

Problems Encountered in Dialogue Journal Writing Via Email: A Malaysian Case Study

Moomala Othman¹

Sekolah Menengah Berasrama Penuh Integrasi Gombak;

Nurairhan Mat Daud, Ainol Madziah Zubairi
International Islamic University Malaysia, and

Faizah Mohamad
MARA University of Technology

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Today's learning environment, which includes technology, has brought unprecedented opportunities for teaching and learning. The integration of technology can transform a class from lecture driven to a constructivist and inquiry-oriented classroom (Newby, Stepich, Lehman and Russell). One possible technology that can realise this transformation in a learning situation is the integration of telecommunication technology. Such a class has the potential of providing an authentic interactive writing environment. Email, which is one of the telecommunication facilities, can turn learning into a social interactive process. According to Allen and Thompson, the effect of email on the quality of writing is positive when students know that the communication is real and that they will receive a prompt reply. Studies also show that online correspondence facilitates peer editing (St. John and Cash; Hawisher and Moran) and collaborative writing (Hawisher and Moran; Bonvallet and De Luce).

Many studies that involved exchanges between second language learners (L2) and native speakers of the language learned (L1) show that emails provide the L2 students with a positive language environment. St. John and Cash, example, studied the correspondence between an English student and a German native speaker over a period of six months. Leh established an email exchange between college L2 students

¹Moomala Othman is currently teaching at Sekolah Menengah Berasrama Penuh Integrasi Gombak, Selangor. She has taught at a number of boarding schools in Malaysia. Nurairhan Mat Daud is a Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia, and Ainol Madziah Zubairi is a staff of the Centre for Language and Pre-University Academic Development at the same university. Faizah Mohamad is teaching English proficiency courses at MARA University of Technology, Terengganu Branch, Malaysia.

in the United States who were learning Spanish with college students in Mexico for 10 weeks. Knight conducted a study on email exchanges between her L2 students at Central Michigan University and Spanish native speakers. Woodin (1997) organised email tandem learning between learners of English and Spanish in Spain and England. The findings of all these studies reflected that email exchanges have a positive impact on language learning.

The nature of research varies from one study to another. Leahy, for example, conducted a study of 24 English students studying law and German language, and German students studying Law and English in Germany. The students were expected to write about 50% of the exchanges in the target language, and 50% in their mother tongue. A qualitative improvement was observed at the end of the project. Leahy, however, mentioned the need to have a longer time frame in order to build a personal relationship. Given a longer time frame students may get to know each other better, and this may prompt them to write more. Newman reported such a case in his study of seventh- and eighth-grade students. The subjects in his study wrote long texts given the time with their computer pals. Leh, however, found that this was not the case with her American students who were learning Spanish and were being trained to be Spanish teachers. They exchanged emails with L1 students in Mexico for ten weeks. Leh reported that the number of messages and the number of words contained in the messages varied. In fact, two of the 18 students in her study did not write any email messages claiming that they did not have the time to do so.

One common problem in email exchanges between students is that they may occasionally be unsure about the correct usage of the language or the reasons for the application of specific grammatical rules (Woodin and Ojanguren 506). But it has also been reported that the L1 native speakers in the exchanges helped to correct the mistakes. In St. John and Cash's study, the German correspondent included the incorrect sentences in his reply (in the correct form) as a way of helping his partner improve his German whilst the English student copied the new words and expressions from the email received.

In the studies reported above, however, the research was conducted during the course of the semester. The problems encountered by the participants were also not highlighted in the studies mentioned. In this paper, the research was carried out during the three-month long semester break. This study discusses an attempt to use email in dialogue journal writing. The availability of email facilities means teachers can communicate with their students beyond the classroom. Email exchanges make it possible for students to submit their work to their class teacher at their own convenience, and the teacher to give a prompt reply from wherever s/he is. In addition, this means of electronic communication may be used by a teacher to develop rapport with the students. An in-depth dialogue can be held over the network as more time can be spent on individual mail than would be possible in the classroom. The study intends to look at the possibility of conducting dialogue journal writing via

email during the school break. It also aims to look at the problems that a teacher would encounter when this approach is adopted.

2.0 DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING

Dialogue journal writing is a written conversation between two parties over an extended period of time (Peyton & Reed; Staton; Schwarzer). In *Dialogue Journals: Interactive Writing to Develop Language and Literacy*, Peyton stresses that the conversations take place between language learners and teachers on a regular basis. Such an activity promotes social interaction in a meaningful context. Kim posits that the dialogue is authentic and that it involves the process of constructing and negotiating meaning and knowledge. The use of email was mentioned by Longhurst who argued that it serves the pedagogical goals with a minimum of environmental and social disruption. The study which was conducted at the Carnegie Mellon University showed that the simple questions provided, helped the students in responding to the instructor.

