

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This final chapter summarises the main findings of the study and outlines the implications that can be drawn from them. It comprises three sections. The first section presents a summary of the findings. The next section discusses the implications based on the findings of the present study. This is subsequently followed by recommendations for future research.

5.1 Summary of the Study

This study attempts to investigate the CSs that are used by e-mailers to achieve successful communication and the reasons for adopting the strategies specifically, this study was designed to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the communicative strategies used by teenage e-mailers when writing their e-mail messages in the Friendster website?
2. Why do they adopt these strategies?
3. How does gender influence the use of these communicative strategies?

a) RQ 1: What are the communicative strategies used by teenage e-mailers when writing their e-mail messages in the Friendster website?

The findings revealed that all the participants used a wide range of communication strategies as exemplified in the modified taxonomy in Table 4.1 (see Chapter 4). Based on the four categories of communicative strategies identified, the analysis showed clearly that the *orthographic* strategies were used most extensively by the teenage e-mailers when writing the text. However, the use of *paralinguistics* and *graphics*, *vocabulary* and *discoursal features* exhibited relatively low frequencies of application. The main reason for this phenomenon was to overcome the distance and silent nature of computer-mediated communication. E-mail writers adapted features of both speech and writing and added other features that neither speech nor writing could convey in their messages through the fast-paced e-mail medium. It is described by Angell and Heslop (1994:xi) as a medium that “makes different demands on writing style and the unique conventions”.

Despite having an organised taxonomy of CSs, the data revealed that the CSs were not distinct from each other as there were many permutations and combinations of CSs used by the participants and hence many overlaps in the CSs used were present. As such the percentages of frequency of use were based on the total frequency of occurrence of each category of CSs to avoid double counting.

The analysis exhibited that the CSs employed were those commonly used by participants in CMC discourse such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) users, Short Messaging System (SMS) and Instant Messaging (IM) with the exception of some new strategies such as phonetic spellings, informal words, abbreviations and interjections which were created by the

participants. This reflects the creativity of the e-mail users on one hand and exploitation of the medium to suit one's taste on the other.

b) RQ 2: Why do they (teenage e-mailers) adopt these strategies?

The answer to this question was gathered from the responses given in the questionnaire and detailed explanations given by the participants during Interview 2. The information gathered brought to light that a wide variation of CSs employment was predominantly due to the need for brevity. E-mailers reduced the number of keystrokes, turning traditional spelling conventions to 'new simplified erroneous' spellings through the displacement of words and simple phrases by their phonemic equivalents. Syntactic simplifications which are unacceptable in conventional writing were present in the data as well. Truncated ungrammatical structures were not seen as serious errors in e-mail discourse in the study as e-mail users were intent on getting their messages conveyed. This is manifested in the use of *telegraphic language* and *syntactic simplification* in the data. In the course of saving time, *speed writing* (punctuation marks were intentionally deleted in contractions), *abbreviations* and *initialisms* were used. In addition, *absence of capitalization* was adopted as a strategy to reduce keystrokes. All these strategies were used to suggest that e-mail language is largely non-standard, playful and highly deviant from the normative rules of traditional written language. Crystal (2001) uses the term 'Netspeak' to describe e-mail language which is neither spoken nor written; and it has adapted features of both spoken and written language to suit the new medium, besides adding other features that neither speech nor writing could convey.

Non-verbal information such as body language, emotions and vocal intonation which accompany verbal language in FTF communication is restricted in e-mail communication. Even novice e-mail users know that it is nonsensical to describe paralinguistic expressions in words, which is against the principle of economy of keystrokes, therefore *graphics*, *punctuation-mark emoticons* or *smileys*, *capitalization* (for shouting), *multiple letters* and *excessive use of punctuation* were used to compensate the restrictions.

E-mail writing style warrants the use of *interjections* of various kinds (English, Malaysian and other informal interjections) to convey the e-mail writer's state of emotion (e.g. *hahaha*, *ish*, *hehehe*) and vocal inflections (e.g. *bluek*, *err...*, *ahh*). The presence of a wide range of dialectal interjections in the data illustrates the "informal, conversational style of writing" in e-mail communication (Angell & Heslop, 1994). This feature was used to avoid the air of formality and at the same time leave room for individual variations in expressing themselves comfortably, and consequently a friendly atmosphere is established. Moreover, it may be culturally accepted in e-mail communication (especially for recreational purpose) to use all these interjections. However, the messages were sometimes very difficult to parse because a few possible interpretations can be made from the presence of one interjection.

Although e-mail is a form of asynchronous mediated communication which means instantaneous response is most probably not given, the occurrence of *interactional features* such as questions was relatively high in the data. This finding illuminates that e-mail message is a hybrid register that resembles both speech and writing and yet is neither (Veselinova & Dry, 1995). Actually, e-mail is more relaxed, flexible and less rule-bound, that is, free from the constraints of discourse norms found in traditional written genres.

