

DOES THE USE OF DIALOGUE JOURNALS AFFECT THE WRITING FLUENCY  
OF LOW-LITERACY ADULT SOMALI STUDENTS?

By

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To my parents, who taught me the value of education and tenacity.

To my brother, Dennis, and my children, Laura, Dave, and Eric, who  
encouraged me to fulfill my goal. I hope I have inspired you to be  
lifelong learners.

To my friends, who tirelessly continued to offer support and words of  
encouragement throughout this process.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Teaching writing presents one of the most daunting challenges that English Language Learner (ELL) teachers encounter in their curriculum. Concentration on reading and speaking skills is often the norm in the classroom with writing instruction lagging behind. Adding to that, students may not be literate in their native languages, which attaches another layer to the challenge. Because I write professionally and fellow teachers have asked me for help in teaching writing, I found myself looking for fresh ways to enable the writing process for ELLs. With these challenges in mind, I began to question whether dialogue journaling, which I had once used successfully in my Language Arts classes for native English speakers, might have beneficial application for ELL students. I wondered whether there could be any improvement in low-level ELL students' writing when using dialogue journals. Specifically, does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency, or language production length, of adult low-literacy Somali students? I also wondered if written recasts would cause them to notice errors and make written improvements. Would confidence levels be affected by the use of dialogue journals?

### Dialogue Journals

The research in the use of dialogue journals began in the late 1970's with the published work of Jana Staton and colleagues after she observed a California multi-

cultural classroom of writers (Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988). The sixth grade teacher, Leslie Reed, used notebooks of written communication that were passed back and forth between teacher and students with correspondence that resembled letter writing. The journals provided a supplementary activity for students to write in during their free time every day. Each morning they received their teacher's responses that she had written in them the night before. From these journals, the researchers plotted written language development in the early stages of learning English. This study shows promise in the potential value of using dialogue journals to successfully teach writing in the low level ELL classroom.

Dialogue journals are interactive with teacher and student taking turns writing and responding. These journals typically do not have assigned topics, and students have the freedom to initiate topics of their choice (Jones, 1996b). The journals are not corrected or graded, an issue that may be a problem, especially for those students who are accustomed to seeing corrections on their work. Providing a safe place for non-threatening, private communication is a tenet of dialogue journals, and this promotes good communication between student and teacher. Topics are often authentic and of high interest to the student and are usually self-generated. Dialogue journals display "student writing becoming more fluent, interesting, and correct over time" (Peyton & Staton, 1992, p. 6-3). Correction is made through recasting or responding by using the correct written form in the teacher's responses and not through the usual means of teacher correction. These aspects of dialogue journals make them a valuable method of teaching writing to ELLs.

Dialogue journals help to build community within a classroom (Kim, 2005). My interest lay in finding a method to teach writing that would be less threatening than more traditional methods had been. Could a dialogue journal improve the writing of low-literacy students while promoting confidence in a community-building forum?

### Responses to Student Writing

There are several methods that teachers may use when responding to students' writing. Should the teacher provide direct error feedback with the correct form, or should the response be indirect, leaving the student to figure out the problem? Dialogue journal responses sometimes make an implied correction in response to the journal entry. For example, a student writes, "I go to zoo yesterday," and the teacher writes, "Oh, you went to the zoo yesterday. What animals did you see?" thus, modeling the correct verb form and also providing a spring board for further communication. In this case, the student must notice the error on her own, without seeing teacher comments.

The converse response to an implied correction occurs when a teacher makes an explicit correction in student writing. Some teachers use highlighting or editing symbols when responding to student writing. Colored markings may appear as students process-write through many stages of their writing or journaling. I found myself wondering which type of recast would be beneficial to learners, especially low-literacy beginning students.

### Research Questions

With a minimum of experience with dialogue journals in both native English classes and ELL classes, I formulated three questions for this classroom action research

study. First, would using dialogue journals affect the writing fluency of low-level adult students, and would the journals reflect increased word counts in the language production units? Secondly, would written recasts cause low-level students to notice errors and make subsequent written improvements? Finally, could I find evidence of increasing confidence levels in the students because of their dialogue journaling?

### Significance for Others

My interest in using dialogue journals peaked when I started my course work in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Earlier in my career, as an English teacher to native English speakers, I had dabbled in using dialogue journals without knowing much about them. However, I did enjoy the improved communication with my students plus being able to provide them a safe and authentic venue for their expression through the use of dialogue journals. Later, I wondered how journals could fit into the teaching of writing for English language learners. Discussions with colleagues revealed that others had the same question. Finally, I considered the possibility of whether the use of dialogue journals might improve writing fluency for my low-literacy adult Somali students.

Because the venue for my research contained a contingency of beginning level Somali adults who were eager to improve their writing, I found myself blessed with a microcosm of a specific culture where I could test my question: Does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency by showing an increase in the number of words in the production units of adult low-literacy Somali students? Specifically, will the use of dialogue journals effect changes in Somali written language production? I

had the further advantage of looking at a single culture in my exploration. Because of Somalis' emphasis on oral traditions, this single culture advantage provided opportunity to study writing with students of similar literacy levels and educational backgrounds.

Somali populations are growing in many areas of the United States as well as in other countries. Consequently, this classroom action research study is of interest to educators who work with Somalis everywhere. This study may also be of interest to teachers of any population of low-literate adult students. In addition, teachers of ELLs in content areas may be interested in the use of dialogue journals as a tool to improve writing fluency. ELL teachers use oral recasts every day; it may be of interest to them to see how written recasts affect written improvements in dialogue journals. Finally, most teachers welcome a valuable tool to increase confidence levels for their students; might that tool be the dialogue journal?

### Summary

This introduction states my research question: Does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency of adult low-literacy Somali students? The introduction also defines what a dialogue journal is and explains my objective in answering my research question. It outlines how I intend to answer the question through specific data collection with a class of Somali adults in light of the need for an effective tool to teach writing to beginning level writers. The use of written recasts to improve written fluency is also discussed; will students notice them? How might students' confidence levels increase? In essence, it explores whether using dialogue journals for adult Somali

adults with limited literacy skills will affect language production and aid in communicating confidently.

### Overview

Chapter Two examines the history and efficacy of dialogue journals with second language acquisition theories, and how the research in error correction affects written improvement. A discussion on using recasts as a second language teaching strategy is included plus a definition of what 'written fluency' means. The benefits to both students and teachers when communicating in the journals plus research on the unique challenges of the Somali population are also explored. Chapter Three examines the methodology used in the current study and its suitability for my research. Discussing the results of my study is the focus of Chapter Four, and Chapter Five analyzes the results of my research question and explores the findings.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of dialogue journals has a rich history. Dating back to the 1970's, dialogue journals have been studied to review their benefits, first for native English speaking students, and then for non-native English speaking students. Most of the existing studies with dialogue journal effectiveness involve multi-cultural populations and do not include low-literacy students. The English Language Learners (ELLs) in this study are valuable in that they are from one cultural group-the Somalis. Most of these students had very little formal education in Somalia. However, it seems feasible that these low-literacy adult students could show improvement in their writing fluency, or number of words written, by the use of dialogue journals. It also follows that a teacher's use of recasts, which is modeling the correct writing in teacher responses in the dialogue journals, might affect the results of student writing as well. Could dialogue journaling at this level of ability promote confidence in the learners? This study intends to answer this question: Does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency and confidence of adult low-literacy Somali students?

This literature review will begin by examining the history and efficacy of dialogue journals. Then, second language acquisition theories and their relationships to dialogue journal use are reviewed. How to address errors in ELLs writing is the next topic to be covered. What 'writing fluency' is and how to measure it is explored next.

Then the case is made for how the use of dialogue journals benefits both students and teachers in a variety of ways. Finally, the unique English language learning issues of the Somali students as writers are examined.

### History and Efficacy of Dialogue Journals

For many years, literacy experts have shown interest in the use of dialogue journals in ELL classrooms. Early research on dialogue journals occurred in 1979 when Jana Staton, a counseling psychology student, studied types of writing that might help students solve both personal and academic problems. She observed Leslee Reed, a Los Angeles teacher, who daily challenged her sixth grade students to write down something they had learned. Reed's curiosity in improving what the students were writing, eventually led to the decision to use notebooks to write back and forth. These journals differed from the traditional personal journal, which is largely self-reflective, in that the dialogue journals were interactive. The next year, Reed was moved to a different school in Los Angeles that had many second language learners, so she decided to try these journals with the English language learners. Reed quickly found "the value of the dialogue in helping her students acquire a second language and become comfortable with the academic work of American schools" (Peyton & Staton, 1992, p. 7-3). The use of dialogue journals for English language learners was proving to be effective. In fact, many teachers reported improvements in content area questions, in more interesting and expressive writing, plus clearer organization of thoughts and ideas. Also noted were improvements in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

The use of dialogue journals for ELLs soon became of interest to researchers and to teachers. Early research, plus teachers sharing successes with other teachers, led many educators to try the journals in their classrooms. Teachers of adult ELL students began adapting the process to their own teaching. From 1982-1989, a newsletter about dialogue journal use and research, *Dialogue*, helped to inform educators about this practice. Soon the application of dialogue journals for ELLs had gained momentum and showed acquisition of higher-order language functions for second language learners. In fact, one strength found with the use of the dialogue journals was that “the use of grammatical forms and structures evolves naturally in the process of the interaction” (Peyton, 1990b). With non-literate students, pictures may be drawn and labeled in the journals with the teacher writing a few words in response to the pictures. The move to letters and writing is made as students show readiness for it.

Peyton’s study with non-literate first-grade students provided support for beginning writing long before excellent oral English skills were developed (Peyton, 1990a). In this study, a first-grade teacher gave her students various exposures to print media, such as books, dictionaries, and posters in the classroom. The teacher also introduced a new nursery rhyme each week, and when reading a variety of books to them, she discussed various stylistic and mechanical features of the texts such as rhyming, quotations, humor, and word sounds. Although students did not yet read, they understood that written text was an important way to communicate a message. This study supports the idea that ELL students can and should begin writing before they have complete control of oral English and before they have mastered its systems.

Hadaway and Young (2002) concur that ELLs can write English early in their development for various purposes.

Soon the teacher introduced the use of dialogue journals by modeling the writing on a large sheet of paper while talking through her thinking process about writing. The students were eager to begin their writing, and despite their inability to read, they were able to write by looking at various sources of print within the classroom. This use of classroom resources in their writing was revealed in their drawing pictures and also by copying words and phrases from their environment. This eventually led to using invented spelling in their original messages. Consequently, the contexts that promoted writing were those where children had frequent opportunities to communicate meaningfully in writing. Dialogue journal use provided a place for beginning-level students to write regularly and to receive recasted feedback to improve their writing.

Another study conducted by Peyton (1990b) examined the use of selected grammatical morphemes in sixth grade students' dialogue journals during ten months' time. She sought to compare acquisition patterns in the journal data with speech and other writings. She found considerable uniformity in the acquisition order, which indicated universal patterns of acquisition (Krashen, 1982). This "natural" or universal order of morpheme acquisition seemed to follow the expected pattern in her students' writings.

Peyton also found that morphemes that are syllabic, such as the progressive *-ing* and copula *BE* (uncontracted), tend to be acquired more quickly. However, morphemes that are non-syllabic, as in plurals or possessives, were not so easily acquired. Given

the difficulty in acquiring non-syllabic morphemes, it becomes even more important to understand how certain instructional practices, such as dialogue journals, may aid specific culture groups of students, such as the Somali adult English language learner in my context.

Finally, she was able to note changes in students' language proficiency over time, even in their early stages of acquisition. She could plot language growth for each student regardless of proficiency level. With the use of appropriate recasts, the dialogue journals began to show emerging patterns of improved morphological systems. This study shows the value of using student-generated dialogue journals for second language students to effect positive morphological changes in an adolescent age group. However, Peyton's study does not address the issues found in one single culture group, as in the Somalis, nor does it address the adult population at a low-literacy level. How dialogue journals affect the writing fluency of adult low-literacy Somali students is a question that is yet to be answered.

Holmes and Moulton (1997) conducted a study on dialogue journals as an English language learning strategy for adult, university students. Ethnographic tools were used to investigate the journals as a learning strategy from the ESL students' perspectives. Students' reactions were overwhelmingly positive with responses such as "no scare," "feel good," "like to write more," and "feel free and excited" (p. 618). The researchers conclude, "By allowing students to write about the 'stuff' of their lives in a nonthreatening format, teachers encourage cognitive and linguistic growth while motivating students to write" (p. 620). This study emphasizes the efficacy of using

dialogue journals to promote positive reactions from university students and to smooth communication between teacher and students. However, once again, this study involved a population that was very different from my students, in this case, a multi-cultural, university-educated population. My study is unusual in that it targets low-literacy adult students from a single culture-Somali.

That written structures of a second language may be acquired subconsciously when writing in dialogue journals is a premise proposed by Jana Staton (1993). Staton argued that the second language learner can acquire written structures by the active communication with a native speaker or the teacher, if these criteria are met: the communication must be authentic; the written input received by the learner must be comprehensible but slightly more advanced than student's writing; the interaction must be comfortably nonthreatening; and clarification must occur. Staton's premises apply to the search for written fluency improvement in dialogue journals. When a teacher uses authentic communication in the dialogue journals with the optimal input of nonthreatening speech, then acquisition of the correct structures of written English may occur.

One can see the parallels to Krashen's theories for oral language acquisition (1982). Some of the tenets of his theory include that the optimal input should be comprehensible, relevant to the learner, and sufficient to meet the learner's needs. These features can be applied effectively to the interactive written texts of dialogue journals with recasting. The analysis of the recasts will present a method for

determining if features are clear and comprehensible and whether students' needs for effecting written change are met.

