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Spoken Features of Dialogue Journal Writing

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Abstract:

This paper uses a student-generated sample of written discourse from a dialogue journal writing project as a means of exploring the interface between written and spoken language. The written sample yields marked similarities with spoken language such as unplanned discourse, a clear interlocutory style and vocabulary selection. The paper includes examples of how dialogue journal entries can be mined for classroom use by the EFL teacher to point out successful discourse strategies, vocabulary choices and features of both written and spoken English. Dialogue journal writing is particularly effective for integrating the skills of returnee students into the EFL classroom.

Key Words: journal writing, discourse analysis, returnees

Introduction

Aspects of written and spoken language are often studied as separate domains and much has been written about how the two mediums differ. Written texts may be neatly categorised as planned, organized and transactional while spoken communication is often presented as unplanned, less structured and interactive in nature. However, features of written language can easily be found in spoken language just as written texts can exhibit aspects of conversation. One obvious example of the latter is the common journal entry, which contains many features of spoken language and can be studied from the perspective of spoken discourse. This paper will consider a student-generated sample of dialogue journal writing, an entry in a journal exchange with the instructor, as a means of exploring the interface between written and spoken language with particular emphasis on how this written sample employs aspects of speaking. By way of summary, the paper will also suggest ways for incorporating dialogue journal writing in the language classroom.

Rationale for journal writing analysis

Halliday (1989) outlines the strong connection between language and its social context. He notes that this dimension “is the one that has been most neglected in discussions of language in education” (p.5). Emphasizing learning as “a social process” (p.5), Halliday’s social-semiotic perspective has obvious relevance to studies of interaction of many kinds, including that found in dialogue journal writing. Citing Halliday (1975), Burton and Carroll (2001, p.5) argue that journal writing, as an exchange in social language, “is an aid to making meaning, with language as a reflective tool.” They highlight interactive aspects of journals such as their inherent conversational and social nature. Journal writing is thus a worthwhile endeavour in that the ability to express our feelings and share meaning is important to our overall linguistic repertoire. More specifically, Halliday (1989, p.12) outlines three features of the context of situation, which can be applied to an analysis of a text, in our case dialogue journal writing. Questions regarding the ‘field’, ‘tenor’ and ‘mode’ of a discourse serve to contextualize the text sample. Beginning our analysis by addressing the sample as such provides us with a model for framing the journal entry in a proper social context.

Of fundamental consideration in choosing a text for analysis, whether written or spoken, is to first identify its purpose. Halliday's 'field' of discourse (1989, p.12) includes questions about what is happening in the discourse and what the participants are engaged in. The written text sample used for this study is culled from a journal-writing project undertaken by three third-year Japanese university seminar students. The project was not carried out with specific pedagogical aims but rather as a means of encouraging students to regularly write and communicate with the instructor. Journal notebooks were provided to each student with a set of very liberal guidelines for writing. First, the journal activity was set up as a means of communicating ideas and students were told that the instructor would react to the content of the writing rather than correct grammar. Students were completely free in their choice of topics, no word limit was given, and they were encouraged to express personal thoughts only to the degree they felt comfortable in doing so. It was made clear to students that this was not a mandatory exercise and that their final course assessment would in no way be related to the journal entries. Likewise, it was made clear that the instructor would respond regularly in relation to what was written by students and, while under no obligation to do so, might periodically express his ideas or thoughts on any given topic. To this date, the journal-writing project continues to elicit regular and meaningful correspondence between students and instructor.

The piece of writing chosen for this paper (Appendix 1) focuses on a single student entry in a journal. The entry marks one portion of a student-instructor dialogue which would be decontextualised in isolation. Therefore, inclusion of more than one entry is needed in order to place the text sample in proper context. To keep the emphasis on what has been written by the student, the instructor's entries have been minimized in the sample. The student's entry prior to the target sample is also shortened though not to the extent of the instructor's, as it too contains useful data which will be used to emphasize interlocutory aspects of the medium. The additional entries are included mainly to underline the interactive nature of this journal-writing exercise and to frame for the reader what has been written leading up to and in response to the main text. As the sample text is part of a "written conversation" exchange, some reference will be necessary to the supporting entries.

