



The effect of dialog journal writing on EFL learners' grammar knowledge

Seyed Jalal Abdolmanafi Rokni ^{a *}, Asieh Seifi ^b

^a Golestan University, Shahid Beheshti Avenue, Gorgan (49138-15739), Iran

^b Golestan Payam Noor University, Basij Sqaure, Gorgan (49138-15739), Iran

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Abstract

One way which teachers try to encourage students to become autonomous is by encouraging them to write journals. Students can write about their personal interests as it can improve students writing skills. The present study was done to investigate the impact of dialog journal writing on learners' grammar development and their confidence. Two intact classes at Golestan University, Iran were randomly selected and assigned as experimental and control groups. The participants were 68 students who ranged in age from 18 to 23 and who regularly attended the general English classes for 12 sessions during the spring semester. The experimental group was instructed to write a journal every session, overall twelve journal entries during the treatment, while the control group received the regular class instruction. A pretest and a posttest were used to evaluate the participant's grammar skill before and after the treatment. The results of the study revealed that journal writing had a significant positive effect on students' grammar knowledge and enhanced their confidence in writing. The findings also showed that EFL learners in the experimental group overwhelmingly preferred the DJW project in improving their grammar knowledge.

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Keywords: Dialog journal writing; grammar; confidence; EFL learners

1. Introduction

In Iran, English education has paid the most attention to the study of language, emphasizing gaining knowledge of English rather than using it. In learning English, Iranian students are supposed to just memorize a great deal of vocabulary and grammar rules and they just need to know how to manipulate these linguistic elements in final tests. Thus, writing and speaking skills are rarely taken care of as important skills in public system and students rarely use their knowledge for writing; even in private language institutes that have some writing classes in their schedule writing is still treated as a one-way communication in which students express their ideas without mutual meaning negotiation with the teacher.

Of course, it is evident that knowing the rules of grammar is considered as one of the features of a competent user of a language but the ability of using it in a correct way is more important. It is important for students to recognize the importance of using their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful way to transfer them from memorized stage to internalized one or from passive stage to the active one. Dialog journals writing (DJW) can be a good solution for this problem. In writing classes, one of the methods used to provide students with collaborative learning is dialog journal writing since it improves students' writing abilities in terms of grammar, content and lexical usage, and confidence in writing ability (Peng, 2007).

* S. J. Abdolmanafi Rokni. Tel.: +98-171-222-0750
E-mail address: j.abdolmanafi@gmail.com

DJW is a written conversation in which students and teachers have mutual communication regularly (daily or weekly) over a semester school year or a course (Peyton, 2000). The topic is random and the teacher doesn't correct students' errors (Taggart & Wilson, 2005). Students can write about issues in which they are interested and seem to be important to them (Peyton, 1993). Teachers can prepare and provide topics about students' real lives and students can also find journal writing friendly and they may talk about their previous problems (Kose, 2005). By providing opportunities for students to think both about how they are learning and also what they are learning (Harmer, 2007), DJW improves their writing skills and helps them to reflect their learning and it can be a good writing practice too.

Moreover, Peyton and Staton (1996) maintain that effective dialog journal is a system with three important components: (a) the written communication itself, (b) the dialogic conversation, and (c) the responsive relationship between a learner and a more competent person in the foreign language. Moreover, according to Barkhuizen, (1995), there are two aims of keeping journals: (a) to give students to reflect their own experiences critically (b) to establish a channel of communication between teachers and students so that they learn more about each other and develop a closer relationship.

Further, DJW has some more advantages, too. Kose (2005) asserts that it provides opportunity to practice authentic language, increases learners' motivation, develops writing and reading fluency, and develops close relationship between a teacher and students. By answering questions and making comments about their students' entry, teachers can get more information about their students and have a wider view of their needs. Then teachers are more able to effectively look for resources that will motivate the students more directly.

Therefore, journal writing makes a new dimension in the relationship between teachers and students because there is enough time and space for sharing ideas. Further, students' attitude toward the second language will change by using DJW in this way. All in all, you can see it helps both teachers and students feel confident (Jones, 1991).

The efficiency of DJW can be classified into two categories for students as well as teachers. In case of teachers, by using journals teachers can learn many things about their students which they were previously unaware of when they read what they write in journals (Harmer, 2007). Since DJW focuses first on meaning as well as on form, teachers can use real topics that seem to be challenging and interesting for students. Teachers can also read students' journals and respond them acting as a writing model for students.

DJW is even more efficient for students. Progoff (1975 as cited in Hiemstra, 2002) stipulates that journal writing enhances growth and learning and it systematically evokes and strengthens inner capacities of students. Through journals, students can improve their fluency and reflect new experiences and emerging knowledge and also think through with another individual's ideas, problems, and important choices (Peyton, 1993). Kreeft (1984) approves this idea arguing that writing journals provides students with a large number of comprehensible texts to read and helps students build fluency in writing. DJW establishes a natural, comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing (Haynes-Mays et al. 2011) and provides opportunities for students to learn grammatical forms and structures by reading teachers' responses and imitating them (Yoshihara, 2008).

It is also to be noted that in writing classes DJW is a method to provide students with collaborative learning. The process enables participants to negotiate and communicate meanings through written messages and provides a way to construct knowledge and share their understanding with others. Thus, it improves students' writing abilities in terms of grammar, content and lexical usage and confidence toward writing. Although many second language learners think learning English writing is an anxiety evoking experience and a negative and anxious activity, teachers can play an important role by using DJW in class to facilitate the process of English writing in a relaxed atmosphere in order to promote

students' English writing. The purpose of learning process is to create meaning and achievement of this goal without grammar knowledge is not possible. In fact, grammar rules are the framework of meaning and have a key role in understanding the text. In addition, there is a strong relationship between the grammar knowledge and language proficiency; also, methods like DJW have an important role in improving learners' grammar knowledge.

Therefore, the purpose of the study was to show how DJW would positively have an effect on learners' grammar knowledge and improve their English writing. In fact, the first purpose of DJW was to increase communication between students and teachers, and the other issue was to investigate learner' grammar knowledge at the next stages.

1.1. Literature review

Among the four skills, writing seems to be the most demanding one needing concentration and constant practice. L2 learners have to consider vocabulary, language use, style techniques and sentence formation all at the same time in order to create an essay. Students are personally involved in writing and teachers are just facilitators in this process. On the other hand, grammatical accuracy is one of the essential parts to ensure the writer's intended meaning and to avoid communicative misunderstanding (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). The issue of accuracy is applicable to JW as JW has proven to be effective in stimulating the natural interaction of language use in ESL and EFL students so that they can further linguistic development (Vickers & Ene, 2006). Moreover, writing progress has been principally measured by accuracy although JW emphasizes fluency in writing content and ideas (Bailey, 1983; Marefat, 2002; Brown, 2004; Oshima & Hogue, 2007). It is also to be noted that learners' errors could signify an effective step towards improving grammatical accuracy (Carroll & Swain 1993).

Of course there are differences among teachers in instruction. In teaching grammar, teachers can resort to *focus on form* (FonF) technique as compared to a *focus on formS* (FonFs) one. The difference in these techniques can be seen in how the students see themselves and the language (Ellis, 2001). A FonF technique looks specifically at linguistic elements during communication. Conversely, a FonFs technique looks at specific discrete lexical items within a non-communicative activity (Laufer, 2006). Basically students in a FonFs situation view themselves as the learners of the language and the language as the object of the study, whereas in FonF, a student learns and practices everything in light of the communicative aspect of the language (Ellis, 2001).

Regarding these two techniques, Spada and Lightbown (2008) believe that one is not better than the other and they are not in competition. Rather, the two techniques are seen as complimentary to each other in complete language instruction. Dialog journaling seems to fit well within the realm of this belief, as the isolated, FonFs instruction can be brought about within the integrated, or FonF, communicative interaction. So dialog journals open a new channel of communication and provide a context for language development. Different studies can confirm the effectiveness of this method.

1.2. Previous studies on DJW

Morrel (2010) investigated the effectiveness of correcting written language errors of seven deaf and hard of hearing children from 7-11 years old using dialog journals for ten weeks. The study concluded that writing dialog journals motivated them to write and to take risks in expressing themselves through writing. Dialog journals were able to correct errors of students who had higher literacy level and to encourage the development of new language structure.

In another study, Kose (2005) explored the effect of using dialog journals on language anxiety and classroom affect. The study was conducted with one control group and one experimental group in the spring semester. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. He concluded that dialog

journal implementation had a positive effect on attitudes towards English courses and it was as a positive way to support students' writing.

Yoshihara (2008) was another researcher who examined the effect of dialog journal writing. He found that dialog journal writing can be one way to build a trust relationship between teacher and student. The finding of the study also showed that Journal writing developed a meaningful relationship between them.

Another study conducted by Voit (2009) examined dialog journal writing in improvements of grammatical morphemes in low-literacy adult English language learners. He analyzed dialog journal entries for a 3-month period. The data showed that there was no clear improvement in grammatical morphemes. The finding displayed that participants' confidence, closer community atmosphere in the classroom, discussing and solving the problems were the benefits of journal writing.

Puengpipattrakul (2009) also worked on the use of dialog journals as a means to develop grammatical accuracy in writing. The data were analyzed through journal entries. This study was helpful for undergraduates in raising their awareness of grammatical accuracy. Additionally, it gave the students more self-confidence in the use of verb tenses and more self-motivation to reflect their own grammatical accuracy.

Further, Datzman (2010) examined the impact of dialog journal writing on writing performance of four fourth-grade English language learners at an elementary school in Northwest Arkansas. The study continued for 12 weeks and students wrote about interesting topics. They showed greater improvement in writing compared to the other learners who did not participate in dialog journal writing. The improvement in writing indicated that DJW is an effective way for improving the writing skill of English language learners.

Moreover, Haynes-Mays, Peltier Glaze & Broussard (2011) conducted a study to investigate the impact of DJW on literacy and language development of African American students. They wanted to implement an EFL technique which allows students to improve their writing. The results of their study showed that students' writing ability improved and students learnt language in non-threatening manner.

In addition, Hemmati and Soltanpour (2012) compared the effects of reflective learning portfolios and DJW on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in writing performance. Treatment lasted for 14 sessions. Students were assigned into two experimental groups. The findings showed that gains in reflective learning portfolios group's performance were significantly better than dialog journal group.

1.3. Research questions

Given the importance of DJW in language learning and due to scarcity of research studies on the effect of DJW on grammar development, the present study attempted to investigate the effect of DJW on learners' grammar proficiency. For this purpose the study was designed to address the following two research questions:

1. Does dialog journal writing have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' grammar proficiency?
2. Does dialog journal writing enhance Iranian EFL learners' confidence?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

To assess the effects of an instruction intervention in a natural educational setting, a pretest-posttest control group design was used for the present study. This design consists of administering a pretest on a dependent variable (grammar development) to participant of both groups. The independent variable

(dialog journal writing) was then administered to the experimental group. Following the treatment, both groups took a posttest on the dependent variable. The scores from the pre and posttest were then compared in order to determine the learners' responses to the treatment (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The data showed the differences in students' grammar performance before the treatment in comparison with the one after the treatment as well as an effect produced via the dependent variable.

2.2. *Setting and participants*

The present study was designed to determine the effectiveness of using dialog journals on improving Iranian students' grammar proficiency. Sixty eight intermediate level students were selected from two intact homogeneous classes (each 34) at Golestan University, a large state university in Gorgan, Iran during the spring semester in 2013. They were non-English major students ranged in age from 18 to 23. Having studied English as a foreign language for at least seven years, they were taking General English course at the university. The sample was not ethnically diverse and all the participants were Iranians whose first language was Persian. They all voluntarily took part in the study and gave consent for data collection. The classes were randomly selected based on a coin toss, in which one class was the experimental group and the other class the control group to help determine the effectiveness of the journal writing on learners' grammar development.

2.3. *Instruments*

2.3.1. *The pre- and posttests*

At the beginning and end of the study, students were given an English grammar proficiency test. It was a teacher-made test consisting of 40 multiple-choice items. The test assumed to measure learners' competence with the English language, and tested only explicit grammatical rules of English. The test was examined by three experts for its content validity. Cronbach's alpha was determined to be 0.84. The main objective of the test was to know the English knowledge of the students that participated in the study and to judge improvements made after the dialog journals were implemented.

2.3.2. *Questionnaire*

A two part pre- and post-study questionnaire was administered in the study. The first part was the Academic Behavioral Confidence Scale (Sanders and Sanders, 2007), a 24-item questionnaire that refers to the students' beliefs that they can perform competently in a particular learning situation and how students behave in the extent to which they have a strong belief, firm trust, or sure expectation in their ability to respond to the demands of studying at school. The second part included three open-ended questions inquiring on students' experience on DJW and their feelings about improvement in grammar ability and confidence in writing. Cronbach's alpha was determined to be 0.78.

2.3.3. *Semi-structured interviews*

To further examine the learners' reactions to the DJW project in the experimental group and to elicit their own evaluations of how their grammar ability had improved, the researchers conducted short semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. As Kajornboon (2005) urges, this type of interview can provide researchers with opportunities to explore interviewees' views and opinions. It was also used to achieve fuller understanding of the results of quantitative analyses concerning the effect of DJW on grammar development. These semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face and individually. The interviews were conducted in Persian, too. The questions included in interviews were as follows: 1. *How do you like DJW? Did DJW improve your grammar knowledge?* 2. *How did DJW contribute to your improvement of grammar?* 3. *Would you like to have DJW included in your syllabus in the future?*

2.4. *Treatment*

An informal meeting was held before starting dialog journal sessions to make them familiar with DJW. The teacher explained about dialog journals and what was expected of students. In dialog journal sessions students were given papers to write their daily journal entries. Students were also encouraged to write about their interests and experiences. This method provided non-threatening environments for students. Every session the learners wrote dialog journals to their teacher. The students selected their own topic, length, and style. The teacher (one of the researchers) read their writings and wrote back in their journals giving some feedback. The learners were told to write about their interests, thoughts, experiences, and feelings freely. The teacher corrected grammatical errors in the journals or commented about their writing. The teacher tried to model correct usage of grammatical errors in his responses. The treatment lasted for 12 sessions. Throughout the study, special attention was paid to the correct use of grammatical morphemes like using ‘s’ as singular third person marker, possessive marker, plural marker and regular and irregular past and perfect tense and subject/verb agreement.

2.5. *Procedure*

The study was conducted for twelve sessions in twelve weeks. At the beginning of the semester, the learners in the two groups were asked to take a pretest in one 35-minute class period before the DJW project. Then the learners in the experimental group were given 20 minutes to answer the pre-study questionnaire on their writing confidence. This research drew from two sources: 1) an informal meeting which was between one of the researchers and students in the experimental group. One of the researchers explained about journal writing and what was expected of students. Students were encouraged to write about their feelings, thoughts, and opinions. 2) The dialog journal writing sessions in which the students wrote journals twice a week. The study was designed to last 12 weeks in which the control group was presented a placebo and did not participate in the Daily Dialog Journal Writing project. After the DJW project, the students in both groups were asked to take a posttest for 35 minutes. Further, 30 minutes were given for the learners in the experimental group to finish the post-study questionnaire. After collecting the students’ journal entries, the researchers interviewed 12 students. Finally, the researchers gathered, computed, and analyzed the scores.

2.6. *Data analysis*

The means of performances of the experimental and the control groups in the pre and posttests were compared to determine whether there was a significance improvement in the test scores. Then an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the results of two groups and an independent sample t-test was employed to assess whether the scores of the two tests (pre-tests and posttests) in each group (experimental or control) differed significantly or not. In addition, the scores on the five-point scale in both questionnaires were analyzed by a descriptive procedure and a t-test. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire were generalized and analyzed. Follow-up interviews were also recorded, transcribed, categorized, and analyzed by the researchers.

3. **Results**

To answer the first research question and to explore the effect of treatment on learners’ grammar development in each group, a paired sample t-test was run. Further, to explore the significant difference between the two groups, experimental and control, on learners’ grammar development, an independent samples t-test was run.

Grounded upon the descriptive statistics of the pretest, it was revealed that both groups had almost the same mean score in the pretest. Thus, both groups were homogeneous. The experimental group gained the mean score of 5.26 and the control group received the mean score of 4.76. The mean scores of both groups showed that there was no significant difference between the groups in the pretest ($p > 0.05$). The data given in Table 1 illustrate the descriptive statistics of the pretests for both groups. The descriptive statistics tabulated shows that both groups performed almost the same on the pretest and there existed no significant difference between the two groups. It should be pointed out that the *t*-observed is 0.813.

Table 1. Comparison of both groups' performances on pretest

Groups	N	Mean	SD	sig	t
Experimental	34	5.26	2.562	0.419	0.813
Control	34	4.76	2.511		

Note: The full score is 40. * $p < .05$

As for the descriptive statistics of the posttest, it was revealed that the experimental group using DJW outperformed the control group in grammar development. The descriptive statistics provided in Table 2 shows that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the posttest and actually there existed a significant difference between the two groups in the posttest-pretest total gain scores ($t=9.312$, $p<.001$). Thus, this study showed that using DJW improved the grammar proficiency of the EFL students. It should be pointed out that the *t*-observed is 9.312.

Table 2. Comparison of both groups' performances on posttest

Groups	N	Mean	SD	sig	t
Experimental	34	23.11	6.645	0.000	9.312
Control	34	11.85	2.363		

Note: The full score is 40. * $p < .05$

Table 3 shows the effect of the DJW project on the students' writing confidence. The participants' mean score in overall confidence in English writing after the DJW project was higher than that before the DJW project ($M = 32.45 < 11.87$). The finding revealed a significant difference in the students' overall confidence in English writing between the pre-study and the post-study ($t = 1.312$, $p = 0.00$). Hence, it can be assumed that the students' confidence for English writing in the experimental group increased after the DJW project.

Table 3: Comparison of the students' confidence on English writing before and after DJW

Groups	N	Mean	SD	sig	t
Experimental	34	11.78	4.87	0.000	1.312
Control	34	32.45	3.63		

Regarding learners' reflections on their improvement in writing and grammar abilities which were obtained via semi-structured interviews, they reported they could write more organized and fluently developing and expressing their ideas clearly in English, too. Some claimed their improvement and development in critical thinking. Some other learners noted that through DJW, they could acquire grammar ability.

Overall, the findings of the present study showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups in learners' grammar development and the DJW intervention enhanced participants' confidence in writing.

4. Discussion

The study was aimed to determine whether DJW would positively affect writing accuracy of specific grammatical morphemes and also to investigate its role in enhancing learners' confidence. The findings of the present study indicated that dialog journal writing is an effective method in the development of grammar of the pre-intermediate EFL learners. They obviously were more able to apply correct agreements of nouns and verbs and also use grammatical morphemes accurately. In addition, the learners indicated more confidence in making sentences and in comparison to the first sessions of the course, they felt less nervous in presenting their writings.

The finding of the present article is in line with that of other researchers like Kose (2005) who concluded that dialog journal implementation had a positive effect on attitudes towards English courses and it was as a positive way to support student writing which was approved by this article, too. This study was also in congruent with the one conducted by Yoshihara (2008) who found that dialog journal writing can build a trust relationship between teacher and student and this was observed during this course and it was more obvious by comparing students-teacher relationship in the control and experimental groups. Voit (2009) found no clear improvement in grammatical morphemes among low-literacy adult learners but asserted participants' confidence, closer community atmosphere in the classroom as the benefits of journal writing. The result of this study is in compliance with other studies such as Puengpipattrakul (2009), Datzman (2010), Haynes-Mays, Peltier-Glaze & Broussard (2011) who found that DJW raised undergraduates' awareness of grammatical accuracy and gave them more self-confidence in using verb tenses and increasing more self-motivation to reflect their own grammatical accuracy. They also concluded that greater improvement occurred in writing of learners who participated in dialog journal writing compared to others who did not. Further, students' writing ability improved and students' learnt language in non-threatening manner.

5. Conclusions and pedagogical implications

As mentioned above, in Iran the focus of public education is on teaching linguistic forms and grammar rules to students and communicative aspects of language are rarely taken into consideration. In this EFL context Iranian learners still have problems with verb tense accuracy and also applying agreements correctly to make correct English sentences in tests and in writing. Therefore, using DJW seems to be a good opportunity for students to practice their memorized knowledge and make it active and also to create a more relaxed context of learning.

On the other hand, writing instructors can use this method as an effective one to improve students' accuracy as well as fluency. Of course, teachers should be careful to different proficiency and maturity levels of learners who come from different age and social backgrounds in presenting new grammatical points and correcting them.

