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**THE USE OF AND RESPONSES TO
A LETTER WRITING PROCESS
TO INCREASE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
IN ESL LEARNERS**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Second Language Teaching at
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of how a teacher can help learners to increase communicative competence through an interactive letter writing process. The study was triggered in response to a specific group of immigrants' apparent improvement in not only their written English, but also in their ability to communicate more confidently with native speakers after using the letter writing process as the consistent medium of instruction.

The research seeks to describe and ascertain the effectiveness of the letter writing process to enable the learners to become more communicatively competent. In order to do this, it explores some of the inherent underlying conditions to which improvement in communicative competence is attributed, and how these are incorporated into the letter writing process. The research identifies the areas to which the learners attribute their improvement in their communicative language ability. It also outlines the conditions needed to set up this process, the strategies used, and the ways in which the letter writing is extended into an oral activity.

The research is in the action research tradition with a qualitative orientation. The researcher focuses on letters written weekly by the teacher to the learners over a one-year language course. The following strategies were explored in relation to the learners' perception of their improvement in communicative competence and their actual improvement in their writing ability: the self disclosure of the teacher in the letter, the

introduction of language used in everyday conversation in New Zealand, and the interaction with native English speaking conversation assistants.

The results of the research suggest that the instructional material, the weekly letter, provided the authenticity, relevance, interest and enjoyment to enable learners to maintain high levels of motivation and increase the level of output and accuracy of their writing. Through analysis of the learners' letters, there is a significant increase in not only the length of the letters, but also an increase in sentence length, the use of idioms and colloquial language, and a decrease in tense error. Through an analysis of written questionnaires and taped interviews, learners clearly identify the letters as significantly contributing to not only an increase in their linguistic performance, but also to their increased cultural awareness and confidence with native English speakers.

The research highlights the potency of teacher/learner interaction and invites further research into the influence of the teacher's personality and teaching style, as well as the effectiveness of the letter writing process in the hands of other teachers.

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Letters Are Commonplace

Letters are commonplace enough, yet what splendid things they are! When someone is in a distant province and one is worried about him, and then a letter suddenly arrives, one feels as though one were seeing him face-to-face. Again, and it is a great comfort to have expressed one's feelings in a letter, even though one knows it cannot yet have arrived. If letters did not exist, what dark expressions would come over one! When one has been worrying about something and wants to tell a certain person about it, what a relief it is to put it all down in a letter! Still greater is one's joy when a reply arrives. At that moment a letter really seems like an elixir of life!

From the Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon, p.202

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This research is, in one sense, of a pioneering nature in that the researcher has not found a letter writing process used in a similar way by any other teacher. Similarly, there is a paucity of research on the role of social interaction in language learning, the underpinning component of this letter writing process. The personality of the teacher in this process also plays a major role, and yet this is a problematic area as research in this domain is so difficult to quantify.

This letter writing process typifies the communicative approach in that it incorporates exposure of authentic material in a natural way. The learning paradigm is that the greater the quality and quantity of appropriate input, the greater the chance of assimilating the language. The quantity of input is critical, and the consistent input provided by the weekly letter, ensures that the learners are constantly fed and motivated. Feedback is also important, and there is natural feedback as the learners' letters are answered by the teacher. There needs to be the development of a positive social relationship between teacher and learner to enhance the essential social character of the learning context (Glynn, 1985), and this develops through a constant exchange of letters. Close interaction between teacher and learner is the key, and the motivation to read and write is increased as learners want to know more about the teacher, and the society around them. Through the disclosure of personal thoughts by the teacher, and the introduction of different attitudes towards and in the society, the learners are given the opportunity to see through

a window otherwise inaccessible to them. Through interaction comes acquisition, and this letter writing process engenders a particular form of interaction.

In the letter writing process, the teacher is the initiator in the exchange with the learner, providing the catalyst to help increase communicative competence in the learners by allowing them to stand in the same garden as the teacher. In New Zealand, the concept of having a garden is an important one, and the analogy of the garden, used by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911) to explain learning, fits into the New Zealand context. This analogy is a way of clarifying how positive attitudes and a strong motivation to acquire a language can unlock the door to a garden. The reality of learning is a spring which offers much hope, and is the place where people meet; the fertile ground to the outside world. The teacher is a facilitator in the opening of doors, which allows the learner to feel free not only to explore their own new garden, but also step outside into the wider community. The teacher becomes a mediator in the learning process, admitting part of this wider community into the classroom in the form of conversation assistants who help to make Kiwi culture accessible to the learners. The strict hierarchy within which the learners had been formally taught, where teachers are inaccessible and revered and learners are to obey only, is replaced by a mutual respect which fosters understanding of and respect for each other's situations. The teacher's enthusiasm is passed on to the learners whose continual interest sustains high motivation in learning. The personality of the teacher plays an enormous role in how this process is handled, and yet research into this area of teacher effectiveness based on personality, is difficult because of the multiplicity of variables. Although the researcher did not intend for teacher personality

to be a major component in this letter writing process, this study begs for further research on the influence of this factor.

