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# E-mail Dialogue Journals in the EFL Classroom

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## 要 約

本稿の目的は、電子メールによる対話がEFL教室における第二言語の習得に確かに寄与することを具体的に論じることである。先ず、対話の定義、教室での実践、利点および欠点について考察を行う。さらに、本稿では、教室における電子メールの教育的利用価値を認めながら、通常のアカデミックライティングと電子メールを使った談話との間に認められる違いを見ていく。

## Introduction

Educators finally understand the benefits electronic mail has in the language classroom. Thought once to be temporary, electronic mail or more commonly e-mail has become a new writing genre of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whether inside or outside the classroom, one thing is certain, e-mail is here to stay. Instead of ignoring the obvious, teachers are making conscious efforts to integrate this technology into the curriculum. One activity that has proven to be a success is e-mail dialogue journals, which stress a one-to-one interactive communication between student and teacher over a computer network. This article will first compare e-mail and its discourse to the traditional academic writing discourse to distinguish what separates the latter from the former. We will then look at some of the pedagogical benefits of e-mail in the classroom. Following that will be an in-depth analysis of e-mail dialogue journals all the while exploring their benefits, drawbacks, and consider some possible solutions for the EFL classroom.

## Perceived differences between academic writing and e-mail

For years standard academic writing has ruled English classrooms the world over. Even in ESL/EFL classrooms alike, this conventional genre has held more importance than informal ones. But now, in the digital age, academic writing is in the face of a formidable challenger, electronic mail.

The concrete difference between academic writing and e-mail is their perceived meaning and definition. Typically, when a teacher gives an assignment to write an “essay”, the student’s schemata of the word essay is inherently rendered to the ideas of strict format,

varied syntax, grammar, as well as paying close attention to punctuation, spelling, and the editing process of many pages. However, when the teacher says the word “e-mail”, a new set of schemata appears. Suddenly, the student thinks of computer network, modern, fun, fast, easy, communication and exchange. The perception of the two ideas ultimately changes the way the student produces written discourse in the two genres.

On the one hand, there is academic writing, the more formal of the two. But formal means restricting. That is, writers are forced to write in an already predetermined fashion. They are not allowed to stray from the accepted format, but must rather conform. Pieter S.Nagel (1999) supports that in academic writing,

students, rely on the third person, and, further, there [is] a complete absence of the student’s own voice in the composition. This kind of writing [is] impersonal, voiceless, the kind of writing which states what the text means (A) for some nameless and faceless person (B) teacher.

Even 2<sup>nd</sup> language learners must conform to these formal set of rules if they want to be considered “good” writers of English. Take for example the introduction to Chapter 1 in Blanchard and Root’s ESL Composition textbook entitled, Ready to Write More: From Paragraph to Essay, which states, “To write effectively in English, you must conform to the accepted patterns of organization.” In their book, these patterns of organization consist of prewriting, essay writing, revising and editing as well as ample practice in writing five-paragraph essays of process, classification, cause/effect, comparison/contrast, and problem/solution, not to mention proofreading and correction. Sound familiar? Of course it does. We have all been trained to write this way from our elementary school years onward. After all, this is the correct way to write.

On the other hand, there exists electronic mail, which challenges the rules of academic writing. Whereas academic writing is a confining tuxedo worn only on dreadful formal occasions, electronic mail is the epitome of a nice pair of jeans. It is comfortable, easy, and liberating. E-mail is so easy that some often compare it to talking. It is no wonder why David Harris (1997) makes the remark that “electronic mail is about communication” and that we should be aware of the “tenor of the conversation.” That is probably why he suggests being polite and courteous by using “please” and “thank you.” Unlike academic writing, e-mail is all about expression. This explains the frequent use of “emoticons.” Writers can now smile on paper or show that they are sad with the help of a colon and a parantheses [ : ) or : ( ]. In the absence of body language, “emoticons” help clarify the meaning of our e-mails as gesture helps clarify face-to-face conversation.

Unquestionably, e-mail resembles a conversation, but in the written form. This is what renders e-mail so unique. It embodies features of both written and oral discourse to produce what Tornow (1999) described as a kind of “written talk.” Abdullah (1998) characterizes this

written talk as showing “incomplete sentences and little subordination like that found in spoken language.” In contrast to academic writing, little time was spent revising and planning electronic mail messages. “This spontaneity may be what leads to misspellings and the use of unconventional punctuation, diction, and capitalization in electronic discourse.”

