

Dialogue Journals as Mediators of L2 Learning: A Sociocultural Account

Abstract: This study explores weekly dialogue journal communication as a form of mediation in L2 learning. Situating dialogue journals within the Vygotskian sociocultural theoretical framework (SCT), data is examined from the journals of eight learners (four high-frequency classroom participators and four low-frequency participators) in an intact intermediate college Spanish class. Data analysis sheds light on the unique ways that dialogue journals function as mediators of: a) identification as a language learner and reflection on language learning experiences, b) consolidation of course content as evidenced in the reporting of personal experiences and opinions relating to topics covered in class c) use of language functions stressed in the classroom. It is concluded that the dialogue journal is an interactive writing environment in which learner goals and agency can comprise an important part of the learning process.

Key Words: dialogue journals, intermediate Spanish, mediation, Vygotskian sociocultural theory

1.0 Introduction: Dialogue Journals

Traditionally, writing in the L2 class is not conceived of as interactive. Much academic writing, in fact, takes place in a social vacuum, with students expected to write on a topic selected by the teacher (Williams Mlynarczyk, 1998). Dialogue journals, however, constitute an interactive form of writing which situates writing within the social context of the classroom (Mayher, 1990). Staton et al. (1988) define the dialogue journal as “the use of a journal for the purpose of carrying out a written conversation between two persons, in this case a student and the teacher, on a regular, continual basis” (4). The literature has examined a number of linguistic, social, and cognitive aspects of dialogue journal communication in language learning contexts. Dialogue journals have been shown to provide learners with a communicative forum in which to carry out a wide range of language functions, including questions, challenges, and discussion of feelings (Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988). In a language and culture course for teachers conducted in Spain, Bacon (1995) demonstrated how learners transformed their dialogue journals into a forum in which to express their observations, feelings and opinions about the foreign culture. Nassaji and Cumming (2000) showed that the dialogue journal is a robust context in which to activate and advance a learner’s zone of proximal development.

In most L2 classrooms, group size severely limits the teacher’s ability to focus on individual learners. Dialogue journals can overcome this classroom restriction because the teacher reads the journals individually and has sufficient time to respond to them. Learners also have more time to produce language in their journals as compared to the classroom, relieving them of the pressure of on-the-spot language production. Learners can think about what they want to write before they write it, and can check language reference sources if they are unsure about certain grammatical structures or vocabulary. Finally, all previous journal content is at learner’s and teacher’s disposal as both record of progress and reference tool.

2.0 Sociocultural Theory

There is by now a rather extensive body of second language acquisition (SLA) research framed in Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT). SCT operates on the assumption that human

cognitive development cannot take place independent of its social context. For Vygotsky (1978; 1962) development occurs as the result of meaningful verbal interaction between novices and experts or more knowledgeable peers, such as parents or teachers. SCT is distinguished from mainstream (psycholinguistic) approaches to SLA in its heavy emphasis on social interaction rather than on the internal mechanisms of the mind.

2.1 Mediation and the Use of Tools

Vygotsky (1978; 1962) postulated a process by which “lower” mental functions, such as elementary perception, memory, and attention, are transformed into “higher”, or culturally-mediated functions, such as conceptual thought, planning, and problem solving. Such transformations are brought about by *mediation* and *tools*. Mediation, in Vygotskian terms, is the process by which human action is shaped by the use of cultural tools. Individuals have at their disposal a variety of psychological tools, one of the most important of which is language. Wertsch (1991) suggested that mediational means be viewed in terms of items that make up a *tool kit*. Lantolf (2000) refers to *social mediation* (verbal discourse), *self-mediation* (private speech), and *artifact mediation*, which might include such items as portfolios or computers.