### Second Language Theories and Dialogue Journals

Many second language theories exist which are useful when determining the validity of dialogue journals in the ELL classroom. Freire (1973) influenced educators by promoting the idea that society impacts an individual in both schooling and in practice. He argued that the personal is political. Meaningful communication and open dialogue on issues of great importance to the writer, integral issues to Freire's followers, are evident in the use of dialogue journals. The journals form a bridge between theory and practice in their exploration of authentic communication and narrative language. Consequently, the tenets of Freire's influence are well represented in the use of dialogue journals. As students practice writing in their journals, they may explore issues of cultural significance in an authentic context.

A number of studies indicate that writers will transfer writing abilities, good or bad, from their first language to their second language. Mohan and Lo (1985) suggest that if a student has a first language deficiency in writing, teachers can expect that they will have equally weak strategies in their second language. Sourysaak and Lee (2007) add that in ELL homes, where the Lao oral tradition is highly valued and practiced, children do not grow up engaging in writing. One can surmise that since some Somali students have limited literacy in their first language and also come from a culture that emphasizes a rich, oral tradition over writing, then writing in English may be very difficult for them as well. Peyton (2000) continues that especially for the newcomer

student, the one-to-one communication of a dialogue journal is critical both for their adjustment and also for the teacher to be able to address students' particular language and literacy needs. The dialogue journals may provide the bridge to improvement in Somali students' writing by providing individualized opportunities for students to engage in writing that reflects their linguistic, cognitive, and emotional levels.

The Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, explored the concept of inner speech and the connections between people and their social interactions (1986). He believed that talking to ourselves, besides being a means of expression and a tension reliever, may become an instrument in seeking and planning how to solve a problem. People use tools such as speech and journal writing to interact with their social environments. This concept is of central importance in understanding the freedom and power that students may enjoy when writing in journals. What begins as a social function when writing may lead to higher level thinking skills (Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995).

Reflection that occurs when writing in a journal becomes a kind of inner speech that is captured in writing. Vygotsky refers to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as that area between what the student can achieve with help and what he or she can do alone. The support that is provided by the teacher in the back and forth exchange of writing in dialogue journals exemplifies the ZPD. Through such interaction, the dialogue journal, as a means of expression, helps students to solve problems both linguistically and practically. As learners mimic the teacher's model, they internalize forms and syntax, thus providing an opportunity for the possibility of increasing their writing fluency. Consequently, the use of dialogue journals, which creates a context for

a teacher to interact with ELL students, may provide a tool for writing improvements within the context of social functioning.

Holmes and Moulton's (1997) findings support Vygotsky in that dialogue journals provide a "highly visible and credible demonstration of modeling and of students' ability to write fluently and communicatively" (p. 619). The university students in this study found that their dialogue journals helped them to increase their fluency not only in writing, but also in their thinking skills. As an act of composing, writing in their dialogue journals became a tool of communication that enhanced their other literacy skills as well.

Krashen's Learning Acquisition Hypothesis (1982) states that language acquisition occurs when students are given opportunities to use language in real situations. When learning a native language, children are not presented with grammatical rules and forms, yet they learn the language well. This is because, according to this hypothesis, they are in real situations that require authentic use of the language. Dialogue journaling fits well into this hypothesis as students are given opportunities to use authentic language when writing about real situations. Here students think about content rather than the technicality of grammatical rules and, consequently, they may be able to write freely.

In light of these second language theories, it seems wise to examine the use of dialogue journals to improve the language production of adult low-literacy level second language students. Would my written recasting in the dialogue journals cause the students to notice errors and make written improvements? Would confidence levels

increase based on increasing ease in writing because of their dialogue journal experiences?

### Addressing Errors Using Recasts

How to address errors through the use of recasts is a topic of interest to the English as a second language teacher and researcher. In Nicholas, Lightbrown, and Spada (2001), the effectiveness of recasts as feedback was examined. They noted the similarities between first language (L1) and second language (L2) learning plus defined the term 'recast' as "utterances that repeat a learner's incorrect utterance, making only the changes necessary to produce a correct utterance, without changing the meaning" (pp. 732-733). Most of the research cited in both L1 and L2 language acquisition was based on dyadic interactions between adults and children. The results on the effectiveness of recasts were mixed due to differing developmental levels of proficiency and the specific linguistic features used.

Loewen and Philp (2001) found that recasts vary in implicitness, which may impact their effectiveness. This study focused on the effectiveness of recasts in adult ELL classrooms and found that recasts were widely used and differed according to their corrective purpose. Discourse cues and the degree of difference between the recast and the utterance accounted for some ambiguity of results.

Long and Robinson (1998) suggested that recasts are effective in showing second language learners their errors. Conversely, Lyster (1998) argued that recasts are ambiguous and may confirm ill-formed meaning rather than correct feedback on form. Overall, the research on recasts shows that the effect of recasts differs depending on the

features of the language, the context or the task, and the developmental readiness for acquisition of the feature (Nicholas et al., 2001).

Noticing is important when evaluating the effect of recasting in dialogue journals. Schmidt (1990) found that the study of enhanced written input, or the role of noticing in second language learning, has produced mixed results in the literature. Drawing learners' attention to the targeted linguistic forms may range from being implicit, as in written input enhancement, to explicit, as in explicit instruction and feedback. Written input enhancement may use typographical cues such as underlining, bolding, italicization, different fonts, or shading. Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, and Doughty (1995) used these same methods to promote noticing of the forms in their study. This study provided unconvincing and conflicting results due to the methodology's failure to gather correct data on learners' attention processes with the L2 input.

In Leow's 2001 study with adult college-level Spanish students and imperatives, he examined whether students noticed targeted linguistic forms while reading an enhanced or an unenhanced text. Enhancement techniques included underlining certain verb forms as well as emboldening targeted morphemes. Students' performance on written production tasks was analyzed. Results indicated no significant benefits of written input enhancement over unenhanced written input. He concluded that teachers need to design activities that promote learners' noticing of the targeted L2 forms when interacting with the L2, and that this desired higher level of awareness should ultimately lead to more learning. Because the use of dialogue journals, with the teacher responses

or recasts, is an activity that may promote noticing, might it ultimately lead to increased written fluency as evidenced in the students' writing?

However, the aforementioned research provides no clear-cut answers on the efficacy of recasting for either the Somali writer or the low-literacy student. This leaves room for exploration of recasts in dialogue journals and its effects on writing to answer my question: Does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency and confidence of adult low-literacy Somali students? Does recasting make a difference?

#### What is Written Fluency?

How to define 'fluency' and 'written fluency' is the subject of much debate. Definitions of fluent speakers often include components of rapidity of speech, coherence, complexity, and effortlessness; these same components are often mirrored in the definition of written fluency (Crystal, 1992). Second language writers may be deemed fluent if they produce written language rapidly, appropriately, creatively, and coherently (Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim, 1998). Fluency may also involve an automatized chunk of language (Ellis, 1996). Ellis argued that language representation comes from the strengthening of memory for language chunks and that the stronger those representations are, the more available they will be for automatic access. Consequently, fluency results when a strong knowledge base of word sequences of "chunkable materials" are readily available.

House (1996) found that fluency involves appropriate use of routines in a pragmatic formula. Routines refer to a whole memorized chunk of language such as 'How are you?' These routines provide an increase on measures of fluency as the units

of production are longer and easier to produce. Routines are believed to be a significant factor in early L2 production.

Written fluency measures include accuracy, complexity, and fluency (Wolfe-Quintero, et al., 1998). These researchers suggest limiting the measurement of fluency to issues of rate and length. In their view, “fluency means that more words and more structures are accessed in a limited time, whereas a lack of fluency means that only a few words or structures are accessed” (p. 14). ELLs, with the same number of productive vocabulary words in their lexicon, may use them with differing degrees of efficiency. Consequently, fluency is not a measure of the accuracy or sophistication that the written structures exhibit, but is instead, a measure of the number of words or structural units that a writer is able to produce during any given period of time. It is this definition, that is, fluency being a measure of the number of words or structural units that a writer is able to produce, that I used as a measurement for defining fluency in this capstone.

### Measuring Fluency

How to measure fluency poses a complex problem. A T-unit has been used as a measure for the length of language production units for many years in Second Language Acquisition research. T-units are defined as “one main clause plus the subordinate clauses attached to or embedded within it” (Hunt, 1965, p. 49). Hunt used the T-unit as the smallest unit that could be considered a grammatical sentence; correct punctuation by the writer was irrelevant to the measurement. Ever since Hunt developed the T-unit

as an index for growth in syntactic maturity of writing, T-unit analysis has been widely used for measurement of the overall complexity of writing samples.

Words per T-unit (W/T) have sometimes been considered measures of both complexity and of fluency. Eventually T-unit measurement evolved into error-free T-units and other iterations. However, Gaies (1980) suggests that T-units are not particularly appropriate for analysis of data for low-literacy L2 students. Because these students often produce many grammatical and lexical errors, T-unit tabulation becomes very difficult. He says, "T-unit analysis seems to be useful only beyond a certain level of development in the target language" (p. 58). Because my adult students are of low-level proficiency, instead of using T-unit analysis, this study will count actual numbers of words used in the dialogue journals. The analysis will include the number of words in the language production unit (W/P) as a measure of fluency, specifically looking for an increase in the word count of low-level Somali writers in dialogue journals.

Ishikawa (1995), in a study that involved two beginning-level groups of ELLs, measured the total number of words found in T-units. She was searching for measures that would be relevant to beginning-level students' writing. By using two groups of low-proficiency ELLs, she sought to determine which writing task type, a holistic approach or a more segmented approach, resulted in increased writing proficiency. Results showed that the group that practiced writing out picture stories, the holistic approach, showed the most improvement. Students who answered questions about the story in the segmented approach showed minimal writing improvement. The best measure for her students proved to be total words in error-free clauses. However, her

students possessed a higher proficiency skill set than mine had, and so T-units were a workable measure for her. She concludes that there is a “dearth of studies at very low proficiency levels” (p. 52), and agrees that T-unit analysis does not work well for very low-proficiency students. It does seem that dialogue journal use with examination of fluency improvements therein, by looking at W/P with low-level students, fills a gap in the research. Consequently, I will be using a word count in each language production unit (W/P) to measure increasing fluency in the dialogue journals of low-level literacy Somali students.

#### Benefits to Students When Using Dialogue Journals

Benefits abound in the use of classroom dialogue journals. One important benefit of their use lies in the improvement in communication between the teacher and students. When used in a class of women, the journals may create a safe space for students to work through gender-specific problems and concerns without fear of reprisal. By reflecting on life experiences and writing about them, women may regain lost voices. Kim (2005) argues that the use of dialogue journals may provide opportunities to practice authentic language through interactions between the writer and the reader. She believes that gained fluency may be a result of this simple act of writing on topics of meaning to the writer. By chronicling their suffering and oppression, Kim concludes that women may be able to find solace and engage in reflection.

Another benefit of dialogue journals for students is how their use can lead to significant changes in attitudes that may affect their learning. Jones (1996a) contends that significant attitude improvements in English Language Learners are often seen in

the promotion of second language literacy skills and in the acquisition of written forms of the target language. These attitudes include overcoming fears associated with writing, willingness to participate in classes with enthusiasm, and re-enrollment for subsequent classes. In fact, Staton (1985) found that students who had used dialogue journals in classes were twice as likely to enroll in subsequent English classes as compared to those students who did not keep journals.

Jones (1996a) discusses four ways that dialogue journals help to improve student writing. First, they write more easily and quickly. Often students begin by writing very little in their journals, but that soon increases with ease (Kreeft, 1984). The Holmes and Moulton study (1997) reveals that, as a result of writing regularly, increased fluency occurs because dialogue journaling mirrors the act of conversation. One student refers to herself as the “habit writer” (p. 618). Secondly, students begin to write more coherently. The dialogue between student and teacher reveals misunderstandings that can be remedied through the course of subsequent discussions. Thirdly, a wide variety of language functions are used which also occur in a conversation. These functions include asking questions, complaining, and expressing other communicative needs and desires (Shuy, 1998). Finally, a student can play with the target language when using dialogue journals. The use of dialogue journals provides an opportunity for the unique personalities and styles of both teachers and students to emerge.

Dialogue journal writing allows practice with skills that second language students need for other types of writing. Kreeft (1984) found in a case study that

dialogue journal writing helped students to polish skills needed in more formal essay writing. These skills included elaborating on topics, writing with awareness of audience, and writing about new topics. Peyton and Reed (1990) found that dialogue journal writing sometimes produced more complex and cohesive writing than other writing by the same student. Consequently, dialogue journals often provide an important bridge to other types of writing.

Another benefit to the student when writing in dialogue journals is that of personal growth and development. Journals can help with learning goals, as well as results, when integrating life with learning experiences, allowing for freedom of expression and stimulating mental abilities. Journal writing provides a venue for an investment in themselves as students explore their personal thoughts and feelings (Heimstra, 2001). In addition, Harmer (2004) compares journal writing to athletic performance: dialogue journal writing leads to improvement in writing just as training enhances an athletic performance. He continues by stating that journal writing has a powerful effect upon motivation as well as promoting learner autonomy in writing.

Provision of additional opportunities for reading is another key benefit for students. “Every time the teacher writes, a reading text is produced for student consumption” (Peyton & Reed, 1990, p. 32). Reading begins as soon as the student makes a journal entry, even if it is as simple as a picture. When the teacher writes back, reading takes place in a relevant context for the student. Both beginning and advanced students often react excitedly when reading what the teacher has written back to them, and, as a result, even more reading has taken place.

### Benefits to Teachers When Using Dialogue Journals

Teachers also enjoy many benefits of using dialogue journals. The journals provide a means to get to know students in a way that may not be possible otherwise, especially with the shyness found in some ELLs. Information shared in the journals builds strong personal ties as teachers grow to learn so much about the lives of their students. Through the interactive medium of the journals, knowledge is acquired about students' cultures while valuable personal connections are formed (Kim, 2005).

Although journals are often private between the teacher and student, sharing of their writings is community building. Through back and forth writings, teachers are invited into students' life experiences and feelings. Orem (2001) finds that the journals may be a powerful political tool in the emancipatory or the participatory classroom. Jones (1996a) describes learning to know his students in this way as "one of the greatest rewards of ESL teaching (that) comes through learning about my students, and through them, about the world" (p. 134).

