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Using Journaling to Aid in Acquisition of Past Tense Verbs

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Using Journaling to Aid in Acquisition of Past Tense Verbs

by

Jan Keleny

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

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English: Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract

For many years I have worked with a group of English learners at a local community college as they took on the challenge of learning English. There were some areas that I noted students particularly struggled with, one of them being applying simple past tense verbs, though they seem to have acquired irregular past tense verbs with little difficulty. With this study, I have tried to determine if using dialogue journals could enhance acquisition of simple past tense morphemes. By actively choosing to use simple past tense in my responses to them I was hoping that noticing proper application would help them acquire this skill. Due to a few factors, one of them being a lack of a control group, I was not able to absolutely prove that keeping a dialogue journal assisted students in learning past tense use, though all students demonstrated an improvement in using simple past tense on their posttests. Further study in this area would be beneficial to determine if dialogue journals could be an added benefit to the English language learner curriculum.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

There are many hurdles English language learners (ELLs) must deal with when trying to learn English. The lexical knowledge alone is overwhelming. According to Nation (2001), *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* "contains around 114,000 word families excluding proper names" (p. 6). English also includes unusual spellings in words adopted from other languages, which render our spelling rules inconsistent. This is evident in words like *seen* or *been*. Adopted spellings include words like *honor*, *meringue*, *adobe*, *lacquer*, *corsage* or *gesundheit*. Just think of all the ways "ough" is pronounced: *though*, *through* and *cough* are just three of dozens of examples. Then there are the homophones and homographs: *to*, *two* and *too*, and *there*, *their* and *they're*. Is it *lead* as in metal or *lead* as in first in line? *Read*, present tense, or *read*, past tense? The same goes for words such as *wind*, *bass*, *sow*, *sewer* and *bow*. Then there are derivations of words with affixes and tenses. Forms of *be* can be very confusing: *was*, *were*, *am*, *is*, and *are* have no phonemic similarities with *be* or each other. Learning even simple past tense verbs can be challenging for many learners. With all these properties and derivations to consider, it is a wonder so many people have attained a level of mastery that enables them to effectively communicate in English.

For this study my goal was to focus on just one small aspect of English; that is simple past tense verbs. Is there a way to advance the acquisition that would be less stressful, an authentic form of communication that would reduce students' affective filter to enhance the awareness, practice and acquisition of these morphemes? More

specifically, can I encourage ELLs to notice, comprehend and correctly employ English past tense verbs in a written format?

Proposal

For this particular study I wanted to use dialogue journals (DJs) in which to model proper past tense application without any kind of structured focus on such. Dialogue journals provide a stress-free, authentic form of communication that all English language learners (ELLs) can use, no matter what their level. It provides opportunities for much needed practice communicating in English and their writing is not graded because the focus is on content only—expressing their own thoughts and ideas with no grammatical judgements from me. Through modeling proper past tense sentence structures, I hoped learners would notice and begin using correct past tense syntax. I proposed that by regularly using dialogue journals I could influence learner uptake of simple past tense verbs through regular exposure to, and use of past tense forms. I hoped this would help guide learners to recognizing and applying correct syntax in written communication, which could then positively affect overall communication.

Purpose of Study

Verbs are more challenging to understand, because unlike nouns, which can be associated with actual physical objects, their meaning is more variable. How do you describe *think*, *scold*, *love* or *process*? According to Gentner and Boroditsky (2009):

Because objects are readily individuated in the world, the denotations of concrete nouns can be derived by linking a word with an existing concept. But

the meanings of verbs and prepositions (even in concrete perceptual arenas) are not “out there” in the same sense. This means that children cannot learn verbs from the word-to-world mapping alone; they must discover how their particular language chooses to combine the elements of experience into verb meanings. (p. 6)

From this I conclude that verbs, overall, are a challenge to learn.

According to Krashen’s Natural Order hypothesis, regular past tense is last in the order of acquisition (along with third person singular and possessive –s):

→ -ing/plural –s/copula

→ auxiliary/article

→ irregular past

→ regular past/third-person singular/possessive –s

In Mackey’s (1999) study she found that learner interaction did improve acquisition over learner observation. What she also noted was that even though interactive learners progressed at a faster rate than non-interactive learners, they still had to progress through specific stages. Learners could “step up the pace” at which they learned but could not be pushed through a developmental stage—“developmental stages could not be skipped” (Gass & Selinker, 2008). Tarone and Swierzbis (2009) agreed; “At best, instruction can speed up the rate at which learners go through stages but it cannot make learners skip stages, or alter the order.”

Kwon (2005) published a chart depicting stages of morpheme acquisition for seven different research studies.

Note that rank order numbers that repeat within a given column (study) indicate a tie for two or more positions, in which case an average point score is assigned to each morpheme. Thus, for example, in a tie for 2nd and 3rd (Brown, 1973), each morpheme is given a rank score of 2.5. (p. 6)

R. Brown (1973)	de Villiers & de Villiers (1973)	Dulay & Burt (1974b)	Haily, Madden & Krashen (1974)	Larson-Freeman (1975)	Hakuta (1976)	Roursky (1976)
N = 3	N = 21	N = 60 Span. 55 Chin.	N = 73	N = 24	N = 1	N = 6
1 Present Progressive	2 Present Progressive	1 Article	1 Present Progressive	1 Present Progressive	2 Present Progressive	1 Present Progressive
2.5 on	2 Plural	2 Copula	2 Plural	2 Copula	2 Copula	2
2.5 in	2 on	3 Progressive	3 Contractive Copula	3 Article	2 Auxiliary	3
4 Plural	4 in	4 Simple Plural	4 Article	4 Auxiliary	4.5 in	4 Article
5 Past Irregular	5 Past Irregular	5 Auxiliary	5 Past Irregular	5 Short Plural	4.5 to	5 Copula
6 Possessive -'s	6 Article	6 Past Regular	6 Possessive -'s	6 Past Regular	6 Past Auxiliary	6 Auxiliary
7 Uncontracted Copula	7 Possessive -'s	7 Past Irregular	7 Contr. Aux.	7 Singular	7 on	7 Possessive -'s
8 Article	8.5 3rd Person Irregular	8 Long Plural	8 3rd Person Present	8 Past Irregular	8 Possessive -'s	8 Past Irregular
9 Past Regular	8.5 Contractive Copula	9	Possessive -'s	9 Long Plural	9 Past Irregular	9 Long Plural
10 3rd Person Regular	10.5 Contractive Copula	10	3rd Person Singular	1 Possessive -'s	10 Plural	1 Past Regular
11 3rd Person Irregular	10.5 Past Regular				11 Article	1 3rd Person Regular
12 Uncontracted Auxiliary	12 Uncontracted Copula				12 3rd Person Regular	
13 Contractive Copula	13 Contractive Copula				13 Past Regular	
14 Contractive Auxiliary	14 Uncontracted Auxiliary				14 <gonna> Aux.	