The following questions were the foci of this study. Firstly, how can weekly letters, written to the learners by the teacher, help to achieve communicative competence, and what conditions are there in the letter writing dynamic which facilitate the development of communicative competence? Secondly, does there appear to be an improvement in the learner's ability to write? Thirdly, how do the learners perceive the letters, and how important do they consider them in contributing towards their increase in communicative competence?

1.1 The definition of communicative competence

Because a method of instruction to help learners increase their communicative competence is under scrutiny in this research, it is important that communicative competence be clearly defined. Communicating is making opinions, feelings, information etc known or understood by others, that is, by speech, writing or bodily movements, and competence is the ability to do what is needed (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English). Therefore, communicative competence is doing what is needed to make a person's opinions, feelings, information etc known or understood by others.

For Chomsky, 'competence' was defined as "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language" (1965, p.4), although this definition related to linguistic competence and not communicative competence. Hymes (1972) is critical of a definition in which little is said of communication, but where the image is of an isolated individual, not, except

incidentally, a person in the social world. According to Hymes, communicative competence is what a person “needs in order to communicate effectively in culturally significant situations” (1972, p.75), and it is not enough to acquire knowledge of linguistic structure. Ellis (1985, p.294) defines the point of competence as being when the learner “internalises rules which are then organised into a system.” Hence, some scholars like Chomsky view competence as entirely linguistic, while others such as Hymes, see communicative competence as both the knowledge of the linguistic rules and the knowledge of how these rules are used to communicate meaning.

1.2 Interaction and acquisition in communicative language teaching

In order to posit the letter writing process into a communicative framework, it is helpful to understand the criterion for communicative success and the aim of communicative language teaching. Brown (1987, p.213) believes that the ultimate criterion for communicative success is the actual transmission and receiving of intended meaning, and hence conveying the message and doing so with fluency are more important than accuracy. In the communicative classroom, learners ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. Ellis interprets this transmission and receiving of meaning as 'interaction', which he defines as the communication of one person with another. It is interpersonal, being either face to face through an oral medium, or involving the written medium (1999, p.1). “One of the main aims of communicative language teaching is to provide opportunities for learners to participate in interaction where the primary goal is to exchange meaning rather than to learn the second language” (1999, p.193). Therefore, there needs to be a process in which such opportunities for learners to interact are made available.

However, providing opportunities on their own is not enough for learners to be able to communicate. Learners are required to internalise some previously unlearned item or rule, or increase the control over the use of previously acquired items, evident through an increase in accuracy. Acquisition is viewed, therefore, as a process by which learners build their competence in the new language (Ellis, 1999, p.234). Therefore, although Brown (1987) views conveying the message as more important than accuracy, Ellis would argue that the level of a learner's accuracy is an important measure of their ability to build their competency. The researcher believes that learners can communicate communicatively without being grammatically accurate, but will need to increase in accuracy if they wish to advance in academic studies. However, for the purposes of communication, accuracy is only important in as much as there is sufficient accuracy for the recipient of the language to understand what is being said.

1.3 Trends

From a preoccupation with accuracy and an emphasis on the teaching of language through strict grammatical structures, where form dominated meaning within a communicative vacuum in the 1960's, there has been a move towards the language being seen as a more unified whole. From a historically teacher dominated classroom, the learning environment has gradually developed into one in which the learners' needs are paramount. From an emphasis on the oral and aural aspects of the language, there has recently been a swing back to appreciating the importance of reading and writing. From a situation in which language was taught in isolation using examples with no relevance to the learners' lives, there has been a reaching out and embracing of the wider community for input, which includes relevant, interesting, authentic material and natural, stress-free

contact with native speakers. The communicative approach has been the focus of much research and this has led to the current interest in the connection between interaction and acquisition. However, there has so far been a lack of qualitative research on interaction which explores how learners master the ability to perform particular language forms, and the effect different types of input/interaction have on the learning process (Ellis, 1999, p. 239).

Contrary to the dearth of research surrounding interaction in relation to learner mastery of language forms, there has been much written on the importance of appropriate input in the success of language learning. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985, 1994, 1998), in which effective progress by learners is attributed to modified, comprehensible input just beyond the learner's current stage of interlanguage development, is posited by Krashen as fundamental to a theory of L2 acquisition. The limitations of this theory are explored by Ellis (1999, p.240) by pointing out the failure of Krashen to specify the meaning of 'comprehension', and by asserting that the role of comprehension in second language acquisition (SLA) is in need of further research.

