Writing Online Dialogue Journals and Penzu for Student-Teacher Interaction and Autonomous Learning: A Research Plan

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Abstract

Technology has been integrated into education for decades, and some issues such as interaction and learner autonomy have been raised in order to design an effective teaching environment. Besides these two issues, pedagogy of care has been another concern as learners that are possibly isolated in an entirely online learning environment may need emotional support. This study plan, thus, focuses on these three issues by investigating a group of students' perceived benefits and drawbacks regarding their online writing experiences. 60 participants who were attending an elementary writing course for their preparatory class in a state university took part in the study. Both students and their teacher first sent letters back and forth to each other, which aims to see how writing dialogue journals facilitates student-teacher interactions. All students then kept an online journal through Penzu, which enabled them to write their exchanges privately. The purpose of the research to understand how writing journals through Penzu impacts learner autonomy. Data were collected through a mixed-methods research design. The study was informed by qualitative data from semi-structured interviews as well as quantitative data from questionnaires that include items on the aforesaid three issues (interaction, autonomy and pedagogy of care). The study intends to shed light on the course in order for designers to reconsider elements of online education, especially in terms of language education.

Keywords

Interaction, learner autonomy, dialogue journal, Penzu

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the shift from classroom to online learning has required teaching and learning models to focus on interaction and autonomy [1, 2] as well as pedagogy of care [3]. One aspect of this requirement is that learning needs to take place in interactive learning environments, and learners need to collaborate with other learners and a teacher as well as a learning content [4] in order to sustain learning. The second aspect is that learners should take responsibility for their own learning to maintain the learning process. The final aspect is that learning should be caring, which occurs through student-teacher interaction. This is especially important in online learning environments where students are sometimes supported remotely by educational resources and their teacher and a significant attribute is given to the integration of these aspects into the learning setting. Although there have been a few studies on interaction and learner autonomy [5], a further examination is necessary to see student-teacher interaction and students' autonomy in line with pedagogy of care, in particular, in remote learning settings [2, 3]. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to report on a research design for a writing course and to see how students of English in a university-level preparatory class interact with their teacher and regulate their learning autonomously in online learning environments.

The present research took place in a higher education institution of Turkey, where education has moved to entirely online learning since the beginning of the academic year. In this regard, this study is also crucial to see students' interaction and autonomy in a context where they have not met their lecturer face-to-face but have been taught completely online. The aim of this study is two-fold, first to investigate how writing an online dialogue journal impacts students' interaction with their teacher, by

which students can communicate and share their feelings with their teacher and second to explore how keeping an online journal affects students' autonomous learning and enables them to handle their learning on their own. Initially, the participants in this study contacted their teacher, and both students and their teacher sent emails back and forth to each other in order to establish ongoing interaction. After this, they kept journals through Penzu, which is different from email dialogues in that Penzu enables users to take notes flexibly and privately. In this sense, this paper seeks out to answer the following research questions (RQs):

1. According to students, what are the benefits and drawbacks of writing online dialogue journals?
2. According to students, in what ways does writing online dialogue journals facilitate student-teacher interaction?
3. According to students, what are the benefits and drawbacks of Penzu?
4. According to students, in what ways does Penzu promote autonomous learning?

This paper will first give some details of the related literature and research on interaction, learner autonomy and pedagogy of care. Then, it will provide information on research methodology. Ultimately, it will present expected outcomes based on the research design.
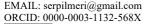
2. Literature Review

2.1. Interaction

The Merriam-Webster dictionary [6] describes interaction as mutual or reciprocal action or influence. Wang, Elston and Zhu [7] relate this definition of interaction to social interaction and biological interaction. Furthermore, they indicate that "it is generally preferable to couple the term 'interaction' with other descriptive words or phrases" (p. 270). In this regard, Lear, Ansorge and Steckelberg [4] list interaction types in e-learning environments into three groups: Learner-to-learner interaction, learner-to-instructor interaction, and learner-to-content interaction. Through learner-to-learner interaction, students' engagement and community of practice are enhanced [8]. Forums, videoconferencing and chatting are examples of digital means to foster this type of interaction. Learner-to-instructor interaction should be learner-centered and can be provided through feedback and group work created in wikis, Skype, Twitter, YouTube etc. [9, 10]. Learner-to-content interaction can be formed through "watching instructional videos, interacting with multimedia, and searching for information" (p. 209) [11]. This type of interaction is very crucial for learner autonomy. For example, learners encounter new information, opinions and experience in an online learning environment, which leads to interaction between the learners and content in such a way that they can improve their learning on their own.

2.2. Learner autonomy

The common definition of learner autonomy is the ability and capacity to take responsibility for one's own learning [12, 13, 14, 15]. In this sense, autonomous learners are the ones who decide what and how to learn, implement their decision or decisions, build their own capacity, and adapt themselves to new situations or learning spaces. According to Holec [14], these learners can easily apply their abilities outside the context not just in school contexts. Furthermore, Dickinson [13] highlights teachers' and contents' role in fostering learner autonomy. Little [14] also adds that the most common misconception about autonomy is to disregard teachers' involvement in learning. Moreover, Benson [12] claims that autonomy focuses on a learning process rather than a particular teaching or learning style on the one hand and autonomy is likely to be promoted well through innovative learning tools on

the other. Additionally, Meri-Yilan [16] points out the interrelationship between learner autonomy and its dimensions, such as self-regulation, self-management, self-efficacy, attribution theory, and learning strategies. However, these interrelationships are beyond the scope of this paper.

