

# A Discussion of E-mail Journals

R. J. McGuire

## Abstract

Journal writing is a frequently used tool in the ESL classroom. By combining the idea of journals with the technology of e-mail, instructors can have journals that are instantly accessible, allowing students to read and react to teacher feedback more quickly than with conventional paper journals. In addition, computer editing capabilities make error correction easier both for the teacher and the student.

## Introduction

The idea of journal writing in the language classroom is not a new one. ESL theorists feel that using journals in a class allows students to write in a way that is non-threatening (non-graded) and allows them to build vocabulary, sentence structure knowledge, and self-confidence (Cross, 1991).

On the importance of writing frequently, the author Ray Bradbury (1990) says, "Quantity gives experience. From experience alone can quality come." (Bradbury, p.42). This concept can be used in the ESL classroom when thinking about journals. By writing frequently and regularly in journals students are creating English in quantity. By

analyzing and correcting their language errors with their teacher the students are gaining experience. From this experience quality comes in the form of better written English.

In this paper I will discuss the reasons for choosing the methods that I have used and the procedures for using e-mail as a medium for journals. Finally, a short statistical analysis of the students' e-mail journal entries will be presented and discussed.

### **Why Journals?**

My class, English Through Media, is a seminar class for second year English majors. In this class we use different kinds of media such as films, books, magazines, and recordings to learn about the English language and the culture of English speaking countries. Journals were assigned as a way of getting feedback from the students on the assignments and topics covered in the class, as a way of extending assignments, and as a forum for the students to ask questions about the class or about topics related to the class. The journals in this class were graded only for completion, not grammatical correctness. Grammatical errors in the journal entries were noted and corrected by the instructor, however. The assumption behind the grading is that the students will take more chances with their writing if the teacher is grading them solely on content (Neilsen, 1997).

This process is guided by three of the precepts from Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982).

1. provide the learner with the opportunity to use language 'to mean'

The students were given questions related to the class and to

topics within the class. They were then required to compose answers to these questions, thereby engaging in a dialog of meaningful 'real' language with the teacher as opposed to simply writing sentences as a grammar exercise.

2. encourage a positive attitude on the part of the learner.

The students seemed to enjoy using the computers in the computer center. They reacted positively to the idea of writing and submitting their journals via e-mail. See the statistical analysis section of this paper for a further discussion.

3. provide opportunities for learning without anxiety.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, students were graded solely on completion of their journal articles. This allowed them to learn from writing and from the mistakes they made without fear of punishment in the form of lowered class grades.

Error correction for these journals followed Selinker's interlanguage hypothesis (1972) which states that all errors are systematic and are a function of where the learner is on a continuum between no knowledge of the language and fluency in the language (Selinker, 1972). From this, only global errors, those errors that appear frequently and regularly in the students' journals, that interfered with the reader's ability to understand the journals were corrected (Scott, 1996).

Regular, frequent practice is important for students to increase their ability in writing. Semke (1984) says :

"The amount of practice, on the other hand, even without correction, did appear to have a positive effect on achievement."

(Semke, p. 197).

By assigning roughly one journal entry a week for the latter part of the term the students were given some extra practice writing in English.

Finally, according to Chun the types of sentences written by students in journals strongly resemble sentences that would be used in conversation. From this, she hopes that some transference of skills will take place between the students' journal writing and their speaking (Chun, 1994). The students responses to the weekly questions assigned to them were similar to the kinds of responses you would expect in a verbal conversation on the same topic. Thus, the students and the teacher engaged in a sort of written conversation in which the questions could be carefully studied before being responded to and in which the students could carefully create their responses before giving them. With the pressure for a speedy response that they would find in a strictly verbal conversation with a native speaker reduced, the students were able to create more complex responses to the teacher's questions. This complexity might include better constructed thoughts, the use of new vocabulary, or the use of grammar patterns that the student would normally not attempt. Thus, the students were able to expand their English in a safe environment that allowed for experimentation with their second language. In addition, the 'English only' format of the journals didn't allow the students to revert to using their first language, Japanese, in order to make themselves understood. All ideas were transmitted in English. This second-language-only communication created an environment where the students had to think more deeply about what they were saying in order to make sure they would be understood by the recipient of their journals.

