An ESL Audio-Script Writing Workshop

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Abstract

The roles of dialogue, collaborative writing, and authentic communication have been explored as effective strategies in second language writing classrooms. In this article, the stages of an innovative, multi-skill writing method, which embeds students' personal voices into the writing process, are explored. A 10-step ESL Audio Script Writing Model is illustrated through the examination of similar writing models and their deficits. Developed in a University Intensive English Program, the ESL Audio Script Writing Model was integrated into a 10-week Idioms course. The multi-skill audio script recording activity integrates opportunities for students to perform, record, and publish. A sample audio script group dialogue is also provided.

Introduction

In this article, the ESL Audio Script Writing Model is illustrated as a multi-skill writing approach where students articulate their voices while working in small, culturally-diverse groups to (a) write collaboratively; (b) create idiomatic dialogues; (c) add sound effects; (d) record an audio script. The ESL audio script writing workshop grew out of the need to integrate dialogue, collaboration, and students' real-world voices into second language writing. The stages of an innovative, multi-skill writing method that embeds students' personal voices into the writing process are explored, along with an examination of similar writing models and their deficits.

Dialogue Journals, Collaborative Writing, and Voices

Dialogue Journal Writing

The roles of dialogue, collaborative writing, and authentic communication have been explored as effective strategies in second language writing classrooms. Utilizing conversation as the foundation (albeit as written discourse or the oral negotiation of the writing process), these authentic approaches to teaching writing target more than one language skill.

One such instructional strategy is the integration of dialogue with journal writing. Similar to the traditional journal format, a dialogue journal is an independent, reflective writing activity. The difference, however, is

that students write in dialogue form in a dialogue journal and engage in a written conversation with their teacher. Like a personal journal, dialogue journals usually span a long period of time, such as an entire course session, and entries do not get corrected or edited (Holmes & Moulton, 1997).

Without a teacher's comments or corrections, the dialogue journal process shelters the ELL, while fostering a simulated, conversation-like writing opportunity. Holmes and Moulton point out that, "the students believed that the journals enhanced their motivation to write..."(p.616). In particular, the authors credit the natural, conversation-like style of the dialogue journal to be the driving force for success: "A further examination of the context of the participants' comments revealed that specific attributes of journal writing that are similar to conversation might account for their perceived improvements"(p.617). They add that, while dialogue journal writing may appear to, "...mirror the act of conversation (p.618), the journal writing itself is completed independently and, in essence, is a one-directional written conversation with the teacher as audience (Holmes & Moulton, 1997).

One downside of dialogue journals is that the non-interactive nature of this written conversation style lacks the natural rhythm and negotiations we expect to participate in during real conversations. Besides, the dialogue journal writer's audience is the teacher (Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Mansor, Shafie, Maesin, Nayan, & Osman, 2011). Holmes and Moulton (1997) also point out this gap in considerations for future dialogue journal writing studies when stating, "Furthermore, is it necessary that the dialogue partner be the teacher?" (p.621). We can imagine that the language, tone, and style of a written dialogue created for a student's peer audience outside of the classroom, for example, may evoke a different flavor. This inherent lack of realistic interaction with others during the writing conversation, and the limits of a teacher as audience, creates room for improvement as a multi-skill writing model.

Nevertheless, the conversational undertone of dialogue journal writing is worth pursuing as a communicative-based writing model for the ELL. According to Richard Orem (2001), "Communication, not totally correct language forms, is the goal" (p.73) in classrooms focused on integrating all four language skills. Jungkang Kim (2005) notes that for adult language learners, dialogue journals not only strengthen the teacher-student relationship, but also create a sense of community within the classroom when personal reflections are shared and read by the teacher (p.26). Here, Kim (2005) finds that dialogue journals help teachers develop "better communication with individual students" (p.25). It seems natural to extend the inherent relationship-building benefits of the dialogue journal to include students' peer relationships as well.

By adding a collaborative feature to the dialogue journal, we view a model which "expresses students' genuine discourse" (Mansor et al., 2011, p.156). In this collaborative model, reflective journal entries are written in dialogue form then exchanged with classmates for written feedback and peer discussion. Students benefit when the dialogue of rich, life experiences can be articulated (Alexander, 2003 as cited in Mansor et al., 2011).

Collaborative Writing

Collaborative writing can be an effective instructional model to teach native and second language writers at all levels. Verbal negotiation is necessary when writers collaborate and share the writing process. Thus, collaborative writing provides writers with opportunities for peer interaction during the writing process. Here, students benefit by directly interacting with peers to assemble, revise, and produce a shared piece of writing that can be categorized as having "joint ownership" (Storch, 2011, p.275). Storch (2011) also illustrates how this collaborative interaction affords peer conversations which require writers to use and filter language: "That is, collaborative writing avails learners with opportunities to deliberate about their own and their peers' language use as they attempt to create meaning"(p.285). Yung Fung (2010) reinforces that, "The most prominent defining feature of collaborative

writing is the social interactions among the members" (p.19). Through collaboration, teachers can guide writers to articulate real-life conversations with their peers.

