

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Dialogue journal writing is a context-embedded 'living interaction' which makes use of language to mediate experiences, motives and the social construction of knowledge. The partners in this interactive writing have a functional relationship whereby the reader interacts and responds to the writer who has a message to share. Thus dialogue journal writing is construed as a purposeful and meaningful activity where our need to communicate, to understand and be understood as well as to acquire new information about knowledge of the world and about ourselves is met. In addition, the dialogue journal also serves as a pedagogical tool for learning as its practice is grounded on the Neo-Vygotskian concepts of scaffolding, zone of proximal development and appropriation which also sees learning entrenched in humanistic and libertarian ways.

In this final chapter it is obligatory that I provide a summary of my key findings, discuss their implications for ESL teaching, suggest recommendations for future research and bring the study to an appropriate close.

5.1 Summary of Findings

Contextually, despite the hostile site that Mazlan was located in, the dialogue journal provided a means for him to overcome the deficiencies that he encountered in his milieu. The key attributes of dialogue journalling which saw the writing taking place in private spaces and private time outside the formal language classroom allowed Mazlan to partake in the natural ecology of writing

where writing was done for real communicative purposes that helped fulfil his personal and language learning needs. In addition, the freedom to write what he wanted in the way that he wanted made this form of writing a meaningful and pleasurable activity for him. Significantly too, the journal 'transported' Mazlan from the restrictive and transmissive mode of learning to a liberating and dialogic mode that was sensitive to his life world and lived experiences.

The process of dialogue journal writing was a journey of discovery not just for the student but also for the teacher. In participating in this study, I was sensitised to the fact that neither Mazlan nor I came into the writing as ahistorical and unidimensional beings but rather we came in with our complex social histories. Thus intramentally, our personalities, world-views, fears, concerns and aspirations shaped our writing and the way we used language. The findings from this study also revealed that on the personal level, Mazlan was a motivated student with positive attitudes towards ESL learning. Not surprisingly, he wrote frequently in the journal and his entries were fairly long too. As regards the intermental level, our social interaction helped us to understand each other better. Consequently, the close bond that developed between us allowed us to reveal our 'human faces' to each other thereby making authenticity the hallmark of our interaction. This had the advantage of motivating Mazlan to invest in the writing and learning process. In addition, the social nature of the writing also gave me opportunities to use language to mediate Mazlan's learning which was first manifested on the social plane before being transformed into internal processes.

Apart from unearthing the contextual and socio-psychological dimensions of dialogue journal writing, this research also threw light on the varied functions to

which language was used in this joint writing. In my capacity as a discourse guide I had used language not only to get Mazlan hooked to the interactive writing but also to scaffold his learning by pitching my instruction to his zone of proximal development in order to optimise his learning. My responses gave Mazlan exposure to a wide repertoire of vocabulary and structures which he soon appropriated and adapted to suit his own semantic and expressive intentions. The insights from this study also suggested that Mazlan was a fluent user of English. This was exemplified in his ability to exploit a wide array of linguistic resources to construct forms of interaction so as to subtly persuade me, the reader, to agree with his views and orientations. The fluid nature of Mazlan's language use made the journal an excellent site for me to complement, contest or challenge his linguistic choices so as to induct him into 'ways with words' and 'ways of thinking' (Mercer, 2000). Ultimately, he could be led to a higher level of communicative competence as well as critical thinking through this form of extended writing. While the findings of this qualitative case study involving one Form Five ESL student dialoguing in writing with his teacher are not generalisable beyond this study, implications can nevertheless be drawn for teaching ESL in the Malaysian context.

5.2 Implications for ESL Teaching

The dialogue journal, as a social environment for the guided construction of knowledge, is a suitable site for using language to promote learning as well as to learn language. Concepts, knowledge, critical skills, linguistic use as well as the ability to be oppositional, defensive or to take on a conciliatory stance can develop during the social process of extended writing. Further, this collaborative interaction

allows students and teachers to assume various roles that require them to use different linguistic repertoires to serve their communicative needs (Stillar, 1998). The pedagogic value for students is that they learn to be sensitive to where their readers are coming from and to position themselves accordingly so as to optimise the effects of their writing to suit their communicative purposes. Teachers, on the other hand, can make use of language to interrogate and challenge students' writing in order to shape their writing into well-conceived, intelligent and coherent texts.

Because dialogue journal writing makes thoughts and words opaque and reproducible for analysis (Cazden, 1976), it provides recurring opportunities for students to read, imitate and practice language in use. As students encounter ways in which words are used in specific contexts, they are inducted into particular social practices and culturally valued ways of deriving meanings from texts (Mercer, 2000). The language in these texts also becomes available for them to appropriate and use. Therefore the journal is a linguistically rich site that students can dip into to help them learn and use vocabulary in context. Additionally, the visible language in the journal also allows students to assess and develop their own cognitive processes as they search for patterns, raise questions and construct concepts and strategies for their own language learning.