For SCT theorists, social discourse is the primary locus of cognitive development. In discourse an expert or more knowledgeable interlocutor and a learner co-construct meaning with each other, during which the more knowledgeable peer guides the learner toward some communicative or cognitive goal. Vygotsky (1978) used the term *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) to describe “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). The more knowledgeable peer determines the nature of the learner’s ZPD and provides fine tuned assistance known as *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

Recent studies have captured the essence of mediation at work in L2 learning (for example, Donato & McCormick, 1994; Sullivan, 2000; Swain, 2000). In a study on learner portfolios, In Donato’s and McCormick’s (1994) study, their teacher education students prepared portfolios of their progress in the course. By the end of the course, the researchers detected evidence of professional development in these students in the form of progressive specificity of ideas and goals related to teaching. On the basis of such evidence the researchers concluded that: “initially unfocused learning actions may become adjusted and modified based on how the learning of the language is mediated. Mediation is, thus, the instrument of cognitive change” (456). Donato and McCormick refer to other potential mediators in L2 learning, including textbooks, visual material, classroom discourse patterns, opportunities for L2 interaction, types of direct instruction, and various kinds of teacher assistance. In the L2 class, it is the teacher’s challenge to implement forms of mediation that will facilitate learners’ acquisition processes and the researcher’s challenge to investigate the nature of mediation in action in language learning.

2.2 Activity Theory and Learner Agency

Two constructs which have become important to SCT research on language learning are activity theory and learner agency. Activity theory posits three levels of analysis of individuals at work on a particular task: *activity*, *action* and *operation*. The activity level refers to the social context and includes assumptions about the appropriate roles, goals, and means to be used by the

participants in the setting (Lantolf 1994). The individual's motive is important to this level, as without a motive there would be no activity. The action level is the concrete goal or intended outcome of the activity, which is often broken down into subgoals. Finally, the operations are the specific physical and/or mental means by which an activity is carried out. The activity or motive, then, tells *why* an activity is carried out, the action tells *what* is carried out, and the operations tell *how* something is done.

Studies carried out in the activity theoretical framework demonstrate the importance of considering learners' motives and goals in given tasks, instead of focusing entirely on the specific actions and/or language forms employed to complete the task. Coughlan and Duff (1994), gave a picture description task to different individuals to elicit specific language structures and lexical items and found that, even with a relatively controlled task, a range of discourse types resulted from subjects' multiple interpretation of a task and other interpersonal factors. Roebuck found that learners engaged in a written recall of content of Spanish journalistic texts not only had an orientation to the task which was different from that of the researcher, but the learners also *changed* their own orientation to the task as the task developed (Roebuck, 2000). Appel and Lantolf (1994) contend that performance on any task is a function of the interaction between individual and task rather than on some inherent properties of the task itself.

Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) define the individual's role in social interaction as learner *agency*: "We believe that learners have to be seen as more than processing devices that convert linguistic input into well-formed (or not so well formed) outputs. They need to be understood as people, which in turn means we need to appreciate their human agency. As agents, learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning" (145). SCT theorists argue that the learner's agency should be given the opportunity to manifest itself. Allowing learners the autonomy to choose their own topics of discussion, for example, can be an important aspect of their L2 development. Hall (1995) demonstrated this in a study (cited in Lantolf, 2000) in which a teacher who often had a specific agenda for each class activity consequently missed opportunities to acknowledge the communicative interests of his students and with this the chance to work with them in their ZPD.

2.4 Sociocultural Theory and Mainstream Theories of SLA

The developing prominence of SCT has encouraged many SLA scholars to either defend or reconsider the fundamental objectives of this field of inquiry. Firth and Wagner sparked a debate which was played out in a special edition of the *Modern Language Journal* in 1997 (see especially Long, 1997), by arguing for a reconceptualization of SLA theory on three dimensions: "(a) a significantly enhanced awareness of the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use, (b) an increased emic (i.e., participant-relevant) sensitivity towards fundamental concepts, and (c) the broadening of the traditional SLA database" (Firth & Wagner, 1997: 286). Firth and Wagner's principal disagreements with mainstream SLA are the following: 1) psycholinguistic SLA is biased towards linguistic aspects of language at the expense of the social contexts, 2) language learners are often considered deficient language users in the sense that they are compared to native speakers and are studied as if they do not take an active role in their language development, and 3) the SLA research base ought to include the "successful employment of communicative resources – as indicators of the dynamics of S/FL acquisition" (Firth & Wagner, 1997: 296). Echoing Firth and Wagner, Crookes argues the need for more

holistic rather than analytical studies of SLA, as well as for case studies conducted by teacher-researchers (Crookes, 1997).