Indeed, e-mail displays characteristics of vernacular-style writing, which makes electronic discourse truly one of a kind, with its own set of unwritten rules and etiquette. But should educators be teaching this new genre in place of academic writing?

### **E-mail in the classroom**

To replace academic writing by e-mail alone would be a crime. However, including e-mail as part of the core-writing curriculum, would give a new twist to a traditional syllabus. Combining both creative conversational writing such as e-mail and attention-to-form writing such as academic writing are necessary to promote the development of the student’s overall writing proficiency.

In the language classroom, the clear benefit of e-mail is its communication value. As Nagel (1999) attests “communication through the medium of e-mail is much less formal and more responsive, stimulating dialogue and exchange of ideas, forever requesting response from receivers.” Allowing the students to break away from the academic format opens a new outlet for written expression. Students have a chance to focus more on the content of their message rather than the form of it.

Gonglewski, Meloni, and Brant (2001) describe some other benefits that e-mail has in the classroom.

(a) **Extends language learning time and place.** That is, students have an opportunity to practice English outside the classroom. They can do this at home, at the library, in a cyber cafe, on the street (with new Internet-equipped phones), anywhere that has computer access, anytime. Thanks to this, students can receive more target language input than if they were to limit themselves only to class time.

(b) **Provides a context for real world communication.** “Interaction via e-mail lends a feeling of reality to students’ communicative efforts that may seem artificial in a classroom setting.”

(c) **Promotes Student-centered Language Learning.** “In e-mail communication, FL learners can experience increased control over their own learning, since they choose the topic and change the direction of the discussion. The end goal is to communicate with another person in the FL rather than to produce a mistake-free composition.”

(d) **Connects speakers quickly and frequently.** “E-mail allows students to communicate with native speakers of the target language without the high cost of traveling abroad. Before the advent

of the Internet, it was not possible to communicate so immediately and so frequently with native speakers or with other learners”

It is clear that e-mail increases the possibilities of the target language in and outside the language classroom. It allows students to have a real reason for writing and to have real power over what is written. But how can teachers integrate this into their syllabus? What kind of activity is suitable for both student and teacher in the writing curriculum?

## **Dialogue Journals**

### ***From Diary to Dialogue Journals to E-mail dialogue journals.***

The idea of using a journal in a writing course is not a new one. In fact, teachers have been using diaries to help students write for years. Essentially the idea is that journals help the students write more fluently because they can generate ideas on paper without worrying about form. But, a diary is private. No one sees the writing except for the writer herself. It is a one-sided self communication.

The diary was replaced by the interactive dialogue journal. According to Peyton (1993), a dialogue journal is a,

written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly (daily, weekly, etc., depending on the educational setting) over a semester, school year, or course. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher writes back regularly, responding to students' questions and comments, introducing new topics, or asking questions. The teacher is a participant in an on-going, written conversation with the student, rather than an evaluator who corrects or comments on the student's writing.

Thanks to this idea, the journal became interactive. It now became one-to one, which changed the writing task from writing privately to writing to communicate.

Once the digital age came about, and e-mail proved to be more than a mere trend, the dialogue journal that was typically in a notebook took on a new shape. It was electronic and on the computer. The concept remained the same, but the medium was different. Now student and teacher could communicate via e-mail on the computer. There was still the same one-to-one communication, but it was faster, more frequent, and more interactive than ever.

### ***E-mail dialogue journals and my Japanese students.***

I have a composition class of 23 Japanese college students majoring in English in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year of study. In combination with academic writing, students must also send me an e-mail dialogue journal every week as part of the course syllabus. The following example illustrates the nature of an on-going e-mail conversation I had with one of my students.

**Student**

Dear Lisa

Thank you for your e-mail. I'm working at Yamada denki third a week. Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Then, I have to go Fukuoka on June 14th. Because, there is a briefing for job applicants. So, I am absent from school. I will go to Fukuoka by a long-distance bus. I do my best!!!! From Sayuri

**Teacher**

Dear Sayuri,

You will go to Fukuoka when? In June? What kind of job briefing will you attend? Is it an interview or is it a test? Will you work there after college? After your briefing will you stay in Fukuoka or will you come back? I wish you luck. So GOOD LUCK!