The Role of Voices

How are these peer conversations different from the conversations non-collaborative journals foster for just the teacher? Can a speaker's audience determine the tone, word choice, and style of dialogue? Stephen Phelps and Dera Weaver (1999) examine the voices used in the classroom, and determine that students posses "public" and "personal" voices (p. 320). On one hand, personal voices are classified as the voices students use to express their private self, feelings, and thoughts. Phelps and Weaver (1999) clarify that, "Public voices, on the other hand, are those contributions that students make to the public discourse of the classroom and school" (p.323). Since students' public, formal voices may be reserved for the teacher and academic environment, students' private or personal voices are the ones most ignored in the classroom (Gilmore, 2007). Integrating peer collaboration with personal journal reflections, can be an effective way for students to articulate their personal voices in the classroom.

An Introduction to the
Audio Script Writing Workshop

We can conclude that collaboration and dialogue writing activities create opportunities for students to articulate their voices (academic and personal) during the writing process. The weakest model, the dialogue journal with teacher as audience, focuses on a safe arena for students to build conversations, in spoken form. Still, it lacks verbal interaction and an authentic audience. With collaborative dialogue journal writing in particular, language skills are integrated through authentic negotiations about the writing process with a peer audience. This peer audience simulates the outside world, where private voices are needed to engage in

daily life. Dele Ashade (2011) reminds us that these, "conversations provide learners with ample opportunities to use the language themselves for communicative purposes in ESL classrooms" (p.13). One might wonder if we can take the beneficial parts of collaborative dialogue journal writing as a building block, and take it one step further by bringing the outside world into the classroom. Robert DiPietro (1981) points out that "real life provides much raw material for classroom scenarios" (p.33). To bring pieces of the real world into the classroom, Chandrika Mohan (2012) recommends simply using teaching aids to, "bring the outside world into the classroom" (p.12).

Al-Ansari and Wigzell (1996) conducted a study focusing on the use of a tape-recorder's role as an, "audio-lingual aid" in the second language classroom, and not just a device for listening. Listening, Al-Ansari and Wigzell (1996) determine, does not require negotiation. Here, we can see a recording device playing a non-verbal, linear role for students, since it promotes passive listening without interaction or conversation. But, as a tool, in conjunction with recording student conversations for playback, a recording device can serve as an asset in the second language classroom.

Implementing the Audio Script
Writing Workshop in the Classroom

The following audio script writing workshop was developed to strengthen students' personal voices by combining dialogue writing, peer collaboration, and students' personal voices using an audio recording component. While developing this writing model, Miller (2012) recognizes that "as students' tapestry of diversity, dialects, and cultural backgrounds evolves, so does the fabric of our students' voices" (p.1). Below, a 10-step ESL Audio Script Writing Workshop is illustrated. Developed in a University Intensive English Program, the script writing workshop was integrated into a 10-week Idioms course.

1. Humorous Transcript and Dialogue Recording
   as Anticipatory Set

To introduce the project, students interact with a written transcript model of a humorous dialogue source, such as Abbott and Costello's classic comedy skit, "Who's On First". This classic 9-minute skit is accessible online and easily found as an audio file or (Youtube) video clip. The Baseball Almanac website (www.baseball-almanac.com/humor4.shtml) includes the full, printable transcript of the hysterical dialogue in addition to the audio recording. After a basic introduction to baseball positions, students find humor in reading the transcript to each other in pairs as an anticipatory set. The "Who's On First" audio recording (www.baseball-almanac.com/humor4.shtml) and video clip (www.youtube.com).

This introductory step not only models the role of a transcript in conjunction with an audio recording, but also illustrates the role humor plays in dialogue. The room usually fills with students' laughter as they read the dialogue and take on new, humorous roles. We can extend or modify this humorous transcript model by using popular television sitcoms like Friends, as Scollon suggests (as cited in Gilmore, 2007). Students explore the role of transcripts and humor with the integration of free, published Friends transcripts (www.friendstranscripts.tk) and video clips (www.YouTube.com) available online. For this ESL Audio Script Writing Workshop, Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" was used as the workshop introduction, as previously described. Next, short sections of Friends transcripts were read (www.friendstranscripts.tk) and video clips were viewed in 10-minute sessions throughout the course. Interaction with authentic transcript models and sitcom characters became a springboard for students, guiding the creation of their own characters in their writing. Here, the connection is strengthened between the role of dialogue in a written transcript and the characters behind the written words.

