



E-MAIL WRITING PROJECTS IN AN EFL CONTEXT: FROM LINGUISTIC AND ATTITUDINAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

A great number of benefits have been claimed in a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) context; however, little research has been conducted by the method of discourse analysis. The purpose of this study is to, through discourse analysis, unfold and uncover EFL learners' underlying feelings about e-mail writing and their writing styles. The participants were thirty-four Applied English-majored college students, writing e-mail to their peers for five times. Based on the data collected from the learners' e-mail and reflection discourse, the results showed that the majority (88.24%) had positive attitudes towards e-mail writing. Besides positive feelings about this writing project, the learners presented highly active participation in writing e-mail to their peers. Through the e-mail writing project, they not only had more opportunities to use the target language, but also supported each other to deal with academic and personal difficulties. Furthermore, their e-mail writing style had also been analyzed. Through the analysis, it was claimed that EFL learners also used repeated letters, punctuation marks, emoticons, and special features in the e-mail writing. Implications of these findings for future studies are proposed to be of help to those who would like to apply e-mail writing to an EFL context.

Keywords: e-mail writing, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

CMC refers to communication through a computer between or among people ([Herring, 1996](#); [Levy, 1997](#)), including synchronous and asynchronous modes. Whether in synchronous or asynchronous modes, a wealth of studies using CMC has reported the benefits of applying this medium to language learning. In a CMC context, learners are provided with a more equitable platform for discussion ([Warschauer, 1996](#)); moreover,

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they interact more with each other ([Al-Fadda & Al-Yahya, 2010](#); [Chun, 1994](#); [Ducate & Lomicka, 2008](#); [Elola, 2010](#); [Goertler, 2009](#); [Kern, 1995](#); [Kuzu, 2007](#); [Sharma, Ke, & Xie, 2010](#); [Warschauer, 2009](#); [Yang, 2009](#)). E-mail communication is a text-based CMC in which participants interact with each other through written language. Moreover, it provides a high speed service to exchange information asynchronously. Several benefits of using e-mail in language classrooms have been noted by a great number of researchers ([Belisle, 1996](#); [Goodwin, 1995](#); [Liao, 2002](#)). The benefits are to promote real and natural communication, to facilitate independent learning, and to arouse learners' interest in communicating with each other ([Warschauer, 1997](#)). Furthermore, e-mail creates opportunities for teachers to interact with learners and also makes learners express their ideas more easily ([Belisle, 1996](#)). In other words, interactive communication happens not just in class, but also in the exchange of e-mail.

Speaking of e-mail communication, the style is not like that of formal communication but more of conversation. E-mail, in most situations, is not composed or edited as carefully as conventional writing. In the same vein, Baron ([1998](#)) proposed that the style of e-mail follows the style of speech, which is that there is little or no editing. The differences between spoken and written languages were identified and categorized by Halliday ([1989](#)). In spoken language, speakers use more contractions, ellipsis, and grammatical words, whereas more content word and phrases are used in written language. In order to examine e-mail, a more speech-like written communication, the method of discourse analysis was applied in the study. Through the analysis, the writing style used by EFL learners would be revealed and moreover, their feelings about e-mail writing would be unfolded as well.

With the intention to understand the implementation of e-mail project in a college composition class, the purpose of the study was to explore EFL learners' attitudes toward e-mail writing and their linguistic features of e-mail writing.

Therefore, the study was guided by the following three questions:

1. What are the EFL learners' attitudes toward e-mail writing?
2. Besides more writing opportunities, what else can be found through the analysis of the e-mail discourse?
3. What are the linguistic features of e-mail writing?

2. Method

The study presented here makes use of discourse analysis in order to examine EFL learners' linguistic characteristics of e-mail writing and to unfold their inner feelings about e-mail writing. The participants were thirty-four Applied English-majored college students, taking English Writing as a compulsory course. In order to reveal their feelings about e-mail writing and examine the linguistic features, EFL learners' e-mail writing and their reflection on it were collected to make up the data.

3. Participants and Data Collection Procedures

The participants were thirty-four Applied English-majored college students, writing e-mail to their peers for five times during a semester. During the semester, each learner, first, found an e-mail writing partner among the students from the same class and then, he or she started writing at least 80 words per e-mail to the partner. The partner wrote back to him or her. The paired learners had to complete the writing project together and to meet the requirement, which was that they had to write no less than five times to each other. By the end of the semester, the learners printed out all the e-mail content and also filled out a personal data form, including reflection on this e-mail writing project.

3.1 Description of the Instruments

What the learners wrote to their peers via e-mail and their reflection on it was collected as the major data for analysis. The analysis was presented in the following ways: attitudes toward e-mail writing, social interaction and mutual support and linguistic characteristics. The data was analyzed to investigate EFL learners' attitudes towards e-mail writing, features of e-mail writing, and their social interaction through quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method used in the study was descriptive statistics, describing the frequency of e-mail opening and closing styles. Besides the style frequency, learners' feelings about e-mail writing were examined and interpreted through the method of discourse analysis.

