently, my hypothesis that dialogue journaling with focused topics will improve speaking skills was not supported

by my research. I started out with an arguably modest study group of ten participants, and ended up post-testing a mere four. As it became clear from the data that the dialogue journaling treatment had not, in fact, produced the favorable results I sought, I could not help but insist that the outcome would be different had I been able to post-test a larger group. Replicating the study with a larger group is merited.

### Limitations

While I have come to know that, no matter how good a learning situation might be, life can always get in the way of learning, I was still surprised by how few participants completed the course. The study took place on Saturday mornings when none of the participants were scheduled to work. Since participants had the morning off, and the course was meant to help prepare them for promotion at work, attendance should not have been a problem. Week after week, fewer and fewer participants showed up to class until just a core four remained and were present for final testing. Roberto wrote in one dialogue journal entry: *I hope continuo whit this classes, but I don't now, because I stop another job for take this classes.* While I felt very frustrated at the dwindling attendance in my study group, comments like this from Roberto help to illustrate just how many obstacles stand in the way of teaching and learning in adult ESL. Roberto's second job at a restaurant allowed him to take Saturdays off for the duration of the course, but could not promise to hold his job for him so that he could continue on with the next session. This is truly a shame because of the steady progress he was making, shown by his class work and improved test scores.

Despite class being scheduled during a time when all participants had off from work (or off from their job at the maintenance company, at least), despite being taught by a workplace ESL teacher known for excellence, despite having curriculum tailored especially for them and for their work, despite compensation for attendance and the hope of promotion, many participants still couldn't commit to this class. The reasons are the same throughout adult secondary: second jobs interfere, daycare falls through, new family members suddenly arrive and need attention or transportation is not readily available. These, and a myriad of other obstacles, stand in the way of participants and their goals. We should continue to look for ways to clear paths to learning and applaud those who do succeed, for it is a tremendous feat indeed.

#### Implications for Further Research

It was important for the authenticity of the study that the participants not know they were being treated differently. All participants exchanged dialogue journals with me, but they did not know that I was using a different technique with some and not others. The teacher, however, mentioned several times that this practice was to help them improve on their speaking test. I can imagine that that statement rather confused the control group, who rarely, if ever, touched on subjects relevant to the speaking test in their dialogue journals. Their interests drove the conversation and were not redirected by my focused topics. With the experimental group, it sometimes took several entries to get a participant to respond to a focused topic question because they were more interested in writing about other things. Such freedom of topic choice is central to traditional dialogue

journaling. I found it a bit unnatural to continuously redirect the conversation back to subjects that the participants weren't that motivated to write about. Perhaps it would help, in practice or in future research, if the purpose of focused topic dialogue journaling were explained to participants explicitly, so that they might better carry on with the subject. If participants had been aware of the purpose of the writing, they may have been more invested in the writing as a learning tool.

While the analysis of reading scores between the groups was an afterthought, the data suggests that dialogue journaling with focused topics may be a promising practice for improving reading. More research into this subject is needed.

There were few participants in this study to begin with and disappointingly fewer who completed the course. The merits of focused topic dialogue journaling can only truly be tested by a larger sample.

### Implications for the Field

Adult Basic Education funding is subject to the National Reporting System (NRS) that holds each state accountable to the federal government. A state's success is measured by how many participants are reported to have completed an *educational functioning level* (NRS Online, n.d.) through results on standardized tests like CASAS. Although basic funding for programs is not yet directly tied to test results, the possibility for it to be in the future exists. Already, discretionary funds are available and may be awarded to programs that have many participants who move to a higher educational functioning level.

Workplace ESL teachers are encouraged to use the CASAS listening test to show progress because it is believed that listening skills are stronger in workplace settings and the listening test is one where participants can show the most amount of progress in the time available between pre- and post-testing. Due to learner turnover, post-testing often occurs much sooner than the recommended 80-100 hours of instruction. If learners leave the company or do not continue with English courses for other reasons, it is difficult to get that learner to come back in for post-testing. Therefore, the whole class is usually post-tested at the end of a typical 10-12 week session, consisting of only about 20-36 hours of instruction. The result is that many learners have a post-test score reported to the state that shows little improvement.

Increased scores on post-testing indicate to both teacher and learner that their skills are improving. A learner can see as his or her CASAS score goes up that their assigned English level also increases. There are six *Educational Functioning Levels* defined by CASAS (2000) starting with *Beginning Literacy ESL* and ending with *High Advanced ESL*.<sup>1</sup> Completion of an educational functioning level is reported to the State at the end of each fiscal year. Programs are encouraged to meet predetermined goals for number of learners who complete an educational functioning level.