Teachers can individualize language and content learning based on journal entries (Peyton & Reed, 1990). With most second language classes having a wide range of English proficiency levels, teachers can tailor their responses to the forms and structures that the student knows, modeled in the context of authentic language. The modeling and recasts can take the form of correct English usage that has been shaped at the student's level of ability. Also, the patterns the teacher notices in the writing can become information to help plan future lessons. Care must be taken to keep these errors

specific to no certain students in order to protect their privacy and not to jeopardize their ease and confidence in writing.

Another benefit to teachers is in personal growth. Support and encouragement are often required in the responses to students as they may complain or share frustration in learning the target language. Teachers may be challenged to come up with versatility in words for their own responses as sometimes several students write about the same subject. Learning to match recasts to the same level as the students may pose another challenge. An area of growth for teachers may lie in the examination of responses to student writing as they question themselves about whether there has been too much personal or political information in their dialogue journals responses (Jones, 1996a). A review of these responses may help the teachers to know themselves better.

A final benefit to teachers is in the maintenance of their enthusiasm for teaching. The joy in correspondence, as well as the sense of connectedness to students, can be powerfully gratifying. It reminds teachers about the excitement in learning and growing with students and may allow them to experience a sense of value and satisfaction in the teaching profession. Teachers often find themselves eagerly looking forward to each class as the enthusiasm of the students can be infectious.

### Somali History and Education

Somali history contributes to a host of literacy problems for the refugee student. After many years of colonial influences and a history of Somali being primarily an oral language, it was decided that a common orthography was needed. In the decades before and after Somali independence, this choice of an orthography for the country involved

volatile religious and political issues. More than twenty different writing systems, some Latin-based and some Arabic-based, were debated for over twenty-five years before the choice of a Roman-based orthography was made in October of 1972 (Johnson, 2006). Prior to this, the Somali language was largely oral with dance and poetry being highly valued designations.

In 1991, with the collapse of the state, Somalia succumbed to competing factions mostly created and led by special-interest warlords. The deliberate destruction of schools, university lecture halls, libraries and labs created many resulting tragedies both for Somalia and for the future of education there (Abdi, 1998). Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to Kenya, eventually becoming part of the Diaspora leading to the Midwest. Some estimate that at least 35% of Somali refugees have been tortured (Farid & McMahan, 2004). Besides the horrors witnessed by Somalis in their home county, many had long waits in refugee camps, which may have contributed the incidence of low print literacy and limited schooling. Although some refugee camps offered schooling, they tended to be large and to have very few materials. Additionally, the quality and consistency of the schooling was often inferior. High costs of books and uniforms prevented many from being able to attend. Another contributing factor to low literacy is that some young women of marriageable age were kept away from school to avoid the risk of sexual violence (Bigelow, 2010).

The progression from orality to literacy has produced a significant effect on the Somali refugee population that has migrated to the United States. Many have come with little or no writing skills. The strength they possess in oracy may not be of value

in the types of educational programming that is offered in the United States. A low level of formal schooling may indicate that students also possess low levels of print literacy. This learning level may add difficulty to their ability to learn academic content through the usual means. With an educational system in the United States that is essentially tied to written text, this factors into the Somali student having difficulty navigating it.

Friedlander (1991) cites four challenges that face refugee students as they learn a new language: lack of proficiency in English, pre-literacy in the native language, lack of educational experiences, and trauma because of war, poverty, refugee status, or family issues. These conditions are certainly present in the Somali population and add a distinct layer of challenge to the teacher of writing to low-level literacy students.

Second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have recently begun looking at the impact of oral L2 processing with students who have little or no alphabetic print literacy (Tarone, 2010). Although findings in cognitive psychology show that the ability to connect a phoneme and a visual symbol affects oral language processing, Tarone confirms that alphabetic literacy changes the way L2 learners process oral L2 input. The focus of Tarone's study is on oracy and not writing with this population. Conversely, my research focus is on low-level adult students and their writing. This is a gap that my research fills by addressing the efficacy of using dialogue journals with low-level adult Somali students.

## Summary

The literature in this review supports exploring the use of dialogue journals for adult Somali students in order to improve the writing fluency of the low-literacy students. Examination of the history and efficacy of dialogue journals provides a backdrop for the study of written production amid recasting for the Somali second language student. A discussion on written fluency follows. Second language acquisition theories and their relationships to dialogue journal use were reviewed. Benefits to both students and teachers are highlighted. Finally, the advantage of studying only one cultural group, the Somalis, provides freshness to this study. In Chapter Three, exploration of the participants, setting, and methodology used to explore this research question will be explained.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In order to discover whether the use of dialogue journals affects the writing fluency of adult low-literacy Somali students required careful methodology in this classroom action research study. Through the use of questionnaires, guided practice, interviews, observation, and journaling by the students and myself, I conducted relevant action research in my classroom. The writing fluency changes I sought in the dialogue journals were, first of all, in the area of words per language production unit (W/P). I measured the number of words in the production unit to find increased fluency as a result of the use of dialogue journals in my Somali students' writing. I also wondered if written recasting would cause them to notice errors and make written improvements in subsequent writing. Finally, changes in confidence levels were also sought by three questionnaires and my observations. I was seeking to answer this question: Does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency and confidence levels of adult low-literacy Somali students? Would the journals reflect increased language production throughout the course of the study? I also wondered if written recasts would cause them to notice errors and make written improvements. Would confidence levels escalate also?

In this chapter, after exploring the research paradigm, I will then discuss who the participants were and where this study took place. Next I will explain the research procedures including several data collection techniques. A three-step

process of implementing the dialogue journals is highlighted. I will conclude with a discussion of how students' confidence in writing increased as a result of using dialogue journals.

### Research Paradigm

English as a second language teachers often develop insights into learning by observing students' behavior. After teachers reflectively analyze behaviors, modify their teaching practices, and evaluate the results, they have produced action research. It is this paradigm, classroom action research, that I have implemented in this research project.

Action research is a systematic, documented inquiry into an aspect of teaching that is conducted by the teacher. Reflection upon the classroom-based research leads to evolution in the teaching. The purpose of classroom action research is "to gain understanding from of teaching and learning within one's classroom and to use that knowledge to increase teaching efficacy/student learning" (Chamot, Barnhardt, & Dirstine, 1998). These classroom action research principles are all implemented in the exploration of my research question: Does the use of dialogue journals affect the fluency and confidence of low-level adult Somali students?

In the classroom action research paradigm, the research question should be "specific, answerable, and lead to significant information on an aspect of teaching or learning" (Chamot, et al., 1998). Because I had wondered if dialogue journals could be used successfully in a low-level literacy class of adult learners, the classroom action research seemed the best choice for my research paradigm. When using classroom action research, data is often collected by the use of questionnaires, student

interviews, and journaling-all useful methods that I used in my data collection. Keeping field notes and a reflective journal of my own observations, both key components of action research, enhanced my reflective teaching practice.

Since action research is an excellent method for testing a new idea, it seemed to fit well with my personal goals. I wanted to test the idea of dialogue journals and increasing word counts with low-level Somali adult students. In addition, action research may be wholly applied to teaching so it allowed me to reflect and modify in order to improve my own teaching.

#### Participants and Venue

The study was conducted in a large metropolitan city in the upper Midwest at a well-organized school that hosts a myriad of second language students every day. It is a free program that is funded by the suburban public school district and the state. This suburban organization was most supportive of my research, which was evident in their high interest in the project and ongoing support during the data collection.

There are four levels of ESL classes taught there. My seven Somali women students, chosen from the beginning level class based on excellent attendance records and their interest, were enthusiastic about trying dialogue journaling in an effort to improve their writing. Their participation was voluntary.

Table 3.1

*Participant Information*

Name	Age	Country	Years of Somalian Schooling	Years in U.S.	Number of Classes in U.S.
Aasha	40	Somalia	3	7	2
Basra	23	Somalia	5	.5	2
Faddumo	26	Somalia	5	9	2
Leyla	36	Somalia	7	5	2
Mariam	45	Somalia	4	10	3
Sahra	37	Somalia	4	10	2
Sufia	23	Somalia	4	5	2

Averaging four years of education in their homeland, these seven adult women, all from Somalia, were between 23 and 45 years old. They averaged about five years of schooling in Somalia and two years of schooling in the U.S. They had lived in the U.S. between .5 and 10 years. Their CASAS scores, between 192 and 203, qualified them for the beginning level class. CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems) is a U.S. Department of Education approved testing system; it assesses adult basic reading, math, listening, writing, and speaking skills in a functional context.

Since they had only a minimum of communicative competence in English, they wanted to improve their English to get a first job, to get a better job, or for general use in the American culture; they viewed my writing class as an opportunity that led to that improvement. Our half-hour classes took place twice a week for eight

weeks for a total of sixteen sessions. Before coming to my noon dialogue journaling class, they had spent the morning in their beginning level class; that class targeted literacy skills with the emphasis on reading, listening, and speaking. Writing there consisted of mainly fill in the blank exercises from their workbooks with little time for free writing. Could the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency of adult low-literacy Somali students? Would the journals reflect increased language production throughout the course of the study? I also wondered if written recasts would cause them to notice errors and make written improvements. Would their confidence levels about their abilities as writers increase as a result of their journaling?

#### Seeking the Answer: Research Procedure

Casual interviews with ESL teachers plus my own experiences revealed that ESL students may not have much experience with writing, especially in the early stages of their beginning classes. Often emphasis is given more to oral contexts than it is to writing. Existing research on writing methods that could be effectively used for beginning-level ESL students seemed minimal. Since it had been my experience that ESL teachers often seek methods to improve beginning level student writing, I began wondering how dialogue journaling might answer the question of an effective method to teach writing for beginning ESL students. Although I had read several studies that used dialogue journals in multi-cultural intermediate and even higher level ESL groups, here was a valuable opportunity to conduct research with low-level adult students. Another advantage to my study was the opportunity to look at the

impact of using dialogue journals as a teaching strategy for a single cultural group - the Somalis.

To answer my question, I began meeting twice weekly with my class of low-literacy adult Somali women. At the first class, I gave the students a questionnaire that asked questions about their English reading and writing habits and educational experiences. With the need for students to act as interpreters for each other, I realized that students who were not yet proficient in the target language brought several challenges, especially since I did not know the Somali language.

Five students had jobs, and two did not. Although two women were unmarried, five students had four children or more. The women averaged four years of education in Somalia and averaged having taken only two English classes prior to the one they were in.

The two questions in the first questionnaire, "Information about You" (Appendix A), produced noteworthy results about their speaking and writing skills in English. I gave them four choices about how they ranked themselves in these areas. Most of my students possessed enough English-speaking skills to circle #2, "English speakers understand most of what I say." However, when it came to writing skills, they rated themselves less proficiently. Of great interest to me was that the students had very little writing experience, as evidenced when most of them circled #3, "I can write very little in English." Informal interviews with the students indicated that their answers referred to their ability to write fill-in-the-blank answers or make lists but not to be able to create full sentences. Students expressed marked interest in becoming better writers. Further interviewing with each student on the last question about what

they wanted to learn from me produced these results: “I want to learn writing,” “grammar,” and “to speak English better.” When I questioned them about their past English lessons, they said that most of it emphasized mainly speaking skills with little or no emphasis on writing at all (Peyton, 1990a). They were all relieved when I both told them and wrote on the board, “Spelling and Grammar Do Not Count!”

I brought new, black composition notebooks to the first class with their names on each one. They were very excited about receiving them and paged through the books to find that I had made two sections on their books: “Dialogue Journal” and “Notes.” My intent was to have them write in the “Notes” section during guided practice so that I could also help them with some organizational study skills as well as the writing skills. Guided practice occurred when I demonstrated the writing skills and techniques appropriate for journaling and conversation. Then they could apply what they learned during guided practice when writing in the “Dialogue Journal” section. I soon observed that this was very confusing for them as they were sometimes writing in the incorrect section; it was also inconvenient for me to have to flip around to try to find their journaling portion after each class. Since maintaining the two sections was proving to take up too much class time as they tried to find the right section, we decided to only write in the “Dialogue Journal” section for the rest of the class time. I had also noted in my own reflective journal that having the notes next to the journal section would allow them to avoid flipping all over the notebook in order to find their notes. This removed the confusion for all of us.

I taught literacy skills in authentic contexts for the guided practice part of the class and then allowed 20-30 minutes of writing time in their dialogue journals, using

my suggested topics (Appendix E). I looked for improvements in their writing, especially in the area of language production or written fluency. I had defined written fluency as “a measure of the number of words or structural units that a writer is able to produce during any given period of time.” Their written fluency would be measured in words per production unit (W/P). In this study, the production unit included the entire journal entry and the number of words contained in that production unit. This study measured the number of words in the production unit by looking at the word counts produced by beginning level Somali writers in their dialogue journals in each entry with each topic. Comparing a beginning, middle, and an end-of-class questionnaire would assess whether their confidence levels had increased because of their writing experiences in their dialogue journals (Appendices A; B; C).

The issue of topic selection when writing in their dialogue journals changed early in this study. I had intended for the students to always choose their own topics and had visions of them writing freely and happily. In my field notes after the first class (Appendix D), I noted that they spent a large amount of time belaboring the choice a good topic, so in the next class, I decided to give them the option of either using my topic or coming up with their own. After the second class, I noted in my field notes that having two options was still taking more time than was optimum. After some reflection, I decided to offer only the one topic that I had chosen from then on. This topic supported a continuation of what they had learned in their morning class and was further reinforced by my guided practice. This change prevented the waste of valuable time when earlier they had been choosing their own

topics. By using related topics from their morning class, vocabulary words were still fresh, and they could build writing ideas from these topics and reinforce usage of those words. This modification, based on observation, is a tenet of classroom action research.

