CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Writing is often perceived as a solitary activity but in reality it is a social act. Even when writers write in isolation, they are nonetheless externalizing thoughts and intentions constructed out of interactions in the social world. Undergirding this perspective is a social cognitive theory of writing which sees writing as a meaning-making activity that serves individual and social purposes (Sperling, 1996).

To a large extent, the language theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981) influence this view of writing and literacy. Vygotsky links language acquisition to cognitive development. He postulates that intellectual functioning begins on the social plane first before proceeding to the individual level, that is, from inter-psychological functioning to intra-psychological functioning. Communicating with others whether by speaking or writing is said to be a re-externalization of internalised thought which has its beginning in social activities.

On an almost similar note, Bakhtin (1981) asserts that language is a dynamic social activity, taking place within a social dialogue where two or more voices come into contact. Integral to his perspective of human social and cognitive processes is the idea of 'dialogicality'. Bakhtin contends that in order to understand the meaning of an utterance produced we have to look at its relationship to other (voice's) utterances that surround it. The dialogic nature of language presupposes that language is fluid and that it takes on new shapes and meanings in new utterance or new context (Wertsch & Smolka, 1993; Fallon, 1995) Following

Vygotsky and Bakhtin, other researchers focus on writers and readers in dynamic interaction. Since it is suggested that speakers and interlocutors interact by co-constructing meaning, it therefore follows that students learn to co-construct meaning and write effectively by engaging in authentic conversation with readers. Thus dialoguing with others seems to be vital to the writing process.

However, the writing that is done in most Malaysian school settings tends to be teacher directed and monologic. More often than not, writing is used to assess whether students have mastered specific forms and structures and also to give students practice in writing exam-type essays. With the preeminent role that examinations play in our society, examination formats have an effect on what kinds of writing are taught, how they are taught and how they are evaluated. Inevitably, how the teacher values and responds to a written product usually conforms to how marks are awarded based on examination marking schemes. Thus the authenticity and purposefulness of writing and dialoguing are sacrificed for the sake of examinations. Is it any wonder then that many students do not find writing relevant to their personal lives? Indeed, the lack of dialogue in our education system has resulted in an impersonal and dehumanized form of learning that does not help today's youths make sense of their life worlds. To redress this imbalance in our education system and to make learning more humanistic, I feel that our curriculum should embrace dialogue and student-teacher partnership in its pedagogy. As dialogue journal writing is anchored in a collaborative, humanistic and dialogic approach to education, I see great benefits in using it to enhance learning, in particular the learning of English as a second language.

In this chapter I seek to provide a brief conceptual and contextual basis for this case study of dialogue journal writing between a secondary school ESL (English as a second language) student and his teacher. I document the origin of dialogue journal writing to show how it has evolved from a classroom practice to become an area of interest for many researchers. Then I describe the background of the present study, articulate the research questions and outline the significance of this study as starting points for further developments in subsequent chapters.

1.1   Dialogue Journal Writing – A Brief History

Although the practice of written interaction may go as far back as the beginning of history itself, the recorded history of the research on dialogue journal writing began in the classroom of a teacher, Leslee Reed, in Los Angeles in 1979 when Staton researched Reed's use of dialogue journals with native speakers of English. Reed's particular practice of engaging students in written dialogue actually began in 1964 when a principal asked teachers to make sure that their students left school each day remembering something they had learned or done. Deciding that the best way to reinforce students' memory was by making students write to her what they had learned, Reed soon grew fascinated with the students' different responses to the same class lessons that they experienced. To help Reed keep track of the written conversations, bound composition notebooks soon replaced the use of slips of paper for writing the messages (Staton & Peyton, 1992).

The difference between the dialogue journal from its monologue cousin, the personal journal, became apparent when Reed discovered that students used the

private discussions in dialogue journals functionally in order to complain, to ask questions, to request help in solving personal and academic problems and to share feelings (Staton, 1988d). In contrast to the communication in personal journals which is private and one-sided, dialogue journals on the other hand develop as a result of real communication between real partners with real information exchange. Further, compared to the artificial writing done in most classrooms, this authentic communication is liberating, purposeful and meaningful. Used in this context, the dialogue journal soon became the core of Reed's instruction. Purportedly, it was not a theory-derived technique or research idea, but an approach that evolved from a teacher's classroom practice which eventually caught the attention of other teachers, academics and researchers during a period when collaborative participation in learning and the power of genuine dialogue were gaining momentum (Staton & Peyton, 1992).