In the same way as Krashen focused on the importance of input, the significant role played by output in acquisition was introduced by Swain (1985), and hence there have developed opposing opinions as to whether input or output is more important. However, Ellis sees more profit in researching the relationship between input/social interaction and 'intrapsychological' interaction and learning outcomes. In other words, exploring how modified input and output jointly contribute to second language acquisition in a holistic approach which examines how learner participation shapes opportunities for learning

(1999, p.242). It is the researcher's view that, through the interaction of teacher and learners in the letter writing process, both input and output are holistically linked to provide learners with their own opportunities for learning.

1.4 The researcher's agenda and intuitions

The personal compelling purpose for this research stems from the researcher's belief that learning takes place most effectively in a holistically balanced environment where the prime importance is placed on the interaction between the teacher and the learners. As in life in general, a person needs motivation to achieve one's goals, so in language learning a learner needs to feel motivated to achieve their goal of communicating with others in a second language. For Gardner and MacIntyre, the motivated individual "is one who wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving this goal" (1993, p.2). Therefore, it could be argued that motivational intensity is related to language proficiency and hence it would seem to be important in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teaching that both the human interaction and motivational aspect are given a high priority. In simpler terms, learners' interaction with others is important, and their level of motivation is critical in increasing their ability to communicate well. If the interaction is successful, the ability to acquire new language will also lead to success in communicating competently.

Although a teacher can not be responsible for instilling the initial drive to reach the goal in the learner, the teacher plays a key role in facilitating activities which provide the motivation for the achievement of the set goals. The researcher has worked in the English

as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ESOL field for over twenty years, and during that time has developed programmes for a wide variety of learners. Although learners' life experiences, life goals, individual learning styles and reasons for learning English may be different, there is an underlying assumption that those learners who are motivated through appropriate language activities will be more successful in achieving their goals.

Within the teaching programme, it is important that the teacher determines the needs and wants of the learners (Alexander, 1993). In the classes in which the participants of this research studied, there was a formal needs analysis conducted at the beginning of each of the two semesters. In analysing learners' needs, learners consistently asked for communicative activities which increased their ability to communicate with native speakers living in New Zealand. They expressed frustration at having spent years of English study in their own countries, only to arrive in New Zealand and sink into a mire of garbled words. Even those, with adequate vocabulary and sentence structure, felt they failed to communicate when faced with the idioms and colloquialisms of everyday Kiwi speech. Not only was there a barrier to understanding the language, but they also felt there was an indefinable wall which separated them from being able to talk with Kiwis and thus be able to understand their lives. It is therefore obvious that language used in the everyday lives of ordinary New Zealanders needs to be made available in order for learners to communicate with accuracy and confidence. In accordance with this, a process needs to be in place so that learners can have the opportunity to talk with Kiwis in a natural way.

In learner evaluations of the language programmes at the end of each semester, the letter writing process ranked consistently highly, if not the highest. Learners spoke of the personal nature of the letters, their relevance to their lives, their ability to use the language in their daily lives, and their obvious enjoyment at receiving a weekly letter. The teacher's intuition was that this letter writing process contributed to the learner's progress in becoming communicatively competent.

1.5 The purpose of the inquiry

Taking into account the researcher's intuition (emanating from the teacher's experience), and the trends mentioned above, the purpose of the researcher's inquiry became more specific. As an ESOL teacher, the researcher wanted to understand more about why the process appeared to be so successful, how the learners used the process and how they thought it had helped them to become more communicatively competent.

This study seeks to demonstrate that the weekly letter, written by the teacher to the learners, can be incorporated into an interactive letter writing process which helps to empower learners to the point where they felt communicatively competent by:

1. sustaining motivation by providing relevance, interest, enjoyment and challenge;
2. helping learners to grasp everyday language such as idioms and colloquialisms hitherto inaccessible in their learning and living environment;
3. increasing the learners' awareness of the host culture and systems operating in the society around them.

As stated in the opening introduction, the researcher has yet to find a similar use of letters in an ESOL programme on which to compare findings. Because the teacher gave the learners an insight into not only the teacher's personal life and thoughts, but also challenged different ways of thinking, there seemed to evolve a psychological process within each learner which interacted closely with the teacher. Unfortunately, this inner process caused by such interaction is difficult to define.