Using all the various strategies seems to bring e-mailers together. They share and use the same language, lingo, signature emoticons, and smileys. Thus, these strategies lead to greater intimacy of friendship, which is what teenage e-mailers and the Friendster website try to achieve.

c) RQ 3: How does gender influence the use of these communicative strategies?

The data revealed that there was no noticeable difference in the overall use of CSs between male and female teenage e-mail users. The female e-mail writers used an insignificant 2.4% (78 times) more CSs than their male counterparts. Among the 4 categories of CSs in the study, female participants were found to use more *orthographic* and *discoursal features* than the male participants when communicating using e-mail. With respect to *vocabulary*, *paralinguistic* and *graphic* strategies, the frequency of use was substantially higher in the male e-mail messages than female messages.

The male and female participants who are experienced e-mail users showed greater preference for *phonetic/informal spellings* under the *orthographic* strategy. Their preference of CSs was due to the influence of ‘simplified, erroneous’ spellings which are used in other forms of CMC (such as Short Messaging System and chatroom language), and application of the principle of economy of effort. Besides, accuracy and precision in spelling and punctuation are not mandatory in e-mail writing. Therefore, one would expect a reasonably high frequency for the sub-strategy – *absence of capitalization*. Having the same rational, *speed writing* (the omission of punctuation marks in contractions) was used but the frequency was relatively low.

With regard to *vocabulary* CSs, the female e-mail users used mostly informal words or colloquial expressions found in the Oxford English Reference Dictionary (1995). Unlike them, the male e-mailers have higher tendency their own new words. The former also refrained from using informal words for fear of polluting the English Language (based on the responses given in the questionnaires).

The speech-like characteristic of e-mail messages in the data is exhibited through the extensive use of 3 types of *interjections* (English, Malaysian and other informal interjections) in the male and female e-mail messages. More English interjections were found in the male participants' messages. This brings to light on the higher frequency of use of fillers and affirmative responses by the male participants as compare to the female participants. While e-mail message is said to be speech-like, this finding contradicts Hirschmann's (1973) finding on greater female use of "fillers" and the "affirmative" responses as markers of supportiveness in FTF conversation. Malaysian interjections from Malay and Chinese and local Chinese dialects (Cantonese and Hokkien) were also used in their e-mail messages like in casual FTF conversation where code-mixing is common. Other informal interjections used to express hesitation or laughter had a higher frequency of application in the male participants' e-mails which denotes a higher degree of casualness and informality in their messages.

The use of both *initialisms* and *abbreviations* were not popular among male and female participants. The male participants employed more *initialisms* while the female participants employed *abbreviations* more frequently. They were unpopular because the teenage e-mail users (both the senders and recipients) need to be very familiar with the initialisms and

abbreviations because their messages may not be understood otherwise. In addition, not all the words or phrases can be written using initialisms or abbreviations.

With regard to the *paralinguistic and graphic* strategy, for both gender, a modest frequency of employment for *multiple letters*, *capitalization* for shouting and *punctuation-mark emoticons or smileys* was presented. The intention(s) of the participant and the interpretation of the strategies played an important role in determining the usage. *Capitalization* for shouting, for instance, which appeared in male messages only is probably a reflection of the men's higher tone and rougher manner (in FTF speeches) in e-mail communication. *Punctuation emoticons* and *smileys*, though rarely used, were helpful in conveying nonverbal language and emotions in the absence of words. Having similar functions, the excessive use of *punctuation*, on the other hand, was more frequently used among female participants. Its use had also become habitual for some teenage e-mailers for recreational purposes.

The use of *telegraphic language*, *syntactic simplification* and *interactional features* was more prominent among female participants. The linguistic nature of e-mail that is a non-edited, non-standard 'spoken' style of writing is reflected in this case. Furthermore, the use of *interactional features* (such as questions) was more distinguishable among female participants, perhaps because it is a female style of showing "supportiveness and attenuation" by asking questions and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions (Herring, 1994).

5.2 Implications of the Findings

The results of the study revealed that a wide range of communicative strategies was being used in e-mail communication by teenagers to compensate for the absence of physical cues. CSs were vital in getting messages across via a silent mode of communication. Given that there was an insignificant contrast in the use of CSs between male and female e-mail users, the findings of the study suggest that the gender of e-mail users is not a determining factor in the use of the majority of CSs when communicating through e-mail. Therefore, the use of these strategies should be encouraged as e-mail users (also learners) can be guided to greater communicative success through strategies (Haastrup and Phillipson, 1983).

Several implications can be drawn from this study, particularly pedagogical implications, which are related to teaching methodology and course or syllabus design.