The influence of earlier and current researchers and theorists such as Bruner, Vygotsky and Freire soon became integrated in the framework for the study on dialogue journal writing. Central to their philosophy is the belief that students are capable of progressing to a much higher level of learning with the help of a more able person than is possible if unaided. Additionally, underpinning the use of journal writing is a libertarian philosophy which strongly advocates that literacy must be used to empower and liberate (Staton, 1988d). It also weaves discourse analysis within an interactional framework for viewing the acquisition and use of language as a way of thinking and getting things done in the world. Fundamentally, it enfolds concepts such as interactional scaffolding, zone of proximal development and appropriation. This powerful combination of highly

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desirable elements found in dialogue journal writing has fuelled the interest of many researchers and teachers who are impressed with such concepts of learning. Consequently, an increasing number of teachers have effectively used dialogue journals with diverse learners ranging from young to adult in L1 (first language), ESL, EFL (English as a foreign language) and other various contexts (Staton, 1988d).

1.2   Background of the Study

The system of education in Malaysia is quite representative of Freire's (1970) 'banking concept of education' (this will be elaborated in 2.3) which sees the teacher's job as drawing contents from the 'central bank of knowledge' and depositing them in students' brains. Furthermore, in Malaysia there is an over-emphasis on examinations which dictate the types of content taught, the ways teachers teach and how they evaluate students' work. Not surprisingly then, students find learning contents uninteresting and detached from their daily experience and reality. In opposition to this banking concept, libertarian education sees the teacher and students as partners in an interactive teaching and learning environment. It seeks to respect and incorporate students' knowledge into classroom pedagogy. Though libertarian education is touted as an ideal pedagogy, its time has yet to arrive in Malaysia. Trapped as we are in our 'banking' position, the situation is not completely hopeless. For in out-of-class dialogue journal writing, I see a bridge for moving students from banking education towards meaningful libertarian ways of learning. Given the benefits of dialogue journal

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writing, I am particularly interested to find out whether it can play a supplementary role in promoting and enhancing ESL learning.

Additionally, the use of the dialogue journal as a tool to support learning is popular in many parts of the world. In Malaysia, though the practice of journal writing is not uncommon in teacher education, yet its use has not spread to our schools mainly due to a dearth of information on this subject. Hence, it is timely that a study be conducted on learning ESL through dialogue journal writing to inform our Malaysian ESL pedagogy.

Last but not least is my concern that most writing research in Malaysia remains confined to studying the artificial uses of written language that occurs in the classroom rather than the meaningful uses of authentic writing as exemplified in real-life communication. It is therefore my intention to fill the lacuna in this area by exploring what actually happens in the real space of real writing between a Form Five ESL student and his teacher. In the following section, I will articulate my research questions for this study.

1.3   The Research Questions

In the naturalistic environment where the student-participant was given free rein to collaborate in journal writing with this teacher-researcher, I was curious to investigate three specific questions which can increase our understanding and henceforth add to our knowledge store concerning ESL writing and learning within our local context. The specific questions which I sought to answer were:

1.   What are the contextual dimensions involved in dialogue journal writing?

2.   What are the socio-psychological dimensions involved in dialogue journal

writing?

3. What is the nature of language use in the dialogue journal?

It is hoped that the answers derived from these questions would benefit ESL pedagogy in ways which will be discussed in the following section.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This qualitative case study is significant in a number of ways. The contextual factors will enable teachers to understand how the physical context of the site and the nature of this real-life interactive writing can affect the student's attitude and motivation for ESL learning and writing. Also, an understanding of the socio-psychological dimensions that bear on this student's learning will open windows for teachers to better understand the internal and external factors that influence the student's relationship with the teacher and his attitude towards learning English as a second language. Further, it will also help to shed light on the nature of language use in real communication and how communicative functions are achieved through the use of linguistic choices. Thus by giving space to one student's 'living interaction' (Fallon, 1995) with his teacher, this study hopes to uncover the impact that this has on the student's learning of ESL. A caveat is in order here. As this study is very much context-bound, it is not my intention to presume that the insights gained are generalisable to other contexts. Notwithstanding, I believe that by taking cognizance of the insights that this study seeks to unravel, teachers and those interested in the field of ESL may be able to learn from specific instances that are pertinent to their situations and applicable for use in their own contexts. In this regard, the discoveries made can be a launching

pad for them to validate and optimise their own understanding and teaching in ways that are relevant to their situations.

Having delineated the framework that will shape my research, in the next chapter I will draw on the relevant conceptual and research literature to further illuminate this study.