Student profile

The sample selected was written by "Emi", a third-year student in the Department of International Studies in a Japanese university. Emi has spent a year in a Canadian high school and is strongly motivated to reach a higher language level. She recognizes that her level has reached a "plateau" at which she can comfortably communicate but not easily advance. Her task is further burdened by a lack of language learning structure in a department which considers English as a key subject but has no official English language major and no structured programme. Emi is also politically active in the local peace movement and has spent considerable time doing volunteer work in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. She views herself as a student who has much to say but frequently complains both that the Japanese university system does not allow her adequate means of personal expression and that instructor feedback on reports and assignments is minimal at best. Like many students who have returned to Japan after a year of study abroad, she finds the level of language classes to be unsatisfying. The dialogue journal writing project was in large part undertaken to meet the needs of students like Emi.

The writer-reader relationship

According to Halliday, (1989, p.12) discourse is shaped by the participants and their respective roles and statuses in a text (the 'tenor' of discourse). Though the focus of this study is on one specific entry, it is nevertheless part of a student-teacher interaction and there are obvious examples of what McCarthy (1991, p.24) refers to as "signals of deference". This written conversation, as can be seen throughout the preceding and subsequent entries, is directed to the instructor who, in his responses, often takes on an advisory tone. Evidence of deference toward a "dominant speaker" (McCarthy, 1991, p.24) in the journal exchange can be found in the writer's account of her boyfriend's description of his relationship to the reader (lines 45-46). Examples of the instructor playing an advisory or guiding role can be found in lines 3, 23 and 51 and deferential acceptance of advice is seen in lines 5-8. Both participants in the exchange either wittingly or unwittingly contribute to the confirmation of their respective role and status. However, notwithstanding these instances of inequality in the sample, the writing style of both student and instructor remains rather informal and free.

Quirk (1986) has suggested that a writer or speaker highly values and seeks the addressee's co-operation in discourse. The category of "writing to an individual" (WI) exemplified by dialogue journal writing - omitted in Quirk's "intersecting dimension" (p. 91) description perhaps due to its obvious interactive possibilities - provides us with both obvious and subtle examples of "wooing" (p. 92) co-operation. Among the obvious examples are the use of direct personal address like 'you' (lines 24 and 45-46) and the use of a rhetorical question: He is funny, isn't he? (lines 46-47). Even the more subtle case in the text sample, where the writer expresses a high degree of vulnerability (lines 27-31), twice using the verb 'feel' (...I felt shameful and ...I didn't feel comfortable...) in explaining her feelings of inferiority toward a fellow student, effectively draws in her addressee who responds in detail in the subsequent entry. In concluding this topic (lines 36-37), the writer three times uses what Quirk refers to as the apologetic or confessional "I" (p. 93), often found in appeals for co-operation in face-to-face communication. The writer's two subtle attempts at humour (lines 34 and 46), perhaps not easily discernable to anyone other than the discourse participants, also serve to build solidarity with the reader. Taken as a whole, the text is a clear example of interactional talk serving the function of "lubricating the social wheels" (McCarthy, 1991, p.136) by consolidating the relationship between writer and reader.

While Hughes (1996) emphasizes "the non-equivalence of written and spoken language", there are many ways in which the written sample in this study displays features of spoken language. In general terms, the language seen in journal writing is often colloquial in style, is often in the first person and emphasizes personal expression, all aspects of spoken language. More specifically, dialogue journal writing is strongly interactive and, by definition, a written conversation. Its focus on conveying meaning and expression without undue attention to language editing is similar to spoken communication as is the fact that the discourse in dialogue journals is designed for a single specific reader. In this regard the reader is in fact a participant, responding in turn to what has been written. As McCarthy (1991) notes, the act of interpreting a text "depends as much on what we as readers bring to a text as what the author puts into it." (p.27). As this is a text with a very specific reader in mind, many of the language choices the writer makes are impacted by what is known about the reader and the relationship of the reader to the writer. Whereas Coulthard (1994, p.4) speaks to the

necessity of preparing most written texts for an imagined reader, ours is clearly shaped by its very strong interpersonal aspects. We can therefore argue that this form of writing should be placed at the far interactive end of the spectrum of written discourse.

Discussion of spoken features in the sample

One way of determining the spoken features of a written text is to find examples of unplanned discourse. Ochs (1979, cited in Stubbs 1983, pp.34-35) defines unplanned discourse as “talk which is not thought out prior to its expression”. She lists several features of unplanned discourse including frequent repetition, simple active sentences, and use of rudimentarily linked co-ordinate clauses instead of more complicated subordinate clauses all of which can be found in our sample. We might add to this list examples of "right-dislocation" structures. Displaying the talk voice of journal writing, one such example of right dislocation is found at the very beginning of our text sample to introduce the topic of the journal entry: It was a busy day today (line 24). In addition, there are four changes in topic in a relatively small target sample. While individual topics are expressed coherently, the overall coherence accomplished by linking topics in a planned discourse is lacking.

