DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING VIA E-MAIL AND ITS EFFECTS ON ESL
STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS

NORHANIZA BINTI ZAINAL ABIDIN

FAKULTI BAHASA

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

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NORHANIZA BINTI ZAINAL ABIDIN

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KAEDAH PENULISAN DIALOG JURNAL MENGGUNAKAN E-MEL DAN
KESANNYA KE ATAS KEMAHIRAN PENULISAN PELAJAR-PELAJAR
BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA

NORHANIZA BINTI ZAINAL ABIDIN

KERTAS PROJEK YANG DIKEMUKAKAN INI UNTUK MEMENUHI
SEBAHAGIAN DARIPADA SYARAT MEMPEROLEHI IJAZAH SARJANA
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this practicum is my own except the quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

1 April 2007   NORHANIZA BINTI ZAINAL ABIDIN
                                            M20021000470

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out the effectiveness of dialogue journal writing via e-mail on students' English writing development. The evaluation was done by looking at the writing qualities that include overall effectiveness, the development of topic selection, the ability to control the sentence structure and grammar and the use of vocabulary. This study was conducted for five weeks and a total of 60 e-mail dialogue journal entries were gathered. Besides that, a questionnaires session was conducted after the e-mail dialogue journal writing session. The findings revealed that dialogue journal writing via e-mail activity helps to develop students' writing skills in relation to writing quality and quantity. The study also revealed that e-mail dialogue journal writing activity encourages students to write as they are free to choose their own topics. In addition to that, they can also express and develop their ideas as their writings are not being evaluated by the teacher. The subjects also found that e-mail dialogue journal writing activity a very enjoyable activity as they were able to interact with a member of their age group.

ABSTRAK

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menilai sejauhmana keberkesanan penulisan dialog jurnal menggunakan mel elektronik terhadap perkembangan penulisan Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar. Penilaian dibuat dengan melihat dari aspek kualiti penulisan yang merangkumi keberkesanan keseluruhan, perkembangan isi dari topik yang dipilih, kecekapan mengawal struktur ayat dan tatabahasa, penggunaan perbendaharaan kata dan panjang karangan yang dihasilkan. Kajian ini telah dijalankan selama lima minggu dan sebanyak enam puluh catatan jurnal berjaya dikumpulkan. Selain dari itu, satu sesi kajiselidik telah dijalankan selepas aktiviti penulisan dialog jurnal selesai. Keputusan kajian membuktikan bahawa penulisan dialog jurnal melalui mel elektronik membantu mengembangkan kemahiran menulis pelajar dari segi kualiti penulisan dan ukur panjang jurnal. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa penulisan dialog jurnal menggunakan mel elektronik menggalakkan pelajar menulis kerana mereka bebas dalam menentukan topik untuk dibincangkan. Disamping itu, mereka juga dapat mencurahkan dan mengembangkan idea mereka tanpa dinilai oleh guru. Subjek juga berpendapat bahawa penulisan dialog jurnal menggunakan mel elektronik amat menyeronokkan kerana mereka berpeluang berinteraksi dengan rakan sebaya.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1   INTRODUCTION

In the past, there was very little consideration paid to the conditions under which students wrote, the individual personalities and attitudes of the students, the teaching method engaged in the classroom and how all these factors influenced students' writing. Writing classrooms were always focused on form and accuracy as the dominant quality in determining the success of students' writing product. It stresses on 'what it is that the learner is expected to be able to do as a fluent and competent user of the language' (Nunan 1991). Students were asked to write as a way to reinforce and practice the linguistic patterns and grammatical concepts that they have been exposed to. The strict formats on writing rules and technique are taught so that the students will produce a written product that is accurate and error free.