According to the Minnesota Governor's Workplace Development Council Workplace Investment Act (WIA) Incentive Grant Planning Team, those programs that are successful, i.e. many students complete an educational functioning level during a

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<sup>1</sup> Currently, level 2, Beginning ESL encompasses CASAS scale scores 181-200. It will split as of July, 2006 into two levels. This may greatly increase the rate of learners who complete an educational functioning level because many learners at the bottom of that range improve their scores 10 points between subsequent tests, but not the twenty it takes to complete a level now.

funding cycle, receive incentive money from the federal government that is earmarked for programs that exceed outcome expectations and benchmarks for performance. This money is used to reward programs with outstanding workplace development and education activities, so there is great incentive to produce results.

To be awarded funding, techniques that promote mastery of workplace communication skills need to be discovered. If teachers utilize focused topic dialogue journaling in their classrooms to better learners' workplace communication skills, and if learners can demonstrate that progress on standardized testing, then perhaps more funding will be designated to our programs, thereby improving our ability to educate and ultimately, effecting a stronger, more proficient workplace.

### Personal Insights

In spite of the fact that I have never been a confident writer, or perhaps because of this fact, I have not allowed myself to shy away from teaching writing in the classroom. Dialogue journaling has been a mainstay in my classes because it can be easily implemented in the multi-level classes I so often teach. While I enjoy the practice, all of my past experiences with dialogue journaling have left me with the same feeling: this is a lot of work; are participants really benefiting from this exercise? I can enthusiastically say that, indeed, participants in this study did benefit from dialogue journaling and I found new energy for it through the introduction of focused topics. I found it a real joy to have the opportunity to get to know participants on such a personal level, and the focused topics helped to bring relevance to each entry.

In past classes, the participants with whom I have become the most closely acquainted were often the most out-spoken participants in the group. Dialogue journaling gave all participants equal time with me. They had ample time to formulate thoughts without being shouted over by another participant and I had the time to focus on my responses to individual participants without being distracted. Participants shared wonderful details from their personal lives with me, both triumphs and struggles. I think there is much to be gained from the use of dialogue journals in the classroom and I will continue to look for ways to make the practice more significant for me and for my participants.

#### Participants' Perspectives

In order to better understand how dialogue journaling works to improve speaking skills from the participants' perspective, I posed one final dialogue journal question for each of them: *What do you think of dialogue journaling as a technique for improving speaking skills?* The comments were generally positive and there is no distinct difference in the responses between the control and experimental groups as a whole. This is, perhaps, due to a lack of awareness about the purpose of the study and the fact that the connection between the dialogue journaling and the speaking test was not explicitly made.

#### **Control Group**

Oswardo: *The technique may help people organizing their speaking grammar but they have to practice talking. The technique by it self won't work.*

Roberto: *I think it is wonderful for me, because you understand what I wrote. I hope continuo whit this classes, but I don't now, because I stop another job for take this classes.*

### **Experimental Group**

Ali: *I love this dialogue very much. because of my interest I know how much I improve my writing skill I can't stress individually this is the way to improve communication skill and writing process.*

Jose: *This is great opportunity because in the past never done. I feel more better after starting to do this. Every weekend I think (incomprehensible) help mi a lot my nerves go away. I was scared to write before but I'm not scared to write anymore.*

### **Conclusion**

In the course of my research, I sought to address whether dialogue journaling with focused topics would improve speaking skills for workplace ESL learners. I discovered that focusing the topic of dialogue journaling does not appear to help learners improve their speaking skills, but it does help them with reading. Also, I learned that dialogue journaling in general, with or without focused topics, is a practice worth implementing in workplace ESL classrooms because those learners who wrote in dialogue journals improved their speaking skills more than did those did not participate in any dialogue journaling.

Perhaps, practice with dialogue journaling has indeed provided the necessary conditions for learning language as described by Shuy (1988). Participants in the study

had many opportunities to write back and forth in a meaningful context individualized to their own interests. By comparing and contrasting what both they and the researcher had written throughout the study period, participants learned to express themselves better in writing and, hopefully, in speaking as well. Jose's comments are the most powerful endorsement for dialogue journaling, for confidence is so critical to communicating effectively in the workplace.

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