### Why E-mail?

E-mail was chosen as the medium for these journals for a variety of reasons. First, e-mail is a new and vital use of computer communication technology. Students should have some familiarity with using e-mail programs before graduating from school and going on to work. Second, computers and e-mail allow for a shorter response time between teacher and student than journals written on paper. The collection cycle for notebook journals can be as long as a week. Using e-mail journals, the teacher can log on to the computer system and access the students' journals every day, and while doing so can provide the students with feedback and corrections that they can access from the computer lab on the same day. This rapid response is a great motivator for students (Warschauer, 1995). This is compared to notebook journals that must be collected by the teacher and then physically returned to the students. Third, computers provide the ability to rewrite and edit very quickly and efficiently. This is a feature that combines the computer's ability to store, process, and retrieve large amounts of data both quickly and reliably, with the human editor's ability to process and evaluate natural language (Ahmad, 1985). In addition to the physical advantages of processing speed and ease of storage and retrieval, writing journals on computers also provides writers with a psychological advantage for editing. Richard Lanham says that typing your prose distances it from you by making the prose less personal. This allows you to look at it more critically, and perhaps more carefully, when you are editing (Lanham, 1979). This point is directly connected to the idea that the students will think more carefully about their writing because it is the only way they can communicate their ideas to

the recipient of their journals.

The following minor points are also worth commenting on. Since no physical journals exist, there are no physical journals to lose. If the data is lost in the computer system, the chances are good that it can be recovered in short order. Also, e-mail journals save paper because they exist only in the computer system. No hard copies of journal entries were produced at any time during this class. The idea of not making paper copies of the journal entries also enforces the feeling that the journals are more conversation-like in nature. The student has no physical record of the journal, just as they would have no physical record of a conversation after it had taken place. Finally, the journals, and any corrections that the teacher makes to them, can be reviewed by simply logging on to the computer system and reviewing the relevant files. This allows both the student and the teacher to go back and review the journals at any time.

### **Classroom Application**

E-mail journals were assigned in this class for roughly the last eight weeks of a 14 week term. Some weeks were skipped for various reasons. In all, a total of five journal questions were posted to the students, and their responses received, read, corrected, and responded to. For a list of the journal topics, please see appendix one.

The journals were to be completed outside of class time. This served two purposes within the class: the first was to maximize lecture time for the purpose of instruction, and the second being that the students could write their responses at their leisure and thereby would not have to worry about finishing a journal response by the end of the class

period. Students generally worked on their journal entries before school, after school, or during lunch. This approach worked well for this class because the students were not filing journal entries every week, so a regularly scheduled session in the computer lab would not have been a good use of resources.

To respond to the students' e-mail I would log on to the computer system three times a week on average and check the journals that had been sent to me. My total time for reading and responding to a complete class set of journals, thirteen student responses, was estimated at roughly one to one-and-a-half hours per week. My responses were also written during off hours for the computer lab, so as not to interfere with other classes using the lab.

Another reason for having the students engage in their computer work outside of class was that the use of the computer in this class was meant to be seen as a means of learning and using language rather than an end in itself. It is my opinion that the computer makes a very efficient tool for language use and study in certain situations, but that the idea of using computers for their own sake can tend to dominate a class if care is not taken in the construction and implementation of the curriculum. I felt that making the e-mail journals a peripheral part of the class helped to achieve a balance between the need to learn and use English and the need to expose students to current technology in the data processing field.

### **Statistical Analysis of the Journal Entries**

In reviewing the students' journals I looked at the average number of sentences produced per entry over the course of the study, the average

number of words produced per journal entry over the course of the study, and the average number of words per sentence both per entry and over the course of the study. These three statistical parameters should give a very basic idea of how the students' writing changed throughout the course of the journal writing and whether or not certain topics tended to foster more writing than others on the part of the students. Unlike Nielsen I did not give the students points based on the length of their journal entries, but rather chose to award points for completion of the journals only (Nielsen, 1997). This would allow for more natural responses in my opinion because the students are not pressured to pad their journal entries in a quest for more points. Lanham calls this use of excess prose the, "lard factor" (Lanham, 1979). By cutting down on the lard factor the students were able to create English that was free of unnecessary information and therefore more like the spoken language. This caused the length of journal responses to fluctuate from week to week. However, it did not cause students to write excessively minimal responses in the journals, for instance an answer of only one or two words.