Hence, there seemed to be little attention paid to the students' problems, interests and abilities in writing. The topics for the composition were mostly assigned topics. They were given little or no choice in the selection of topics. Thus students were not free to write on any topics they like. Besides that, writing teachers also distributed samples of model essays to students so that they can copy the structures, ideas and words from the model and apply them in their own writings. This could benefit the students whereby they will be exposed to some common linguistic and grammatical patterns in writing. However, this could be a disadvantage for the students as it will restrict their production of ideas and writing will be nothing more than an exercise in grammar and linguistic accuracy (Raimes 1987). In short, the writing activities initiated in the teacher-centered classroom had a tendency to hinder students' creativity in writing.

Apart from that, writing was also then regarded as a totally solitary activity. There was little opportunity for the students to gain feedback from their teachers as to how they can further improve their written products as well as the quality of their writing. The teacher of writing merely a red ink pen-marker who scanned written work of students for structural errors. Zamel (1985) reports that feedback from teachers that are vague and abstract cannot help develop students' writing ability. She further mentions that when teachers focus too much on grammatical accuracy rather than the students' written product, students will not be able to develop their writing well. This will restrict their creativity and further create anxiety towards writing.

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According to Krashen (1981) there is a distinction between learning and acquiring second language. He claims that learning occurs as a conscious process where learners study the formal properties of the language in an organized manner following a program or syllabus. As a result, students know the rules governing the use of the language and they are able to produce accurately these formal properties systematically. Acquisition on the other hand occurs subconsciously as a result of participants in a natural communication where the focus is on meaning. It is very similar to the way one learns one's nature language. The learner tends to pick up the language he hears around him thus gradually requires the language he is to use in order to communicate with the people around him.

Krashen further claims that "fluency in second language performance is due to what we have acquired, not what we have learned". Therefore, learners should try to acquire the language as much as possible to achieve communicative fluency; otherwise they will focus too much on rule learning and are too conscious with the forms of language. To achieve communicative fluency learners should get an optimum exposure to the language in an environment that is rich in the language to be learnt. This process will result in learners gradually being able to use the language fluently and appropriately. Both learning and acquisition are important in second language classroom environment as they support and complement each other (Ellis 1985). Thus, teacher of second language should support the conscious learning of selected language

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items with exposure to a lot of other items in real life situations in order for acquisition to take place. Acquisition can be promoted, for instance, through implementation of communicative activities that provide opportunities to use the language such as project work, role-play, journal writing and so on.

The influence of Krashen's acquisition theory has led the eighties towards a major paradigm shift in writing pedagogy from the product-oriented approach to process-oriented approach to writing. Researchers like Kantor, Hudelson and Zamel (cited in Zamel: 1987) undertook classroom based investigation in an effort to understand better, the links between writing behavior and writing pedagogy. Their findings challenge traditional practices in the teaching of writing, for their focus in writing pedagogy was now on purpose, audience and context of writing, with an attempt to understand the individual learner. This brought forth fresh implications to the role of the teachers who were now urged to assume a less controlling role, and to be prepared towards goal that could not be easily predetermined. Teachers started to realize that fluency is as important as accuracy. They started utilizing authentic texts in the classroom and they tend to capitalize on learners intrinsic motives to learn. Thus, the writing activity was then perceived as a process where according to Zamel (1985), the writers go back and forth in brainstorming, writing, editing, revising and rewriting before producing a final product.

In process-oriented approach, emphasis is on the understanding of an individual writer's need (Zamel 1987). It concentrates on audience, context and also the purpose of writing. The role of the teacher is less dominant and they are expected to guide the students to develop their writing skills gradually by giving positive feedback and responses. Siti Hanim (1994) reports that process approach helps reduce students' writing apprehension thus enable them to produce better writing quality and longer essays.

With the shift of focus in the teaching of writing, researchers pointed out that more heed needed to be paid to the context within which students write. A good student-teacher relationship and a comfortable atmosphere which encourage students to interact, were found to be conducive to writing. They also declared that when students were provided with a real audience, it would make writing a meaningful activity to them.