I made an effort to choose topics that reflected authenticity. Authentic learning is based on real-world problems and solutions, often worked collaboratively. Examples of authentic topics that proved to be very popular were when we made a popcorn snack together with a recipe and also when we sampled types of apples to decide which ones we preferred. Authenticity is effective in ESL classes with low-literacy students as it combines real situations with language learning.

With the writing back and forth between the students and me, I had an ongoing collection of data from the journals. I did not correct the journals explicitly with any marks or correction, but I did respond using written recasts in simple language. I took notes on each student's responses to observe whether she had noticed my recasts and then applied the corrections in her subsequent writing. As I read students' writing, I pulled actual problem areas from the journals to use as the next day's guided practice on the white board. In order for students to understand my expectations in their writing, I provided many examples through modeling and discussion. I looked for language production increases or W/Ps as evidence of improvements in their written fluency. Through observation and questionnaire answers I also watched for evidence of changes in their writing confidence levels.

I used field notes to document information about what was happening with each student during the class sessions (Appendix D). This data collection tool was a

form that included questions like: How quickly did she begin writing today? Did she ask any questions that I need to address with the whole class? Is there any evidence of recasts and self-correction? How confident does she seem about her writing today? Are there any adjustments that I need to make for the next lesson? Are there any patterns emerging?

At mid-study, I gave the students a short Mid-Study Questionnaire, which was designed to determine students' perceptions of their own writing processes (Appendix B). They chose from four options:

1. I am a very good writer.
2. I can write what I want to say in English.
3. I am writing better since learning to journal with Marlese.
4. I can not write in English.

In addition to the Mid-Study Questionnaire, I also looked for evidence of increased confidence in their writing as reflected in their eagerness to write as they came into the classroom each day. I noted students' enthusiasm on the Field Notes Chart (Appendix D). By means of this chart, plus observing the word count and written data in their journals, I recorded my impressions of their progress in my reflective journal for later analysis.

Lastly, the Final Questionnaire was given at the end of the study that measured their self-perceptions about positive change in their writing abilities and changing confidence levels (Appendix C). By examining these collection tools, I was provided with information about a student's prior knowledge, as well as showing her gained confidence in writing throughout this study. Counting words in each

journaling passage gave further evidence of expanded written fluency; I hoped to find increasing word counts to parallel growing confidence levels.

### Implementation of the Dialogue Journals

I followed Larotta's (2009) recommendation of a three-step process for implementation of the dialogue journals. The steps were: modeling, establishing guidelines, and guided practice.

I began the first class by explaining or modeling what a dialogue journal is and how we were going to use it. I used the white board to model my thinking and how I decided what to write in my pretend-journal. Topic examples were explored, and I gave them examples of what an entry would look like.

A few guidelines about the writing needed to be established. First, we discussed the dialogue journal format to be sure this concept was understood. Then we talked about questions that may seem too personal. We agreed to always be respectful of each other in our question selection and in our answers. If one found a topic too personal, another could be suggested and accepted. Length of responses could vary as needed to establish a good dialogue but I requested at least three sentences in every entry. Drawing pictures was acceptable and encouraged; this option depended upon their literacy levels. I gave them plenty of class time to begin writing in case there were any questions. Journals and pencils were provided for them. I always walked around the room and answered many questions as they were writing. I always sought responses from each of them by asking such questions as: How is the writing going today? Is there any way I can help you? which I recorded in my field notes (Appendix D). Each day I put a list of words and phrases on the board

as they asked about them; this prompted others to ask about another problem word or phrase. I praised and encouraged them liberally. All writing was valuable. Students continued building on prior knowledge when expressing their thoughts in writing.

Cunningham Florez (2000) discovered a number of strategies that her beginning adult Hispanic ESL students used. Most strategies were socially-oriented like translating for each other, consulting with each other, and confirming answers. She also identified coping strategies such as humor, and sharing memories or traditions that were present in my classroom. Similarly, it was evident that my students were most eager to help one another amid our laughter and good will.

Since I collected the journals at the end of the class period, I then responded to the individual entries at home in each notebook before the next class. I was careful never to explicitly correct their writing, nor point out errors, but only to recast their errors by correctly writing responses back to them. I tried to restate what they had written at a level that matched their literacy level. In this way, I hoped to determine whether this recasting helped to improve their writing by their noticing of the recasts and making changes in subsequent writing.

When they came to the next class, they were very excited to see what I had written back to them. The first five minutes of class time was devoted to their reading of my responses and then answering my question back to them by writing their responses. These were very short entries in nature and designed to make them comfortable with the format as well as a get acquainted tool. These journal entries were part of the first few minutes of class and not to be confused with the longer entries that were different topics given to them after the guided practice. I did not

make word counts of these early topics as they were designed to promote dialogue, increase their writing fluency, and positively affect their confidence levels with their writing. Here is an example:

Aasha: It is so cold. I need new coat.

Teacher: Oh, you need a new coat? What kind of coat do you want to buy?

Here I added the missing article, 'a', and added a question which required more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer and also gave her practice in answering a question in a true dialogue fashion with shorter answers. I did not use a red pen to highlight errors nor did I underline or in any way point out the error. I used simple recasting which required their noticing of the change in order to correct errors in their future writing. Since this was an early question, she wrote a short answer, "red coat" which was fine for this format. However, as the class went on, I encouraged them to write longer sentences as I had modeled on the white board. Since the weather was getting colder, this was an opportunity for me to show them a down coat and explain its relative desirability, another example of authentic learning. Because this class was made up of entirely Somali women, I enjoyed the ability to teach lessons specific to common errors made by Somali students. I could also design lessons that included topics of interest that were gender-specific. As women, they were always interested in talking about fashion, comparative cultural dress, and families. Using topics of interest to my students added to their enthusiasm about writing. Cooking, fashion, and culturally significant topics produced the longest responses plus the most spirited discussions. I have included a list of topics that were used (Appendix E).

The third step was for me to design some guided practice based on what I observed in their journals. Often it was a verb form or a grammar point; sometimes I had designed a short worksheet to highlight the problem. I was careful not to correct mistakes in their journals; instead I used written recasts only. However, non-highlighted mistakes in their journals provided great sources for mini-lessons in grammar, vocabulary, and other issues that I commonly found in their writing. For example, I used a guided practice lesson on the use of articles, a common error in Somali writing, after noticing how many articles were commonly missing in their writing. I always tried to make the lesson about something from the previous day's writing that I had noted was presenting a common problem for most of the class. I used one-on-one sessions with each student weekly to check progress and to encourage enjoyment of the entire writing process. I made field notes in my journal and on the Field Notes Chart to check understanding (Appendix D). I kept in mind that the goal of the writing was to develop fluency while writing in English and not to insist upon correct English in their first attempts at writing. Instead of marking up their mistakes, I used the time to discuss their questions about writing during this guided practice time.

After the guided practice, I gave them the topic that I wanted them to write about for that day (Appendix E). I encouraged plenty of discussion to check for their understanding of the topic and to heighten their writing interest. Then, as they wrote in their journals, I circulated around the classroom to provide assistance and encouragement as needed. Flexibility was a necessary part of every class as I was trying something new each day based on what had happened the previous day. If I

had more class sessions, I would have welcomed the students choosing to write about their own topics, but our time constraints did not allow this.

I also observed the importance of my modeling some possible journal entry examples on the white board, but only the words they needed to help to get them started. This seemed to allow them to proceed with their writing more quickly. When they realized that there was no limit to what they could ask me, the questions flowed easily. By keeping a list of words and phrases that they were asking about on the white board, all writers were encouraged to write more. However, I was careful not to make any corrections in their journals neither during the writing time nor at home. They often asked me to read their entries before they left class, and my enthusiasm, I believe, added to their feeling successful.

I took the journals home with me each night so that they were always either in my possession or in the classroom with the students. Then I could record word counts and make observations from this data. From the previous day's journaling, I pulled what I would use for guided practice in the next session as I found patterns in their writing.

I also observed how they approached writing in these first weeks carefully. Were they at all apprehensive? Were they eager to begin writing? Which writing topics generated the most interest with larger word counts? Were they excited to receive their journals each week and read my comments, and did this excitement grow as the weeks progressed? Were students expressing increased confidence in their writing abilities; was this reflected in their W/P? On the basis of observation, plus their answers on the introductory and the mid-class questionnaire, I determined

how the increasing confidence in their writing paralleled the progress of their writing fluency. On the mid-term evaluation, they stated their thoughts and experiences when using dialogue journals. I made adjustments in my teaching based on their responses and my own observations. The Final Questionnaire indicated satisfactory responses on students' self-perceptions on their writing abilities.

### Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the research paradigm of classroom action research followed by who the participants were and where this study took place. Then I explained several data collection techniques, including questionnaires, observation, and the journals. I also explained the three-step process of implementation of dialogue journals including modeling, establishing guidelines, and guided practice. I concluded with a discussion of how I determined students' confidence in writing and how that connects to writing fluency when dialogue journaling. In Chapter Four, I will record my observations from the study, show documentation from the dialogue journals, and reflect upon and analyze the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This study, designed to determine whether word counts improved over the course of sixteen weeks for students using dialogue journals, took place in a suburban school in the Upper Midwest in a beginning level ESL class of seven Somali women. The classroom action research study also looked at the question of whether written recasts caused students to notice their errors and then make improvements in subsequent writing. Finally, students' confidence levels about their writing abilities were examined; I wondered whether the students' confidence about their writing abilities would increase as a result of their dialogue journaling. Data was collected in this classroom action research project by means of questionnaires, interviews, observations and dialogue journaling.

### Student Word Counts

The following graphs show the results of individual student's word counts from their dialogue journals. The word counts are noted in the lines towards the top of the graph with diamond shapes for each topic, as recorded from the class sessions. Since this was a voluntary program, attendance was sometimes a problem when trying to have continuity from lesson to lesson. These absences are noted by the larger squares at the bottom of each graph. There is pertinent biographical information with results on which topics produced the highest and lowest word counts after each graph. Information from two questionnaires (Appendices A; C) is also included which was collected from each student during the first class. After the graphs, in the following

three sections, I will discuss the results of the three research questions: the question of whether the word count increased in the journals, the question of whether the recasting was noticed and they made subsequent written improvements, and the question of whether the dialogue journals contributed to increased confidence levels.

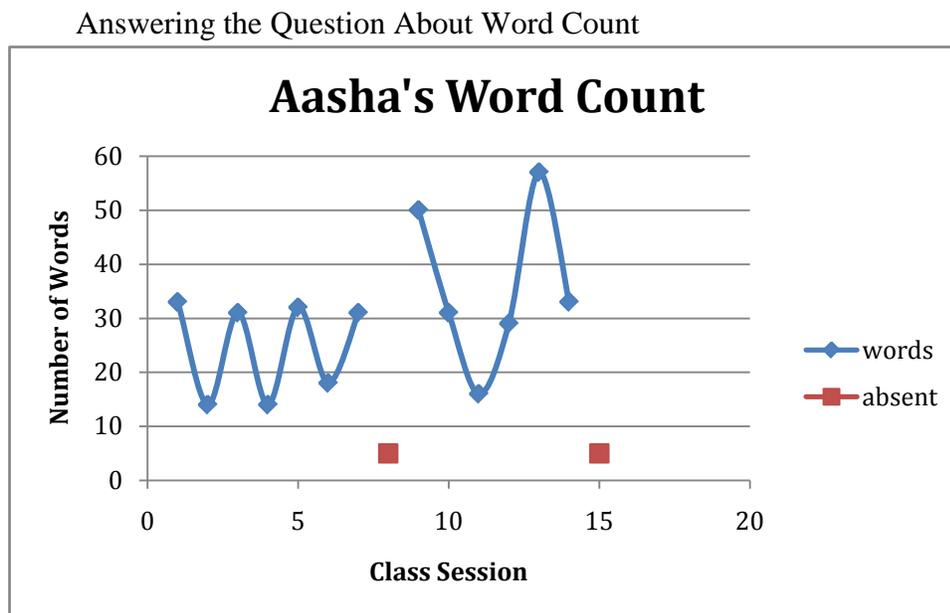


Figure 4.1. Aasha's Word Count

Aasha's word count graph is interesting in its up and down pattern. She journaled 57 words, her highest word count, when writing in session 13 about the picture of the young Somali girl. Her next highest word count of 50 words occurred when writing about a magazine picture of a model in session 9. Her lowest word count was 14 when journaling about what her favorite activity was in session 4. As a mother of five children plus working a night job as a janitor followed by entire mornings in English class, there were some days when she seemed very tired. She had lived in the United States for seven years but only studied in Somalia for three years. After taking only two English classes, she said that English speakers "understand most of what I say." As to her writing, she said, "I can write a very little in English." By the end of the class, she said, "I feel more confident (stronger) about writing in my journal." With the best attendance in the class, she seemed the most eager to improve her writing. She only had two absences out of the sixteen class sessions.