This study investigated the effect of dialog journal writing on Iranian EFL students' grammatical proficiency. The major findings of the present study can be summarized as follows: the dialog journal writing promoted the students' grammatical proficiency especially in correct usage of grammatical morphemes like using 's' as singular third person marker, possessive marker, plural marker and regular and irregular past and perfect tense and subject/verb agreement. Significant differences were found in the students' writing performance in terms of using correct grammatical morphemes between the pre- and posttest. On the other hand, when participating in the pre-test, the learners had a lot of mistakes in choosing the correct option but they could present a better representation in the posttest after 12 weeks. Second, the dialog journal project improved the students' confidence in producing sentences fluently. The overall result of this study revealed that the students' writing ability improved. By the positive feedback that received from the participants and the information drawn from the questionnaire given to

the learners in the experimental group, it can be concluded that the students held positive attitudes toward the dialog journal writing project.

Overall, the findings of the present study support the benefits of dialog journaling. The research done to date also strongly shows the benefits as well. On the basis of the students' perspective, the finding showed a belief that the writing was easier, freer, and that they developed a better written fluency. Additionally, it was found that as a teacher, the more initiative left to the student, the better the results. Finally, in the case of the improved use of grammatical morphemes, it was clearly shown that an improvement was seen over time. That is DJW lead to correct use of grammatical morphemes like using 's' as singular third person marker, possessive marker, plural marker and regular and irregular past and perfect tense and subject/verb agreement

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Diyalog Günlüğü Yazmanın İngilizceyi Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğrenen Öğrencilerin Dil Bilgisi Üzerindeki Etkisi

Öz

Öğretmenlerin öğrencilerini bağımsız olmaya teşvik etmek amacıyla kullandıkları yöntemlerden biri de onları günlük yazmaya teşvik etmektir. Öğrenciler ilgi alanlarıyla ilgili yazdıkça yazma becerileri gelişecektir. Bu çalışma diyalog günlüğü tutmanın öğrencilerin gramer bilgisi ve kendilerine güven duygusu üzerindeki etkisini araştırmak amacıyla yürütülmüştür. Çalışmada İran, Golestan Üniversitesi'nden iki doğal sınıf rastgele seçilerek deney ve kontrol grubu olarak belirlenmiştir. Katılımcılar, yaşları 18 ile 23 arasında değişen ve bahar döneminde 12 haftadan oluşan Genel İngilizce derslerine düzenli olarak katılım gösteren 68 öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Kontrol grubu olağan öğretime tabi tutulurken, deney grubu, dönem sonunda toplamda 12 adet günlük kaydına ulaşacak şekilde, her hafta günlük yazmakla ödevlendirilmiştir. Katılımcıların uygulamadan önce ve sonraki gramer becerilerini ölçmek amacıyla ön test ve son test kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, diyalog günlüğü yazmanın öğrencilerin gramer bilgisi ve yazma konusunda kendilerine güven duymalarında manidar bir olumlu etkisi olduğunu göstermiştir. Ayrıca çalışmanın sonunda deney grubundaki öğrencilerin büyük çoğunluğu gramer bilgilerinin geliştirmek için diyalog günlüğü yazmayı tercih etmişlerdir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Diyalog günlüğü yazma; dilbilgisi; kendine güven; İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrenciler

AUTHORS' BIODATA

Dr. Seyed Jalal Abdolmanafi-Rokni is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Golestan University, Iran. He holds PhD in English Language Teaching from the University of Mysore, India. He has lectured in universities, colleges, and language institutes in Iran. He has published articles in national and international journals. Currently, he is an active member of the editorial board of some journals including *ELT Voices-Indian*, *Language Forum (LF)*, *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJOAL)*, *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, *Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL)* and *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLALW)*. His interests lie in Teaching Methodology, Language Testing, Additional Language Acquisition Studies, Task-Based Language Teaching, Learning Strategies, and CALL.

Asieh Seifi is an instructor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Payam Noor University, Iran. She holds MA in English Language Teaching from Payam Noor University, Tehran, Iran and also in linguistics from Allameh Tabatabaee, Tehran, Iran. He has lectured in universities, colleges, and language institutes in Iran for 8 years. She has published articles in national journals. Her interests lie in Teaching Methodology, Learning Strategies, Additional Language Acquisition Studies, Translation studies and sociolinguistics.