The current study aims to serve as an example of holistic teacher-research studies called for by Crookes.

3.0 The Study

The study was conducted in an intact third-semester intermediate Spanish course at a large semi-private university in Pennsylvania.¹ The curriculum employed an integrated-skills approach (listening, speaking, reading and writing) within a task- and content-based program. The tasks assigned in the text had clear linguistic and communicative goals, and were divided into sequenced subtasks (Lee & VanPatten, 1995). The textbook was organized into units that tightly integrated grammatical structures with thematic topics (Lee, Wolf, Young, & Chandler, 2000). The three unit themes covered in the course were communication, superstitions and other popular beliefs, and television. The principal grammatical structures emphasized were past tense verbs (preterite and imperfect), and the subjunctive mood. Learners were expected to employ these grammatical structures both orally and in writing in language functions such as past narration, question formation, and stating opinions using embedded clauses. The teacher, who was also the researcher, was a non-native speaker of Spanish and had substantial experience in using dialogue journals in college Spanish classes.

3.1 Participants and Journals

Eight learners from a class of fifteen were the participants in this study (all were 19 – 21 years old; all were female except for L2 and L7). The learners were selected by “purposive sampling” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) based on their oral participation in class as observed by the teacher during the first several weeks of class: four of the learners typically participated very frequently in class (“high frequency classroom participators”) and four of them participated infrequently (“low frequency classroom participators”). Such selection was made for data reduction purposes and to provide for a more interesting analysis of dialogue journal communication by dealing with learners at opposite ends of a spectrum.

Learners were asked to keep a weekly journal beginning the second week of class. They were instructed to hand write a minimum of three double-spaced pages per entry in a spiral notebook. To give learners extensive L2 writing practice, the journal entries were to be written in Spanish. Learners were permitted to choose their own topics but it was suggested to them to react to topics covered in class, and/or their experiences as Spanish learners. The teacher responded to journal entries as an interested conversation partner rather than as a Spanish language authority, requesting clarification or related information and making related personal comments and opinions. In order to maintain a non-threatening environment in the journals, error correction was kept to a minimum and learners were not penalized for grammatical inaccuracy. Learners were afforded other opportunities to compose written compositions in which error correction was given more importance. As the journals changed hands weekly, they began to take shape as a personal dialogue between learners and the teacher. Following appropriate research protocol, learners signed a permission form to release their journal data to the teacher-researcher for publication purposes. The teacher-researcher never informed the

learners of the particular research questions involved in the study; in fact, the research questions were derived at the end of the semester when nearly all data had been collected.

3.2 Research Questions

As is common practice in the qualitative research tradition of which this study is a part, the researcher made multiple passes through the journal data in search of interesting phenomena on which to focus and study further. From this three research questions emerged: In what ways do dialogue journals mediate:

- 1) identification as a language learner and reflection on language learning experiences?
- 2) use of targeted language structures and functions?
- 3) consolidation of course content?

3.3 Data Analysis

To reduce the corpus of journal data, three weeks of journal entries were selected for analysis: weeks two, six and ten. The entries were cataloged according to topics discussed, and phenomena relating to the three research questions were coded in the data (reference to learner identity and to course content, and use of targeted language functions). The data reported below in Tables 1, 2 and 3 were subject to interrater reliability by having a colleague familiar with the study verify the researcher's coding procedures, and then a third rater to settle any disagreements.²

3.3.1 Basic Units of Analysis

To answer research question one, concerning references to learner identity, the basic units of analysis were categories that evolved in the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) outline a procedure for data coding and indexing which begins with a "start list" of potential categories generated from experience or theory. During multiple passes through the data, patterns are noted and categories are created, eliminated or revised according to each new piece of data that is added.

Topic was the primary unit of data for analysis of research question two, concerning discussion of course content. Vygotsky (1962), addressing the basic problem of understanding human behavior and particularly human language in use, spoke of the need to identify the smallest observable units of analysis which retain all the basic properties of the whole. In dialogue journals teachers and learners engage in discussion of topics of interest, thus the topic represents a meaningful unit of language behavior (Staton et al, 1988: 13). Looking at topics also allows the data analysis to take on an emic (learner-centered) perspective, due to the fact that the learners in this study nominated their own topics.

Keenan and Schiefflin (1976) noted that topic identification may be difficult to categorize neatly due to the dynamic, functional nature of topics. In dialogue journals, as in oral discourse, topics often change, merge, and are elaborated. This study follows the topic-identification approach used by Shuy (1981) in his analysis of videotaped conversations. Shuy suggests three criteria to provide a workable method of determining topic boundaries: a) change of subject focus, marked by lexical items and evaluative structures to indicate the writer's focus, b) structural evidence such as lexical markings ("Concerning..., Relating to...) and new paragraphs or sentences, and c)

internal cohesion and anaphoric devices. Using these criteria, the entire text of each of the three journal entries was separated into topics and coded for analysis.

To answer research question three regarding language functions, syntactic cues were utilized. Past narrations were identified by means of preterite and imperfect verbs (or in some cases, the researcher's interpretation that the writer *intended* the verb form to be preterite/imperfect), as well as by the use of past time adverbials such as "ayer", "el verano pasado", etc. Questions were identified by the use of question marks, and statements of opinion were identified according to the use of an expression "creo que" followed by an embedded clause (explained in more detail in section 4.3).

4.0 Results and Discussion: Identification as Spanish Learner

In the SCT view, learners assume at least partial responsibility for their cognitive development. If learners indeed take such responsibility, then they might describe in their journals issues relating to their engagement in the L2 learning process. *Identification as a Spanish learner* is defined as any reference to experiences relating to the learning of Spanish. An initial pass through the data generated the following categories: accomplishments in the L2, challenges or difficulties with the L2, enjoyment of learning the L2, goals, statements about the learning process, questions for the teacher concerning the language and/or culture, and mention of experiences with the language outside of class. Table 1 indicates the categories of reference to learner identity that occurred in each entry, as well as one representative example from each journal entry.

Table 1: References to Spanish Learner Identity

	Week 2	Week 6	Week 10
High Frequency Classroom Participators			
L1	E, X, X/C : Cuando estuve con la familia mexicana, estuve muy nerviosa para hablar en español con ellos.	E, X, X, G : La noche pasada, ¡sueñé en español!	X,X/Q, G/A : No puedo esperar a visitar México (on a church mission). Muchas personas no podrán hablar con ellos, pero yo sí..
L2	X, X, E/X : Es verdad que canté el canción “Los ojos negros” en la escuela secundaria (cita la letra de la canción). Oíste la canción “Que viva España”?	X, E/L, X Descubrí una palabra mala en mi diccionario. Se llama “joder”. Es un diccionario bueno, ¿no? El español es una lengua interesante..	Q, G: Hablé con mi madre y ella es seguro que vamos a viajar a Cancún este verano. Voy a practicar mi español.
L3	X, G : posible el año proximo, quiero estudiar en España, porque podré aprender la lengua y las costumbres mucho mejor.	E, L : Pienso que es importante a hablar con otros estudiantes afuera de la clase en español.	X : Cuando fue en la biblioteca anoche, leí un periódico que se llama “el País. Es de España y los artículos fueron muy interesantes.
L4	(No references to learner identity).	C, E/L : Me gusta todos los actividades que hacemos para la tarea. Leer y escribir en español es muy bien para aprender.	C/L, C/L Odio “por” y “para”. Nunca me requiero cuando usar uno o el otro.
Low Frequency Classroom Participators			
L5	(No references to learner identity).	(No references to learner identity).	Q: Se usan “buenos días” por la tarde o por la noche en Puerto Rico?
L6	C : Este semestre español es muy difícil para mi.	(No references to learner identity).	E/A, G : Hoy en su clase, yo me gusta su lectura [de Cristina]. Yo participé mucho, o mas que normal.
L7	E, C: A mí me gusta español tres. Español tres es mucho trabajo.	Q : ¿Sabes si Ecuador es una buena país para “Study Abroad”?	G: Quiero decir gracias para el ayuda me dio sobre mi futuro y study abroad.
L8	C, C/L, C/L : Yo tengo muchas metas. Número uno, yo necesito hablar más en clase. Siguiete, necesito hablar español o oír español fuera de clase.	(No references to learner identity).	(No references to learner identity).

Key:

A= Accomplishments in the L2

C= Challenge, difficulty

E= Enjoyment

G= Goals

L= Learning process

Q= Question/request for information about the language/culture

X= Real life experiences

In Table 1, L1-L4 are those learners that participated frequently in class, while L5-L8 are those who participated infrequently. As Table 1 shows, all learners made references to their Spanish-learning process in at least one of the three journal entries, and all but two did so in two or all three entries. The learners reflected upon a variety of personal experiences with the Spanish language. Some of the comments specifically mention acquisition of certain grammatical structures or vocabulary words, whereas others relate to experiences using Spanish outside of class, and many of the comments refer to cultural aspects of the Spanish language and Spanish speakers. The nature of the comments seems to indicate that many of the learners in this cohort are actively involved in their language learning process.

Comparing the two groups³, it can be seen that all of the high frequency classroom participators discussed aspects of their Spanish-learning experience in all of the journal entries, with the exception of L4, who only made such references in two of the three entries. In the second group, L7 made references to Spanish-learner identity in all three journal entries, and L6 made references in two of the three entries. L5 and L8, however, only mentioned issues related to Spanish learning in one entry. There does not appear to be much difference between the two groups then, in terms of whether or not they made mention of their language learning experiences, except for the two learners in the second group who only reflected on this topic in one of the three entries (L5 and L8). It should be kept in mind, however, that only three journal entries out of ten were selected for analysis, and that learners from either group may have made additional comments in the journal entries that remain outside of this data set.

A few more points are worth mentioning about the Table 1 data. First, six of the learners mentioned being aware of their language learning process and/or committed to practicing the Spanish language both inside and outside of the classroom. Five of the six expressed specific plans to gain more experience with the language in a travel or study abroad context. Comments such as these bring learners' inner thoughts to the social plane with their teacher. Through interaction in the journal, the thoughts become shared information. With the teacher's knowledge about language acquisition and life in some Spanish speaking cultures, the learner's thoughts can be expanded upon, adjusted and refined, and transformed into a learning experience.

Contrary to learner comments about learning goals and achievements, one learner (L4) mentioned a specific difficulty with Spanish, that of distinguishing between the Spanish prepositions "por" and "para" (both of which translate to, among other things, "for" in English). It has been suggested, if not empirically proven in the literature, that when an L1 structure such as the English preposition "for" is semantically split into two structures in the L2, such structures will present the L2 learner with significant difficulty (Danesi & DiPietro, 1991). An initial step in mastering problematic L2 structures is *becoming aware* of the difficulty (Schmidt, 1990). Writing about such learning challenges in the journal objectifies the challenges and makes them available to be reflected upon, after which additional exposure and/or instruction may better assist the learner in acquisition of the structure(s). A final observation on the learner comments in Table 2 relates to participant L1's week six entry about dreaming in Spanish. Reaching the point of actually dreaming in the L2 can be considered a significant milestone in a learner's L2 development (Cook). As with L4's statement about the difficulty of learning "por" and "para", L1's recording of the dream in Spanish objectifies this language learning event, which may potentially enhance the event's significance in the learner's L2 development.

Comments such as those in Table 1 open a window on learner cognition, which can empower researchers and teachers in gaining a more fine tuned understanding of individual learner variables such as the nature of their ZPD, as well as learner goals, interests and experiences. Lantolf & Pavlenko (2001) have cogently demonstrated that individuals are agents in charge of their own learning. Gillette (1994) similarly made the important point that learner goals play a pivotal role in the language learning success. The data in Table 1 suggest that the learners in this study not only have an awareness of their language learning processes, a necessary first step in language development, but they demonstrated themselves in their dialogue journals to be active agents in their L2 development. This is one of the ways in which the learners appropriated the dialogue journal and transformed it into a personalized interactive writing forum.

4.1 Consolidation of Course Content

The learners in this study were encouraged, but not required, to write in their journals about topics discussed in the classroom. Weekly topics were not assigned, but rather left open to learners. It was hypothesized that if learners chose to write about course topics in their journals, they would demonstrate their reflection on the topics, which could in turn strengthen or solidify their knowledge or make it more coherent. Learner discussion of course content in this study is therefore referred to as *consolidation* of course content. Language teachers may sometimes feel the need to obligate learners to write about course content. In this study, however, the journals were implemented as a communicative forum in which the learners had complete control over nominating their topics of discussion and what they wished to say about such topics.

Table 2 shows the number of topics, as well as the number and the percentage of sentences per journal entry that included references to course content.

Table 2
Number of Sentences and Percentage per Entry Related to Course Content

	Week Two		Week Six		Week Ten		Total	
High Frequency Classroom Participators								
L1	6/39	15%	26/41	63%	10/45	22%	42/125	34%
L2	0/38	0%	16/50	32%	6/52	12%	22/122	18%
L3	0/22	0%	30/30	100%	18/31	58%	48/83	58%
L4	16/26	62%	0/22	0%	12/30	40%	28/78	36%
Total	22/125	18%	72/143	50%	46/230	20%		
Low Frequency Classroom Participators								
L5	28/28	100%	30/44	68%	0/38	0%	58/110	53%
L6	0/33	0%	0/36	0%	0/32	0%	0/101	0%
L7	0/36	0%	0/36	0%	0/49	0%	0/121	0%
L8	3/18	17%	10/24	42%	14/29	48%	27/71	38%
Total	31/115	27%	40/140	29%	14/138	10%		

Topics: Week Two: communication, Week Six: superstitions, Week Ten: television

Looking at the Table 2 data by topic, Week Two (communication) produced a very similar pattern between the high frequency classroom participators and the low frequency classroom participators group. In each group, one of the learners discussed the topic at length (L4 and L5); one of them wrote about the topic briefly (L1 and L8), and two of them did not address the topic at all (L2, L3, L6, L7). Interestingly, the percentages for the second group are slightly higher this week than for the first group, 31/115 sentences, or 27% of the combined L5-L8 entries are dedicated to course content, compared to 22/125 or 18% in the L1-L4 group. Given that L1-L4 typically contributed frequently to discussion of course content in the classroom, whereas L5-L8 typically did not, the Week Two data suggest that the dialogue journals mediated consolidation of course content for these learners in a different way than did classroom participation (at least in this entry).

Both Week Six and Week Ten manifest a different pattern from Week Two, in that the high frequency classroom participators group clearly wrote more about course content than the low frequency participators group (72 sentences versus 40 sentences in Week Six and 46 versus 14 sentences in Week Ten). Discussion of topics other than those related to course content is not necessarily undesirable, but is rather a function of learner autonomy in nominating their own topics. In addition to course-related topics, learners wrote in their journals mainly about their lives, often in the present, but sometimes in the past and future. It is not counterintuitive that learners would stick to topics immediate to their own lives rather than discuss the more abstract topics introduced in the curriculum. According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines, intermediate level learners create language in very *familiar* contexts, using simple vocabulary (Omaggio, 2001). Advanced learners are more likely to venture into the abstract than are intermediate learners. The fact that more than half or nearly half of the content of nine of the 24 entries in Table 2 focused on course content rather than on

the learners' immediate lives may be a finding that these particular learners were at times peaking to advanced level proficiency.

4.2 Use of language functions in journal entries

Table 3 shows how many of the journal entries included use of the three targeted language functions: past narration, expression of opinion, and question formation.

Table 3
Use of Language Functions in Journal Entries

	Week Two			Week Six			Week Ten		
	Past	Opin	Quest	Past	Opin	Quest	Past	Opin	Quest
High Frequency Classroom Participators									
L1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
L2	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
L3	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
L4	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Low Frequency Classroom Participators									
L5	X			X		X	X	X	X
L6	X								
L7	X						X	X	X
L8	X	X		X	X		X	X	

As seen in Table 3, all learners narrated in the past in all three entries. Unlike the past narration function, the data concerning formation and support of opinions show a marked difference between the use of this function between the high frequency class participators and low frequency class participators. In this study, statement of opinion is operationalized as an expression such as, “Creo que, pienso que, etc., followed by an embedded dependent clause which may or may not require the subjunctive mood. Thus, simple statements such as, “Me gusta...”, without an embedded clause were not counted. The motivation for this definition is that the use of dependent clauses, and the use or non-use of the subjunctive within dependent clauses, is a specific objective of the Spanish III curriculum. Embedded clauses are important at the intermediate Spanish level because their use demonstrates a higher complexity than a simple sentence in Spanish. First, the Spanish learner must learn to conjugate both the verb in the main clause and the one in the dependent clause. Second, the sentence with the embedded clause is often longer than the simple sentence, giving learners more syntactic information to handle at once. Finally, in Spanish there are many pragmatic contexts that call for speakers or writers to decide whether to use the indicative or the subjunctive mood. Table 3 reveals that one learner (L1) made an opinion statement with a dependent clause in every journal entry, and the other three in the high frequency classroom participators group did so in two out of the three entries. In the low frequency classroom participators group, L8 performed the opinion function in two entries, whereas L5, L6 and L7 only did so in one entry. The explanation for L5, L6 and L7 may be that they avoided embedded clauses due to their syntactic complexity.

Although writing in the journals is only semi-voluntary, actual communication is completely voluntary (Morroy, 1985). To ask a question is to actively seek information from the interlocutor, which promotes dialogue. Of the high frequency classroom participators, L1 and L2 asked questions in every journal entry, and L3 and L4 asked questions in two of the three entries. It is apparent that these learners attempted to engage in dialogue with the teacher. As was the case with the opinion function, the low frequency classroom participators performed the question function less often than did the high frequency participators group, with the exception of L5, who asked questions in two of the three entries. L7 only asked questions in one entry, and the other two in the low frequency participators group asked no questions at all. Learners who carried out the question function less often may have had little or no interest in engaging in social interaction with the teacher in their journals, might not have known what to ask, or might have avoided the syntactic structure of question formation.

5.0 Conclusion: Dialogue Journals as Mediators of L2 Use and Development

This study has presented a snapshot of the dialogue journal as mediator of communicative L2 use among eight intermediate Spanish students. Specifically, it has shed light upon the unique ways in which the learners expressed their language learner identity, their consolidation of course content, and their use of targeted language functions. The learners utilized their journals as a forum in which to express accomplishments, challenges and difficulties, enjoyment, goals, real life experiences, and to ask questions about the Spanish language. As such, they demonstrated themselves to be active agents in their language learning process. The learners also made choices regarding the content to write about in their journals. Often as much as half or more than half of their entire entries were dedicated to course content, although in a few instances some learners chose to avoid course content almost entirely in favor of topics that were

more personalized and therefore perhaps more meaningful to them. Most of the learners in the cohort also made use of the language functions targeted in their syllabus, providing them an additional opportunity, beyond that of classroom discourse, to practice and therefore possibly help them to learn these language concepts.

Vygotsky believed that the introduction of new cultural tools transforms the mediation process, rather than simply facilitating forms of action that would otherwise occur (Vygotsky, 1981; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). As an interactive writing forum, dialogue journals are a unique variety of tool which provide a context where joint construction of meaning takes place between teacher and learner. An advantage of dialogue journals over classroom communication is that the journal format allows teachers to interact with learners on an individualized level, placing the learner at the center of L2 instruction. This individual focus is especially important given the fact that not all learners in the same class are at the same developmental level. Each one has a unique developing L2 linguistic system and vocabulary repertoire, as well as interests, motivations and goals. In the data presented in this study, for example, L6 performed very few of the targeted language functions, did not make reference to course content in any of the journal entries, and commented in one of the first entries that, “Este semestre español es muy difícil para mí”. Teachers who strive to determine the nature of the ZPD of their learners can focus in on the special needs of learners such as L6 and provide specific types of scaffolding to try to help the learner along her or his ZPD. Although such a dynamic can also occur in classroom oral interaction, it is not likely to occur often for each learner, given time and class size constraints on typical L2 classes.