Figure 1. Comparisons. 5Note that rank order numbers that repeat within a given column (study) indicate a tie for two or more positions, in which case an average point score is assigned to each morpheme. Thus, for example, in a tie for 2nd and 3rd (Brown, 1973), each morpheme is given a rank score of 2.5.” (Kwon, 2005. p. 6)

The order of acquisition does vary slightly but the similarities are strong. Kwon explains:

In sum, the results of L1 and L2 studies are not identical. However, the similarities between the two appear significant, and many of the differences may be ascribed to disparities in learners' level of cognitive development. (p. 10)

In examining the charts, past tense verbs are acquired later in almost all the study results depicted. Obviously then, focusing on past tense acquisition could be beneficial for many ELLs.

It appears that this is an appropriate area to focus my study on. If extra writing practice can “step up the pace” of acquisition, perhaps it will help my students arrive at this level of learning sooner than what would normally be expected.

Research Questions

1. Will students begin noticing proper past tense syntax with regular exposure?
2. Will improved noticing of past tense syntax be demonstrated in their ongoing journal exchanges?
3. Will students demonstrate improvements in overall acquisition of simple past tense by the end of this testing period?

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Explanation of Dialogue Journals

A dialogue journal (DJ) is a written conversation between two people, generally a teacher and student, that happens regularly, daily or weekly. It is ungraded, unedited text with topics initiated by the student to which the teacher responds (Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Kreeft, Peyton, Staton, Richardson, & Wolfram, 1990; Staton, 1985; Stillman, Anderson, & Struthers, 2014). By allowing the student to choose the topic they are freer to express themselves, can write as much or as little as they want, and can write about what they know (be the expert) in a non-threatening medium of expression.

My study entailed using adult ELLs, over a period of at least 6 months. Unlike Shoff de Gonzalez's students from her 1992 study with "nine elementary ESL students in grades four through six," these students are adults, have more at stake in learning English and are thus more willing learners. I hoped these significant changes in demographics would influence students to participate in this study.

"It has been suggested that writing, whether in one's first or second language, is a process in which meaning must be given priority" (Hyland, 1998, p. 281). DJs provide a risk-free form of writing that focuses on content only. Journal conversations become avenues for sharing information and thoughts regarding classroom topics to personal ideas. Unlike assigned reports or essays they allow "students to develop more coherent self-expression and a personal 'voice'—both essential aspects of writing which are often lost when basic composition skills are stressed" (Staton, 1985,

p. 198). From the students' perspective, "the students believed that the journals enhanced their motivation to write and increased their fluency" (Holmes & Moulton, 1997, p. 6).

History of Dialogue Journals

In 1964, a California elementary school teacher, Leslee Reed, was using daily journals as a way for students to summarize what they learned that day so when they got home, they would have a response to the age-old question posed by parents: "What did you learn today?" As she read the responses she began to realize just how diverse the students' perceptions were about what was important or noteworthy. She wrote back to students and they in turn responded to her queries. Thus began written conversations between teacher and student. In 1979 researcher Jana Staton met with Reed to learn and study the input between students and teacher and they coined the term *dialogue journals*. In 1981 Reed was transferred to another school that had a high ESL population; she continued using dialogue journals and found great benefit for her English learners as it provided a risk-free way of expressing themselves while at the same time practicing writing in English.

Review of Previous Studies

A benefit of dialogue journals versus oral conversations is that students can think through and compose their response. In oral conversations some responses have to be more spontaneous. Speakers have to take turns but more capable speakers will be able to do that more quickly than less fluent speakers who may require processing time. Topics in oral conversations may not be of the speaker's

choosing and not in an area they feel knowledgeable or comfortable. In a DJ, students are allowed to initiate and encouraged to expand upon their particular subject. Martha Dolly (1985) used dialogue journals during a summer ESL course as a supplement to the non-native speakers' (NNS) course work. She describes how students advanced the conversation and repaired the conversation while negotiating for meaning. Students showed a fondness for topic initiation, which she explains, "may be due to the time lapse between turns, which reduces the awkwardness of moving from one topic to another" (p. 320). DJs served as encouragement for students to try out different conversational roles that they might normally refrain from doing in an oral conversation.

Shoff de Gonzalez (1992) focused on improvements in past tense application through the use of dialogue journals. Even though her study only consisted of nine students, she was able to collect a significant amount of data during the course of one school year that showed measureable improvement, from 41.88% correct incidences to 87.22% correct incidences.

Results of the study reveal an increase in the number of correct uses of simple past tense, an increase in length of entries, and an insignificant increase in the number of incorrect use of simple past tense. (p. 51)

Dialogue journals encouraged students to write more because there was no fear of corrections, the response from the teacher was friendly, personal and encouraging, and the topic was of their own choosing. When compared to assigned academic topics Kreeft Peyton, Staton, Richardson, and Wolfram (1990) found that students used nearly three times as many words in their DJs than their essays. They

state that although students are not graded on quantity, the greater the number of words used indicates a desire to write more, to communicate more. That motivation to write was not as prevalent in assigned essay topics.

In Jungkang Kim's (2005) classroom, DJs effectively gave students a voice to express themselves and to learn about others in a mutually respectful learning environment. Kim utilized DJs in critical literacy development, as she had students create dialogues with their peers, describing it as "the significance of critically understanding social and cultural contexts of language and learning" (p. 27). The authentic communication gave way to building a community in Kim's classroom, bringing together students from Hispanic, Arabic and Asian cultures helping the "adult learners come to appreciate diversity and differences that each individual brings to their classroom" (p. 22).

Clarena Larrotta (2009) used dialogue journals to help adult ESL students learn to write using authentic communication. Over time she states, "the DJ activity became more exciting as the written conversations progressed since the entries became more personal and authentic" (p.13). When students evaluated the effectiveness of dialogue journals many found that it helped them become more proficient writers of English:

"I understand the sentence structure more and I am constructing sentences more accurately."

"Now I can write a lot more in English because I realized that I can also write the way I talk if it is informal writing like in the journal."

Larrotta found that “writing became a more flexible and social process in which meaning and communication were the focus” (p. 21).

Dialogue journals can also encourage students to experiment using different voices for different audiences. Stillman et al. (2014) paired students to communicate with DJs and found that more capable writers or those more socially adept were able to encourage their partners as well as “mediate each other’s learning, including language learning” (p. 156). This served as a springboard for learning about writing to different audiences, the need for different voices, and the many different genres of writing, areas that are challenging to teach even to native speakers.

Corroborating Studies in Support of DJs

Socio-cultural theory and ZPD. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian scholar who’s research in child language development wasn’t made known to the western world for 20 years after his death, having been suppressed for including work by Western and European researchers while redesigning psychology consistent with Marxist philosophy. His results and theories were ahead of his time and even today have a great influence in current research on human development. His contemporaries included Piaget, Luria, and Bruner.

Vygotsky believed that life experiences and socio-cultural influences, once internalized, led to self-mastery, which led to higher cognitive functions. His Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) states that, “The discrepancy between a child’s actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance indicates the zone of his proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 187). A child learns by

having a guided experience just beyond their cognitive level, which they then learn to master and perform on their own and becomes scaffolding for future knowledge; it is what a child is capable of learning built upon what a child knows.