Other features of the text also reveal examples of unplanned discourse. The writer makes no effort to translate ‘kokkomi’ (line 28) which is the shortened Japanese name for "Department of International Studies" to which she belongs. Other examples are ‘Imai-sensei’ (line 24) for ‘Professor Imai’ and ‘enshu’ (line 26) for ‘seminar’. These examples of Japanese usage might be explained by any number of factors including the medium of free expression provided in journal writing, familiarity with and knowledge of her reader’s level of understanding, or even laziness. Rather than view them as ‘slips’ they might more accurately be regarded as representing the strong interplay between the writer and the addressee with the writer relying on the interpretive powers of the reader, much like what happens in conversation. McCarthy (1991) notes this by arguing that “the active listener and the active reader are engaged in very similar processes” (p.147). It should be noted that the instructor does not use language modeling to correct the student in his response, referring back to the subject as ‘Imai-sensei’ (line 53) and adding to the unplanned nature of the medium by using ‘enkais’ for ‘parties’ (line 54), further bastardizing by adding the English plural form (s) which is not possible in

Japanese. Negotiation of allowances for such use of local words is complicated by the fact that many local English native speakers sprinkle their vocabulary with them. Though they do represent a more free flowing unplanned discourse, strategies could be included to prevent the habit in a more tightly controlled journal-writing exercise.

This is not to suggest that some more planned features common in written texts are not present in the sample. While the text is littered with simple coordinating conjunctions more prevalent in speech such 'and', 'but' and 'so', the writer does make an effort to add written stature to the entry by using written devices for transition like 'however'. Even the more conversational style conjunctions serve to lend greater organization to the text than would likely be seen in an equivalent spoken example. She also makes an effort to use written punctuation conventions for expressing dialogue as is evidenced by the recounting of the fortune-telling experience (lines 32-34) and in quoting her boyfriend (lines 45-46). Furthermore, a complex grammatical structure is employed when Emi shares that she and her boyfriend "will have been together for two years" (line 44). This structure does not come naturally to Japanese EFL learners and we can guess that she either wanted to practice this pattern or took the time to construct it. Finally, we can see evidence of more planned discourse in one particular chunk of the target sample, that from lines 27-37 in which the writer uses time sequencing devices such as This week, I prepared... (line 27) and At first, I didn't...(line 30) and more complex sentences in which the main clause follows a subordinate clause. For example, Being a (sic) honest girl, I thought...(lines 34-35) and If you stop doing this..., you'll be more successful (lines 33-34). There is also an instance of fairly complex conjunction in line 29: I was confident with what I had, yet I felt really shameful.

There are also obvious ways in which our text is different from a conversation. Dialogue journal writing is not spontaneous talk and real time factors such as being constrained by what your interlocutor puts forward, back channeling and people speaking at the same time. Turn taking is present but is obviously different from conversational turn taking. In its dialogue format, journal writing has very clear mechanisms for the negotiation of turns and because the writers have time to think about how to respond, the sentences are for the most part well formed whereas conversational discourse is not. Only the broadest definition of what constitutes a conversation would include the journal writing medium.

Nevertheless, our sample text seems more like a spoken interaction in many respects. The writer is speaking to the reader in the sense that there is a clear interlocutory relationship, much the same as might occur in an email exchange. Seen in the context of previous entries, it is a dialogue in which topics are being negotiated by the writers, to be either taken up or disregarded by the reader. Entries in isolation remain non-conversational “static entities” (McCarthy, 1991, p.70) only until they are read and responded to by the reader. The content also suggests a degree of spontaneity with unmarked shifts in topic within a particular “turn” like that seen when introducing the last topic in the target sample (line 44). The overall text also has the rhythm of everyday speech. This is accomplished most obviously by wide use of contractions and by use of first and second person pronouns. The writer also uses a spoken device in line 37: Well...I hope I am... Stubbs (1983) describes ‘well’, as an “utterance-initial particle...almost entirely restricted to spoken English” (p. 69). Used here as a way to conclude her topic and combining it with the dangling (...) mark, the writer wishes to express in some written form an interactive signal of uncertainty or vagueness more easily accomplished in face-to-face spoken interaction. It can be seen either as a remark on her own previous utterance lending cohesion or as introducing “an explanatory comment” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, p.269).