See you. Lisa

**Student**

Dear Lisa.

I'm going to Fukuoka on June 9<sup>th</sup>. Of course, I come back soon. It's day trip. Have you ever been to Fukuoka? I went to Fukuoka the year before last. Because, I went to concert at GLAY!! It was very fun. I went to Fukuoka Dome with my friend and my older sister and my older sister's friend for the first time. GLAY is very cool!! I like TERU very much. He is vocalist. I was very happy. I want to concert again. Have you ever been to concert? Who's fan? See you next Wednesday from Sayuri

**Teacher**

Dear Sayuri,

Thank you for writing. I like GLAY too! I have one of their CDs at home. I went to Fukuoka Dome one time to see Southern All Stars last Autumn. It was very fun. In America, I have been to many concerts such as Alanis Morissette, Peter Gabriel, U2, Ziggy Marley, John Mellencamp, Dave Matthews Band, etc... Many singers come to Chicago, so it is pretty easy to see a concert. Plus, it's cheaper than in Japan. I'm glad that you had a good time. Who would you like to see next in concert? See you. Lisa

**Student**

Thank you for your e-mail. I have no plan to go to concert now.

But I want to go to concert. For example, B'z, Back Street Boys, Blue etc... Back Street Boys and Blue are hardly come to Japan. My friend went to concert at Back Street Boys in Nagoya Dome last winter. She had a pleasant time. I wanted to it, but I have no money. I do want to go to concert next time. I'd like to live in cities and go to many concert. Which do you prefer, the town or the country?

**Teacher**

The town or the country? Well, as you know, I'm from Chicago. I like the city because of the excitement and the cultural activities that I can see and do, such as concerts, exhibitions, good restaurants, seeing famous people, or other activities such as festivals. But, the country is quiet, the nature is beautiful, and I can relax and soothe my mind and soul. I enjoy both. But, if I have to pick one, I would choose a big city. If I had free time, I would travel to the countryside so that I could get a break from all of the noise and the city pollution. How about you?

The student's messages were by no means perfect. There were grammatical, spelling, and even punctuation mistakes, but the overall message was comprehensible. As Peyton (1993) reminds us, "the teacher is attempting above all to communicate with the students, [so] teachers do not overtly correct errors. This is the one place where students may write freely, without focusing on form." My role was not to evaluate but to simply respond to the student's questions, add my own comments and opinions, and introduce new topics.

As for the student, she chose the topics that were of interest to her. Her topic choice varied from academic subjects to more personal issues and concerns. This is the advantage of e-mail. It is ongoing and one never knows in which direction the conversation will turn or how it will evolve.

### **Benefits of E-mail Dialogue journals**

E-mail dialogue journals have many advantages in the EFL classroom. The following details some of the benefits dialogue journals offer students and teachers.

#### ***I. Building a positive relationship with students.***

One of my students claims, "I enjoy e-mail because I can know the teacher. It's very interesting to get any information from teacher."

Another one states that, "I like e-mail because I could expect interesting answer. I could get foreign culture or philosophy."

After the first two weeks of e-mailing my students, I noticed a remarkable change in classroom atmosphere. Where once stood much distance between teacher and student had now developed into a more personal relationship where we had shared information thanks to this on-line exchange. The exchange was not only linguistic, it was cultural, and more importantly it was personal. This bond changed the student's overall perception of me. I had now become an accessible teacher, because I had suddenly become "real" in their eyes. I had gained their respect and confidence and my students gained a native speaker to whom they could write anywhere and anytime. A definite win-win situation.

#### ***II. Improving literacy by reading authentic e-mail from a native speaker.***

One student admits, "I very like e-mail. Because I can see teacher's grammar. So I can understand grammar."

Another one affirms that, "I like writing because I can find my mistake sentence and I can know right way of sentence. I like practice typing".

Students who take a composition class want to ultimately improve their own writing. Often researchers make the claim that reading and writing go hand in hand and that one without the other is impossible. With an e-mail exchange, reading and writing are intertwined. The student must read the message from the teacher and reply. "The teacher's

written language serves as input that is modified to, but slightly beyond, the student's proficiency level; thus the teacher's entries can provide reading texts that are challenging, but that are also comprehensible because they relate to what the student has written" (Peyton 1993). While reading the language model of a proficient English writer, the students become aware of the way in which the message was written by paying close attention to specifics like style and expressions.