Jack Wigfield (1996) stated that some instructors feel that writing should accompany reading and be introduced as soon as possible. Learners should be allowed to use their “interlanguage,” a combination of their language and grammar rules and English syntax, stating that, “interlanguages account for various stages of vocabulary and grammar development” (p. 37). Writing, therefore, should be part of language development from the start; “the two draw from and build on each other.” The other important piece is that teachers must react to students’ writing, confirming and validating learners’ communication.

Dialogue journals provide opportunities for students to use their current writing skills to communicate thoughts and ideas. In replying back, modeling correct syntax allows students to be exposed to examples of correct vocabulary and grammar in a conversational manner:

The teacher’s written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the student’s proficiency level; thus the teacher’s entries can provide reading texts that are challenging, but that are also comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written. (Peyton, 1993)

The input hypothesis and the affective filter. Steven Krashen

(1982) states:

The Input Hypothesis claims that humans acquire language in only one way—by understanding messages or by receiving comprehensible input. (p. 2)

Similar to Vygotsky's ZPD, Krashen states that learners need to be given information that is just above their comprehension level: $i + 1$. Having information provided in context encourages learners to stretch themselves, to discover the inferred meaning of the communication. Because students determine the topic of conversation, the context is clear. When presented with new lexicon or grammar, the meaning is more easily construed. DJ topics are chosen by students and feedback from teachers provides comprehensible input that, even if slightly above a student's comprehension level, is written in context with the student's chosen topic so its meaning can be inferred.

When students are writing about a topic they are familiar with and know well, they will attempt to use lexicon that describes their thoughts, even if used improperly. This practice of using new vocabulary requires skills above their current level and helps incorporate new lexical terms into their interlanguage. This leads to scaffolding for future learning.

In a DJ there is more processing time thus more opportunities to be in control of the topic, write about it and ask for clarification. The feedback becomes the input, which leads to acquisition.

Dialogue journals also play a big part of reducing what Krashen coined as the *affective filter* (AF). He writes that students who are highly motivated, have strong self-confidence and low anxiety are going to have better chance of acquiring a second language.

Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not only tend to see less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective

Filter—even if they understand the message, the input will not reach the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. (p. 31)

Although Peyton and Staton (1996) do not mention AF they do concur that, “the absence of corrections makes dialogue journals relatively non-threatening to most students” (p. 18). They also reported that even shy students were more open in a dialogue journal, that “the journal was clearly nonthreatening” (p. 20). Bilash (2011) writes, “In any aspect of education it is always important to create a safe, welcoming environment in which students can learn. . . learners need to feel that they are able to make mistakes and take risks.”

The drawbacks of DJs. As stated above there are many positive outcomes for language learners who use dialogue journals for the sole purpose of authentic communication while acquiring greater skill using an L2. The drawback is that the teacher must read and respond to each student’s journal entry. This can be time consuming when added to all the other grading and responsibilities of teaching. Therefore it is recommended that DJs be used for single classes or small groups. If teachers let other duties get in the way of responding, students can lose faith in the communication. “If too much time elapses between entries the writing tends to lose its interactive quality...” (Peyton & Reed, 1990). Peyton and Stanton (1996) describe an English teacher in Madrid who got caught up in other responsibilities and lagged in writing her responses. The students were upset because they felt it was important to correspond consistently:

“I don’t like to write letter if any people don’t answer me.”

“Listen, Janet, if you don’t answer me I will tell you nothing more because this can get in a monologue and this is very bored.” (p. 26)

Teachers should make sure their responses are not formulaic but genuine and authentic because these too, can discourage writers from sharing.

Another bit of cautionary advice is to maintain confidentiality and privacy.

Something a teacher may see as mundane might be very important or embarrassing to the writer. “The journals belong to the students and they should be free to keep them when they are full” (Peyton & Staton, 1996, p. 29) because to many students these represent an important part of their lives.

There is also concern that the writing can become too personal. Some teachers tell their students at the beginning that the DJ is not for keeping secrets in; it is for communicating about “things they are doing at home, at school, with friends, and things they are thinking about that aren’t secrets” (Peyton & Reed, 1990). For topics that seem too personal or beyond the teacher’s expertise, students can be asked to talk to their parent, or another teacher or staff member. Something else to remember:

Indeed, in teacher-student dialogue, teachers always hold significant power—power that can be misused or abused. Thus teachers must grant students the freedom to share only what they’re comfortable sharing, and without threat of retributions. (Stillman et al., 2014)

Creating a DJ means developing an ongoing relationship with the student.

This requires a commitment on the part of the teacher to be wholly engaged in the entire dialogue journal process, from start to finish. There is a great deal of responsibility that goes with using dialogue journals but Holmes and Moulton (1997) have:

concluded that dialogue journals provide the following conditions for learning: interaction about topics relevant to learning, focus on interaction rather than form, enhancement of reading skills, modeling of correct grammatical forms, natural evolution of grammatical structures, and interaction in a private, nonthreatening way. (p. 1)

Chapter 3: METHODS

In the following information I will go through some of the details regarding the study population, the procedure and the proposed outcome. The study population was chosen because I already knew most of the students and I have had a working relationship with them and their teachers through adult evening classes at a suburban community college in central Minnesota. The procedure and data gathered is supported by comparing a pretest and posttest, which involve answering questions designed to provoke a recollection of events and retelling of a story. The ideal outcome would be that there would be more successful attempts at using simple past tense to answer the questions on the posttest than on the pretest. This could then be used as an indicator that, yes, DJs did help “step up the pace” in the uptake and acquisition of correct simple past tense verb forms.

Study Participants

For this study I asked for volunteers from the English language learners (ELLs) from the evening classes at a community college. I have been volunteering with the ESL program for the past five years and have gotten to know many of the students. During the time of this study I returned or collected notebooks from students.

As expected, many students dropped out from the program at the college. Originally 19 students volunteered to participate but after three months 10 had left the program entirely and four more dropped due to not having enough time to commit to writing regularly. That left five students who actively participated for the duration of

the study. The students' ages ranged from 22 to 55 and their time in the US ranged from .25 to 24 years. Their first languages include Hmong, Spanish and Russian. The names given are pseudonyms:

Name	Gender	Years Studying English
Lani	F	4
Allyn	F	2
Selina	F	1.83
Oleg	M	.58
Katrina	F	.25
Elena	F	1

Figure 2. Student names, gender, and years of studying English

Procedure

When I introduced this study I told students that this was part of my course of study for my master's degree at St. Cloud State University. It was emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, that they could quit at any time and none of the work they produced would be graded. There would be pretest and a posttest, again, not graded. The dialogue journal would consist of a notebook that I would be providing and all they would need to do would be to write a minimum of one or two sentences about anything they would like to share each week, return the notebook and I would respond in writing to them and give the notebook back to them. It would be just like a conversation but in writing instead of speaking and they should consider it extra practice using English. I explained that my purpose in using dialogue journals was to monitor their rate and level of acquisition during this time. I proposed collecting their DJs on Mondays and returning them on Thursdays but with students' sporadic attendance we simply exchanged notebooks each time I saw the students.

They were given preliminary instructions to tell me about themselves, where they were from, and how long they've been here and they could feel free to ask me similar questions. The posttest would take place in December, the week before winter break.