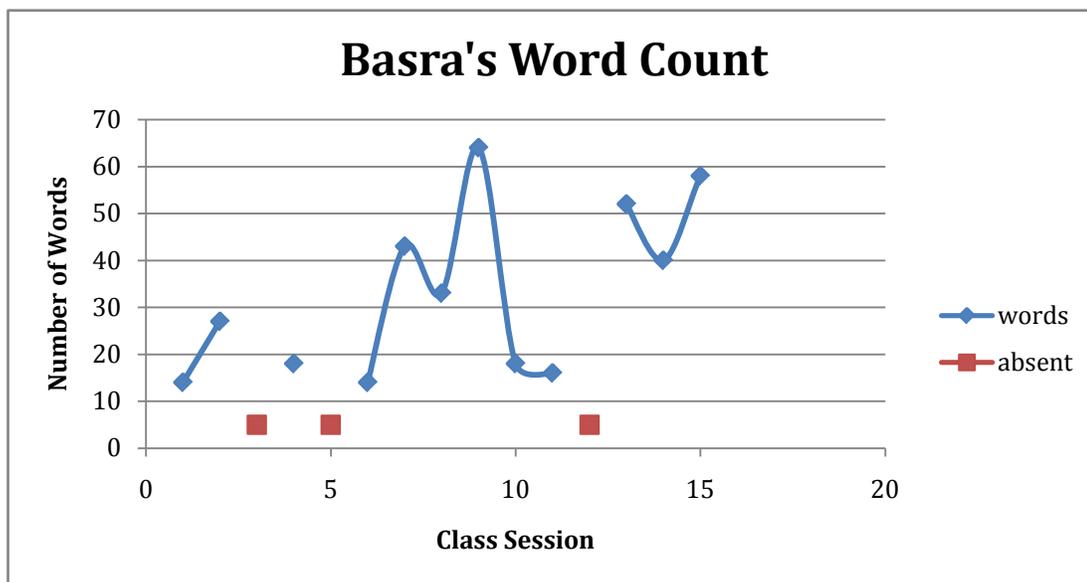


Figure 4.2. Basra's Word Count

Basra had only lived in the United States for six months and had only taken two English classes here. She had five years of schooling in Somalia where she learned to read and write her native language. As the youngest in the class, she did not have a job yet. She noted that “English speakers understand most of what I say” when filling out the introductory questionnaire. She characterized her writing skills as “I can write a very little in English,” but by the end of the classes, she said, “I can write what I want to say in English with Marlese’s help.” Her highest word count of 64 occurred while journaling about a model’s clothing; she also imaginatively wrote a story about the model. Her next highest word count of 58 words was recorded from her thank you note to me. Her lowest word count of 14 occurred the first week when writing about her family. Basra enjoyed writing very much when the topic appealed to her, and she always came to class with an eager attitude. She was absent only three of the 15 sessions.

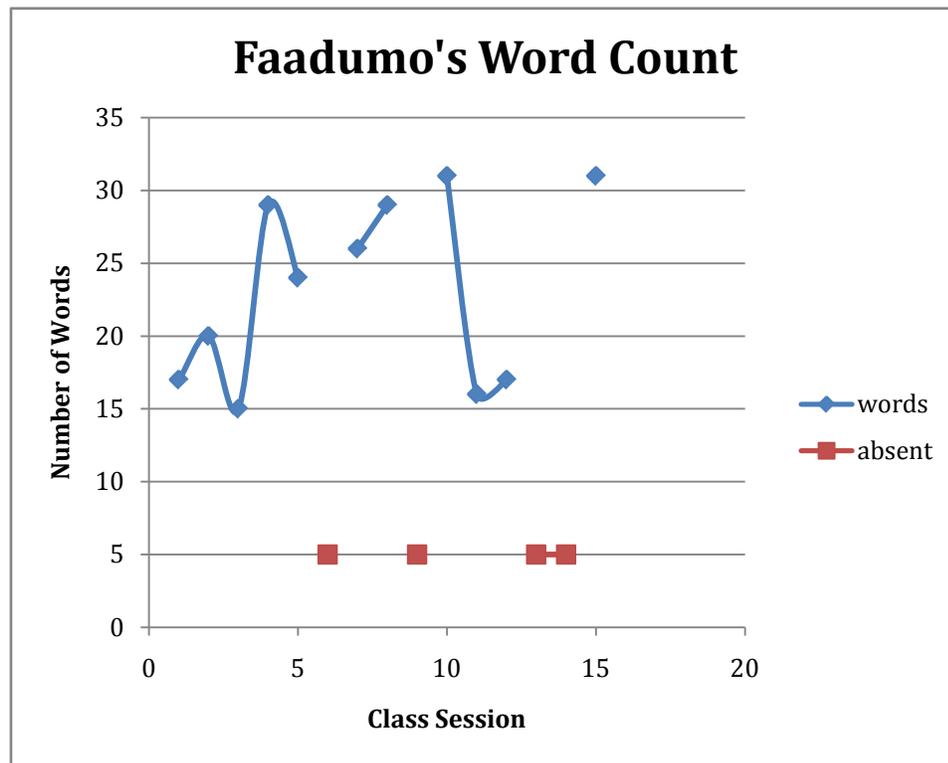


Figure 4.3. Faadumo's Word Count

Faadumo had five years of education in Somalia and Ethiopia plus two English classes in America. She said, "I can write a very little in English" in the first questionnaire given at the beginning of the class. At the end of the class she reported, "I can write what I want to say in English with Marlese's help." Faadumo, absent four of the sixteen sessions, had several children and worked in a daycare. Her highest word counts were 32 words when she wrote her thank you note to me in session 15, and 31 words when she wrote about the popcorn snack in class 10. Her lowest was a 15-word count when writing about where she shops in session 3.

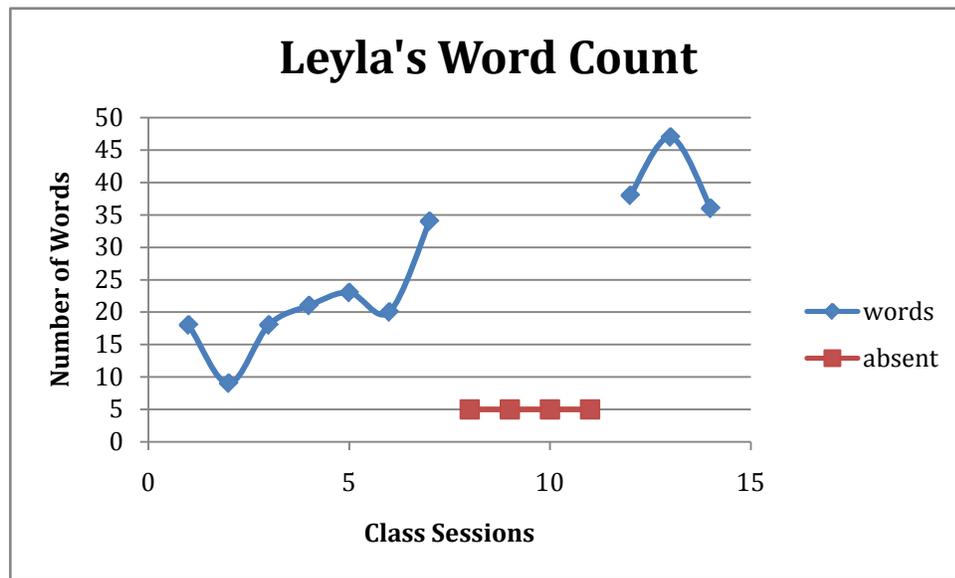


Figure 4.4. Leyla's Word Count

Leyla went to school in Somalia for seven years, and she had taken two English classes in the United States. Her word count numbers showed a general trend towards improvement. In the first questionnaire, Leyla reported that English speakers understood “most of what I say, but that “I can write a very little in English. Leyla was eager to get started with the dialogue journals. She worked as a home health care aide and had several children. Her four absences in a row during an illness did not seem to inhibit the upward momentum of her writing word counts. Leyla's highest word count of 47 words was attained after viewing a picture of a young Somali girl in session 13. Her next highest word count of 37 words occurred when writing about a picture of a Somali boy and his camel in session 14. Her lowest word count of nine words was written when describing objects seen in a tray during session 2.

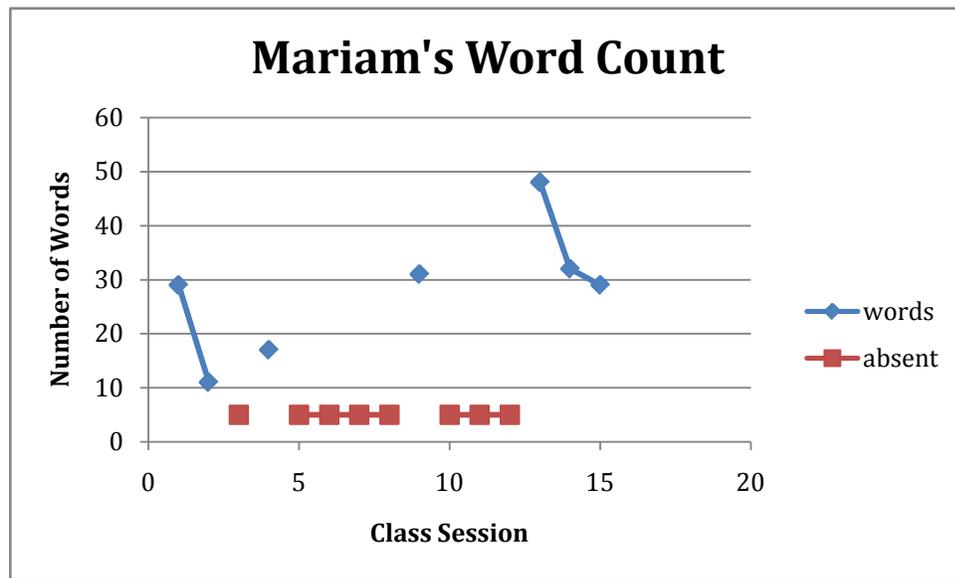


Figure 4.5. Mariam's Word Count

Mariam's graph looks very unusual due to all of her absences. She was ill for over half of the class sessions, but in general, one can see the progression of her journaling as peaking at 48 words during session 13 when writing about the young Somali girl picture. Her next highest word count of 32 occurred when writing about a picture of a Somali boy and his camel in session 14. Her lowest word count was during session 2 when writing about items viewed in a tray. Mariam had many children whose needs sometimes kept her from class. She learned to read and write in Somalia where she attended school for four years. She noted in her beginning questionnaire that English speakers "understand most of what I say," but that she could "write a very little in English." By the end of the classes she said, "I can write in my journal about a lot of things." She worked in a nursing home in the evenings.

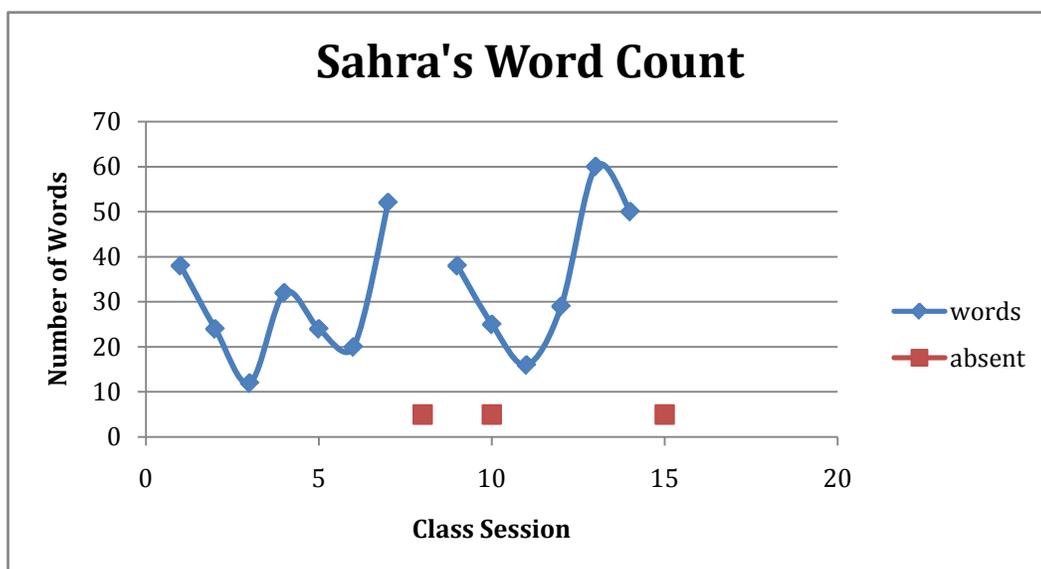


Figure 4.6. Sahra's Word Count

Sahra learned to read and write in Somalia by attending school for four years before coming to the United States ten years ago. She reported in the first questionnaire given at the beginning of the class sessions that although “English speakers understand most of what I say,” that she could “write very little in English.” She expressed great enthusiasm in learning how to write better in English. Sahra worked evenings as a janitor, and she had several young children. Her highest word counts were written after viewing a picture of a young Somali girl in session 13, and she recorded a 52-word count in session 7 when writing about what she observed in the classroom. Her lowest word count occurred when she wrote about where she shops in session 3. In the end-of-class questionnaire, Sahra said, “I can write in my journal about a lot of things.” She was absent three of the 15 class sessions.

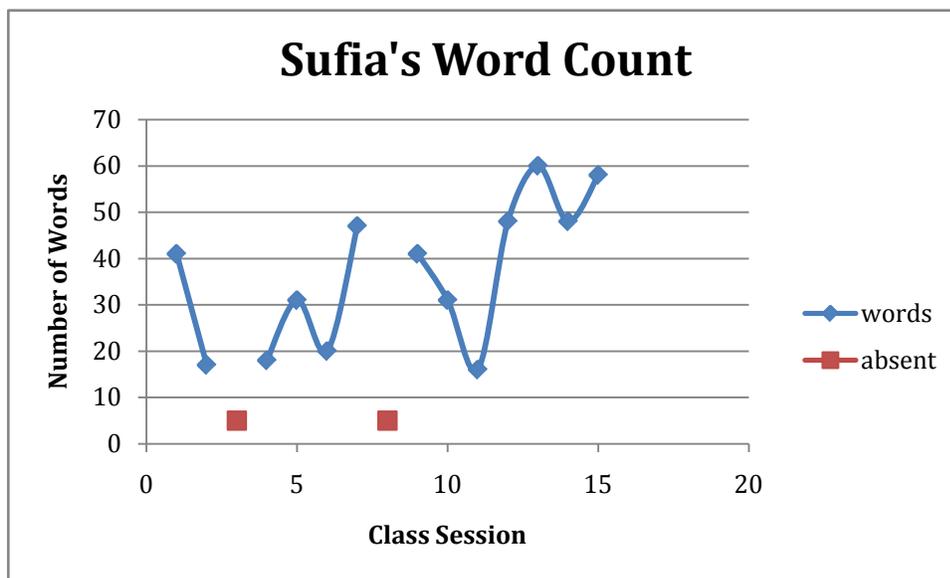


Figure 4.7. Sufia's Word Count

According to the introductory questionnaire, Sufia had lived in the United States for five years. She learned to read and write in Somalia during the four years of her education there. She indicated that “English speakers understand most of what I say” in her introductory questionnaire. As to her writing skills, she said that she could write “a very little in English,” but by the end of the classes, her questionnaire said, “I feel more confident (stronger) about writing in my journal.” She did not have a job. Her youth and enthusiasm seemed to contribute to her tendency to write a lot in her journal with her highest word count in her journal being 60 words when writing about a picture of a young Somali girl in session 13. Her next highest word count was 59 words when writing her thank you note to me. Her lowest word count occurred during session 11 when she wrote about American Thanksgiving foods. She was absent only two of the 15 class sessions.