In dialogue journal writing, centrality is given to meaning and communication. This has the advantage of encouraging writing and increasing students' motivation to use language to pursue their own interests and communicative goals. By implication, if writing were to flourish in the Malaysian ESL classrooms, there must be occasions where students' writing and teachers' responses give primacy to meaning and communication. This will pave the way for

students to write in response to their personal needs, lived experiences and life worlds rather than writing merely to fulfil conventional school practices. This kind of writing will make them more engaged in the learning process. In similar fashion, Mercer (2000) pointed out that the quality of students' educational experience and their commitment to the learning process are affected by the extent to which " what they are doing in class has continuity, a comprehensive purpose and scope for their active participation (p. 161)."

Also, because dialogue journal writing is characterised by the use of language functions within the structure of discourse, it gives students practice to utilise unlimited language functions in connected writing. By giving students a wider access to use all their linguistic resources in writing, their chances of becoming more successful in the ESL classroom are likely to increase in tandem with the increased language use (Cook, 1996). This implies that ESL teachers need to give students more leeway in writing and not over-control their writing as this will limit their cognitive and linguistic growth.

Another benefit of dialogue journal writing is that it allows teachers opportunities to use language to reach out and get through to students. As such, quite often the 'us and them' stance of the traditional classroom is replaced with an 'I and thou' (Noddings, 1984) relationship of reciprocity that enhances motivation for second language learning. This kind of libertarian, humanistic and affective approach to education should be incorporated into the ESL curriculum as it has potential for changing students' misconceptions of school or the second language classroom by using language to expand their horizons and raise their cultural awareness and sensitivity to situations.

Lastly, this study also revealed that some of the topics or themes Mazlan wrote on, like descriptions of people and events, complement the topics in our Malaysian Form Five curriculum specifications. In this regard the writing from the journal can be used to help students improve their classroom writing of such topics. Therefore, as a tool for teaching writing, I see the benefits of using the journal as a resource for helping students select suitable topics for further development into good essays. Further, I feel that the journal can also be used as a natural and comfortable bridge to other kinds of writing which are valued in school. Indeed if we want to tap on the potential of this resource, it necessitates that we build into our ESL curriculum the use of dialogue journals as a tool to supplement and complement classroom teaching.

5.3 Recommendations

In this study I have attempted to show the contextual and socio-psychological dimensions involved in dialogue journal writing as well as the purposes to which language was used in the journal. As well, I have also tried to illustrate that learning involves exchanges of meaning and of texts as shared enterprises through which education is made relevant and responsive to the student's needs. It is hoped that the insights from this modest research can be used as fodder to feed ESL curriculum development and teaching practice in order to enhance students' learning and writing.

I do not deny that dialogue journal writing is a time-consuming activity for teachers. Therefore to warrant its use in the classroom, teachers need to be convinced of its efficacy in enhancing students' writing ability and motivation for

learning. This being the case, there is a compelling need for the use of multiple case study designs to collect data to answer such research questions so that cumulative generalisations can be made to inform ESL teaching in Malaysia. Also, in view of the fact that this study did not investigate whether the ESL student was able to transfer and apply the writing skills he learned in dialogue journaling to other forms of formal writing, there is a need for further research to add to our understanding of how this interactive writing can support academic writing. Finally, as dialogue journal writing is an interesting area that is relatively unexplored in Malaysia, it is my hope that this research will help to whet the appetite of those interested in ESL curriculum development and teaching to go out and gather data in this largely uncharted field. New research in this area will provide useful and rich insights that can further illuminate and enrich decision making as well as enhance ESL teaching and learning in Malaysia. Indeed, it will be to our enlightened interest if we seriously explore and consider dialogue journal writing as an invaluable resource for learning.

5.4 Conclusion

To round up, there are sufficient grounds to suggest that dialogue journal writing can be an interesting, motivating and meaningful writing activity as it allows students to scribe what they want about the stuff of their lives in a non-threatening way. Through this interactive form of writing, Mazlan the key participant in this study, was encouraged to use a multitude of language functions to express his communicative intents. This encouraged him to write as well as helped to extend the purposes to which he used language. There were also

indications of cognitive and linguistic growth in him as I scaffolded his learning and pitched my instruction within his zone of proximal development. Through this type of extended writing, Mazlan was also exposed to authentic discourse in its richness and diversity which allowed him to appropriate and learn new words. Additionally, as Mazlan and I established a nurturing relationship which involved caring and sharing, Mazlan's personal development was also enhanced. Furthermore, because the journal allowed me to view slices of Mazlan's private world, I was better able to pitch my writing to meet his personal and language learning needs. In the final analysis, Mazlan's intramental processes were facilitated and accelerated by our intermental activities which were mediated via the textual space of dialogue journal writing.