2.3. Pedagogy of care

Pedagogy of care is identified as caring for one's self and others' selves [17]. Busteed [18] links it to emotional engagement. According to Noddings's [19] pedagogy of care framework, four components are necessary for a properly emotional help in education. These components are modelling, dialogues, practice and confirmation. A study by Burke and Larmar [3] confirms Noddings's [19] framework in e-learning environments. In modelling, teachers behave in a caring way rather than stating that they care for their students. Dialogue occurs through the interaction and engagement between teachers and their students in a caring way. As practice, students apply or show what they have learned, namely, learning that has occurred during the pedagogy of care, into new learning settings. They may also show it through their exam results or presentations. Confirmation takes place through "a caring relationship cultivated between the teacher and student" (p. 5) [3]. In this sense, each student and teacher asserts that the pedagogy of care has an impact on them to fulfil learning and teaching goals.

3. Methodology

This section presents a methodological aspect of the planned research in terms of the sample size; data collection procedures, instruments and analysis; and ethical considerations.

3.1. Sample

The project is currently in the stage of analyzing the qualitative data and writing findings. 60 first-year students who were attending an elementary writing course for their preparatory class in a Turkish state university took part in the study voluntarily. Their ages were varied from 18 to 30. They were chosen because they were attending virtual classes entirely online during the academic year, and they had not met their teachers face-to-face since the beginning of the academic year.

3.2. Data collection procedures and instruments

Before collecting data, the participants' teacher asked them to send an email to her in order to communicate and exchange information with them. The purpose of this email exchange was to help the researcher understand how writing online dialogue journals can affect student-teacher interaction, for instance, whether it facilitates them to contact their teacher and motivate them to learn better. After this email exchange, the teacher asked them to keep an online journal through Penzu, which was chosen for this study because it enables users to write their texts privately as well as share with others, namely, their teacher in the context of the present study. This way, keeping online journals through Penzu, intends to assist this study to see how writing online journals privately can impact students' autonomous learning, for example, how they choose topics to write about.

Table 1 illustrates data collection procedures.

Table 1
The timeline of data collection, and procedures

Procedure	Time	Aim

Training - Orientation	Week 1	To help students create an account and familiar with sending emails
Writing online dialogue journals (Teacher and students send emails back and forth to each other)	Week 2 to Week 6	To facilitate student-teacher interaction (RQs 1 & 2)
Introducing Penzu and making them write their diaries there (Students will send the screenshots to their teacher each week.)	Week 7 to Week 12	To promote learner autonomy (RQs 3 & 4)
Data Collection	Week 13 to 15 (before the end of the academic semester)	To answer the RQs

This study is a mixed methods research project. For the quantitative research instrument, a questionnaire which has three parts was distributed to the students. The first part includes items on students' learning through writing dialogue journals prepared based on the literature on interaction [4, 8]. The items are about whether the process of writing dialogue journals has enhanced their learning and helped them to interact with their teacher and what its benefits and drawbacks are. The second part consists of items on students' learning through Penzu drawing on scales of learner autonomy by Meri-Yilan [16] and Orakci and Gelisli [20]. The last part contains items on students' views on pedagogy of care and has been designed based on four elements of pedagogy of care drawn from Noddings [19]. For the questionnaire items, a 5-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree) was used. The qualitative research instrument, semi-structured interview was conducted asking questions to elaborate on the questionnaire items and RQs. For example,

1. What do you think of your learning through writing an online dialogue journal?
2. Has this affected your interaction with your teacher?
3. What do you think of your learning through Penzu?
4. Has this affected you to take responsibility for your own learning? Etc.
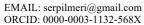
3.3. Data analysis

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively. The percentages and frequencies of each item were automatically calculated by the Google form. Data from the interviews have just started being analyzed through NVivo, qualitative data analysis software. The study is based on grounded theory that helps discover 'uncharted territories' (p. 155) [21] where codes will be generated after analyzing data and linked to the RQs and aims of the study.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Participants were asked to participate in the study voluntarily. In their first email, they stated that they accepted to be part of the study. In other words, informed consent was established. Before data collection, both instruments were reviewed by two experts who will also give their review on codes. The agreement between reviewers must be at least 80 % [22], which will be ensured in the study.
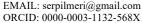
4. Expected outcomes

This paper presumes some outcomes based on the preliminary research steps: First, this study might contribute to the understanding of interaction and learner autonomy in learning environments where education is transferred to entirely online. Second, a pedagogy of care might be highlighted to show how important caring is, especially in online learning. Third, students might differ in preferences regarding interaction with their teacher (i.e. some students might not wish to write an online dialogue journal) and show their autonomous learning (i.e. some students might not wish to use Penzu and share their writings with their teacher). Last, it may shed light on administrators' and teachers' implementation and design of online education to some extent that they may construct interactive and autonomous learning settings supported with caring.

However, there are some challenges that need to be addressed. There are some insufficient data to understand student-teacher interaction, learner autonomy and pedagogy of care as this study collected data through just two instruments such as questionnaires and interviews. Also, the participants were not accustomed to this kind of interaction. Additionally, sharing their writings in Penzu with their teacher might have shaped their topic choices as well as their decision on how to write. Therefore, future research should look at related issues such as understanding teachers' intentions and discursive strategies used in the interactions as well as understanding the possible impact of the dialogue journals on learners' future action and autonomous learning.

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