

## **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

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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

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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)			*

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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)	*		