Sociocultural theory brings to the study of SLA a new focus on the language learner as a social individual, as opposed to viewing interaction in terms of the specific linguistic characteristics of input and output that may affect the learner’s developing L2 linguistic system. With this new focus on the social individual comes the need to study the unique ways in which L2 learners utilize the tools of social mediation that are made available to them. The dialogue journal is an interesting research and pedagogical tool for several reasons. First, the interaction that takes place in dialogue journals is unique in that it is in written form but is also interactive. Second, dialogue journals provide a forum for extensive L2 communication and also constitute permanent, tangible evidence of ongoing L2 use and development, as well as a concrete manifestation of student thinking in semiotic form. Finally, the dialogue journal offers the opportunity for L2 learners to express and develop their agency, by using their L2 in ways that *they* wish to, instead of being assigned writing topics that may be of little or no interest to them. Doing so will provide teachers with a wealth of information about their students, which can personalize learning and make it more meaningful. The development of learner agency as well as L2 linguistic competence is an aspect of SLA research and pedagogy that needs to be fomented.

5.1 Limitations of this study

As an exploratory study of dialogue journal communication, the research presented here has a number of limitations. First, due to the qualitative, ethnographic nature of the study and the small number of participants involved, the findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other research and pedagogical contexts. Second, based on the data presented, no claims can be made regarding the specific effects of the dialogue journal exercise on these learners’ L2 development.

The data presented here could be used, however, to motivate carefully planned studies regarding specific quantifiable aspects of L2 development.

5.2 Recommendations for further practice and research

This study has constituted one example of dialogue journal communication couched in a sociocultural framework. There is room for more research into the dialogue journal as a mediational tool. More studies could be done centering on the teacher's role in promoting interaction in journals, with special emphasis on scaffolding and the learners' zone of proximal development. Dialogue journals can also be analyzed as a bridge to oral communication and/or formal writing skills.

A number of pedagogical recommendations can also be derived from this study. Teachers can use dialogue journals as a forum for discussion of course-related issues beyond the walls of the classroom, as well as allow learners to select their topics. Teachers can also connect journal content to class discussion by having students share what they write.

A potential disadvantage of dialogue journals is that reading them and providing feedback can be time consuming for the teacher, especially in large classes. Also, it may be a challenge (but well worth the effort) to push reticent students beyond filling the pages of their journal with repetitions of short, simple memorized chunks of language.

Vygotsky (1981) held that the introduction of new cultural tools often transforms the mediation process, rather than simply facilitating forms of action that would otherwise occur. As an interactive yet written form of mediation in L2 learning, dialogue journals provide an interesting environment in which to investigate L2 use and learning. SCT is a useful framework to explain the discursive nature of SLA, taking into account the unique history, motivations and goals of language learners, in other words, placing emphasis on learner *agency*. This study aims to contribute to SCT by capturing the essence of dialogue journal communication as "mediation in action" in the L2 Spanish class.

NOTES

¹ In developmental terms, most learners at this course level are intermediate-low on the ACTFL scale (Languages, 1999), meaning that they are able to produce complete sentences, perform simple descriptions and narrations mainly in the present tense, and initiate, maintain and close simple conversations.

² In Table 1, for example, the second rater verified whether or not each item corresponded to the code assigned by the researcher. In Table 2, the second rater verified the division of journal content into discrete topics. Finally, in Table 3, the second rater judged the classification of each of the language functions. In Table 1 data, interrater reliability was originally 93% (agreement in 51 out of 55 samples). For Table 2 data, interrater reliability was originally 96% (agreement on 23 out of 24 topic classifications). For Table 3 data, interrater reliability was originally 92% (agreement on 66 out of 72 language functions.) All cases of disagreement were resolved by consulting a third rater who was also familiar with the research study and who ruled either in favor of the researcher's or the second rater's judgements.

³ Due to the qualitative nature of this study, statistical comparison was not carried out. Thus, "comparison" refers to a qualitative description of the differences and similarities between the groups.

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