Schwarzer suggests two ways of looking at a dialogue journal; one, as a pedagogical tool to increase students' writing abilities and two, as a written conversation between two participants to negotiate meaning through the written message. In this study, the intended learning outcome was an improvement in the students' communication ability. This necessitated an emphasis on the communication process itself rather than correctness. The focus was more on function rather than form.

3.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to look at the possible problems facing dialogue journal writing via email. It specifically looks at the problems faced by students in writing their journal entries using the email facilities that they have during their long semester holiday.

4.0 RESEARCH PROCEDURE

This section describes the population and background of the study. The approach used in this study is also outlined below.

4.1 Subjects

The subjects of the study consisted of nineteen Year Ten Malay students from a boarding school in Malaysia. Their native language (L1) is Malay, and they studied English (L2) as a second language at school. Eleven of them were males and nine were females. These students obtained a place in that school based on their good

performance in the Primary School Assessment Examination, which is a national level examination. All of them also performed well in English in another national level exam which was held for Year 9 students. Since it is a boarding school, students are normally allowed to go home only during the long break. It is also customary that students are given homework to be completed during the break.

These students were chosen for this study because they came from different parts of the country. This made dialogue journal writing exercises more interesting as they had different stories to write about. Since all of them had access to the internet, it made it possible for a study on the use of email in journal writing to be conducted.

4.2 Research Approach

Data gathered were both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The collected data consisted of email messages and survey responses. First, the questionnaires were distributed to the class to find out whether they all have a computer at home and have access to the Internet. As the survey showed that all students have access to the Internet at home, they were then instructed to:

- (a) write a journal on their daily activities and e-mail it to their English language teacher during their three-month semester break;
- (b) respond to the teacher's comments.

Journal writing was in fact part of the homework that the students were expected to do during the semester holiday. The students were expected to write on their daily activities and submit their reports to their teacher at the beginning of the semester. Instead of a one-way communication, emails could help to facilitate dialogue journal writing. In this study, the journal writing activity lasted throughout a three month semester break.

Based on the class teacher's experience with previous groups of students, the conventional pen and paper journal writing activity could not be successfully conducted because students tended to do last minute work – some even copying from their friends when they came back from their school holidays. With this problem in mind, the teacher opted for an alternative means of organising dialogue journal writing. Email was finally chosen as it has the potential for making the exercise more effective during the long holiday break. As email exchanges can be prompt, they may also encourage originality in writing.

When the school reopened, another questionnaire was distributed to the students to know what they felt about the whole exercise. In addition, they were asked what they felt about the role that their teacher played in the exercise. An open-ended question was also included to elicit information pertaining to their experience in using email in dialogue journal writing and the difficulties faced in their exchanges.

5.0 RESULTS

Data gathered from the different sources were compared and synthesised. The total number of words appearing in the email messages was counted using the word count facility of Microsoft Word.

Although email facilities have the potential of making writing more appealing to students, they were not attractive enough to encourage all the students in this study to do the assigned task. The number of emails sent and the content of the emails show that the majority of the students were not really enthusiastic about the exercise. Table 1 below indicates the number of responses received from the students and the total number of words which were actually written:

Table 1: Number of emails sent and words written by the students

Student	Total no. of emails sent	Total no. of words written	No. of words in each mail
S1	0	0	0
S2	0	0	0
S3	1	80	80
S4	2	104	43, 61
S5	4	117	46, 22, 15, 34
S6	1	135	135
S7	5	137	22, 27, 34, 26, 28
S8	3	148	57, 59, 32
S9	2	214	133, 81
S10	5	313	33, 134, 30, 34, 82
S11	2	329	147, 42, 140
S12	2	377	108, 269
S13	4	590	436, 117, 37
S14	7	1158	68, 153, 150, 63, 114, 546, 457
S15	7	1447	188, 260, 326, 302, 38, 191, 142
S16	21	1791	497, 56, 74, 98, 19, 39, 47, 84, 91, 81, 80, 74, 47, 21, 58, 81, 31, 52, 81, 82, 98
S17	15	1894	128, 122, 122, 92, 74, 155, 99, 134, 153, 134, 56, 103, 178, 148, 196
S18	7	2543	222, 9, 22, 766, 344, 660, 5207
S19	59	12715	228, 114, 387, 253, 292, 216, 234, 212, 422, 226, 81, 505, 418, 160, 229, 143, 242, 166, 138, 60, 135, 277, 94, 129, 370, 162, 267, 835, 212, 341, 7, 302, 59, 283, 78, 146, 66, 322, 146, 194, 181, 143, 142, 273, 293, 256, 307, 305, 109, 154, 106, 229, 250, 201, 238, 204, 156, 48, 69

* Minimum number of words in an email sent: 0 (= no email)

* Maximum number of words in an email sent: 835

Table 1 also shows that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the number of emails sent and the number of words written in terms of their length. It seems that the students wrote whatever they felt at the time of writing their email, and when the content was analysed it was obvious that some wrote the emails because they felt that they had to do so. The following excerpts from the emails sent to their teacher indicate their lack of commitment in carrying out the exercise.

S11: today i didn't do anything special like the other days...

S17: Today i couldn't and didn't find the topic to tell you, I' m sorry.

S18: ... I'm sorry for not sending my journal entry. I have no apparent reason for doing so. Anyway, nothing much has taken place in my life lately. So, there's nothing interesting that I can tell you.

It was observed that many tended not to follow the usual writing convention such as the use of capital "I" for the first person pronoun. Other than S5, S14 and S18, all the other students used the lower case instead of the capital letter for the first person pronoun in at least one of their emails. This is one common feature in internet discourse such as the internet relay chat. Its usage may be an indication that the students regarded the activity as an informal exercise. One of the students admitted that she found it difficult to write formally:

Do you know something teacher? Everytime when I mails to my friends I'm so used of using shortform like 'u' instead of 'you' n 'gr8' instead of 'great' so I always find it hard to type the whole word to you.

In the questionnaire the students were also asked about their feelings towards the assignment. Table 2 below summarises their responses to the question:

Table 2: Students' Feeling about Dialogue Journal Writing via Email

No	Items	Student	Frequency	Category of feelings
1	Enjoyable	S4,S5, S19	3	Positive feelings only (n= 10)
2	Interesting, enjoyable	S13, S15	2	
3	Interesting, enjoyable, meaningful	S6, S4, S16	3	
4	Interesting, enjoyable, easy	S1	1	
5	Interesting, enjoyable, meaningful, educational	S18	1	
6	Interesting, enjoyable, meaningful, time-consuming	S12	1	Mixed feelings (n= 7)
7	Interesting, time-consuming	S2, S17	2	
8	Interesting, burdensome	S9	1	
9	Interesting, burdensome, enjoyable	S10	1	

10	Interesting, burdensome, enjoyable, difficult, time-consuming	S11	1	Negative feelings only (n= 2)
11	Burdensome, difficult, meaningful	S3	1	
12	Burdensome, time-consuming	S7	1	
13	Burdensome, time-consuming, difficult	S8	1	
	Total		19	19

The table above indicates that there are basically three different types of responses gathered from the group of students. The first five rows of the second column in Table 2 indicate that the feelings or combination of feelings for this group of students are all positive. The feelings or combinations of positive feelings chosen were: “enjoyable,” “interesting,” “meaningful,” “easy,” and “educational.” The number of students in this group is 10. On the other hand, columns 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 indicate that the feelings towards dialogue journal writing for this group of students were rather mixed. Table 2 shows that besides choosing the positive feelings mentioned earlier, this group of students also felt that dialogue journal writing via email was “time-consuming,” “burdensome” and/or “difficult.” Seven students were in this category. It is also apparent from Table 2 that only two students felt all negatively towards dialogue journal writing via email. The negative feelings chosen were: “burdensome,” “time-consuming” and “difficult.” Based on this, it seems that the majority of the students liked the idea of having dialogue journal writing via email.

Students’ feelings towards the assignment and the number of emails sent, however, did not seem to correspond. That is, students’ frequency of writing did not necessarily reflect their attitudes or feelings towards the exercise. For example, the student who was positive towards writing via email (S1) was also the one who did not send any email to the teacher throughout the exercise. Similarly, S17 who actually wrote many emails found the exercise interesting but time-consuming. For this reason, it is also important to investigate the problems experienced (if any) by the students in their “attempt” to do the exercise. Their responses are tabulated in table 3 below:

Table 3: Difficulties Experienced in Dialogue Journal Writing via Email

Students	Reasons
S1	Spent most of the time going out with friends and family (busy).
S2	Spent most of the time going out with friends and family (busy).
S3	Gave priority to other homework.
S4	Was away from home on holiday and forgot about the journal.
S5	Other things on the Internet are more interesting.

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S6	Mom asked her to concentrate on revision rather than wasting time and money on the Internet.
S7	Plain lazy.
S8	Do not like to use the Internet just for sending emails. It is a waste of time and money.
S9	Problem with modem. Had to use computer in mother's office.
S10	Problems with the modem and the Internet connection.
S11	Modem broke down and had to go back to grandparents' house. Also had to do other homework.
S12	No difficulties in surfing the Internet but only reply to important emails.
S13	Did it at first but had to stop when she went back to her grandparents' house. Her modem broke down when she came back.
S14	Technical problems such as problems with modem.
S15	Have to share the computer with father and sister who are in the IT profession.
S16	She can only go online during certain times of the day and could not write when the server was down.
S17	Had to get Internet connection.
S18	Would rather spent time studying for the exam. Hate it when not getting feedback. Found the exercise a waste of time, money and energy.
S19	Internet connection was slow and sometimes gave up because could not stand waiting.

The responses given by the students reflected two common problems. The first was related to the technical difficulties faced by them in writing their journal via email. For example, S9, S10, S13 and S14 consistently mentioned technical difficulties related to the modem. Similarly, S15, S17 and S19 mentioned that access to the internet or computer was problematic. When the responses were closely examined, it could be deduced that many of the students were actually not keen on doing dialogue journal writing via email. For instance, it could be seen that S1, S2, S5, S8 and S12 found other activities such as going out with friends and surfing the net more interesting and attractive than doing the exercise. In addition, there were students who felt that other academic activities were of a higher priority than journal writing. For example, S3 and S18 felt that homework and revision (in the traditional sense) were more important.

The answers given, strongly reflect the attitude of the students. One of them (S7) even admitted that he was "plain lazy!" Even students who were positive and wrote many emails found the homework problematic (for example, S15 and S19).

Students' attitude towards an activity may be changed by their teacher. It is known that students would strive to perform well academically if they liked their teachers. Furthermore, if teachers are perceived positively by students, it is easy for them to get through to students in terms of giving encouragement and changing their attitude towards work. That is why, in this study, students were asked about what they

felt with regard to the role of the teacher in the exchange of emails. Their answers are given in table 4 below:

Table 4: Students' Perception of Teacher's Role in the Email Exchanges

Perception	No. of students
Friend	2
Advisor	3
Advisor and friend	7
Friend and teacher	1
Advisor and teacher	2
Advisor and confidante	1
Advisor, friend and confidante	3
Total	19

It is obvious from the table that all the students had a good relationship with their teacher who was regarded as more than just a teacher in this study. This was reflected in their emails. The language used, along with the contents of the emails, showed that the students were at ease with the teacher. The following excerpts reflect this:

S6: I have a sad story for you. My beloved uncle has passed away on the first of ramadhan. I love him very much...

S16: ... seconds later, a man said "excuse me" to shut our huge mouth up but it didn't work well, teenagers are stubborn aren't they?

S19: Today, I was so sleepy during physics lesson I had no idea what the teacher was talking about.

The close relationship with the teacher was, however, not enough to push the students to do the task that was assigned by her. The assumption that a student will work harder if s/he likes a teacher was not true in this case. The problems might actually lie in the kind of feedback given to them by their teacher. Table 5 below shows what the students felt about the feedback given by the teacher:

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Table 5: Students' Feelings about Teacher's Feedback

No	Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
1.	Teacher's feedback does not make my writing better.	S6, S18	S2, S3, S9, S15, S16, S17	S1, S11, S13	S4, S7, S8, S10, S12, S14, S19	S5	
	Total	2	6	3	7	1	19
2.	Teacher's feedback is easy to understand.	S1, S2, S4, S7, S9, S10, S13, S18, S19	S3, S6, S11, S12, S14, S15, S16, S17	S5, S8			
	Total	9	8	2	0	0	19
3.	Teacher's feedback helps to improve grammar.	S13, S18	S2, S3, S6, S7, S9, S11, S12, S15, S16, S17, S19	S8, S10	S1, S4, S14	S5	
	Total	2	11	2	3	1	19
4.	Teacher's feedback helps to improve organisation.	S6, S18	S11, S12, S13, S14, S16, S17	S1, S2, S3, S7, S8, S9, S15, S19	S4, S10	S5	
	Total	2	6	8	2	1	19
5.	Teacher's feedback helps to improve content	S18	S1, S2, S4, S6, S7, S9, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15, S16, S17, S19	S3, S8, S10		S5	
	Total	1	14	3	0	1	19
6.	Teacher's feedback makes my writing better	S18, S19	S1, S2, S3, S6, S9, S13, S15, S16, S17	S4, S12	S7, S8, S10, S14	S5	
	Total	2	9	2	4	1	18
7.	Teacher's feedback is difficult to understand.	S2, S3, S4, S6, S7, S18, S19	S1, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15, S16	S5, S8, S17			
	Total	7	9	3			19
8.	Teacher's feedback does not help to improve grammar.	S6, S11, S18	S1, S2, S3, S7, S8, S9, S12, S13, S15, S16, S17, S19	S4	S14, S10	S5	
	Total	3	12	1	2	1	19
9.	Teacher's feedback does not help to improve organisation.	S6, S18, S19	S3, S7, S11, S12, S14, S17	S1, S2, S8, S11, S13, S15, S16	S9, S10	S5	
	Total	3	6	7	2	1	19
10.	Teacher's feedback does not help to improve content.	S6, S18, S19	S1, S2, S3, S7, S11, S12, S13, S14, S15, S16, S17,	S9, S10	S4, S8	S5	
	Total	3	11	2	2	1	19