E-mail communication is very significant in this modern technological world. The need for e-mail for both social and business communication as a tool to cut across geographical barriers has accelerated the extensive growth of online culture. However, the use of e-mail language, including the use of communicative strategies, is equally important to ensure that the information being communicated is clear, readable, and if possible, standardised. Additionally, studies have shown that word processing and e-mail are currently the most widely used systems in the commercial world (Le Vasan, 1996). The findings in Le Vasan's (1996) study on computer-mediated discourse in a Malaysian manufacturing company revealed that all the 20 managers in the company indicated that they used electronic mail in 80-100% of their tasks and "used it many times routinely in one working day" (Le Vasan, 1996). In another study, Chan's (1994) survey of 300 IT professionals in

Singapore indicated that e-mail ranked the most significant electronic channel used at the workplace. In addition, more than 50% of Chan's respondents recommended that e-mail writing be taught to students and samples of authentic e-mail texts from the workplace be given during training. As no research was done on e-mail use among teenagers, the researcher has chosen to study the communicative strategies in e-mail messages which are employed by teenagers for recreational purpose. Teenagers today will soon join the workforce and use e-mail for both social and business purposes and therefore it is recommended that e-mail writing be taught to students at school level.

Although e-mail language is in its evolving process of creating systematic rules, it has various limitations. There are issues related to the mechanics of writing and communicative strategies apart from technology which falls under the traditional writing syllabus. Therefore, the language used in e-mail messages needs to be given emphasis as it is becoming more significant in communication and business. The increasing interaction through e-mail communication as well as other forms of CMC, and the evolution of the language in CMC create the need for users to become familiar with the conventions of writing e-mail messages. As e-mail lacks standardized guidelines, the interpretations of e-mail texts are not necessarily shared by e-mail users in any exchange. The research holds the opinion that course designers of language and communication courses should incorporate standardized e-mail language as part of the syllabus at secondary and tertiary levels.

Teaching and practising the use of communicative strategies, which could be helpful to learners when encountering problems in e-mail writing, can be done in language and communication classes. This provides a platform for learners who may be current or future

email users to understand and apply appropriate communicative strategies to overcome the paucity of paralinguistic expressions and wordy expressions. In the process, learners are also made conscious of CSs available to them. They can then select the most appropriate and effective strategies that would help in successful communication. Besides, it also grants learners the opportunities to create new communicative strategies without being fearful of making mistakes.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

- a. As this study has examined the communicative strategies used in only teenagers' e-mail messages for recreational purposes, it cannot be generalized that all the CSs in the present modified taxonomy will be used for other communicative purposes as well. Besides, the CSs employed may vary when the participants communicate with other groups of people, especially those from different personal and social backgrounds. Perhaps future studies could make a comparison on the use of CSs by teenagers in their e-mail messages for different communicative purposes. In addition, the study can focus further on other variables which may affect the use of CSs such as age, social status, race and education level of e-mail users in the same website or in others such as Facebook and Hi5. The present data also displays great richness which allows further exploitations into the various grammatical aspects and sentence structures as well as language functions of e-mail messages.

- b. The displacement of words by their phonemic equivalents or representations such as letters and numbers which are similar to telegraphic codes such as 'd' (the), 'b' (be), '2'(to) and 'u'(you) has been widely used in e-mail communication. Thus, it would

be interesting to study the possible scenario of the increase in usage of these phonetic spellings. Future research may investigate the overwhelming influence of SMS texting that infiltrate the e-mail language of teenagers.

- c. The study has illustrated some of the strengths and some of the drawbacks of the methods employed in data collection. Different methods of data collection and analysis should be attempted to achieve better understanding of the use of various CSs by both genders. A better research work would be observational research which examines how people act in natural social settings and describes the actions (i.e. behaviours) or messages of the individuals, groups, or media being studied. An ethnographic approach to researching text-based language should be used as it provides a method of learning about, and learning how to talk about e-mailers' cultures, through the researcher's participation. The researcher, while looking for behavioural norms and regularities, would observe and describe what the participants do to solve problems and then describe the consequences of their actions. As for a case study, the researcher may observe and describe the culture, and language used by the participants in their interactions; and she may interview participants to verify the observations. Apart from the researcher's participation and observation in the research, a larger number of participants would be needed in order to better evaluate the use of CSs by male and female e-mailers.

5.4 Summary

This study adopted a holistic approach (a combination of quantitative & qualitative analysis) to investigate the e-mail messages of teenagers for recreational purposes. More

specifically, it set out to identify the communicative strategies used in the messages. A corpus of 123 authentic e-mail exchanges that took place in a natural setting over a period of 11 months formed the primary data. The analysis revealed that all the male and female participants studied used a wide variety of CSs in their e-mail communication. Even with adequate command of the English Language, the participants would resort to CSs that used creative deviations from the standard language predominantly due to the need for brevity. There were other reasons for adopting the various CSs as well but ultimately, it is the silent mode of computer mediated communication which forced them to use the CSs.

The results also showed that some CSs were more frequently used than the other strategies. *Orthographic* strategies were highly employed by both male and female participants, followed by *discoursal features*, whilst *vocabulary*, *paralinguistics* and *graphics* were the least used. A comparison, which was made to highlight the use of CSs by male and female e-mail users, proved that both genders used almost similar frequencies for all the CSs. Perhaps the only exception is the absence of *capitalization* for shouting in the female participants' messages which may to a certain extent display the gentle female style of interaction.