4. Presentation of Findings

The analysis was divided into three major categories: attitudes towards e-mail writing, social interaction and mutual support, and linguistic characteristics. Below was the analysis for each category.

4.1 Attitudes towards e-mail writing

Analyzed through the learners' reflection, it was found that the majority (88.24%) had positive attitudes towards the e-mail writing project. Moreover, their good feelings about it were grouped into four main categories: an interesting project, experiences to be shared, tightened friendship, and improved English writing.

A. An interesting project

Many learners mentioned that the e-mail writing project was fun and interesting. Because of its fun and interesting aspects, they enjoyed writing e-mail to each other, without complaining about the workload of writing.

"I think it's very interesting assignment" (S1)

"very happy, it's my first time to write a letter to my friend." (S2)

"...sometime I would forget it or have nothing special to share. But it is still quite a lot funny." (S3)

"This email assignment was fun and interesting." (S4)

"I think it's fun, Fantastic." (S5)

"It's fun. Feel like talking to someone who I don't know, just like making new friend." (S6)

"I feel very fresh and interesting." (S7)

B. Experiences to be shared

Apart from opinions about the interesting and fun part of the project, the learners also claimed that they were provided with more chances to share life experiences with their peers.

"Through this project, we can know more about other's life." (S8)

"Also I can get some information from my friend." (S9)

"I can share everything that I experience everyday. Just like I have an internet friend." (S10)

"I can more know my friend." (S11)

"We also get the chance to communicate with classmate." (S12)

C. Tightened friendship

Provided with more opportunities to share experiences with each other, the learners felt closer to their e-mail writing partners, making the ties between classmates stronger and stronger.

"Increasing our friendship." (S13)

"And I think Ashley and I become closer." (S14)

"It's a good assignment that can improving the relationship between classmates." (S15)

D. Improved English writing

Not only did the learners feel closer to their partners, but they also thought that their English writing improved through this e-mail writing project.

"I think it did improve my writing skill." (S16)

"It's very helpful to me learn more in English." (S17)

"The email is a good skill to learn English." (S18)

"That can help me more improvements." (S19)

The analysis above which was based on the answers from the reflection form revealed that the learners had fun doing this e-mail writing project and they also became closer to their classmates. Most importantly, they thought they were provided with more opportunities to practice English and their English writing improved. Besides the analysis of the reflection form, the analysis of the e-mail content demonstrated that the learners supported each other mentally and psychologically to overcome any difficulties in the family or academic life.

4.2 Social interaction and mutual support

Through discourse analysis, social interaction and mutual support between the learners could be revealed and interpreted. When one learner faced a problem or difficulty, the other learner offered a helpful hand and tried to make a suggestion to help deal with it. In the study, the interaction between learners was strengthened through the e-mail project; similarly, Warschauer (2004) mentioned that *"Computer-mediated communication combines several features that together make it a powerful new medium of human interaction (p.5)."*

1.

A1: *"Li, actually I didn't sleep well last last. I've been in bad mood from these couple days because of some reasons."*

A2: *"You can do it if you like to find someone to talk about or take a way our of your problem, can't you? I will be happy to see that if you can take in my suggestions. The most important thing for a successful person that is taking action for your goal."*

2.

A3: *"The other thing I want to share with you is what I faed now. That is I got lost in my way, is it serious? I was setting my goal and I really wanted to reach it. But now I feel that is not what I want and I can't feel anything. How can I do? Can you give me some advice?"*

A4: *"I know sometimes we would lose our self in life, because of the age, job, and environment or without any reason. You know sometimes the dream and reality are conflict. Just follow your heart. Maybe you just confuse temporary. Don't worry too much!"*

3.

A5: *"Talking about the final presentation, I bother my listening presentation too. The topic is "The different marriage between India (arranged marriage) and free love.""*

A6: *"That's a very interesting topic. Are you searching for the India Marriage already? Don't worried about the 10 mins presentation, you should practice at home several times before you go on the stage."*

4.

A7: *"Unfortunately, when I got off my duty, the money I received was less than they previously told me. I was pretty upset about this...Anyway, I was just grumbling."*

A8: *"That sucks! If I were you, I would fight with my right. Did you ask your boss about the salary? I bet you didn't do that...Duet to I am a person who don't like to waste time, if I didn't get the feedback As I pay, I will ask it directly..."*

In this CMC context, the learners not only have more chances to use the target language but take part in this virtual social network, sharing their lives and encouraging their peers. CMC indeed strengthens the connection between learners. Learners, therefore, on one hand, practice the target language; on the other hand, they develop social communication skills and gain support to face personal or academic problems.