The need for audience awareness in writing was emphasized by Samuel (1987), who said that for writing to be meaningful, the students should first be made aware of that it is an activity which enables one to articulate one's personal experience or to communicate information with a real audience. He maintained that 'a student must be taught to develop a sense of dialoging not only with himself, but also with audience external to the page' (Samuel 1987).

Only then would the student feels that he is communicating – not because he is compelled to, but because he wants to. Samuel firmly believed that communication with a real audience would lead towards a more genuine approach for it would increase the student's performance to the written word. This concept of interaction with a real audience was hardly instilled in the student in the traditional classroom where the student wrote, merely to be evaluated by the teacher.

The advent of new theories also demanded a change in the manner in which feedback was provided. Zamel (1987) proposed that the teacher when responding to a student's written product, should take on 'the role of co-inquirer is an intellectual enterprise' and treat the written product not as final but instead respond to it by raising questions about it. Fuller (1983) cited in Austin (1989) felt that the interactive questions would serve to sustain students' involvement in the writing process. The questions would lead students to reconsider, elaborate or extend and would motivate them to write, for it showed that there was an audience who was genuinely interested in developing their individual written products.

However, the recent approach still believes that content is an important aspects in writing and should also be emphasized. In addition to that, teachers are to focus more on the language environment and to expose students to real life communication as much as possible. Nonetheless, correctness and accuracy still play an important role in determining the quality of a composition but they are no longer a major focus.

The value of process writing has made many teachers realize that they need to emphasize the context within which the students write rather than the written product itself. Thus, many teachers begin to discover, accept and implement the approaches and philosophy associated with process-writing such as the journal writing and quick writing (Reid 1993). These approaches will help students develop their own feelings and thoughts, which are essential in process writing because writing is viewed as a process of discovery. Such activities that encourage fluency are journal writing, email journal writing, free writing, listing and brainstorming. In these tasks, students are free to express their ideas and concentrate less on grammatical accuracy.

Journal writing is a type of expressive writing that has become popular among writing teachers (Peyton 1990). Reyes (1991) mentions that journal writing techniques enable students to feel free in selecting topics, asking questions and seeking academic or personal help in a non-threatening, non-graded context. This technique promotes students' development of their personal thought, ideas and opinion to the teacher. As the reader, the teacher in turn gives positive feedback and remarks to further encourage students to write. The teacher will not evaluate the students' writing thus makes the writing a free authentic communicative activity.

Recently, we can see the incorporation of new mode of language teaching instruction being applied in the ESL/EFL classrooms; that are Internet and computer mediated communication (CMC). One of the most prominent aspects of computer-mediated communication that is incredibly progressing is the usage of Electronic Mail

(E-mail). Electronic Mail is seen as a new medium of communication that has gained remarkable attention and its users has increased rapidly. E-mail has been called 'the mother of all Internet applications (Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni, 2000). Since the evolution of networks, computers can offer ESL learners more than drills as ' they can be a medium of real communication in the target language, including composing and exchanging messages with other students in the classroom or around the world' (Oxford, 1990).   Using e-mail in a writing class can occur over any kind of network as long as workstations with e-mail software are readily available to the students. This could be in the lab, over a campus network, across the internet.   Students become familiar with a communication tool that is vital to their survival in the 21st century by using e-mail in the writing class.

Email extends what one can do in the classroom, since it provides a venue for meeting and communicating in the target language outside of class. They can log in and write e-mail from the comfort of their room, from a public library or from a cyber-café, and these spatial possibilities increase the amount of time they can spend both composing and reading in the target language in a communicative context.   Rankin (1997) notes that the additional interaction in the target language provides ESL learners with more input that they would able to expect from their classroom activities.

Electronic Mail is said to be the most popular way to communicate on the Internet as e-mail messages can be sent locally and globally across various networks (Kroonenberg 1995). Belisle (1996) reports that nearly every major universities in the

United States provides Internet e-mail for its staff and students. This shows that rapid growth of e-mail over the Internet.