A rough observation of Table 5 would show that a greater number of students agreed with the negative statements. However, upon further analysis it was found that students also gave contradictory answers to the questions posed in the questionnaire. For example, for items such as whether their teacher's feedback made their writing

better, except for S19, it was noticed that the students gave the same answers be it in the negative or positive form. The same is true for other statements. Their inconsistency reflects their lack of seriousness in the given task. In other words, just like with the conventional pen and paper based dialogue journal writing, the dialogue journal writing via email was also not given due attention. Thus, the problem lies with the students' attitude towards the task.

6.0 DISCUSSION

Out of nineteen subjects, two did not send any emails to their teacher. The same finding was reported by Leh in his study where two out of his eighteen students did not write any email messages. Similar to Leh's findings, the number of messages and the number of words contained in a message in this study also varies. The problems that he faced might be similar to this study. Although the majority of the students claimed that they had some or all of the positive feelings towards this exercise, this did not seem to motivate them enough to engage themselves fully in the exercise throughout their semester break. The value of this exercise was not equated with academic activities (such as revision for examination) or social activities such as spending time with families and friends.

Despite their lack of enthusiasm, a teacher would still have to find ways to improve her students' language skills. In this case, the study aimed at getting the students to communicate in the target language (L2). Their ability to do so was reflected in the emails sent to the teacher. Unfortunately, not all of the students took advantage of this activity. Not all of them participated, while some others were not frequent writers.

The exchanges indicate that the students already had a good relationship with the teacher. The secrets that they shared with their teacher in their emails are evidence of this. It was also noticed that the style used was informal from beginning to end. Some even used cryptic language and emoticons, that is, the symbols that some Internet users employed when communicating.

Despite the good relationship with the teacher, it did not encourage the students to write more. This was not in line with Newman's and Leahy's findings which mentioned the need to build personal relationships in order to ensure the success of the undertaking.

Perhaps one possible explanation for this observation is the students' negative perception of dialogue journal writing via emails. From the responses given by the students it was apparent that many of them did not see the seriousness and the benefits of the writing activity as compared to other conventional academic activities such as homework and revision for content-based subjects. Excuses which were related to technicalities (such as modem failure and connection problems) also suggest that they were not really motivated to overcome the problem as they could have written the emails offline in a word document, and go to a cyber café to email it to their teacher.

These are indications that they did not see the benefits of the exercise in terms of enhancing and improving their L2 language.

The fact that the correspondence was done with somebody who was familiar to them might be the reason for their lack of interest in the activity. In many of the “successful” studies (St. John and Cash; Leh; Knight; Woodin; Leahy) the participants did not know each other, and hence they might have more to tell or report. In this case, if such an exercise is to be continued the teacher might want to arrange for a partner who is unknown to the students or, if the teacher stays as the partner a topic might have to be given for the students to talk about. The topic would have to be related to the students’ daily activities to ensure that it fulfils the objective of the exercise.

7.0 CONCLUSION

In this study, the use of email was new to the students, and it was not successful enough in attracting the whole class to write. Nevertheless, there were a few who actually carried out the exercise. There seemed to be many reasons for its lack of success. Among them were that some students went on holiday where an internet connection was non-existent, some faced technical problems, and many did not seem to be motivated enough to do the exercise. The parents of some of the students also failed to see how their children could benefit from such an activity. In other words, awareness is badly needed so that both students and parents will not feel that they are wasting their “money, energy and time.” The findings of this study, therefore, suggest that the first step to be undertaken is to inform or instil awareness amongst those involved about how such an educational exercise can be of help in the learning process. Such a step might make all parties concerned understand the importance of the exercise and the need to take it seriously. This, in the long run, will ensure that the learning objective is achieved.

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