The data show that although there was a general pattern of increased word counts as the class sessions went on, the number of words still varied greatly from class

to class. Holmes and Moulton's study (1997) supports this result in its finding that writing regularly helps to increase fluency because dialogue journaling mirrors the act of conversation. The data also show a noteworthy connection between what the topics were and how that affected the number of words written in their journals. There seemed to be certain topics that produced a pattern of larger word counts; there were also certain topics that produced a pattern of smaller word counts. The larger word count topics involved culturally relevant sources to the Somalian adult women. Consequently, Hadaway and Young's (2002) suggestion to use "a familiar context" to offer writers an opportunity to write about known topics from their own cultural background seems especially valid.

#### Answering the Question about Recasting

The second question that I sought to answer in this study was: Did my written recasting without enhancements cause the students to notice their errors and then to make written improvements in their subsequent writing? I had observed their journal writing in the first of two parts of each class session. In the first part, the students and I had a running two-way dialogue in the journals, topics determined by whatever topic was on their minds. The first thing the students did when coming into class was to quickly find their journals to read what I had written to them prior to class. They always seemed eager to read this and then to respond to my follow-up questions. I was careful to word my questions/responses to what they had written in such a manner to elicit longer answers; in other words, I tried to avoid yes/no questions. Here is an example taken from one of the journals after a short lesson on what a favorite activity might be:

Student: my favorite activity is takin car of my children because I paly my children. I want outside sometimes paly prok. I am a good mam.

Teacher: I am pleased that your favorite activity is taking care of your children and playing with your children outside and at the park. Do you have a park near your house? What is the name of the park?

Student: yes, it is near my house. I don't know. Thank you wrote for me.

In this exchange, I hoped to see that she would repeat 'taking care' or 'play at the park,' but that didn't happen. Here there was no evidence of noticing my recast.

These shorter exchanges were valuable opportunities that I had to encourage my low-level students in their writing. I made sure that I praised them in some way in the writing as well as orally each day. Often I would simply restate some of their writing with the hope that their journals would reflect the language principles that I had taught during guided practice. For example, I was often pointing out the importance of 'a, an, the' before most nouns in English which is a common error in Somali writing. Here is another example of entries in one of the journals:

Student: I am wearing red dress and glasses.

Teacher: Lots of good writing, Aasha! You were wearing a red dress and brown shoes too.

Student: Thank you my teacher you say good writing Aasha.

In her later writing, I noticed more use of 'a, an, the' but not always consistently being used correctly. Again there was no evidence in this journal entry neither of noticing my recast nor of making improvements in her response. This is in direct contrast to Long

and Robinson's (1998) finding that recasts are effective in showing second language learners their errors. In this case, the recast went unnoticed.

The journal entries were excellent sources for future guided practice lessons. Here is an example of a journal exchange, which followed a discussion about a picture of a beautiful, young Somali girl. It contains pertinent information to be mined for future English lessons:

Student: Her name is Maryam. She is 12 years old. She has a beautiful family. There are three brothers and four sisters. She eats rice and goat's milk. She likes angeela. She is smiling.

Teacher: Very nice writing, Basra! What is angeela?

Student: Thank you so much teacher the angeela is favorite Somalia. All Somalia we eating angeela for breakfast every morning

From this entry, I noted the present progressive verb problem and used that idea for the guided practice emphasis during the next session. And finally, this excerpt:

Teacher: Will you get married in December?

Student: I am happy to be your student. I happy with family always. I will get married January.

Teacher: What does your wedding dress look like?

Student: Hi teacher thank you for ask that. The wedding dress is look like white long.

Although we had a class session on the English practice of adjective-noun order, this student continued to write in the order that reflected the usual order for Somali speakers, that being the noun-adjective order. Furthermore, there was no evidence of

noticing the recast. Loew's 2001 study suggested that the teacher needs to design activities to promote learner's noticing of the targeted L2 forms, and that this desired higher level of awareness should ultimately lead to more learning. However, despite my guided instruction on the correct adjective-noun order, this student continued her incorrect pattern of reversing the word order.

Both of these journal sections were helpful for me to reflect upon and to see where the guided instruction needed to focus. It provided a way to get to know students better, allow them to lose some writing anxiety, and to be able to relax and learn. Here is another example of the journaling with no noticing or change after the recast:

Student: My chile a laves with me.

Teacher: Your children all live with you. Where do you live?

Student: I laves in apartment.

Here the student noticed the drop of 'a' for 'all' before 'lives' but still used 'laves' instead of 'lives' as modeled in the recast. Again there was no evidence of noticing my recast, which would have led to her making improvements in her response.

Here is another example of no change after the recast.

Student: She going to school red books. She like a school

Teacher: Yes, she is going to school to read books. She likes school. Do you like to go to school?

Student: yes I like a school because I learn English I like to red.

Again there was no change although I was hoping to see a change in her response due to my recasting. However, she used the same language when responding to my question, showing no noticing nor change after the recast. In fact, out of over 50 student entries, I

only observed one instance of where the recasts made a difference; this change is shown in the following journaling section about apples. A class discussion about apples plus our tasting of several types of apples led to this journal entry:

Student: My favorite fruit is apple

Teacher: I am glad that you like the Honeycrisp apples. Did you go to the store to buy some more apples?

Student: Yes I do like those apples. I buy always.

Teacher: I'm glad that you always buy those apples.

Student: yes I do.

This is an example of a student who did notice the change in 'apple' and then making the adjustment in her subsequent writing to the plural 'apples'. Just like the students in Peyton's 1990b study on emerging patterns of improved morphological systems with recasts, this student did notice the recast, and then made the correct morphological change.

However, I only found this one instance of a student noticing a recast and making subsequent changes in her writing. Consequently, in general my written recasts did not cause students to notice their errors and then make written improvements in subsequent writing. Lyster (1998) would concur with his finding that recasts are ambiguous and may confirm ill-formed meaning rather than showing correct feedback on form.

#### Answering the Question about Students' Confidence

The third research question was: Will students' confidence levels about their writing abilities increase as a result of the dialogue journaling? To acquire the answer, I

used an introductory questionnaire (Appendix A), a mid-class questionnaire (Appendix B), interviews and observations (Appendix D), and a final questionnaire (Appendix C).

In the introductory questionnaire, all seven students indicated, “I can write very little in English” from these questions:

1. I am a very good writer.
2. I can write what I want to say in English
3. I can write very little in English.
4. I cannot write in English.

During the eighth class session, I presented the students with a mid-class questionnaire where I asked them to circle one of these choices:

1. I can write what I want to say in English.
2. I can write very little in English.
3. I am writing better since I have been using a dialogue journal.
4. I can not write in English.

All seven adult Somali students chose answer #3 which indicated a pattern of movement upward in their confidence levels about their writing. They had moved from “I can write very little in English” to “I am writing better since I have been using a dialogue journal.”

On this same mid-class questionnaire I also presented them with a Likert scale to measure “My confidence in how I write.” Through my limited acting ability and their shared language, I finally became certain that they understood the term ‘confident’ plus how to fill out a Likert scale. There were three gradations labeled: ‘very good

writer', 'just average', and 'cannot write'. They all put their marks somewhere between choices 2 and 3, thus indicating that their confidence levels were increasing.

Another indication of their increasing confidence levels was the speed at which they began their writing. After a short, guided practice session on an aspect of English, which I had lifted from their writings, I would assign the journal topic for the day. At first, they were hesitant to begin and would talk to each other in their native language to try to help each other. As the weeks went on, they directed a few questions to me but generally, very quickly and eagerly began writing as soon as they knew and understood the topic. My weekly observations showed a decline in the length of time that it took them to begin writing. I saw this increased speed in beginning to write as a marker of both how confident they were feeling about the writing and also how comfortable they were with the routine and expectations.

During session 10, I walked around the room and asked them what they liked about writing. Answers were "learning English," "seeing what you write me," "learning words," and "laughing together." I often used the casual interview questions from Appendix D. Hadaway and Young (2002) noticed the same behavior when observing "how eagerly students anticipate writing when they know there will be a personal response to their composing efforts".

The last indicator of their increasing confidence levels was the final questionnaire in a yes/no, circle one format (Appendix C). We went through each question as a class so that I could help with their understanding. Since by this time we were very social and comfortable with each other, I asked that the students spread out throughout the room so they would be doing their own work and not working together.

Of the seven students, they chose answers that seem to indicate a positive progression along the confidence scale. Here are the results:

Question: I can write in my journal about a lot of things.

Answers: 5 yes; 2 no

Question: I feel good about writing in my journal.

Answers: 7 yes

Question: I feel more confident (stronger) about writing in my journal.

Answers: 7 yes

Question: Marlese has helped me to learn about writing.

Answers: 7 yes

Question: I like to read what Marlese writes in my journal.

Answers: 7 yes

Question: I can write what I want to say in English with Marlese's help.

Answers: 7 yes

Question: Today I am a better writer than I was when we started journaling.

Answers: 7 yes

Question: Today I am a better student.

Answers: 6 yes; 1 no

When students wrote their thank you notes to me at the last class, they said some things that I thought also pointed to their increased confidence such as “I am help English;” “Marlese help me a lot of thinking. She teach me English;” “I like your teacher Marlese because help is writing book;” “You are example everything you teach;” and “I am not forget for every because so a lot of things you learn.” I certainly agree with Jones (1996a) who described the strong ties made with students through journaling as “one of the greatest rewards of ESL teaching.”

Although the purpose of this study was not to examine the quality of writing, I did notice that the quality of their sentences and their word choices were improving. There was evidence of their absorbing what I had taught them in the guided practice times as reflected in their journal entries. One example is that I saw some complete sentences as time went on instead of the fragmented, incomplete sentences of earlier entries. This benefit is supported by a study by Peyton and Reed (1990) who found that dialogue journals may provide a bridge to other types of writing. Kreeft (1984) also noted a link to learning skills necessary for essay writing as a result of the use of dialogue journals.

### Summary

Through the use of questionnaires, interviews, and observation, I conducted a classroom action research study to answer the questions of whether word counts improved over the course of sixteen weeks for students using dialogue journals. Also included was a look at whether written recasts caused students to notice their errors and then make written improvements later. Finally, I looked at whether students’

confidence levels about their writing abilities would increase as a result of their dialogue journals.

The data showed a general trend of increasing word counts in the students' dialogue journals as the class sessions continued; some interesting data involving certain topics and word counts seemed to be emerging. The data strongly indicated that low-level literacy students in this study did not notice recasts when they were unmarked or not highlighted. The data also suggested that students' confidence in their writing skills made a marked increase because of their use of dialogue journals.

In this chapter, I presented the results of my data collection in a classroom action research project designed to examine whether fluency improved, recasts made a difference, and confidence levels increased as a result of low-level students who used dialogue journals. In Chapter Five, I will discuss my major findings, limitations and implications of the research, suggestions for further research, and end on a personal note.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In this classroom action research project, I attempted to answer the questions: Does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency of adult low-literacy Somali students? Would my written recasts cause them to notice errors and make written improvements? Would students' confidence levels about their abilities as writers increase as a result of their journaling? In this chapter, I will address my major findings of the three study questions. Then I will discuss an unexpected finding about topics, the limitations of the classroom action research study, implications for other teachers, suggestions for research, and finally, end on a personal note.

### Findings: Written Fluency, Word Counts, and Topics

Does the use of dialogue journals affect the writing fluency or word count of adult low-literacy Somali students? In this study, the answer is 'yes.' The use of dialogue journals did positively affect their writing fluency. Despite the up-and-down fluctuation of word counts, there was a general upward trend for each student in the numbers of words per entry as the weeks progressed. The students' word counts generally showed a pattern of increase over the course of the sixteen sessions. However, an unexpected finding was the distinct differences in word counts depending on the topic. Certain topics consistently produced larger word counts while other topics consistently produced lower word counts. As I began seeing results of word counts

fluctuating in an irregular pattern, I began wondering: what might it be about the topics that make some selections produce larger versus smaller word counts? Did my preparation and classroom discussions make any difference? What was it about certain topics that made students' writing explode? What about cultural considerations and community building? Could any conclusions be reached based on these developments?

I thought the answer lay in first examining the largest word count topics. The outstanding topic in producing the highest word count was in session #13. I had gone to the library and found a book where the cover depicted a beautiful, young Somali girl. Students' faces lit up when I first showed this picture to them; an added benefit was that she looked a lot like one of the students in the class. An animated discussion began as I encouraged them to orally tell her story. They chose a name for her - Maryan. They discussed how old she was, where she lived, what her family composition was, what she liked to eat, and where she was going. As they offered up each part of her story, I furiously wrote on the white board. Their enthusiasm for this topic, "Write about Maryan" was reflected in the highest average word count of 55 words in their dialogue journals.

The second highest word count occurred in session # 9 when I brought in pictures of models in winter garb that I had found in a major department store advertising flyer. I chose these pictures because they included a tall, beautiful Somali woman featured predominantly as one of the models. Our prewriting discussion consisted of naming the models, discussions about the types of clothing worn, the advantages of down coats over wool coats, and where the models were standing. When

they wrote about “What is she wearing; what is she doing?” they produced an average of 45 words per entry in their journals, providing the second highest word count recorded.