According to Goodwin, Hamrick and Stewart (1993), e-mail was originally used as a channel for communication among military units. However, today this computer technology has far exceeded its use as a means of communication between military agencies. It has now spread to individual use as well as in the education line to promote more effective communication than before. Thus, it is now considered as a speedy, inexpensive and secure communication among members of the academic and business communities.

ESL/EFL teachers today have become more aware of the advantage of introducing the internet CMC in their language classrooms. Kroonenberg (1995) further reports that Electronic Mail (e-mail) is one of the widely used mediums of instructions in language teaching classrooms. According to her, it is proven that even the technologically phobic teachers are able to encourage students to use e-mail in developing their language skills and even the most timid language student can come alive and create meaningful communication via e-mail.

Belisle (1996) supports Kroonenberg's view and he mentions that the reason why teachers are utilizing e-mail in the language classrooms especially writing class is because its usage presents a number of advantages to the students. One of the advantages is it increases students' motivation as they view it as a new learning experience whereby they can discover a lot of new things through it. Besides that, it

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can be a means of interaction between teacher and student outside the class. Here, the interaction can occur outside class via e-mail. Finally, when students use e-mail they communicate using authentic language. For instance, when they send mails to one another as part of a pen-pal project they use the language authentically even though it is an artificial exercise to promote communication but students can become truly communicative in this environment.

1.2   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Unlike their first language, ESL students normally find it very hard to express themselves in English. This could be due to the fact that the students faced mental blocks against writing which results from the lack of proficiency and ability to write and the lack of interest towards the assigned topics, according to Lai and Ngooi (1990), many students experience the feeling of anxiety when asked to write. As a result, few students enjoy writing and view it as a natural source of pleasure. Most ESL/EFL teachers agree that in order to develop confidence and efficiency in writing, students need to be given more free writing practices. Exposure through exploring and experimenting with the English Language in an informal writing context is essential to enhance students' writing ability. This can be done by assigning free writing activities to students. E-mail journal writing is one type of free writing assigned activities that can provide such opportunity to explore and experiment with the language. It can serve as

an alternative instructional writing tool as it has the criteria mentioned in Krashen's acquisition theory whereby he states that an instructional tool should promote authentic usage of the language in real life situations.

Mello (1998) reports that e-mail journal writing activity provides students with an environment whereby they are able to discover their own voices and learn to interact with each other. Besides that, they are also responsible in contributing ideas and responding to other people's ideas. Therefore, many teachers of ESL/EFL find journal writing as a good basis to expose students to interactive writing whereby students' language and literacy can be developed. Here, students will be given the opportunity to use English in a non-threatening environment that they will be motivated to develop their writing skill. Mello (1998) also mentions that e-mail journal writing in ESL/EFL classrooms be a form of written conversation between students and teacher or between students themselves. Writing to peers is one way to give the students variety in their writing activity. They can communicate on daily, weekly or monthly basis, depending on the educational setting. Writing journals to peers can stimulate their interest in language because by communicating with them, students will be able to enter into real communication on a personal level with people of their age group. From this activity, they will be able to discover more about their peers, develop their writing skills and enjoy themselves through the activity.

The advantages of using e-mail journal writing in ESL/EFL writing class have encouraged language teachers to introduce it in their language classes. Therefore the researcher feels that it is important to conduct an experimental research on the effects of using e-mail journal writing activity in the Malaysian ESL language classroom. It is hoped that the findings of the study will provide an insight into the usage of e-mail journal writing as a teaching and language tool for English as a second language learners in educational institution in Malaysia.

1.3   PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study attempts to find out:

1.   The effects of e-mail journal writing on students' writing qualities

2.   The effects of e-mail journal writing on the students' writing quantity.

1.4   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study, the following research questions are posed:

1.   How does e-mail journal writing affect the development on the students' writing skills in terms of writing quantities?

The writing quantities examined are:

a) Length of the written product