In addition to the evidence of unplanned discourse, there are other ways in which the journal entry seems to be written as if spoken. Vocabulary is often non-explicit (nice and kind, line 25 and know [instead of “learn” or “discover”] what is happening there). Admittedly, this may indicate the limited vocabulary of a language learner but it might also be explained by the fact that the writer and the reader share common knowledge therefore relieving the writer of the need for explicitness. There is also wide usage of more informal vocabulary and expressions more commonly associated with speech. In the target text, four such examples can be found. When she writes, “I think it’s good in a way...” (line 29), “I kind a want to...” (line 39), “Me and my boyfriend...” (line 44) and “I bet you don’t...” (line 46), the text most convincingly comes across like writing as speaking. Another example of vague and imprecise vocabulary use is when she writes “a not-so-rich country” (line 40). It is not difficult to imagine a spoken context wherein the speaker might invent offhand a similar word play.

Limitations

This study of a student's ongoing written dialogue with her instructor must address several issues not least of which is the instructor's proximity to the sample. While every effort has been made to view the text in an objective way, direct involvement in the sample presents the possibility of placing value on aspects of the text based on the closeness of the interlocutors. Scollon and Scollon (2001) have noted, however, that studies of interdiscourse communication often involve the researcher as participant leading to observations "rich in nuance" (p. 17). Still, it is difficult to determine whether the instructor's proximity to the student's work serves to attach meaning that an unrelated observer might not find.

Moreover, analysis of a text produced by a non-native language learner is more complicated than one produced by a native speaker. For example, we must consider to what extent any use of written or spoken features are symptomatic of a non-native student's failure to recognize their respective differences. Likewise, the lack of precision in vocabulary choice cannot easily be explained as an example of unplanned discourse when it could very well be representative of a limited vocabulary. It is therefore difficult to make assumptions about language choices in such a sample. Finally, while language is a means of personal expression and dialogue journal writing facilitates such expression, it has been noted by Johns (1997), that in spite of this, there comes a point when "students must contend with grammar and form and more public contexts of writing"(p.10). However, as will be suggested in the following section, journal entries can be used by the teacher to demonstrate what is appropriate for writing and what is not.

Applications for the EFL Classroom

Beyond the obvious merits in creating a forum for students to carry on meaningful written interaction with the instructor on any number of topics, journal entries can have more specific applications for language teaching. McCarthy (1991, p.149) writes that while many discourse studies are not undertaken with "overt pedagogical aims", they can nonetheless be useful for the language teacher. The dialogue journal writing entries discussed in this paper are a good example of this. As stated, no particular language items, skills or functions were specified when the project began. However, after a year

of maintaining a journal-form dialogue with students, a wide selection of written data is now available to be used by the teacher with future language classes. This data can be used for either writing or speaking aims. Journal entries characterized by the “writing-as-if-speaking” style include good examples of both speaking and of writing, which can be mined according to teaching objectives. We might also add, parenthetically, that there are a growing number of Japanese students who are returning to Japan after a period of study abroad. For various reasons, many of these students are often unwilling to act as “language models” by interacting with weaker students and it is sometimes difficult for the teacher to integrate their skills into the lower level language classroom situations common in Japan. Gathering a body of “writing-as-if-speaking” journal entry data produced by student returnees to be used by the teacher in an alternative way effectively utilizes this growing resource.

One possibility is to present written journal entry samples as authentic materials for speaking practice. McCarthy (1991, p.137) notes Belton’s (1988) criticism of the overemphasis on transactional language in English teaching. Journal entries satisfy Belton’s call for wider use of interactional materials in a number of ways. First, language learners could be asked to remember short segments of journal entries and express them orally by guessing what tone the writer meant to convey. A text reconstruction approach, either teacher or learner centred, could also be used. With data retrieved from more advanced students, the teacher might exploit the text to point out successful discourse strategies, vocabulary choices, features of natural and spoken English and perhaps even as sample for a more elaborate analysis as we have attempted here. In a more learner centred approach, students could be invited to substitute examples of written forms found in the text into more colloquial expressions and vice versa. Entries could also be used as oral practice for more specific conversation practice, such as the intonation of asides. Our sample elicited one such possibility, redrafted in corrected form:

- A: It was a busy day today. I went to see you, Ryan and Professor
Imai. He’s one of my favorite teachers. Oh, he said “hello” to you.
B: I don’t know him very well but he seems like a very nice man.