Several similarities in these two classes are noteworthy. First, both involved realia or real objects depicting Somali life. Through the use of these pictures of life in Somalia or using Somali models in American settings, students chose to apply their cultural experiences to their journaling entries with enthusiasm. Both situations allowed them to draw from their prior knowledge. Secondly, we created stories in our discussions during both sessions of prewriting. Since oral storytelling is a prominent aspect of the Somali culture (Johnson, 2006), these imaginative and conversational activities during prewriting seemed to contribute to their enthusiasm for creating narratives. In summary, their writing on two topics using Somali pictures of interest, plus allowing them to use imaginative oral storytelling during prewriting, produced the largest word counts in their dialogue journal entries.

Other uses of realia that seemed to generate interest for writing by producing higher writing word counts involved making a popcorn snack and sampling different varieties of apples. Since hospitality is an important value for the Somali culture (Johnson, 2006), our sharing of food brought warmth and good will to the class. This community building seemed to produce good writing as well.

Next, I decided to examine the two topics that generated the lowest word counts. The lowest average word count of 17 words occurred in session #2 when I brought in a series of items in a metal tray, and asked, “What do you see in Marlese’s tray?” The

items were a pencil, a pen, a cup, a toy bird, a paper clip, and an orange. My intent was to point out article usage, a common Somali language problem, and review some vocabulary words. I was surprised at the low word count outcome as, again, I was using realia. However, did this seem more like a vocabulary workbook exercise to them? Apparently, the choice of realia had been quite important in producing large word counts at other times. They certainly responded differently in later sessions when Somali pictures were used. I wondered what could account for this low word count response.

The next lowest word count recorded in their dialogue journals was an average of 24 words in session #3 when writing on the topic, “Where do you shop? Why do you like that store?” When prewriting, we had made a list on the white board of stores where they shopped for clothing and reasons why they did so. However, when it came to writing about these habits, again the word count was quite low. I wondered what accounted for the diversity in word count numbers.

I found myself comparing the two categories of highest and lowest word count topics to try to reach some conclusions. I had used realia in the #2 tray topic, yet it produced weak results. From this, I could conclude that the use of any realia was not the key. I thought about Somalis’ love for oral poetry recitation and for creative storytelling. This tray topic did not require any imagination nor any storytelling components. Both of the lowest word count topics involved a simple reporting of what they saw in the tray or reporting on where they typically shopped. This reporting

required neither creativity nor any storytelling from a culture that so highly values oral artistry (Johnson, 2006).

Another observation of interest lay in the recognition that the two highest word counts occurred in later class sessions when the students knew me better. Conversely, the two lowest word counts occurred in very early class sessions when we did not know each other as well. This is reinforced by Jones' idea of community building, a component that Jones values highly as it often emerges from the use of dialogue journals (1996a). By the end of all the class sessions, we had opportunity to write back and forth many times. There were two entries for each class session that I was responding to, both the running dialogue about whatever was going on with them and the selected topic dialogue. Consequently, each student had over 16 opportunities to dialogue with me before coming to class session #9. Dialogue journaling enabled us to get to know each other in ways that may not have been possible in other contexts. Did the sense of knowing me better contribute to their increasing word counts as the classes progressed?

After thinking about the above considerations, I came to several conclusions about why certain topics were so appealing to my Somali students. First, realia is important but not just any realia. The key lies in using pictures of cultural significance that activate students' prior knowledge. In my study, the pictures of Somali children and adults generated the most word counts. It seems clear that we need to value and make visible students' personal experiences as a strategy to encourage greater fluency in their writing (Souryasaak & Lee, 2007).

Secondly, writing topics that resemble a simple reporting on subjects produced very low word counts in my study. It is possible that the tray topic and the shopping topic may have seemed like extended, familiar workbook exercises that were tedious to my adult students. If I had more time, an interesting twist would have been to use Somali items in the tray. My best guess is that this, too, would have produced astounding results based on their obvious enthusiasm for native reminders. When I had guided them to class discussions on Muslim holidays or common Somali foods, lively discussions always followed. Making the connection between learning in the classroom with the students' lives outside of the classroom walls produces greater fluency (Larotta, 2008).

Thirdly, building relationships with students produces great benefits in increasing word counts. Their comfortability with me as their teacher created a safe place for them to write more as the weeks progressed. In addition, as they came to know me better and to see my appreciation for their culture, students' enthusiasm increased as they used knowledge from their prior experiences as a useful resource for developing skills in their new language and culture (Kim, 2005).

Community building seemed to increase word counts in our classroom of dialogue journalers. I grew to learn so much about the lives of my students through their writing and our discussions as their entries increased in length. This built my knowledge of the Somali culture while allowing me to make unique personal connections. This aligns with Kim's finding that teachers benefit by being able to learn about new cultures when students share freely in their journals (2005). Also, my

students became my friends. At our last session, one student gave me her phone number with the directive, “Call me!”

ESL students often have limited contact with Americans, especially immigrants and refugees whose boss or landlord may be the only native English speaker with whom they speak regularly. If they enroll in English language classes, often teachers are overwhelmed with the many facets of teaching and learning and cannot connect with each and every student. I found that through the dialogue journaling, our communication was expanded and deepened, which enabled us to develop new understanding and respect for each other. This led to a relaxed classroom atmosphere as we continued to build community. Students called out questions regularly. We enjoyed some hearty laughter as they helped me to understand them, and I tried to get them to understand me. I loved hearing them converse in Somali, and we laughed even more as I tackled Somali phrases. Good writing seemed to follow as they reveled in my liberal encouragement.

The journals became a great teaching resource for me. As we came to know each other better, I could predict which topics were more appealing to them. I made adjustments in topics as I came to understand better what might precipitate larger word counts. The journals prompted insights into the effects of my classroom methods (Peyton & Reed, 1990). As Harmer states, “Learner perceptions may be different from teacher perceptions” (2004). What they revealed in their journals became the source for lessons that I had not always anticipated. Then I could make adjustments or introduce elements to answer their concerns. I believe this flexibility made me a better teacher as,

in writing, I answered their questions, made suggestions, and empathized with them in response to their writing. I believe that these same advantages are applicable to all teachers.

#### Findings: Recasts

Does written recasting in the dialogue journals of these low-level adult Somali students cause them to notice errors and make written improvements in subsequent writing? The answer to whether my written recasts made a difference is a resounding 'no.' Out of the many journaling entries that I measured for this purpose, I found only one evidence of a recast leading to a change in the subsequent writing. This involved making a word into a plural, and it may have just been simple oversight that made the student forget the plural in the first place.

I was somewhat surprised by the findings on recasts. After all, I was combining written recasts with guided instruction on the same problems, which seemed like a good teaching combination. I had hoped that my written recasting in the dialogue journals would promote noticing that might lead to increased written fluency in student writing; that did not happen. In addition, my research on other studies on noticing had produced mixed results. Both written input enhancement, such as underlining errors, and explicit instruction and feedback had provided unconvincing and conflicting results (Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughty, 1995; Schmidt, 1990). Furthermore, Leow's 2001 study of college-level students also indicated no significant benefits of written input enhancement over unenhanced written input. In addition, recasts may be misperceived as confusing and conversational (Lyster, 1998). My findings supported these earlier

studies in that my students did not notice the unenhanced written recasts, despite my explicit instruction.

Another element to this outcome of my students not noticing the recasts may lie in the fact that their literacy level was low. In a study of Somali speakers with limited formal education, researchers found that their ability to recall an oral recast was related to the learner's alphabetic print literacy level (Tarone, 2010). Consequently, my low level learners may have been less able to process my written recasts for similar reasons. Perhaps my low-level Somali students could not note the written recasts because of their low alphabetic print literacy levels.

I found it a personal challenge to try to match my recasts to the same literacy level as my students had. As I kept in mind Krashen's tenets of comprehensible optimal input, relevancy to the learner, and sufficiency to meet the learner's needs, I sometimes struggled to come up with words that would match or challenge students' writing levels (1982). As I became better at doing this, it resulted in an area of personal growth in my teaching skills.

If I had more time for the study, I would have introduced some enhancements such as highlighting or underlining mistakes to see if that would make any difference in their noticing the recasts. However, my concern would be that the enhancements might have hindered the freedom that they did experience without concern for writing 'correctly'. Teachers need to take care not to dampen student enthusiasm with excessive correction (Orem, 2001).

### Findings: Confidence Levels

I observed several things about the students and their increasing confidence levels. First of all, the students' timidity of the first few sessions gave way to more confidence shown as the experience with journaling progressed. I was pleased to see them become friends and seek each other out for support in language or in understanding of the assignment in addition to being classmates. The power of synergy was evident as they learned from each other as well as from me. There was no holding back in their questions nor their immediately seeking help from me or from each other.

Secondly, I observed their confidence in the speed with which they began writing as the weeks progressed; they seemed to understand the expectations as the weeks went on and felt successful in their output. This was reflected in all seven students reporting at the end of the study, "I feel more confident (stronger) about writing in my journal." Jones (1996a) states that the students' change in attitude as they overcome writing fears may inspire confidence from doing something new and doing it well.

Finally, the students saw a progression in their own writing abilities, another reflection of their confidence levels, when, by the end of the study, all seven students said, "Yes, today (in December) I am a better writer than I was in September." Dialogue journal writing promoted better communication with the Somali women while creating a learning environment that enhanced their learning (Kim, 2005).

One of the greatest benefits to me was the opportunity to get to know the students better through their writing where we could ‘chat’ back and forth in the dialogue journals. They hurried into the classroom each session to pick up their journals and read what I had written. It seemed that I had the gift of seven adult Somali women who were longing to make connections with me through their journaling. In fact, all seven students had responded ‘yes’ to this question: “I like to read what Marlese writes in my journal.” I observed increasing confidence levels in their interactions with me when they had ready smiles and ‘hello’s’ for me when they came in the room or in the hallways. They drew pictures for me during the last class and wanted me to come back for visits after the study had ended. Their journals served as a wonderful tool for me to be able to take a closer look into their complex lives and to know them better.

I found great satisfaction in the informal interviews with my students. Their comments were very helpful in guiding me to construct our class sessions in ways that appealed to how they would best learn. For example, here are the responses I received when I asked, “What am I doing as your teacher that helps you to write better?” Their answers included: “when you start out sentence on board”, “when you talk to us first”, and “I like to read what you write to me”. This connects to the Holmes and Moulton (1997) study that found that when students write about the ‘stuff’ of their lives in a nonthreatening format, teachers will enjoy both linguistic growth and smoothed communication between teachers and students.

Students appreciated the modeling effects of my writing on the board and in their journals. As I gave them clear examples of how to begin a journal entry, the writing task became less daunting. Then, the give and take process of communicating in the journals served as non-confrontational feedback. This is different from writing-on-demand from a typical content class. Assigned writing tasks may bring fear of failure and rejection that hinders their linguistic efforts. Conversely, dialogue journals free students to initiate and change topics at will while practicing their writing. With no ‘absolute correct’ way to write, this freedom helps students to be able to grow as writers while instilling confidence in their abilities. The pressure to be correct is reduced by stressing the goal of communication, not just grammatical accuracy (Orem, 2001).

My Somali students shared a pattern of growing confidence in their abilities to compose in English. By the end of the class, all seven students agreed to this: “I can write what I want to say in English with Marlese’s help.” Dialogue journals offered my students a path through their writing hesitation by allowing them to journal about topics that were meaningful to them in a nonthreatening context.

#### Limitations

Consistent attendance poses a problem in a voluntary ESL program. My students had full lives outside the classroom with work and family responsibilities. Several illnesses and doctors’ appointments precluded better attendance as well. However, my students were chosen based on good attendance in their morning ELL class, and it was obvious to me that they were trying to attend class. They always let me know why they had to miss class and seemed to value their time there.

My study was a few sessions shorter than I had intended it to be with the fall holidays and breaks for district professional development days. I found that although the school had allowed one day's absence for the Eid holiday, most students took the whole week off from school. Consequently, I met with my students fewer times than I had originally planned. Several of the other dialogue journal studies had much longer lengths of time for their studies such as 10 months for the Peyton study (1990a) and an entire semester for the Larotta study (2008). More weeks of class sessions would have been ideal for this research application.

Our time constraint was a definite limitation. Since they had been in an English class all morning, they needed a short break in between classes to make phone calls, secure rides, and other business. Then they often had jobs to go to right after class so we usually had only 30-45 minute sessions. With their busy lives, they were often tired. Ideally, they would have been well rested and ready to write for at least an hour; that simply was not feasible. I would have been able to allow the students to use the journals as less of an academic tool and more of a reflection on their lives tool if I had more time. Our time constraints did not allow for a more free-flowing reflective use of the dialogue journals.

The Likert scale of Appendix B was troublesome as I was using it as a way for students to measure their confidence levels. The students had never encountered one before, and it required a lot of time to explain it to them. Consequently, I would not recommend using this assessment tool with very low-level students as it confused them.

Multiple choice or yes/no assessment formats items may promise more success where the Likert scale did not.

A final limitation was the students' desire, at first, for me to correct grammar and other skills in their journal. Because the study was designed to measure possible writing improvements based on noticing the written recasts without enhancements, I did not want to be editing or correcting their journals. I thought all those corrections might also inhibit them from trying to write longer journal entries. By not correcting their errors, I also wanted to convey to the students that I was interested in their writing meaningful content, not that they could write absolutely correctly. Also, I could not explain to them why I was not correcting the journals without affecting the integrity of the recast and noticing portion of the study.

#### Implications for Teachers

These results of this study are useful to all types of teachers, not only ESL teachers. All teachers who are searching for help in teaching writing to low-literacy students, will find a valuable instrument in the dialogue journal for student improvement in writing, plus they will gain the added benefit of getting to know the students better. Dialogue journal writing becomes a meaningful living and learning context of the students as they invite their teachers to join in sharing and learning about their lives (Kim, 2005).

Opportunities to practice authentic language through the interactions between the writer and reader abound in the use of dialogue journals. Pairing students for Internet dialoguing, if students have access to computers, would be an effective tool for

practicing their writing. Individual language and content learning may naturally occur as they write. Students will learn to value other students' writing as they challenge and learn from each other.

In addition, this study's results are relevant to content teachers of all subjects as a useful learning tool. Journals have been found to be effective in content instruction to improve writing skills, get to know the students in a class, and identify areas of misunderstanding from their writing. Study skills may be taught effectively through the use of dialogue journals as well.

Journal topics may give teachers a valuable look into learners' lives and concerns. From the written exchanges, themes may be explored further both in the journals and in classroom discussions. Although teacher sensitivity is necessary to protect ELL's privacy, themes of great interest to students, such as health care and housing issues, allow students to explore the written word as a communicative form. In some cases, students may use their journals as a forum where they may discuss and solve problems.

Informing instruction is another valuable outcome of using dialogue journals. I found several grammatical issues that I could then address in classroom mini-lessons that were based on what I had read in the journals. Student entries provided excellent feedback on the effectiveness of a particular lesson. This information became a valuable tool when planning future lessons with possible differentiated instruction. Care was taken to first ask permission of the students whether I could use their writing examples, and then only to use the examples anonymously as a classroom learning tool.

Targeted grammatical areas to teach later emerged from my students' writing. I envision that if a teacher has a large class and not the time to regularly write back to a lot of students, pairings could be made of an ELL with a native English speaker for journaling and for community building. As students write their own journal entries and then read the ones from their partners, they may assist each other in the reading and writing tasks. This may lead to possible brainstorming for new ideas while correcting vocabulary and spelling. However, there is a bit of warning here. I believe, as does Larotta, that it creates a problem if a teacher would choose to point out the mistakes in every single piece of writing produced by the students (2008). Then the dialogue journal is no longer a safe place for writing in a non-threatening context. Consequently, my suggestion would be that teachers step away from the mainstream vision of what writing and teaching should look like and, instead, embrace the natural, authentic communication of what the dialogue journal offers.

Many students like to write in their journals, and teachers can become partners with them in shared dialogue. It is somewhat like a diary with the teacher writing questions and comments. I found that my Somali women enjoyed the community building as well as the ability to increase their writing fluency. Their writing content, being self-generated, was easily comprehended and elicited a sense of satisfaction as they worked with materials that were personally meaningful.

With higher literacy students, journals may be used to help to process some of life's challenges that were experienced in the refugee camps and beyond. I have used journals in such a setting, and the writing has been revelatory for my understanding of

my students and sometimes cathartic for my students. As they gifted me with the sharing of pieces of their lives, I learned more about them and their histories than I could have learned in any other way.

Some teachers show “an avoidance or oversimplification of the writing process” for ELLs (Hadaway & Young, 2002). Others hesitate when approaching the teaching of writing because they believe that students must first master the oral language or may feel that they do not have the skills to teach writing. The beauty of using dialogue journals is that if one knows how to have an oral conversation, then dialogue journals are most useful as they are simply a written conversation between two individuals. All that this method requires is a willingness to try it, making the time to write back to the students, and adjusting lesson plans according information gleaned from the journals. Dialogue journals, requiring only a notebook and a pen for each student, provide a purposeful writing task for all literacy levels of students while being uncomplicated in their structure. I have found that the benefits of journaling far outweigh the hesitations to use them.

Finally, journal writing helps to develop writing skills; the more they practice writing, the more fluent they will become. As they expand their range of written expression, they will begin to write with greater facility and speed. Just as we encourage our students to read more in order to become better readers, so it is important for students to write more and more to become better writers. Journal writing, as it contributes to student writing improvement, may be compared to how training boosts an athlete’s prowess; both are fortified from practice (Harmer, 2004).

### Suggestions for Further Research

The refugee population, made up of a large proportion of low-level learners, continues to grow throughout the United States and other countries. We teachers are faced with many challenges when seeking ways to address effective literacy instruction for low-proficiency students. First of all, this classroom action research focused only on a writing strategy - the dialogue journal; there is much to be discovered in the other literacy skills of speaking, reading, and listening when studying the low-level learner that may be addressed in further research.

Secondly, my students all possessed limited literacy. Studies with groups of learners with little or no alphabetic literacy, a growing population in the United States, is a largely undiscovered area of research. Tarone (2010) refers to low-literate learners as “an under-studied population.” Historically, the emphasis in the research has been with intermediate to higher-level proficiency students, often with the university population. I found it difficult to find much research on low-level learners, particularly in writing. Because each year more and more ELLs with limited education or with interrupted education are coming to the United States from refugee camps, more research is needed on how to best teach writing to the low-literacy level students.

Next, although my study involved only Somali students, the norm for most classrooms would be in a multi-cultural context. Studying dialogue journaling in a multi-cultural classroom would also present some valuable information to inform pedagogy, especially in the low-level context.

Additionally, there is a need for studies on recasting with low-level students. It is yet to be determined what types of written recasting are most beneficial to the low-literacy student. How does the literacy level of the student become a significant factor in their ability to correctly process written recasts? Both implicit and explicit recasts could be studied with students to measure their efficacy. Also, it is still unclear what the role of noticing might be in low-level learners.

Finally, further examination of the selection of certain topics as they relate to specific cultural interests would be a beneficial study to inform teachers. What patterns might be found in topic selections that affect written fluency? Just as the relevancy of imagination and storytelling appeal to Somalis, other cultures may respond as favorably to other facets in pre-writing presentations as well. A research study designed to examine what topics prompt writing fluency within different culture groups of students would be interesting to note as well.

#### Personal Insights

This study proved what I hoped it would in that it supported the efficacy of dialogue journaling for purposes of fluency and student confidence in low-level ELLs. I was greatly rewarded by learning more about the Somali culture through our journaling study. However, it yielded some more intangible results in the area of my personal goals that I did not expect.

One of my teaching goals has been to be instrumental in student growth and improvement. Another goal was to know my students and to make a difference in their lives. However, I didn't expect to see a combination of these goals as a result of this

research study. Through the use of dialogue journals, I watched student growth as their writing improved while I enjoyed building relationships with my Somali students.

From my own use of dialogue journals with higher-literacy level students in other English classrooms, I knew how valuable they could be. However, I was delighted to find how useful they were in lower-level classes as well. By providing authentic writing opportunities for students, regardless of their proficiencies, it follows that all students can be writers. Although some teachers may hesitate to use journals with lower-level students or at least until students have mastered spoken language, I found real value in the use of dialogue journals with beginning English language writers as well.

The communication channel of dialogue journals allowed us to come to know each other in ways that are particular to this medium. With teaching time constraints and new student reticence, the journals provided a unique, quick way to communicate openly and regularly. This expanded writing between the students and me enabled us to view each other with new understanding and respect. Consequently, my students became more than students; they became my friends. The endearing thank you notes that I received on my last day will forever serve as reminders of the beauty of knowing and teaching my Somali friends about dialogue journaling.

I found myself eagerly looking forward to each class, as the enthusiasm of the students was infectious. It was rewarding to observe body language and students' faces as they read what I had written to them. I could see them laughing, looking up at me with knowing smiles, and asking clarifying questions upon reading my entries.

In our short time together, I learned about their educational concerns, religious expression, family roles, their food, their dress, and even an upcoming wedding. I developed a greater empathy for their issues when trying to fit into our American patterns of life. They showed me a combination of an eagerness for improving their literacy abilities with an eagerness for connection. The journals became a meaningful living and learning context for all of us as students generously invited me into their life experiences and worlds through their writing and their friendship. They learned to share their own unique histories and to communicate that history to me.

A well-known Somali proverb is this:

*Wadiiqada yari waddada weyn bay kugu riddaa.*

A small path will take you to a big road.

My hope is that second language students will continue to find great value in using the ‘small path’ of dialogue journaling as their teachers guide them to the ‘big road’ of literacy learning within the context of this effective, interactive, and confidence-building reading and writing experience - the dialogue journal.

APPENDIX A  
Information About You

My name is\_\_\_\_\_.

How many years have you lived in the United States?\_\_\_\_\_

How old were you when you moved to the United States?\_\_\_\_\_

How many years did you go to school in your home country?\_\_\_\_\_

Do you read your home language? Yes No

Do you write in your home language? Yes No

Did you go to school in your home country? Yes No

Do you read English? Yes No

How many English classes have you taken in the United States?\_\_\_\_\_

What is your job?\_\_\_\_\_

How old are you?\_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any children? Yes No How many?\_\_\_\_\_ages?\_\_\_\_\_

Tell me about speaking English.

1. I speak English very well.
2. English speakers understand most of what I say.
3. I can only say a few words in English.
4. I can not speak English at all.

Tell me about writing in English.

1. I am a very good writer.
2. I can write what I want to say in English.
3. I can write very little in English.
4. I can not write in English.

Write a few words about what you want to learn from Marlese.....

APPENDIX B

Mid-Study Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Circle one.

1. I am a very good writer.
2. I can write what I want to say in English.
3. I can write very little in English.
4. I can not write in English.

My confidence in how I write

| \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_

very good writer

just average

cannot write well

---

Mid-Study Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Circle one.

1. I am a very good writer.
2. I can write what I want to say in English.
3. I can write very little in English.
4. I can not write in English.

My confidence in how I write

| \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_

very good writer

just average

cannot write well

APPENDIX C

Final Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle one.

Yes

No I can write in my journal about a lot of things.

Yes

No I feel good about writing in my journal.

Yes

No I feel more confident (stronger) about writing in my journal.

Yes

No Marlese has helped me to learn about writing.

Yes

No I like to read what Marlese writes in my journal.

Yes

No I can write what I want to say in English with Marlese's help.

Yes

No Today (in December) I am a better writer than I was in September.

Yes

No Today I am a better student.

APPENDIX D

Field Notes Chart

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Session # \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Students Present</b>	
<b>Writing Topic</b>	
<p><b>Observations</b>  How quickly did writing begin?  What questions were asked?  Any evidence of recasts/self-correction?</p> <p><b>Questions Asked:</b>  How can I help you?  How is the writing going?  Any problems?  Please notice the words on the board.</p>	
<p><b>Reflections on this Class</b>  What worked today?  What didn't work today?  Any emerging patterns?</p>	
<p><b>Changes to be Made</b>  Any adjustments to be made for the next lesson?</p>	

APPENDIX E

Dialogue Journal Topics and Class Ideas

## Class 1:

Talk about:

- Introductions
- Explain dialogue journals
- Guided instruction: 'to be' verb

\*Journal topic: Tell me about your family. Include talking about somebody who is tall.

Class 2: Students come in and read what I wrote to them and answer my question every day, first thing.

Talk about:

- Permission slips
- What is small talk? discuss weather expressions to make small talk
- Guided instruction: noun markers: a, an, the

\*Journal topic: What is in Marlese's tray? Write about what you see. (in tray are items that require an article in front of each one like an apple, a bluebird, a cup, a pen, a pencil, an orange, a paper clip) Make list of these words on the white board.

## Class 3:

Talk about:

- Greetings
- First questionnaire
- Favorite stores where they shop; list on board

\*Journal topic: Write about where you go to shop for clothes? Why do you like that store? Brainstorm words to write on the board.

## Class 4:

Talk about:

- Good writers practice writing!
- Review small talk, polite words-please and thank you
- New word: activity

\*Journal topic: What is your favorite activity? Why?

## Class 5:

Talk about

- Favorite foods
- Grocery stores
- Review food vocabulary

\*Journal topic: What are your favorite foods? Which grocery store do you like the best and why?

## Class 6:

Talk about:

- American exclamation phrases; Oh my! Oh wow!
- Exclamation point-when to use it
- Different types of apples to taste
- Introduce an apple corer

\*Journal topic: Describe Marlese's Honeycrisp apple. What shape is it? What color is it? Use new words in your writing: stem, core, round

## Class 7:

Talk about:

- Identify classroom objects and list on board
- Use of 'there is/there are'
- Review article usage
- New words: pleased and glad=happy
- 'You're welcome' after 'thank you'

\*Journal Topic: Write about the objects that you see in this classroom.

## Class 8:

Talk about:

- My favorite ring
- New word: favorite
- Possessive /'s/
- Review 4 seasons words

\*Journal Topic: What is your favorite season? Why is it your favorite? Begin with: My favorite season is.....

## Class 9:

Talk about:

- Review present progressive verbs
- Bring pictures of models in various clothing
- Use pictures of Somali models from Macy's flyer

\*Journal Topic: What is she wearing? What is she doing? Give her a Somali name. ex. Hawo is wearing.....

## Class 10:

Talk about:

Making a snack or recipe

- First, second, then, finally
- I am going to make a snack for you.
- I am going to make the popcorn.
- I am going to add the peanuts.
- I am going to add the pretzels
- I am not going to add marshmallows. (pork product)

\*Journal topic: What did you like about Marlese's snack?

## Class 11: What is Thanksgiving?

Talk about:

- Typical Thanksgiving foods
- Different types of corn
- Pictures of soybeans, wheat
- First American immigrants-Pilgrims

\*Journal topic: Tell me about a food that you like. Why do you like it? Is it from Somalia or America? Begin with "A food that I like is...."

## Class 12:

Talk about:

- Continue with present progressive with infinitive
- I am going to drive to Southtown.
- I am going to buy a scarf for my mother.
- I am not going to buy her a coat.
- I am going to read a book at home.

\*Journal Topic: Write about what you are going to do when you go home.

Class 13:

Talk about:

Correct writing of letters /g/ /j/ /p/ /y/

- Concept of writing above and below lines
- Do final questionnaire

\*Journal Topic: Write about picture of Somali girl

Class 14:

Talk about:

- Discuss concept: what is confidence?
- Do confidence scale rating of yourself
- Camel discussion

\*Journal Topic: Write about the picture on the Somalia book. Who is the boy?  
How old is he? Write about the camel.

Class 15:

\*Journal Topic: Write a goodbye letter to your teacher. Give them my thank you notes.



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