The pre- and post-tests consisted of nine questions designed to elicit a past tense response. Question ten in the both the pretest and posttest had to do with the students analyzing a page from a wordless picture book that depicted a series of simple events. The pretest used two pages from the book, *The Adventures of Polo* by Regis Faller (2006), and the posttest had two pages from *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs (1978). I wanted them to 'read' the page and then retell the story in their own words about what happened in the story, again, using past tense.

On April 20, 2015, after getting student signatures on the Informed Consent forms I handed out the pretest with instructions to complete it at home and return it by the next class. When students returned their pretests to me I gave each one a new notebook and reviewed some preliminary information they could write to start our DJ conversations. Each time a journal was returned to me, I created a response and returned the journal to the student at the next class. I asked for a minimum of one or two sentences each time they wrote to me, because I realize these adults are very busy people with families, jobs and responsibilities beyond attending evening classes three days a week at the college. What was impressive is that many wrote far more than one or two sentences; many filled half a page or more, sharing bits about their lives and their families, their traditions and cultures.

Chapter 4: RESULTS

Avoidance

When going over the pretests I found Gass and Selinker's (2008) observation to be true; they discovered that if a student did not know the correct lexicon to use he or she would avoid using that word entirely and simply restate the response using alternate vocabulary. Tarone and Swierzbis (2009) also found that, "Avoidance occurs when learners do not refer to an entity or action because they do not know or cannot access the relevant lexical item" (p. 73). On the pretest this avoidance resulted in students either writing sentence fragments, or using present tense in their responses (words that are italicized reflect opportunities while words underlined represent correct past tense applications):

"While, no"

"not things"

"My Mom"

"Because my hubby *live* in Minnesota"

Two students, Katerina and Oleg, used only sentence fragments and listed the main points rather than create complete sentences in past tense:

Question 7: "What was one of your favorite stories when you were a child?"

Question 8: "What was it about?"

From Katrina:

Aladdin.

About Aladdin's magic lamp, about Gin and about love...

From Oleg:

My favorite stories were about live my grandfather stories about his live

From Selina:

the 3 little pigs

The 3 pigs make houses for themselves

Selina also answered questions with sentence fragments and present tense:

“the lakes,” “the fruits.”

Her pretest essay only consisted of sentence fragments:

dog going to stairs

going up. Going up

dog going to slide

Its fun for him

Oleg’s pretest essay also consisted of many sentence fragments:

The dog walk with umbrella

The dog thinking

The dog up stairs

The dog in the middle of the stairs

The dog down umbrella

The dog on top

The dog is looking at the bottom

The dog slides down

Throughout many of the journal entries there were occasional sentence fragments and much of the journaling was in present tense so for many entries,

especially Allyn's, for which there was no data available. This led to the following percentages of avoidance incidences per student:

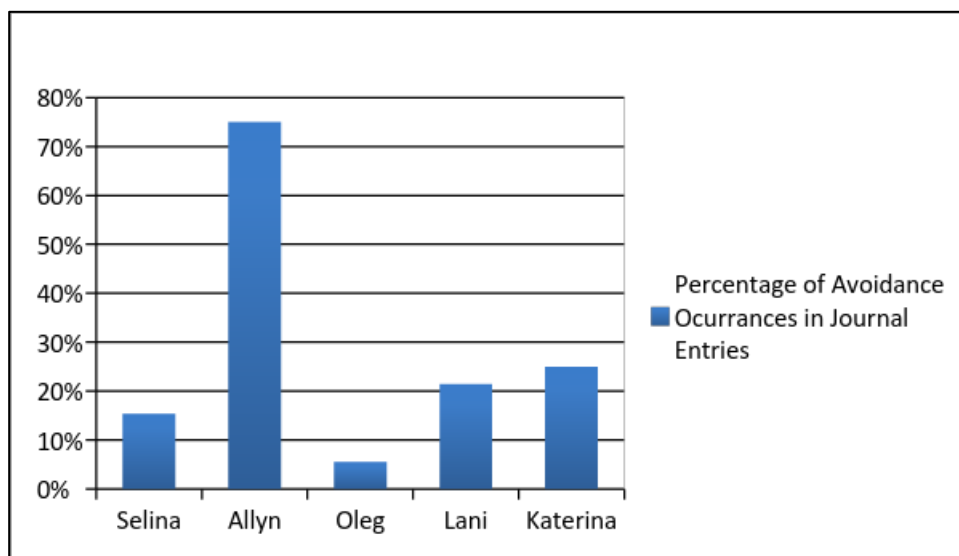


Figure 3. Percentages of avoidance incidences per student.

This was not as apparent on the posttest as most students wrote in full sentences and in past tense responses. Only Allyn's final essay was written primarily in present tense though she answered the nine questions in past tense, twice using perfect past tense:

"I have enjoyed going to the zoo..."

"I have traveled to Florida..."

These results indicate to me that students became more adept and confident in using past tense, in their ability to write in complete sentences, and used more sentences to explain their answers, no longer demonstrating strong avoidance tendencies. Many students used multiple sentences to answer the questions. Selena showed the greatest improvement:

Pretest:

I came to America in 2008

I came to Minnesota first

Because my ex-husband lived here

Posttest:

I went to home depot because my sink is *damage*. I rented a machine and my friend helped me to fix it

I went to Puerto Vallarta, Is a beach in Mexico, and too traveled at Monterrey the third important city in Mexico.

I like the four season in Minnesota Is wonderful, awesome, are different but I enjoyed of them

Pre- and Posttest Study Results

The average number of simple past tense opportunities in the pretest with the DJ group was 2.8 with an average of 1.4 correct applications; this is 50% accuracy. After 8 months the posttest revealed the number of attempts to use simple past tense had risen to 9.2 with the number of correct applications at 8; this is higher at 87% accuracy.

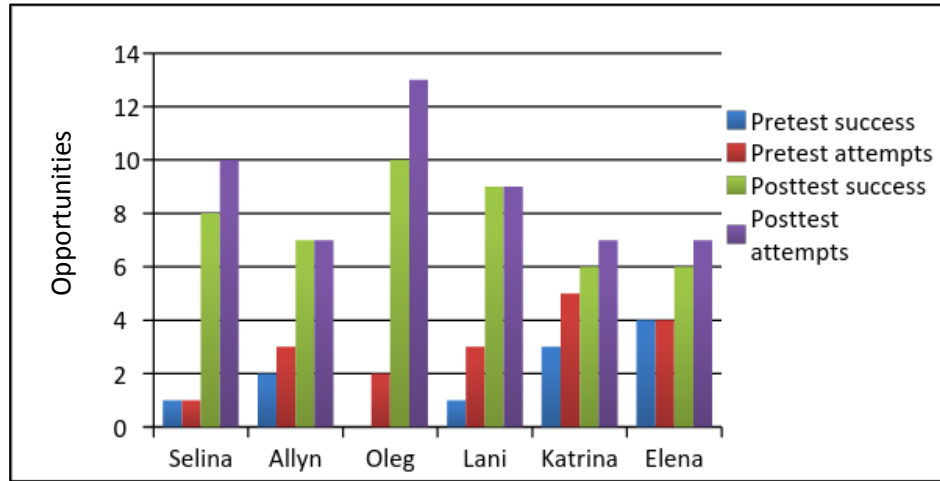


Figure 4. Number of opportunities to use simple past tense.