4.3 Linguistic Characteristics

Besides social interaction and mutual support, linguistic characteristics could be analyzed as well through discourse analysis. Through it, the way how the learners write e-mail was revealed. The language of e-mail writing is far more different from standard writing for "it is informal" and "it is graphic" ([Warschauer, 2007](#)). Informal and graphic characteristics in e-mail writing were unfolded through the analysis of data. The data was examined for discourse features in the light of the following aspects: openings and closings ([Crystal, 2001](#); [Gains, 1999](#)) and special language features ([Crystal, 2001](#); [Murray, 1988](#)).

A. Openings and Closings

The opening styles were analyzed by the category proposed by Crystal (2001). The category was divided into two parts: +Dear messages and -Dear messages. Table 1 below showed that the learners used more +Dear messages (60%) in their e-mail writing

while –Dear messages (40%) were less written. Writing in a CMC context is less formal, especially in the context the senders and recipients are peer classmates. Some of them even used +Dear with intimate name to express their close relationship with the recipients, such as Dear More Responsibility, Dear Mama-to-be, and so forth. Table 2 indicated the styles of closing used by the EFL learners. The most frequent closing style is “sender’s name only (25.88%),” followed by “no closing (24.71%).” Given with the results of opening and closing styles, it is suggested that in an e-mail environment, the language is different from the one used in face-to-face and telephone conversations (Murray, 1988). Moreover, informal and casual ways of communication were revealed through the style of opening and closing e-mail by the learners.

Table 1 E-mail Openings

	Frequency (%)	Examples
+Dear	60	Dear Li Dear Joyce
-Dear	40	Hi, Kira Hello, Zevine

Table 2 E-mail Closings

	Frequency (%)
Sender’s name only	25.88
No Closing	24.71
(All the) best (wishes/ regards)	17.65
Sincerely (yours)	7.65
Bye/ See you	5.88
Good luck	5.88
Others	5.88
Have a good (nice) day	4.71
Thank(s) (you)	1.18
(Much) Love (and respect)	0.59

B. Special features of CMC writing

Apart from the openings and closings, special features of CMC writing were also revealed through the analysis. The features were grouped into four parts: repeated letters, punctuation marks, emoticons, and abbreviated language.

a. Repeated letters

“Heloooooooooooo Angelina”

“I have to go to bed and good nightttttttt.”

“Yeah, I haven’t touch the studies yeeeeet!”

“Btw its sooooooooo hot today!!!”

b. Punctuation marks

“Yup...finally!!!! We are gonna finish the writing final assignment.”

"Hi!!!!Nana, I am always very busy in holiday."

"I can't wait to show you the film I made!!!! It certainly will amaze you!!!!"

"Why is the beautiful clothing so expensive!!!!???"

c. Emoticons

"If so, why don't we go together. :D"

"See you again! ☺ Hope you will have fun with the second love!"

"We were so happy so drink some beer ☺"

"The weather was really terrible, keep raining and raining. Don't forget to bring umbrella with you. ;)"

d. Abbreviated language

"The ture is my linguistic fail~~~~~OMG!!"

"See u on Monday!"

"Bcuz, I ahd a so down mood..."

"At least he has been sitting next to me and having some classes with me b4, right?"

In a CMC context, senders and recipients do not see each other; however, they are still able to use special language features to express emotion. Just like what was analyzed above, the EFL learners used repeated letters, punctuation marks, emoticons, and abbreviated language in their e-mail, bridging the gap between face-to-face and online communication.

5. Discussion and Implications of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that the majority of the learners (88.24%) have positive attitudes towards e-mail writing. Apart from their good feelings about it, they also presented highly active participation in this project. It is acknowledged in this study and other research ([Kamhi-Stein, 2000](#); [McPherson & Nunes, 2004](#); [Trajtemberg & Androula, 2011](#); [Warschauer, 2009](#)) that the learners' social interaction has improved and mutual support has also been gained through CMC contexts. Some learners reported that they would like to continue writing e-mail to their partners even after they were not required to do so. At the beginning of the project, the learners wrote e-mail mostly out of extrinsic motivation. However, after the project, they did it due to intrinsic motivation, driving them to have further e-mail contact with their partners. Furthermore, special features of e-mail writing are used by EFL learners, including repeated letters, punctuation marks and emoticons, which demonstrates that e-mail is an informal form of written communication. The analysis of e-mail writing style is in accordance with the definition of spoken language proposed by Halliday (1989) and the informal writing characteristics categorized by Crystal (2001), Gains (1999), and Murray (1988). Obviously, in this written communication, senders could still express their

emotions through special language features. Special language features make the virtual world closer to the face-to-face world.

Based on the findings, language teachers should be encouraged to use technology to reinforce teaching and learning. Furthermore, e-mail writing could be used as a medium between teachers and students and among students. Since the data of this study is small and the e-mail writing is only conducted for one semester, future studies could be undertaken to implement e-mail writing into language learning for a longer period of time and to recruit more participants. Future research could also be conducted to examine the writing performance of EFL learners before and after the e-mail implementation in a language context. It is hoped that the findings and conclusions shed some light on the application of e-mail in a composition class and it would be of help to those language teachers who would like to arouse learners' interest in writing and promote more positive interaction between or among learners.

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