1.6 The letter as an interactive, communicative medium

The letter is a written medium for communication which, the researcher believes, is undervalued in technologically advanced societies. However, the letter not only forms a link with another person, but also involves a great deal of thought and effort from its conception to fruition. It is a means of expressing inner thoughts, and often thoughts are disclosed which would otherwise remain locked in the mind of the writer. At the time of the recipient reading the letter, there is no pressure to think of an immediate reply to what has been written as there is in the speech context. In conversation, the pressure for learners to respond is enormous, as it is even for native speakers. Because the written medium has permanence, words are written with care. Not only does the writer have to think about what is to be written on the page, but the reader also takes time to search for the meaning of the words formed for their eyes. The learner can take time to 'intrapersonalise'¹ the material, enabling them to speak in their heads and enable them to try and take control of the new information. Having read the information, the reader then has the power to decide whether to respond or not. Learners, who feel so often powerless, are given the power of choice which is so rarely available to them. If they

¹ Ellis (1999, p.252) defines the expression 'intrapersonal interaction' as learners' 'talk' to themselves.

choose to reply to the letter, they do so in their own time, and in their own way. Having written the letter, they then await the teacher's reply, and this comes in the form of feedback about what has been said and how it has been said. The interaction is entirely positive, which increases the motivation to continue the experience.

Further interaction takes place with volunteer native English speakers who share in reading and discussing the letter, at a time when the learners have had a chance to be familiar with its contents. This process will be outlined in the following section.

1.7 The mechanisms of the teacher's letter writing process

As was previously stated, letter writing is a conduit through which the writer's thoughts can be expressed, and the effectiveness of this conduit depends on the way the letter writing process is handled. The letter writing process incorporates mechanisms for promoting learner communicative skills, and highlights the crucial role played by the teacher/learner concerning motivation, enjoyment, challenge, language appropriateness, and social awareness.

The focus of this research is on a professional immigrant group, those speakers of other languages, the ESOL learners, who have come to New Zealand to live as new members of the society. After ten years of writing weekly letters to learners as part of a one-year language learning course, the teacher found that the letters had developed into a letter writing process and had become an integral part of the teaching programme.

As part of the language learning programme, the teacher began writing a weekly letter to the learners with the objective of reaching the learners on a personal level, using the kind of language used by ordinary Kiwis on an ordinary day. This letter was initially to be read only by the learner, and to be answered as the learner felt able to do so. However, the letter developed into writing material which was not only read by the learners, but was shared with native English speakers who interacted with the learners in the class once a week as volunteer conversation assistants. Learners also commented that their spouses and home tutors² also read the letters, allowing for a widening of the interactive process. The letter was given to the learners the day before meeting the assistants as a homework activity, and the new words and structures were highlighted by learners at this time. Small groups of two or three learners and one conversation assistant discussed the content of the letter, the questions raised within it, and this often led to a digression to all manner of topics which allowed the learners and native speakers to understand each other better. The new words and expressions were identified again the following day in a brainstorming activity before being put into context by making sentences with the help of the teacher. Time was given for learners to formulate questions about those parts of the letter which were still not clearly understood, and in turn, they were asked to answer questions which arose in the letter and from the conversation assistants. This new language was then reinforced in a revision gap-fill exercise done for weekend homework. During the week, the learners were encouraged to write back to the teacher, answering questions which had arisen, expressing their own opinions, and sharing any personal information which they felt was appropriate. In return, the teacher wrote a personal answer at the bottom of the learner's letter, giving feedback on both writing skills and the content of the letter. Hence, the development of the letter into a complete teaching

² Volunteers who give informal English lesson to immigrants in their home at least once a week.

resource, using all four skills, became an integral part of the language learning programme, and it is this letter writing process which is the focus of this research.

1.8 The organisation of this study

Chapter Two and Chapter Three deal with the theoretical literature which substantiates the beginning of the inquiry and situates the study within its broader field. Chapter Four explains the rationale behind the letter writing process and explains it within an interactive cycle. Chapter Five illustrates the researcher's journey of locating the study within a qualitative research paradigm, and introduces the participants. Chapter Six draws on the literature from Chapter Three to link the conditions for communicative competence and interaction to the letter writing process, while Chapter Seven shows the transition from letter writing to speaking. Chapter Eight presents the findings of the study of the twenty five participants who answered a written questionnaire, an analysis of the learners' letters, as well as the findings of a representative sample of six of the participants who were interviewed and recorded on audio tape. Chapter Nine serves to draw the major insights of this study. It begins with the validity and limitations of the study and refers to the initial theoretical endeavour, which was established in Chapter Two, to discuss the findings within this theoretical framework. That is, how a teacher establishes a letter writing process which helps to meet the needs of the learners for communicative competence. The contributions of this study are declared in Chapter Ten, followed by the implications for further research in the teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

1.9 Conclusion

Knowledge is power and it is through the knowledge of their new world that the learners will be able not only to enjoy their own garden, but also walk out confidently and interact effectively with members of their new community. The letter writing process proffers a key, in the form of letters, which unlock some of the knowledge the learners need to have access to their new society.