Below is a graph depicting the percent increase in opportunities created by students from the pretest to the posttest:

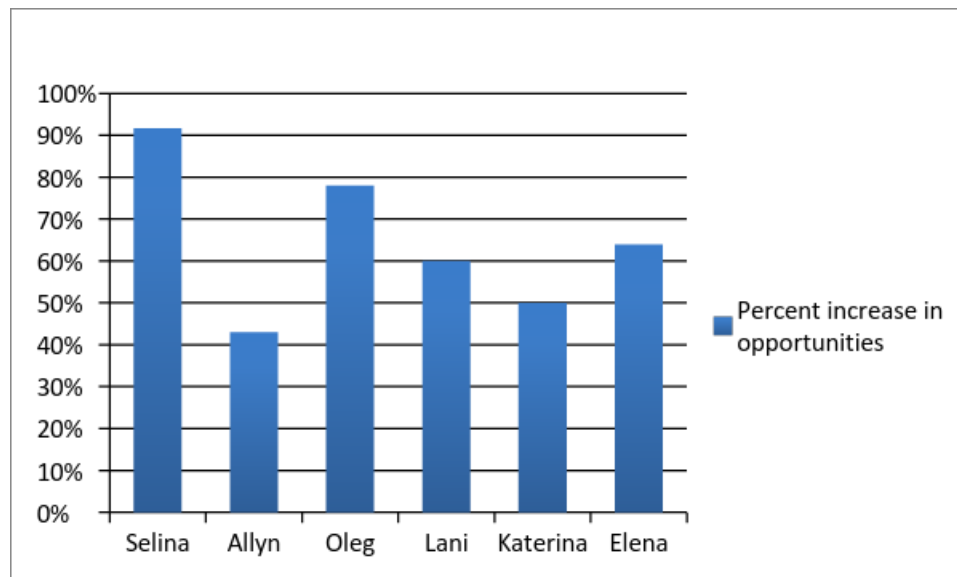


Figure 5. Percent increase in opportunities from pretest to posttest.

Both Selina and Oleg showed dramatic growth in applying past tense in their posttests, through all students showed improvement.

Individual Analysis

Below is an individual analysis of each participant's DJ entries. Opportunities for using simple past tense were counted as were number of successful applications for each day that students submitted their DJs. As will be seen Allyn and Lani used present tense in nearly all of their prose while Oleg and Katerina showed improvement in past tense application throughout the trial period. I did not include exact dates of the entries because many students had sporadic attendance, especially during the summer months and in the fall, so students had 12 to 18 entries from April through December. Their entries are therefore numbered according to each appearance rather than a specific date.

Ellena. Ellena is a middle aged Russian woman who had been in the United States nearly 7years at the onset of this study. She opted to not participate in keeping a dialogue journal but was willing to take the pre- and posttests for me. Her results were comparable to the rest of the students who did use DJs. She scored four out of six correct applications for each opportunity on the pretest and scored 11 out of 12 on the posttest. Since she is the only student who was willing or available to take the posttest she does not adequately represent a control group to compare the DJ group to. Her number of attempts to use simple past tense had risen by 3.

In Elena's pretest she had one opportunity to use past tense for the nine short answer question and her essay was short compared to her posttest response, with which she created seven opportunities for the nine short answer questions.

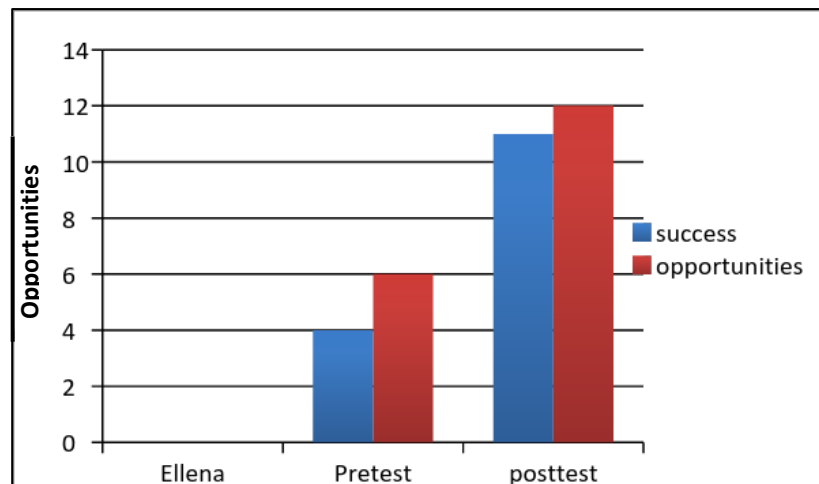


Figure 6. Comparison between Ellena's pretest and posttest responses.

Elena's sentence structure on the pretest questions was brief, direct and occasionally a fragment. Her posttest results showed a positive growth in fluency and willingness to take chances and share more information about herself.

Pretest:

(Question 2) I came fo Minnesota first

(Question 3) Because in Minnesota lived my relatives.

Posttest:

(Questions 1) In Saturday I cleaned my house, made laundry, cooked. In Sunday I went to the church.

(Questions 6) I left brief time In Siberia, there very interest places. In Siberia is big lake Baikal landscape it is wonderful.

Selina. Selina is a woman from Mexico who had been here for 6 years at the start of this study. There were two DJ entries where she avoided an opportunity to use past tense. Her second entry showed four successful attempts in four occurrences. This contrasts with her six out of seven correct attempts using irregular past tense verbs in that same entry. This pattern of using irregular past tense occurred throughout all eleven of her entries whereas her attempts and application of simple past tense did not increase over the course of the study. Her posttest results did show a dramatic up tick in number of successful attempts, from one in the pretest to eight in the posttest, resulting in a slight upward trend on her graph. Even though her DJ entries lacked opportunities to use simple past tense, her posttest results show a significant ability to apply this morpheme appropriately.

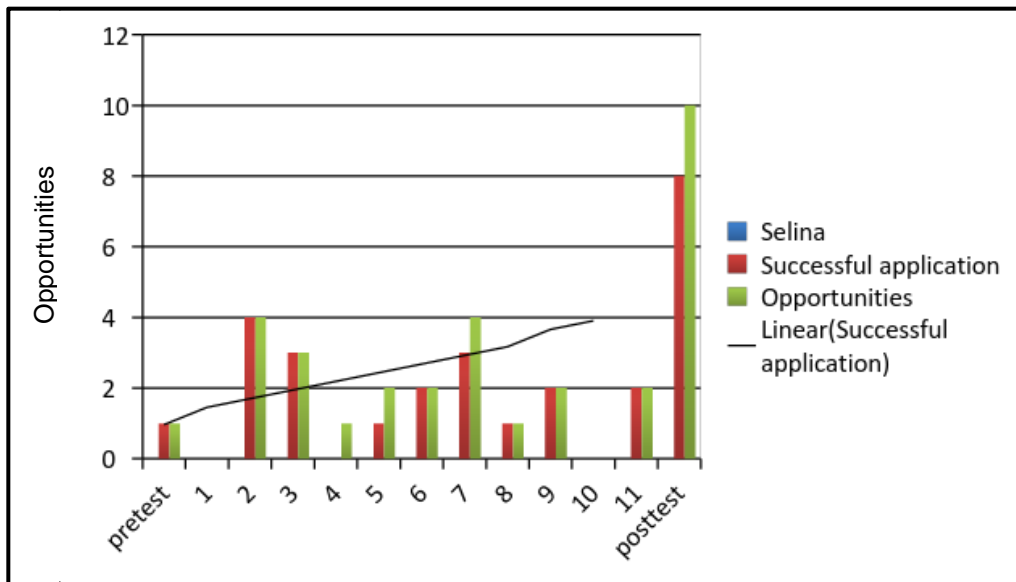


Figure 7. Comparison between Selina's pretest and posttest responses.