### **III. Building hope and confidence**

A female student observes, "I can write longer sentence than before."

Another remarks, "I can practice English and so fun!! I can fluently writing English day by day. But sometimes I make a mistake. Writing is very difficult but I can practice and I can talk to you by e-mail."

According to Peyton (1993), "adult learners who engage in journal writing profit from the experience in two ways: increased confidence in their writing skills and a deepened understanding of themselves." Ron Belisle (1996) adds that, "Students' social awareness and confidence increases because networking frees them from the limitations of traditional writing tools that often inhibit and restrict writing processes. Learning is then transformed from passivity to an experience of discovery, exploration and excitement." Once students realize that they are in control of the e-mail discussion and start drawing upon their own ideas from their own schemata, the writing process takes on the form of free expression. When the teacher responds, the students feel a sense of achievement because their message was understood, the teacher made comments, and there was an exchange of information. This student comments, "I send the e-mail and you return the e-mail. It is very fun. If I don't meet you in day, we can talk by e-mail. It's very useful." The fact that the teacher responded held great importance for the student, "you return the e-mail." Consequently, he added, "It is very fun". I doubt this same student would have made the same comment to a formal essay where one-to-one communication was not an issue.

### **IV. A Non-threatening Environment**

This student affirms, "I'm not good at speaking English. I prefer to communicate by e-mail"

In contrast to spoken language, the student does not have to respond as quickly by e-mail. This is when the written form helps the student. E-mail is written, thereby giving the student the opportunity to reflect upon her answer before she sends it. At the same time, e-mail relieves the stress related to academic writing because the focus is not on grammar. Again, this is a win-win situation. The shy student who is eager to practice conversational English can do so, but in the written form and behind a computer. It



encourages all students to participate in the activity because the experience in and of itself is a safe one.

### **Drawbacks and Solutions**

Do not assume that e-mail dialogue journals are without fault. Like anything, dialogue journals have their set of drawbacks.

The most common complaint from teachers is the workload. Depending on the number of students and the number of classes, a teacher could face an inbox full of 30 or so unread messages. This is when the stress builds and the teachers question why they decided to incorporate e-mail dialogue journals into their curriculum. However, there is a solution to this problem. Teachers need to pace themselves. Reading a few everyday and replying frequently will keep both student and teacher happy.

A final setback is that of the computers themselves. It becomes more of a question of logistics. Sometimes the system is down, the computer will freeze, or maybe a glitch will occur. This is uncontrollable. We have to simply bite our tongues and accept the difficulties that may develop.

### **Conclusion**

E-mail dialogue journals are an attractive activity that really works. They boast a plethora of pedagogical benefits for the student such as extending language study outside of the classroom, increasing the frequency of language production in the L2, and receiving authentic input by the part of a native speaker. Student confidence levels increase because there is meaning and reason to write, to exchange information. This need of question seeking response, and clarification and negotiation of meaning insist that there be communication between the two parties. Ultimately the idea is a good one.

However, we noticed that there are some setbacks, that being mainly the workload. The “busy” teacher that does not have time should not partake in this type of activity. An activity such as this is a serious commitment for both teacher and student. For progress to happen, this commitment, by no means, can be broken. Before making e-mail dialogue journals a part of your syllabus, ask yourself if you are ready for the challenge. If you do decide to commit, you will receive the consequential reward of your students’ positive attitude and confidence, a better contact with your students, and you will be able to trace your students progress.

One-to-one communication E-mail dialogue journals with a teacher are just the beginning. It helps students to familiarize themselves with the computer, writing e-mail in the target language, and prepares them for more autonomous learning. Although e-mail dialogue journals with the teacher are student-centered, they still involve the teacher. Setting up a classroom exchange with another class, hopefully from the target culture, can make the task even more student-centered. This idea of exchange allows students to discover a new

culture, and learn about their own culture, all the while communicating in the target language. If you are interested, I encourage you to check out some of these sites, which try to connect classrooms and interested students: <http://www.epals.com/> <http://www.iecc.org/>, <http://www.teaching.com/keypals/>. What a better way to make a global classroom?

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