#### **The Average Number of Sentences per Entry : Method**

The first aspect of the journals to be analyzed was the average number of sentences per journal entry over the length of the journal study. To get the relevant statistics I counted the number of sentences the students had written for each journal entry and from there computed a class average for each entry which was expressed as a decimal number. The results are as follows :

<b>Entry</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Ave.	4.27	3.9	4.18	4.8	5.6
sentences					

### Analysis

On looking at the change in the average number of sentences over time we can see that the numbers remained fairly consistent, even increasing slightly towards the end of the study. This would seem to indicate that the students remained interested in writing journal entries using e-mail, at least over this admittedly short period of time. The average number of sentences per entry computed for the class remained within two standard deviations of the numerical average of 4.55 sentences per journal entry, with one SD equaling  $\pm .6$  sentences. This range gives us a 95% probability that the number of sentences per journal entry corresponded to each other by some factor other than random chance.

### The Average Number of Words per Journal Entry : Method

The average number of words per journal entry was computed for each of the five assigned journal entries for the entire number of participating students. In other words, the number of words per entry for each participating student was totaled, and that number divided by the number of students responding to the specific journal entry. Some students did not submit one or more journal entries for a variety of reasons, including class absence due to illness, and lack of a password for the computer system.

Entry	1	2	3	4	5
ave.	38.09	33	33.27	34.77	40
words / entry					

### Analysis

With the average words / entry we see a fluctuation in entry length. This fluctuation seems to follow a biweekly pattern, but without data covering a larger number of assignments we cannot make any inferences as to the cause. The number of words per entry seemed to remain fairly constant however, with the students writing journal entries that were between 33 and 40 words in length on the average. This fits in with the numerical average of 36.62 words per entry with a standard deviation of  $\pm 2.47$  words. Again, all the data in this study fits within  $\pm$  two standard deviations of the average giving us a 95% level of confidence in the data.

### Average Words per Sentence : Method

The average number of words per sentence was computed for each journal entry by taking the number of words for each student journal entry and dividing them by the number of sentences in the same journal entry. The results from these calculations were then summed and the average taken for each of the five journal entries used in this study. Again, students who did not write a response for a given journal were not included in that week's average.

Entry	1	2	3	4	5
ave.	9.07	10.49	8.35	7.12	7.08
words / sentence					

### Analysis

Here we see a definite downward trend in the average number of words per sentence. The average peaks during the second week at 10.49 words per sentence and then declines for every week after that. The average for the number of words per sentence was 8.43 with a standard deviation of  $\pm 1.25$ . Again, all the data fit within  $\pm$  two standard deviations of the numerical average, giving a 95% confidence level.

### General Analysis and Conclusion

Upon looking at the data we can see that the average number of sentences the students wrote for each journal entry went up as the number of words per sentence declined. The number of words per entry, on the other hand, seemed to stay within a certain range, moving up and down over time but not following any discernible trend over the length of the study. The very tentative conclusion that can be reached from this data is that students were writing a larger number of shorter sentences as the journal assignments progressed.

There could be several explanations for these trends. One is that the students began to take the lard out of their prose ala Lanham (Lanham, 1979). The removal of extraneous words from their sentences caused the words-per-sentence average to go down while the number of sentences went up. This would indicate that the students were using a

greater number of more compact sentences to transfer information.

The second explanation is that due to the small number of students involved in this study, 13, and the short duration of this study, five journal entries over the course of several weeks, the numbers are part of a larger trend that was not revealed because of the limited amount of data collected. Follow-up studies similar to this one could be done for longer durations in order to get a clearer idea of the trends involved in the students' writing.

The final explanation for these numbers is that the students may be re-shaping their journal entries to be more like spoken discourse. This refers back to Chun and her theory that the students' journals will resemble speech in their patterns (Chun, 1994). An interesting related study to this one would be to see how students responded both verbally and in writing to a series of questions posed to them in order to find out if certain patterns emerged depending on which medium, written or spoken, they were responding in. As a corollary to this, the students may also have been creating more meaningful responses ala Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, 1982). In other words, by using real language in a situation where it must provide meaning and information in the form of answers to questions, the students found it necessary to re-shape their prose into what was described by the statistics collected in the study.

In conclusion, this paper has discussed some of the background and reasoning behind using e-mail as a medium for journals. The similarity of journal entries and spoken language, the opportunity for regular practice using the language, and the opportunity to use the language to create meaningful sentences in English are all strong reasons for

including journals as part of a class. Ease of collection, correction, and response are among the reasons for using e-mail as the medium for these journals. Finally, a statistical analysis of the content of these journals was provided. This analysis revealed some clues as to the trends in the students' writing as well as some ideas for follow-up studies based on the same general theme.

### Bibliography

Ahmad, K., & Corbett, G. (1985) *Computers, Language Learning and Language Teaching*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Bradbury, R. (1990) *Zen in the Art of Writing*. New York : Bantam Books.

Dulay, H., Burt, M. & Krashen, S. (1982) *Language Two*. New York : Oxford University Press.

Freedman, D., Pisani, R. & Purves, R. (1978) *Statistics*. New York : W.W. Norton and Company.

Gibaldi, J., & Achtert, W. S. (1988) *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York : The Modern Language Association of America.

Hacker, D. (1992) *A Writer's Reference*. Boston : Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press.

Kroll, B. (1991) Teaching Writing in the ESL Context. In M. Cele-Murcia (Ed.). *Teaching English in a Second or Foreign Language* (2nd ed.), (pp.245-263). New York : Newbury House / Harper Collins.

Chun, D. (1994) Using Computer networking to facilitate the acquisition of interactive competence. *system*, 22, 17-31.

Lanham, R. A. (1979) *Revising Prose*. New York : Charles Scribner's Sons.

Lanham, R. A. (1974) *Style : An Anti-textbook*. London : Yale University Press.

Nielsen, B. M. (1997) Journal Writing in the English Conversation Classroom. *Tokai Dai Gakuen Kieo* 10 : 39-45.

Scott, V. M. (1996) *Rethinking Foreign Language Writing*. Boston : Heinle and Heinle Publishers.

Selinker, L. (1972) Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics* 10 : 201-231.

Semke, H. D. (1984) Effects of the Red Pen. *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (3) : 195-202.

Warshauer, M. (1995) *E-mail for English Teaching*. Bloomington : Paragraph Printing.

Cross, D. (1991). *A Practical Handbook of Language Teaching*. London : Cassell.

**Appendix 1. A list of e-mail journal questions from the first term of Oral English Seminar.**

1. What parts of English : (grammar, vocabulary, culture, or conversation) would you like to study in this class? What kinds of media (movies, videos, stories, songs, etc.) can we use to study them?
2. How does reading and discussing news articles in English help you get a different perspective on the world? Also, what are some themes you can see in world news?
3. What do you do when you listen to English speech? Where do you have trouble? What happens? What can you do when you have trouble?
4. English metaphors and similes are important. They can make your writing or speech more interesting. For example, "She runs like a deer." is more interesting than, "She runs fast." Do you use similes or metaphors in Japanese? If so, please give me some examples in both Japanese and English.
5. In Japanese culture or old stories, what makes a person a hero? What are some of the important parts of a classical story in Japanese culture : heroes, villains, love, etc.? What kinds of things happen in these stories : long journeys, heroic battles, etc.? Finally, what is a hero to you?

**Appendix 2 A table of information from student e-mail journal entries.**

Entry Student	1	2	3	4	5
1.	0 / 0	48 / 6.8	16 / 5.3	30 / 7.5	23 / 5.8
2.	38 / 9.5	23 / 23	33 / 11	28 / 7	8 / 8
3.	35 / 5.8	29 / 7.3	0 / 0	20 / 4	20 / 4
4.	59 / 8.4	0 / 0	50 / 10	62 / 10.3	58 / 9.6
5.	0 / 0	22 / 11	0 / 0	24 / 6	45 / 6.42
6.	49 / 9.8	63 / 9.5	57 / 9.5	33 / 5.5	85 / 8.5
7.	25 / 6.3	25 / 8.3	49 / 9.8	30 / 7.5	40 / 6.7
8.	7 / 3.5	25 / 8.3	26 / 6.5	31 / 6.2	56 / 8
9.	58 / 19.3	0 / 0	24 / 8	42 / 8.4	34 / 8.5
10.	33 / 11	35 / 11.6	32 / 8	33 / 8.3	54 / 6.8
11.	31 / 7.8	46 / 9.2	18 / 6	42 / 5.3	21 / 7
12.	35 / 8.8	46 / 11.5	26 / 6.5	24 / 6	34 / 6.8
13.	49 / 9.8	49 / 9	79 / 11.3	53 / 10.6	42 / 6

Notes :

Table entries are read as, "number of words in journal entry / average words per sentence."  
Zeros indicate uncompleted assignments.