In one of Selina's DJ entries she expressed concern about her plan to move back to Mexico, particularly because her son was only two when they moved here.

He is now nine and is not fluent in Spanish:

This weekend I went to Rochester, MN was instruction because we heard a lot information about How we can be happy. But I drove 2 hours on Friday in the morning, I was nervous in the road. . . I'm *worry* because I want to trip to Mexico, but I don't know if my plan is good for my children. My son is 9 and he was 2 when we *arrive* from Mexico. Now he not speak Spanish a lot.

My response:

You must be worried about your son adjusting to only speaking Spanish. I would be worried too. Your weekend sounded like a busy one. I hope you can use the information you learned about how to be happy. I know you are concerned about moving. Making big changes is scary. When we moved here 35 years ago I was scared too. I worried about where we would live and if I would find a job. But it all worked out ok. I'm sure it will work out for you as well. Be strong!

Allyn. Allyn is an older middle-aged Laotian woman who has lived here for nearly 25 years. All her children were born and raised here and she began taking English classes just 2 years ago. As can be seen from the graph, this middle aged woman from Laos created opportunities for past tense only five different times in her DJ, four of them successfully, choosing avoidance by using present tense almost exclusively. Yet her Posttest presented her with seven successful opportunities to use simple past tense so even though she demonstrated a lot of avoidance use in her dialogue journals she was able to apply simple past tense on the posttest.

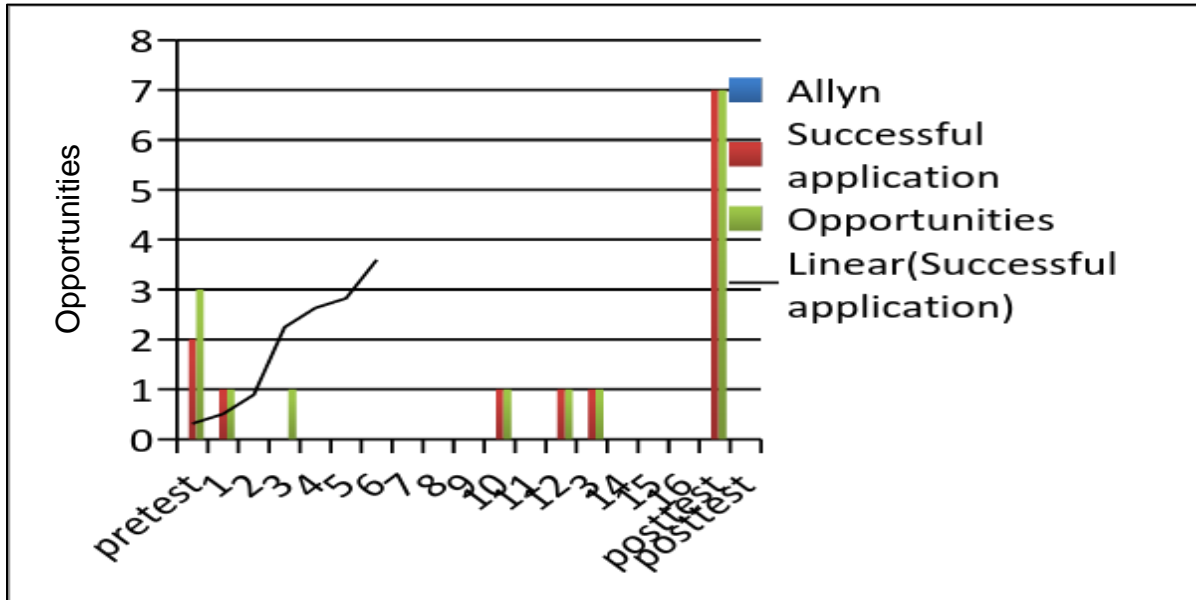


Figure 8. Comparison between Allyn's pretest and posttest responses.

In her 10th journal entry, Allyn used simple past tense only once:

That is good! It wil definitely pay off! I wish that I was as motivated as you. I am so busy that I can't even sigh up for a member shop at any fitness center.

My response:

I have been so tired I didn't get to the gym once! This week I have committed to working everyday and on Saturday another teacher called to see if I would work for him the following week.

She made only four other attempts throughout the trial period and used simple past tense correctly three of those times. Her posttest showed that she could use simple past tense even though she predominantly used avoidance throughout her weekly journal entries. She continues to write in her DJ with me, even though she doesn't need to but because she welcomes the opportunity for extra writing practice.

Oleg. Oleg's graph shows a gradual increase of simple past tense application over time. There is a dramatic difference between his pretest and posttest results, from one attempt but incorrect application to eight out of eight correct applications. Oleg is a very hard worker, taking classes in the evening not only at the school where I met him but also at another center during the day. He had been here seven months at the onset of this study and was in level 3. He has also been taking college classes in Residential Construction in order to get a job doing maintenance work. The combination of using DJs, evening classes and daytime ESL classes along with his Residential Construction classes have helped Oleg advance his English skills greatly, as seen with the steady incline on the graph.

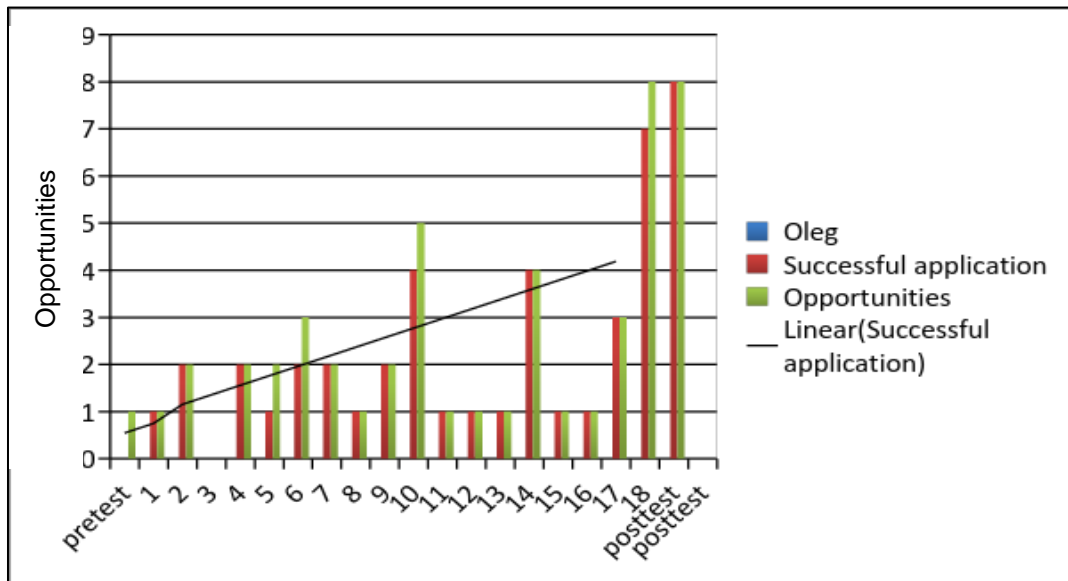


Figure 9. Comparison between Oleg's pretest and posttest responses.