2. Integrating Idioms or Other Content

For this course model, idiomatic expressions were used as the basis for written dialogues. Idiomatic expressions (idioms)such as, look on the bright side, down in the dumps, and live from hand to mouth can stand alone as a complete expression. Such idioms, as Guduru (2012) defines, are "pre-constructed phrases" (p.486). For a beginning activity, students can integrate ten idiomatic expressions into a 10-line dialogue and highlight or underline each idiom. Here, the use of idioms makes creating humorous dialogue easy. For example, phrases like it's not my cup of tea can serve as a complete line of dialogue. Nevertheless, the content selected to embed into dialogues can be modified to include an instructor's current vocabulary list. The integration of idioms or vocabulary becomes the foundation of the writing workshop and is individualized to accommodate learning objectives.

3. Re-examination of Transcripts

The next step is to help students begin to understand the goal of working collaboratively to write a group script. This can be accomplished by re-examining the written transcripts from Friends, other television sitcoms, or Abbott and Costello's Who's On First as authentic models. The transcript below is part of an online-retrieved transcript of a Friends episode (www.friendstranscripts.tk). The transcript illustrates how written words connect to real characters. It provides students with an authentic template for script writing. At this stage, in-class opportunities exist for students to select a character, highlight lines, and role play the script aloud as a group activity. [Scene: Central Perk, Rachel is talking to a customer.]

Rachel: Okay, okay, I checked. We have: Earl Grey, English Breakfast, Cinnamon Stick, Camomile, Mint Medley, Blackberry, and.. oh, wait, there's one more, um.. Lemon Soother. You're not the guy that asked for the tea, are you? (Guy shakes his head) Okay.

[Scene: Central Perk, Monica enters with some mail.]
Monica: Mail call, Rachel Green, bunk seven.

Rachel: Thank you. (Examines it) Oh, cool! Free sample of coffee!

Monica: Oh good! 'Cause where else would we get any?

Rachel: Oh. Right. ...Oh great.

Monica: What is it?

Rachel: Country club newsletter. My mother sends me the engagement notices for 'inspiration.' Oh my God! Oh my God, it's Barry and Mindy!

Monica: Barry who you almost...?

Rachel: Barry who I almost.

Monica: And Mindy, your maid of...?

Rachel: Mindy, my maid of. Oh!

Monica: (Takes it) That's Mindy? Wow, she is pretty. (Sees Rachel's look) Lucky. To have had a friend like you.

[Scene: Monica and Rachel's, Rachel and Ross are eating Chinese.]

Ross: Marcel. Bring me the rice, c'mon. Bring me the rice, c'mon. Good boy. Good boy. C'mere, gimme the rice. (Marcel brings the rice) Thank you, good boy. Well, I see he's finally mastered the difference between 'bring me the' and 'pee in the'. (Rachel ignores him) 'Bring me the' and- Rach?

Rachel: What?

Ross: Hi.

Rachel: Oh, I'm sorry. Oh, this is so stupid! I mean, I gave Barry up, right? I should be happy for them! I am, I'm happy for them.

Ross: Really.

Here, personal voices are highlighted as words move beyond the written form and take on roles that mimic life outside the classroom while learners are scaffolded towards their own script creation.

4. Pre-writing

From here, the next phase of the audio script project is to transition students into writing groups and begin the pre-writing stage. Writing groups should consist of members at a similar writing level. The best results are achieved when the group tapestry reflects a diverse blend of cultures, native languages, and personalities.

The first pre-writing step is for students to negotiate an idea for a scene. A useful online script-writing resource can help shape students' idea of the basic parts of a good story (www.scriptfrenzy.org). Script Frenzy, a comprehensive resource for teachers, contains a copyright-free, downloadable script-writing workbook. Here we find guides, graphic organizers, and a myriad of additional tools to assist writers in developing plot, humor, characters, cliffhangers, monologues, or resolutions. The depth to which teachers decide to develop the script, during this stage, is optional. Any of the above-mentioned writing extensions can be explored via mini-lessons, or integrated later during the revision stage. For example, students can revisit scripts to add bits of humor or insert a monologue to fill a plot gap. At the very minimum, students must understand that scripts need to contain an initial action, rising action, climax, and resolution.

Graphic organizers can be in hand while groups engage in discussions to outline the script and incorporate fundamental story components. Figure 1 is a Script Frenzy graphic organizer which can be used to negotiate script ideas. Meanwhile, the teacher guides students as they brainstorm the scene's direction and note final plot decisions on the graphic organizer.

Figure 1. Script Frenzy Plot Outline Graphic Organizer

Now, fill out your very own plot roller coaster using the plot outline you just made.

5. Collaborative Dialogue Writing

Once the teacher has reviewed each groups' plot outline, it is time for students to create a first draft. Before writing, groups need to have a list of at least ten content vocabulary words or, in this case, idiomatic expressions to embed into the dialogue. For an introductory start, ten idioms or content vocabulary words are used to create a ten-line dialogue, with one idiom used in each of the ten lines. This ten-idiom format can be lengthened as students get more proficient and create more complex scripts. As students write, content idioms are integrated into the script and highlighted or underlined. Throughout this collaborative dialogue-writing process, expect laughter, personal voices, and students' unique personalities to be heard.

A collaborative student script sample developed during an audio course workshop is found below, with

idiomatic expressions underlined. Noted in parenthesis, simple sound effects are added into the script to complete the dialogue scene. The dialogue reverberates with linguistic diversity. Here, student-generated characters take on roles that include the curt Saudi Arabian boss, a competitive Chinese spy, and a success-driven Russian employee.

Collaborative Student Script Sample
(Names are Pseudonyms)

Scene: Kara applies for a job at a telecom company, whose President is Mike. She gets the job, but discovers that Jen, Mike's assistant, is stealing money from the company. In the end, Kara helps to save the company.

[Scene Opening: Kara's living room]

Kara: Oh my goodness! This telecom company is hiring new graduates right now! Should I apply? I think I should, or maybe I shouldn't? No, I will apply because I have the *guts* to get this job.

[Scene 1: The telecom company's conference room]

Mike: All the people that applied today were not impressive, non of them will get the job, they're all *flakes*.

Jen: I understand sir, but there is one more girl who is waiting outside. Let's just hope she *has what it takes*.

Mike: *Fat chance*! All the people from this city are idiots, none of them are worthy of working in my company. I don't even know why I asked them to apply for jobs *in the first place*.

Kara: (high heels sound) Hello, I'm Kristina. I have just graduated with a business degree.

Mike: Interesting. Tell me Kristina, why did you pick

my company among all the companies that are offering jobs right now?

Kara: (coughs) Well, *in my opinion*, your company or should I say organization allows me to work in my studied field. So that means, I will be doing just what I was taught.

Jen: But you do realize this is not studying- this is real life work. There is a lot of *money on the line*. You make one mistake, half of *the money is gone* and you will *get the ax.*

Kara: I do realize that, so that's why I took the co-op program that the University offers for its students.

Mike: You know what? You *impressed me!* You got the job!

Kara (enthusiastically): Really? Oh, thank you very much! I promise to improve this company *even more*!

Jen (*rolling her eyes*): That's what they always say.

6. Listening to Dialogue Readings

The next feature of the workshop includes students reading printed scripts in groups for the class. This step has two-fold benefits, including providing a listening experience for peers and allowing students' personal voices to play a role in classroom instruction. This activity also serves as a scaffold to the final audio recording of scripts, with the sheltered support of a group for a peer audience. Peer feedback can be offered, too, in oral or written (rubric) form at this point.

7. Printed Script Revisions

In the seventh step, script drafts are revised. The

benefit of having an oral script reading before this step allows for the audience's perspective. Peer listeners can provide revision feedback by noting where character lines fall short or gaps appear in the plot. At this point, any weaknesses in the script structure are revised, along with mechanics, grammar, etc. Teachers can, if desired, return to the Script Frenzy online guidelines as tools to support students' weaknesses in character development, plot, humor, creating action, etc.

8. The Recording Process

Before recording, students are encouraged to read through scripts several times in front of their peers. The scripts support the students as they read the roles and have the security of the text being in front of them. Guided by the teacher, groups are transitioned to the recording stage. Simulating the in-class reading, students read scripts and are recorded. Any recording device that is comfortable for the teacher is acceptable.

A hand-held microphone, computer with speakers, or an iphone's microphone are some options for recording live script readings. The suggestion is to use a method that creates the easiest transition for a recording to be accessible for in-class playback listening. High quality scripts were recorded an iphone's microphone feature in conjunction with external speakers. This digital format, for example, can easily be saved as a file and burned to a CD for follow-up listening.

During the recording process, basic sound effects can be added to create an authentic scene. Classmates and group members can open and close doors, laugh, sneeze, or clap. Furthermore, an unlimited amount of computer-generated sound effects are also available to integrate. Sound effects must be negotiated before the recording and roles be assigned to the audience if needed. Smoothly integrating these types of sound effects may mean a few additional recording attempts, but undoubtedly turns the script into a scene.

9. Voices Worth Hearing

Once scripts have been recorded and available as an audio recording, they are played in class. Listened to in isolation or in conjunction with students' printed transcript, the audio script writing workshop now comes full circle as students end with an activity just like the "Who's on First" model examined at the beginning of the workshop. The biggest difference, of course, is that students read their own writing and hear characters which emerge from their own voices.

10. A Script Collection

At the close of the audio script workshop, group scripts can be copied and published as a script collection or booklet. The audio recordings, too, can be collected on an audio CD. These student-created, multi-dimensional artifacts filled with students' voices, make authentic project models for future workshops.

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