Indeed, written journal entries provide the teacher with a means of incorporating McCarthy and Carter’s (1995, p.217) call for a “three ‘I’s” methodology. The spoken

aspects of the journal entries provide the “real data” for examination in the ‘illustration’ stage, a body of interpersonal uses of language to be practiced in the ‘interaction’ phase and in a learner-centred activity as noted above, teachers can give students exercises to better recognize and understand different lexical options needed to facilitate the ‘induction’ stage. Even though McCarthy and Carter focus on spoken data, written journal entries can be mined to the extent that they represent aspects of students writing as they speak.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to place a sample of dialogue journal writing in the context of the spoken features it exhibits. In spite of its written form, the selected sample suggests many ways in which features of speaking are employed by the writer. These include evidence of unplanned discourse, the many colloquial aspects of the text such as use of contractions and vocabulary choices, and an interactive nature to the discourse more reflective of speech than writing. As a text that bridges both spoken and written styles, this paper has also suggested ideas for using journal writing data in the language classroom, with a focus on utilizing the skills of returnee students who are able to produce near authentic renderings of natural speech.

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Appendix 1: Dialogue Journal Writing Sample

Emi,

The simple answer is to ask him to try a little harder and for you and your parents to expect a little less. Easier said than done!!

5 Thank you so much, Darren. I really appreciate what you wrote. I remember when I was in Canada, my host-mom helped me a lot with a great patient. I realize how important it is to give Jahve a time to think. My parents' expectation may be a little too much as you wrote. I'm going to tell my parents what you've told me. I'm sure they will feel better. Again, thank you, Darren!!!

10 Last weekend, I went to Tokyo to take a lecture for the International Volunteer Camp. Last time wasn't so good but this time I enjoyed it very very much. We talked about the Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon, also some problems we would probably have when we are there. That gave me a lot of information & ideas about Islam & Lebanon. The more information I get, the more I become exciting.

15 A volunteer at the lecture told us that refugees take foreign girls as doors to the new life. I thought it's really sad cause they want to get out of their life so badly. Unlike the other refugee camps, Palestinian ones are like small towns. Because their lives as refugees have kept so long time that they built buildings and concrete houses. I watched a video from last volunteer camp. I was surprised there were no tents, a lot of cars and shops. There are riches and poors, tall building and so on. Refugees actually live there. This stands for how difficult & long the Palestinian problems have been.

Emi,

20 *I'm glad this trip was more rewarding for you...That these places can develop into real communities is a sad thought because it means that what we think as usually "temporary" is, in fact, unfortunately "permanent". I will probably ask you and Azusa to report to the seminar on your respective experiences sometime in October.*

25 **It was a busy day today. I went to see you and Ryan, and Imai-sensei. Imai-sensei is one of my favorite teachers. Oh, he said hello to you. He is really nice and kind. In his class (called Kokusai Kankei ron, enshu) we have a discussion about globalism.**

30 **This week, I prepared a r sum  for the class but I wasn't satisfied with my work. My partner was Tanaka-san (she is a kokkomi student and the fourth year student), and she prepared a great r sum . I was confident with what I had, yet I felt really shameful. I think it's good in a way because she always makes me motivated person. At first, I didn't feel comfortable being with her because I tended to compare myself with to others (in this case to Tanaka-san). However, I've read a fortune-telling in a magazine says "You're really smart person, you can give a right comment in the right time. However, you tend to compare yourself to the others. If you stop doing this and clear up your mind, you'll be more successful." Being a honest girl, I thought, "that's right," and I changed my mind.**

35 **Comparing myself to the others is a bad habit, and I still do that sometimes. I'm changing little by little to be more positive person. Well... I hope I am....**

40 **I found a scholarship for going to the States, The University of Illinois, for a year. I'm thinking about it. I want to study abroad again while I'm in the university. I kind a want to go to Thai land as an exchange student of government expense. I'm in the middle of the choices. I want to live in a not-so-rich country like Thailand and know what is happening there. Especially, I'm interested in Asia. It's important for me to feel or experience Asian life. However, I'm not sure if it's possible because I'll be in the fourth grade... I'll work on it!**

45 **Me and my boyfriend, Takeshi, will have been together for 2 years. He told me that he went to the party you had with your students. So every time I talk about our seminar, he says "I went drinking with Darren." I bet you don't know him but he thinks you and him are best friends. He is funny, isn't he?**

Emi,

50 *I remember the party but I don't specifically remember Takeshi. But tell him he will forever be my best friend too!*

Sounds like you are doing a lot of thinking for next year. A year in the States would certainly raise the level of your English but I was more intrigued by...

55 *I don't know Imai-sensei very well but he seems like a very nice man. When I've had the chance to speak to him at enkais he seems genuinely modest, quiet and reserved but he is a good communicator, both in English and in Japanese.*

I found your talk about Tanaka-san very interesting...