Below is a sample from Oleg's DJ:

Oleg:

On Thursday, September 8, I *attend* my third lesson to prepare for work. It was "Crime-free" We studied how to protect yourself and people, and their and

owner's property. I registered for Certified Residential Maintenance Technician Program of the Minnesota Multi Housing Association. After I finished all classes, I will have two exams in April. I hope I will be pass them and I will recive some certificate for maintenance buildings.

My response:

Many years abo we tore the roof off of the house and added a second floor so our house expanded from 2 bedrooms to 4 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms. I also helped with repairing the old downstairs bathroom so we have fixed almost everything from plumbing, painting, windows and electrical. I hope you do well with this new career.

Lani. Lani is a young woman from Laos that I met when she first came to the ABE program four years ago. At that time she spoke no English and would merely nod and smile shyly when asked any questions. She is now in Level 2 and continues to make steady progress though the results of this study indicate that she struggles with past tense. With two small children at home she struggles to find time to study and attend class. Yet she is no longer shy in speaking to native speakers and her willingness to use English will continue to help her proficiency.

Her application of simple past tense is sporadic. This is a sample from her posttest:

"I favorite experiences is I like to teach my children and learned cooked American food."

Here she properly included /to/ before /teach/ but then failed to include the modifier /to/ before /cook/ and instead improperly used the past tense of /cook/ following the already past tense /learned/. In another example, she applied /to/ preceding a past tense verb where it was not necessary:

"I like to enjoyed shopping and study English."

She understands the rule to add –ed to verbs to indicate past tense but overgeneralizes its use and thus applies it incorrectly. Her posttest showed eight opportunities to use simple past tense, seven of which were correct. The graph shows only a slight improvement in past tense usage over the eight months. With two small children at home she struggles to find time to study and attend class. Yet she is no longer shy in speaking to native speakers and her willingness to use English will continue to help her proficiency.

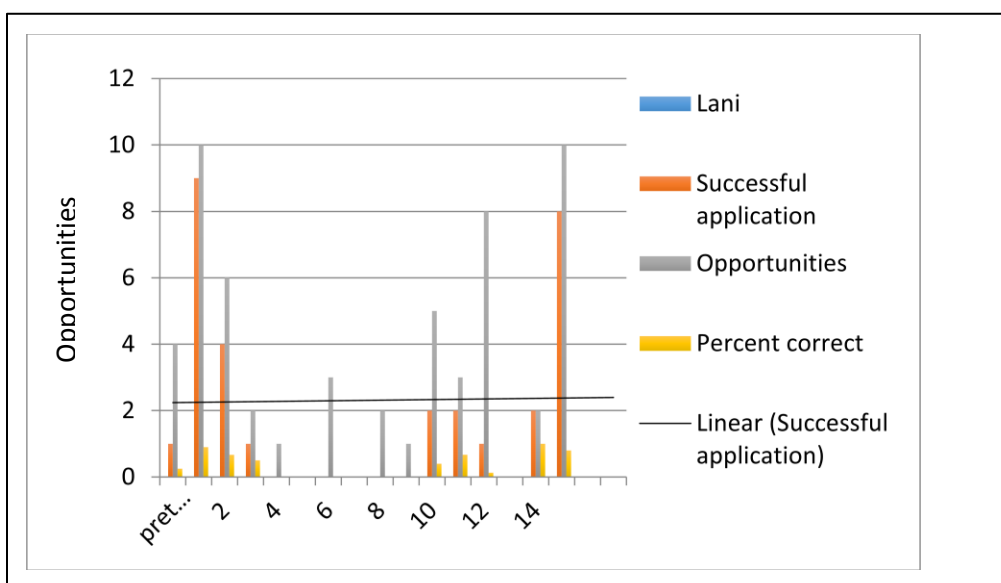


Figure 10. Comparison between Lani's pretest and posttest responses

Katrina. Katrina is a young Russian woman, single, hardworking, with a wonderfully quirky sense of humor. She is very intelligent and has been quick to pick up the language. At the start of this study she had only been in the United States for a few months but was already in the Level 3 class. She consistently used simple past tense, on average, two times each week. The exception was the 10th week, which

had been a very eventful week and she took the time to relay the information in detail. This is a summary of her week, as written in her DJ:

“... It all started on Monday:

1. I had congestion in the bathroom.
2. On Tuesday–the internet disappeared.
3. On Wednesday–the broke part of my tooth.
4. On Thursday–I was offered a new job (return to the “old job” GVGH)
5. On Friday–just Friday.”

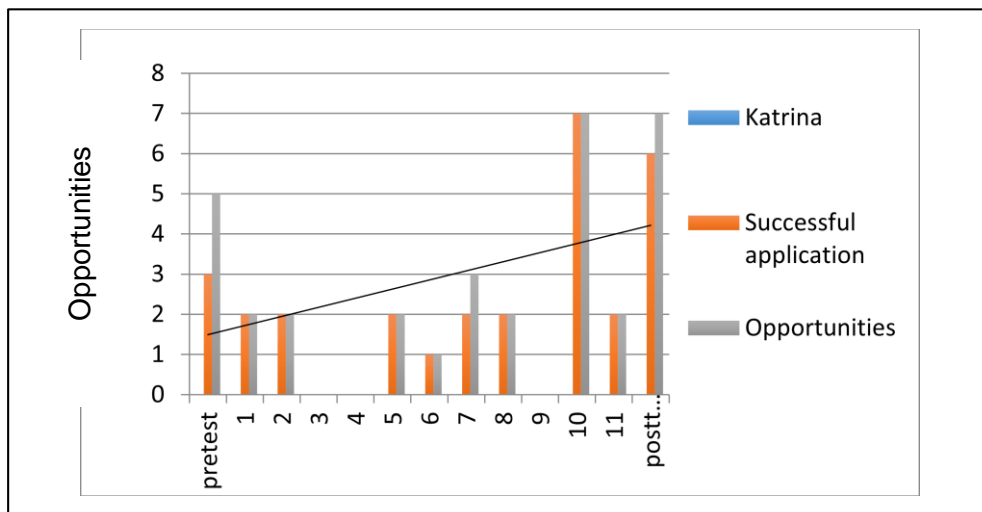


Figure 11. Comparison between Katrina’s pretest and posttest responses

She “decided to fix problems as they occur” and proceeded to give a detailed description of the various solutions thus demonstrating a good working knowledge of simple past tense application.

