

E-MAIL PENPALS: ARE THEY REALLY LEARNING?

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Introduction

There is little doubt that ESL e-mail exchanges are meaningful ways of learning a second language. The more crucial question for language teachers, however, is how valuable this technology is as a learning resource for their students. This study examines ESL e-mail communication in three discourse genres and concludes that not all e-mail communication is equally productive. In fact, certain types of online exchanges may be more linguistically challenging than others. Also, the extent to which learners are so challenged may also be modified by another factor, the keypals' level of intimacy.

Learners writing to a keypal may communicate about a wide range of topics. They may introduce themselves, describe their school or community, narrate a story, or discuss an issue in their community. Thus, the writing may fall along a range of various discourse genres or topical areas. If we assume that learning a second language requires exposure and practice to certain syntactic structures, then writing certain types of messages which are identified with certain discourse genres could be more productive as a learning activity by virtue of the fact that these grammatical features occur with greater frequency in those genres. In fact, a search of the research literature of written discourse in conventional (non-online) writing seems to support this view. Numerous studies (Crowhurst and Piche 1979; Perron 1976; Rosen 1969; and San Jose 1972) have demonstrated that mean length of T-unit, a common measure of syntactic complexity, varies depending on the mode of discourse. It tends to be greater for argumentation than for

E-mail penpals: Are they really learning?

description, with exposition and narration falling somewhere in between (Dvorak 1987). This study will attempt to ascertain whether rankings of syntactic complexity in computer-mediated discussion via e-mail correlate with those reported in conventional writing within the same discourse genres.

The study examined the effect of discourse genre on the lexical and syntactic complexity of the message that the learner composes. It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between genre and grammatical complexity of the message with the assumption that the higher the complexity of the message the more useful it is as a learning activity for the ESL student.

Subjects in the study were 150 students who are taking a required course called Basic English at the University of Puerto Rico, Humacao campus. The students take computer lab once a week and they regularly send and receive e-mail messages either to each other through in-class email or to keypals in other countries through Dave's E-mail Connection (the address of this webpage appears in the list of references). Dave's E-mail Connection provides what it calls a guestbook list of some 50 to 100 e-mail messages from ESL learners who want e-mail keypals. The messages are usually capsule personal introductions where they tell about themselves and express a desire to communicate with other ESL learners. Learners choose keypals from the list and carry on e-mail exchanges on topics of their choice. The students during their weekly computer lab also communicate with each other by posting messages in electronic mail. While both forms of communication can be defined as "non-synchronous" since neither was done in real time, the in-class exchange of ideas requires posting a message and waiting for a reply, which usually arrives within minutes, as opposed to e-mailing foreign keypals where the reply is usually delayed for several days. Since in-class exchanges take place over a shorter span of time, it is, therefore, more immediate and comes close to that of synchronous, real time communication. Receiving and posting messages to foreign keypals, therefore, preserves a unique characteristic of e-mail, which allows the learners more time to reflect and analyze ideas and to pay attention to grammatical accuracy (Warschauer 1997).

Most of the time students were free to choose their keypals (either a classmate or a foreign keypal), to choose the topics they

wished to discuss, and to send and receive messages during the lab time and also during their free time. They were given credit towards their grades based on the number of messages they composed. However, in order to receive credit for their work, they had to send me a copy of these messages.

The texts of my students' e-mail messages, both in-class messages and messages via Dave's E-mail Connection, were the basis of my research data and were subjected to discourse analysis. These messages were initially placed into three discourse categories or genres based on their subject matter: exposition, narration, and argumentation. When learners introduced themselves to a new keypal, their messages were classified as exposition. When they narrated an event that happened to themselves or someone they knew, it was classified as narration. Finally, when they discussed and took a position on a social or political issue in their school or community, it was classified as argumentation.

In order to analyze discourse for level of syntactic complexity, two kinds of T-unit analysis were used; first, mean T-unit length was computed. A *T-unit* is defined as "an independent clause plus any subordinate clauses embedded in it" (Dvorak 1987). Thus, a sentence "My name is Juan" is counted as one T-unit, as is the sentence "I live in San Juan, which is the capital city of Puerto Rico" since the latter contains an independent clause followed by a dependent subordinate clause. However, the sentence "My name is Juan and I live in San Juan" counts as two T-units since both parts of this compound sentence are independent clauses and are separated by the coordinating conjunction *and*. Mean T-unit length is said to increase with language proficiency since more proficient learners use more subordination while less proficient ones use more coordination (Warschauer 1996). Since much of the discourse of second language learners is characterized by numerous errors, I also opted to include an alternate measure, that of *error-free T-units*, which has also been used widely in the second language research literature (Dvorak 1987).

Results

The results of data analyzed for discourse genre show that students' writing is more complex in the description-narration and

E-mail penpals: Are they really learning?

argumentation categories than in exposition, with the difference between exposition and argumentation being significant. When students introduce themselves they tend to use short, choppy, formulaic statements characteristic of this kind of expository writing. However, once students get beyond the introduction mode and write narrative, descriptive, and argumentative passages, the lexical and syntactic complexity increases significantly. One illustration of this contrast is seen in the subject Rafa, who in the internal e-mail exchanges wrote two different classmates in two modes of discourse. In the first (Figure 1), he is introducing himself, so the message is classified as *expository* discourse. Here the length is only 4.9 words per T-unit since it is composed of short, choppy statements. In Figure 2, he is commenting to another student in the class on my system of awarding points to students for class participation and he is arguing in favor of the system. For this type of *argumentative* discourse, the length is 9.8 words per T-unit. While the first passage contains choppy sentences with numerous *coordinate* clauses, the second is marked by more flowing statements with numerous *subordinate* clauses (asterisks are used to mark the end of T-units).

Figure 1

Hi. I am Amuary.* You can call me Rafa if you want.*
This is my fourth time that I wrote you.* I study chemistry.*
I live in Caguas* and I want to meet you.* You are friendly.*
I speak with you* and you inspire trust.* I hate Humacao.*
I want to transfer to Mayagüez.* I was there last semester*
and I like it so much.* I am 10 years old* and my birthday
will be in May 20.* I don't have girl friend.* Do you?
(17 T-units-4.9 Words Per T-unit)

Figure 2

I like Mr.Kaufman puntitos system because I can practice
in the class.* That show him my interest in the class.* It is
better than the tests.* Do you think like me? * The puntitos
pressure us to study.* In the quizzes we only have to read
over the material,* and we should have good punctuation.*

Of course, if you read the lectures and if you answer the professor questions, it is a good idea.* If you do not think like me, please write me back* and expose your opinion.*
(10 T-units-8.8 Words Per T-unit)

In comparing mean T-unit length for all the samples, it is clear that students use more complex syntactic structure in certain discourse genres. The analyses are shown in Tables 1 and 2, which show the results of a one-way analysis of variance comparing T-unit length among the three discourse categories. A post-hoc Scheffe test shows that argumentative discourse had significantly greater T-unit length than did expository discourse.

Table 1

**One Way ANOVA of Mean Length of T-units
For Discourse Samples in Three Modes of Discourse**

Source	DF	Sum of Sq	Mean Sq	F Ratio	F Prob
Between	2	11637.124	5818.562	3.8237	.0312
Within G	36	54781	1521.718		
Total	38	66418.97			

Table 2

**Post-Hoc Scheffe Test
For Mean Length of T-units
in Three Modes of Discourse**

		G 1	G 2	G 3
Mean	Group			
62.6316	G 1 (Expository)			
77.0000	G 2 (Desc.-Narrative)			
110.2857	G 3 (Argumentative)			*

E-mail penpals: Are they really learning?

When error-free T-units are used as the measure of syntactic complexity (Tables 3 and 4) the difference between the argumentative and the other two genres was even more dramatic, with the difference between argumentative and expository again being statistically significant.

Table 3

**One Way ANOVA of Mean Length of Error-Free T-units
For Discourse Samples
in Three Modes of Discourse**

Source	DF	Sum of Sq	Mean Sq	F Ratio	F Prob
Between G	2	26347.01	13173.50	5.0337	.0118
Within G	36	94213.64	2617.04		
Total	38	120560			

Table 4

**Post-Hoc Scheffe Test
of Mean Length of Error-Free T-units
in Three Modes of Discourse**

		G 1	G 2	G 3
Mean	Group			
56.8421	G 1 (Expository)			
70.8462	G 2 (Desc.-Narrative)			
128.2857	G 3 (Argumentative)	*		

The ratio of coordination to subordination also varied depending on the discourse genre. As seen in Table 5, 66.7 percent of the clause structure in expository discourse was coordination versus only 33.3 percent for subordination. In the other two genres the ratio was in the other direction with more subordination than coordination.

Table 5

**Ratio of Coordinated to Subordinated Clauses
For Discourse Samples in Three Modes of Discourse**

	Expository	Narrative- Descriptive	Argument	Totals
Coordinate	52 (66.7%)	30 (40.0%)	15 (34.0%)	97 (49.2%)
Subordinate	26 (33.3%)	45 (60.0%)	29 (66.0%)	100 (50.8%)
Totals	78 (100%)	75 (100%)	44 (100%)	197 (100%)

The significant differences reported above in mean T-unit length and mean error-free T-unit length were found both in the e-mail messages students sent to foreign keypals via Dave's E-mail Connection as well as in in-class messages they sent to their classmates. However, when I compared the students' messages to the two types of interlocutors, the messages to their classmates were often characterized by greater syntactic complexity. Thus, the higher level of intimacy that students shared with their classmates may have encouraged students to express themselves in a more relaxed manner and contributed to the syntactic complexity of the message. An illustration of this can be observed in the subject Carlos, one of my male students, who likes to assume a playboy role in his online communication. In Figure 6, when corresponding to a Chinese girl from Hong Kong for the first time, Carlos writes:

Figure 6

“Well, let me present myself.* I’m a 18-year old man.* I’m study in the Puerto Rico University in Humacao.* I’m studying Business Administration.* I like the love, the poetry, music, theater, and being an actor.* I like the world,* is very fun.* I like to go to movies, to the beach at moonlight and pass a great time.* Well, hope to receive an answer.* Love, Carlos.”

(9 T-units-7 Words per T-unit)

To a classmate that Carlos has known for some time, Carlos writes

Figure 7

“Hello, Brendly. I hope that you’re fine.* I want to tell you that your friendship is very important to me and thank you for give me a beautiful smile every day.* I pray all night,* and one of the things that I pray is for you want that you can get all that you want.* You know that you can count with me all time,* and no matter how, I’ll be there for you.* Since I meet you last year, I found in you a creative, good, and lovely girl in you.* And since that time, I’m happy because I know that I had found good people and one of them is you.* I hope that our friendship grow so big that a tree and so beautiful like a rose.* You can count with me.* Love, Carlos.”

10 T-units-14.3 Words per T-unit)

Carlos’ somewhat more restrained introduction to the Chinese girl featured a mean T-unit length of 7, but in his no-holds-barred overture to a girl in his class, the mean T-unit length soared to 14.3. The latter also contained 11 instances of subordination versus three coordinations versus only three subordinations over zero coordinations for the message to the Chinese girl.

Conclusions and Implications

As the results indicate, certain e-mail genres seem to be more productive and challenging for ESL students, and the statistical data

seem to support this position. The other factor, level of intimacy, may also play a role, although there were not enough samples of messages in the various discourse categories in this study to support this hypothesis. Nevertheless, future researchers should explore all aspects of the keypal interlocutor relationship and its impact on the syntactic complexity of the message.

What is the implication of this for ESL teachers who contemplate initiating an e-mail exchange program? Instructors who want to do this are actually in somewhat of a dilemma. They could steer students in the direction of writing in the more productive modes of discourse. But, if they do so, they are limiting the students' freedom. E-mail exchange projects are highly motivating precisely because they are learner-centered activities, and such activities imply a certain freedom of choice. Also, the inherent advantages of these activities are that they involve more equal participation among students than in face-to-face discussions (Warschauer 1996) and they foster autonomous learning, enabling students to use collaborative strategies of communicating with their peers to negotiate meaning (Tella, as cited in Warschauer 1995). For example, if students don't know how to express an idea or to interpret a message they receive, they can ask a classmate sitting nearby. Why ruin a good thing with the imposition of teacher guidelines? On the other hand, giving students free rein to choose their keypals as well as the topics of discourse may result in making the writing less versatile. As ESL teachers, we must somehow steer a course between giving student too much freedom and restricting the scope of their writing so that it becomes another structured, teacher-centered activity.

Using e-mail as a teaching device is one way we can get students to use authentic communication in a meaningful setting. However, once students have made their initial introductions, it may be advisable to steer them in other directions; for example, students can participate in discussion forums. Many websites featuring forums tailored to the ESL learner have recently been launched for cross-cultural discussions that allow students considerable leeway in terms of freedom to pursue their individual areas of interest. My research seems to indicate that general chat sessions that are not focused on a particular topic should be avoided, and even in-class e-mail exchanges where no guidelines have been established tend

E-mail penpals: Are they really learning?

to be limited to superficial dialogue. The challenge of our profession is to harness this new technology of e-mail communication in such a way that our students can maximize their learning potential.

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