A sample from her DJ:

Katerina:

Hi! My week went well. I particularly liked the Mothers Day celebration, that was in my job. I tried Mexican food (delicious). And music–trio played: violin

and two guitars. Latin music is very romantic. Most of the people in 'Green Valley Green House' is Mexican. So, I think that soon I'll know Spanish is better than the English.

My response:

That would be wonderful to be able to speak more than even 2 languages! Three years ago I needed to take a foreign language so I learned American Sign Language. I loved talking with my hands! Unfortunately I don't have anyone to practice signing with so I have forgotten much of what I learned.

Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

I would love to say that yes, using dialogue journals did help students acquire the use of simple past tense, and looking at the graphs could give that impression, but I have too many doubts. Much of the progress can be explained by just the steady progression of naturally acquired skills over time, from using DJs, yes, but also from consistently attending class, and living and working in English speaking environments. This study did not confirm whether or not dialogue journals aid in the acquisition of simple past tense. In a future study, having a group of students as a control group taking only the pre- and posttests would provide a valid comparison to results from participants using dialogue journals and testing. The pretest could also be improved because I don't feel the questions were worded with enough past tense to invoke a past tense response (see Appendix A). Some of the questions were answered with simple, one word responses rather than full sentences, which, if worded differently, could have given students opportunities to further demonstrate past tense morphemes. Having students write a summary of the wordless illustrations from the children's books invoked the most past tense usage. Perhaps a test composed entirely of retelling a children's story would have been sufficient if I could get the students to understand that they needed to retell the story after they had completed reading it. For the students who completed the study, five of the six responded in the present tense to the retelling of the pretest story because I did not specify to read the story first then write about it. There were five students who began the study by taking the pretest and beginning the DJs but then left the program

before the study was completed. For four of the students, the response to the story retelling was also done in present tense:

1. He walking in short leong and he slips.
2. He walking in the didn't now how you can go up in the top
3. He now how go up and he start go.
4. He going and he cautious.
5. He going up but they are vey winds.
6. Finally he get up but he neede one step to get the top but he tired.
7. Finaly he stay in top and he see down.
8. And the end he go down and he hoppy.

When I passed out the posttest (see Appendix B) I made a point of explaining to the students that I wanted them to read the story first, then set it aside and retell what they recalled happened. For each respondent these instructions did invoke a retelling of the posttest story using past tense.

It is also a fact that during the course of the study many journal entries were written in present tense. This could possibly be attributed to avoidance—a fear of failing while attempting something new—so how can an instructor help students who seem to employ this method of communicating? Would this be an example of Krashen's Affective Filters being too high and students not feel at ease while communicating? Easing students' stress levels certainly comes into play. Yet most of the students and I have a very comfortable working relationship since I have known

and worked with them for two or more years. Could other factors besides avoidance come into play?

Throughout history in English and many other languages story telling of past events is often done in present tense. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2016), narrating a story or event that happened in the past using present tense is referred to as using *historical present*. Are students simply relaying stories using historical present because it is common in their first language to do so? Or could listening to native speakers relaying stories using historical present impact the acquisition of past tense? The dictionary goes on to state, “However, it has been noted that, no matter how exciting stories are, the speakers never use present tense verbs exclusively—even when relating the most crucial events.” Even though present tense isn’t used exclusively, would listening to stories relayed in this manner have an impact of past tense acquisition? Gass and Selinker define pragmatics as “the way we use a language in context” (p. 13). Would it be beneficial to study the pragmatics of historical present in language acquisition?

In summary, if I were to repeat this study I would reword the pre- and posttest test using more past tense questions that would require a past tense response. Instead of asking, “When did you come to America?” I could ask, “What were some reasons you had when you decided to come to America?”

Instead of asking, “Did you come to Minnesota first or did you live somewhere else before coming to Minnesota?” I could ask “Where are all the places you have

lived since coming to America?" By incorporating simple past tense in my queries I would hope it would influence an equally past tense response.

I would use the wordless storybooks but include the instructions to read the story first then set it aside before retelling the story in their own words. That seemed to generate the best results on the posttests.

I don't believe this study's results are conclusive in helping ELLs acquire the simple past tense morpheme. My research questions were:

1. Will students begin noticing proper past tense syntax with regular exposure?
2. Will improved noticing of past tense syntax be demonstrated in their ongoing journal exchanges?
3. Will students demonstrate improvements in overall acquisition of simple past tense by the end of this testing period?

I cannot say for sure that students noticed proper past tense syntax that may have positively influenced the application of past tense in their DJs or posttests. They did demonstrate an overall improvement in the proper use of past tense when presented with opportunities to do so but there does not appear to be a direct correlation to having used DJs.

Conclusion

Would I still recommend using dialogue journals? Yes! I enjoyed getting to know my students better as they revealed more about their personal lives, their struggles and their hopes and dreams; as they freely wrote about important and not

so important family events, jobs and celebrations and losses. Writing regularly in a DJ was great practice for them in a non-structured, non-threatening setting, allowing them to freely voice whatever they were feeling or thinking without being judged or critiqued. When the rest of the curriculum required specific context for writing topics, this was left open to their own discretion. “The writing produced in the DJ is unique because everyone’s journal is different, and it reflects the connections the learners make between language and thought” (Larotta, 2009, p. 36). That freedom of expression is not often given much credence in academia and even though it was an added burden for some students each week, those that continued throughout the entire study period expressed no regret in participating. As mentioned earlier, one student continues to share a dialogue journal with me each week. Whether or not writing in a DJ can “step up the pace” of acquisition of a particular morpheme may not be as important as building a relationship with a student, providing stress-free opportunities for writing practice, giving students the power of their own voice and opinions and a chance to be heard and respected in a thoughtful and caring manner. I feel it was beneficial to all involved and would willingly make DJs an integral part of a regular ELL curriculum.

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Appendix A: Pretest Sample

Pretest for Thesis Study

Name: _____

1. When did you first come to America?
2. Did you come to Minnesota first or did you live somewhere else before coming to Minnesota?
3. Why did you choose to live in Minnesota?
4. What is something you have enjoyed about living in Minnesota?
5. What is something you have not liked about living in Minnesota?
6. What is something you miss from your country?
7. When you were growing up what was one of your favorite childhood stories?
8. What was it about?
9. Who told you these stories?
10. Attached are two pages from the book, Polo, by Regis Faller. What did the dog, Polo, do in the story?

Appendix B: Posttest Sample

Posttest for Thesis Study

Name: _____

1. Please describe what you did this past weekend:
2. Since you first came to Minnesota, what have you enjoyed doing?
3. Where have you traveled in the United States or Minnesota?
4. What did you see or do?
5. What has been one of your favorite experiences this past year?
6. What interesting places have you been to in your own country?
7. Describe a favorite teacher you had as a child:
8. Tell about something you would do with your friends when you were younger:
9. What is a holiday tradition you learned from your parents or grandparents?
10. Look carefully at the copies of the pages of the story. Once you think you can tell the story without looking at the pictures, *put the pictures away* and then describe what happened: