

## **Integrating Reading and Writing to Facilitate Reading Engagement Through Epistolary Writing among ESL Tertiary Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the pedagogical perspective of employing epistolary writing in a reading program. Reading and writing have traditionally been taught separately. However, researchers have increasingly noted the connections between reading and writing as having similar processes of meaning construction. Writing when integrated with reading permits meaningful engagement between reader and text. In this qualitative case study, epistolary writing or letter writing is employed to capture the students' understanding and reflection of their reading as well as on what has been taught by the instructor in the classroom. Three students took part in the study. Data were obtained through observations, interviews, and students' written documents. The findings reveal conditions that enhance and hamper engagement among the students. The students reported the process of writing enabled them to strengthen their understanding of the texts assigned to them. In addition, aspects of pedagogy found useful by students were also identified. However, lecturers need to expose students the purpose of writing before employing it in the reading class. Discussion will focus on implications from insights gained and instructional practice in second language education.

**Keywords:** Epistolary Writing, Reading and Writing Connection, Pedagogical Perspectives, ESL Tertiary Learners, Academic Reading, Reading Engagement

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reading and writing when integrated facilitate students to engage actively in the construction of meaning of their reading text. This is because both reading and writing are acts of composing (Grabe, 2004, 2010; Graves, 2004; Zamel, 1992). When students write their interpretation of the text, the process of writing allows them to conceptualize and strengthen the comprehension of the text. Furthermore, the simultaneous process of reading and writing provide a space for students to engage in the meaning construction which consequently prepare them to become effective readers (Grabe, 2010; Olson, 2007; Shanahan, 2006).

Several studies illustrated that effective reading comprehension is an important skill which university students need to acquire in order to succeed in their academic pursuits (Bernhardt, 2005; Bosley, 2008; Isarji, Ainul Madziah, Mohd. Sahari & Mohd. Azmi, 2008). As noted by Sweet and Snow (2003), reading comprehension becomes especially important to

students at the university level as it provides the basis for a substantial amount of learning. Without the skills of reading comprehension, students' academic progress is limited and some may not be able to follow through their academic subjects successfully in university (Alverman & Earle, 2003). This may explain why educators often spend a lot of time finding avenues to facilitate students' comprehension skill.

However, students' inability to do well in reading is still a source of concern to many teachers and lecturers (Bosley, 2008; Burt & Peyton, 2003; Isarji, Ainul Madziah et al., 2008). The scenario at the institutions of higher learning prove this, as can be seen in a study conducted by the American Institutes for Research which found that 50% of university students do not have the skills to function as proficient and effective readers (Baldi, 2006). In Malaysia, a similar finding was found indicating that university students do face problems in their reading skill (Ahmad Mazli, 2007; Harison (2010); Isarji, Ainul Madziah et al., 2008; Jamaliah, & Faridah (2001); Nambiar (2005).

In view of the prominence of reading comprehension to university students, as asserted by scholars such as Bernhardt (2011), Grabe (2010), and Pressley (2000, 2002) and the state of university students struggling to grasp reading skill, a vital issue for instructors of reading is to explore ways to scaffold university students' reading comprehension skill. This study intends to explore the employment of epistolary writing to facilitate students' reading engagement.

#### *Problem Statement*

Many research findings on reading and writing connection (e.g., Bosley, 2008; Coady, 2007; Shen, 2009; J. M. Van Manen, 2007) reveal that when reading and writing are integrated, students' reading skill improved. They further noted that writing activity in a reading program permits students to explore and discover their own interpretation of the text being read. These studies also demonstrated that reading and writing are taught most effectively as an integrated process.

Nevertheless, the current practice of teaching reading at university, particularly in the ESL context, does not create the space for students to engage with their academic text meaningfully as writing is most often separated from the reading class. This is one of the two aspects which have hampered students' growth in reading.

The second aspect is the research conducted in this area. Minimal research has been done on the pedagogical aspects of engagement theory (Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Guthrie, 2004). Most of the research done on reading engagement focused on quantitative research methods. Since reading is a dynamic process it is inadequate to rely on quantitative research methods to examine an improvement in reading comprehension. Most of the studies done in this area have implications on the benefits of integrating reading and writing; how students acquire this knowledge through their learning experience and how they become engaged in their reading through the reading and writing connection is still poorly conceptualized (Pressley, 2000; Shanahan, 2006). As aptly put by Nist and Simpson (2000), for university students to succeed in their studying, they need to "understand the characteristics and nuances of academic tasks and

adjust their strategies accordingly” (p. 649) as they tackle their academic texts. Hence, the integration of reading and writing is deemed necessary in developing students into effective readers. However, the notion of engagement theory in reading is often downplayed. The idea under this theory is that engagement is regarded as multidimensional, encompassing students’ behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions.

For learning to be meaningful and engaging, the process of internalization of cognitive skills must be in parallel and heightened during the learning process. Through this concept cognitive engagement is viewed as including mental investment in learning and employing strategies to regulate reading. The dimension of affective engagement as referred to by Lutz, Guthrie, and Davis (2006) implies the physical display of emotion by the students during learning. In this dimension, they view the exchange of interpretations of text and other ideas about reading and writing as important social behaviors of students who are engaged in reading. Students who are engaged employ strategies such as activating background knowledge, asking questions, and monitoring their comprehension as they read; they want to learn, and persist in their effort to understand what they read no matter how difficult the text; they are socially interactive in learning (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004). As stated by J. Van Manen (2007) epistolary writing permits students to experience reading in an engaging manner. This is because the act of writing the students’ interpretation of the reading materials in the form of letters allows students to reinforce and strengthen their understanding better. As a result, the process enables them to interact meaningfully with the text better.

What the foregoing discussion suggests is a need for effective instruction for the reading and writing connection as a means of developing students’ growth in reading engagement and experiences in this phase of learning. Therefore, to teach reading as a more engaged and meaning-making activity to university students, instructors need to develop appropriate classroom instruction as well as strategies which integrate writing and reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) stipulated that a pedagogical combination of reading and writing is useful in facilitating learning and understanding of reading. Sanchez and Paulson (2008) supported this view and suggest that a more progressive pedagogical approach to teaching academic literacy should not only address how students learn to read effectively but must also expose students to reading strategies and ways of analyzing critically the discourse that makes up the text. In addition, the pedagogical instruction and practice should be thoughtful and reflective (M. Van Manen, 1991). The pedagogical instruction should allow for students to grow and understand their learning process. This type of teaching creates a space for the instructor and the students to interact. The space created will enable the lecturer to really understand what the students are experiencing as they read the text. Consequently, the space provided will be an avenue for the instructor to give whatever assistance and help to the students in understanding their reading text. J. M. Van Manen (2007) employed the use of this strategy for her study in the educational setting. Through this approach she explored her students’ understanding of literary text as they send their interpretation of the text in a letter form to her. She discovered that her students’ engagement in reading was fostered when they continuously reflected their understanding through the letters.

Nevertheless, J. Van Manen's (2007) study focused only on narrative text and the subjects of her study were native speakers of English. Studies on the reading and writing connection have been concerned with establishing the effects of the reading and writing connection on students' reading or writing skills and how the two are linked to one another (Coady, 2007; Koons, 2008; Shen, 2009) but not on how the pedagogical instruction of reading and writing connection influences students' engagement in reading. Most of the research designs of these studies have used quantitative research design; this may have also been a deterrent to seeking better understanding of how the reading and writing connection facilitate students' reading engagement and add on to the knowledge of pedagogical instruction of teaching reading. Thus the researcher intends to explore the employment of epistolary writing in a reading class.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Epistolary Writing*

One strategy which has been employed by J. M. Van Manen (2007) is epistolary writing. Epistolary writing is an approach that employs letter writing. She has used Altman's (1986) description of epistolary writing. Altman (1986, p. 4) defines epistolary writing as an approach which employs letters to generate meaning of a text by a reader. In her book entitled 'Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form' she described how she uses the letter's formal properties as a parameter to read epistolary literature. She further explained that letter writing is not merely ornamental; it has properties which can be used to dissect meaning that is constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works. In the area of writing and reading, the epistolary situation as described by Altman (1986, p. 186) 'evokes simultaneously the acts of writing and reading' as the sender and receiver exchange letters and share ideas and thoughts together. In following this strategy, educators can focus on the meaning that derives from the structures and potential ideas as expressed by students in the form of a letter (Altman, 1986) sent by the students and subsequently, scaffold the students' learning as the instructor responds to the students' letters.

The letters, as noted by J. M. Van Manen (2007), contain students' reflections on their reading. They are required to reflect on the content and also to indicate their own interpretation of the text. As such, according to J. M. Van Manen (2007), epistolary writing creates a space where ideas can be explored and interpreted. This act of writing, according to Zamel (1992), gives rise to the generation and reconceptualization of ideas and as posited by Tierney and Shanahan (1996) is a powerful vehicle to extend understanding of reading because writing is not separated from the reading task.

Furthermore, the interaction between students and instructor through this letter writing creates a pedagogical space which allows the instructor to understand and give help when necessary as well as establish a closer relationship with every individual in the class. This pedagogical space created through the use of epistolary writing has influenced J. M. Van Manen (2007) to employ this strategy in her study. The pedagogical space occupies what M. Van Manen (1991) refers to as pedagogical thoughtfulness.

He opined that teaching with pedagogical thoughtfulness makes a difference in a child's learning because it focuses on and is concerned with the child's self-development during the

learning process. In other words, as the instructors design their lesson, they placed utmost importance on the students' needs, for example, the students' understandings, likes and dislikes, what works best for the students, and any problems that they would encounter. Thus, the role of the instructor here is important in ensuring that learning takes place in a conducive and thoughtful manner.

#### *Theoretical framework of the study*

The theoretical framework for this study is constructed based on three theories, namely, the socio-cultural theory, the reading engagement theory and epistolary theory. Based on the three theories description, learning is much influenced by the context and its environment as well as how the instructor approaches the learning. Additionally, learning does not occur in isolation; learning is socially mediated (Vygotsky, 1978). The process of learning takes place when students interact with others either with the instructor or their peers. Motivation and engagement contribute to reading comprehension (Guthrie, Wigfield & Perencevich, 2004). The heart and mind of the students may influence and facilitate learning development (M. Van Manen, 1991). In other words, students who are engaged readers read with an aim to understand; they enjoy learning, they have a positive attitude toward their own reading abilities, and they are motivated to read. According to the framework of thoughtfulness, the role of the instructor is vital in ensuring learning does take place (Altman, 1992).

#### *Research Objective and Research Questions*

The aim of this preliminary study is to explore the employment of epistolary writing in an academic reading class. The study sought to answer the following questions: What are the participants' conceptions of epistolary writing? How does epistolary writing contribute to the participants' engagement in reading?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study drew its participants from degree students who took the course. There were 25 students in the class. A brief description of the reading class is explained here. The students in the class were required to take the course. The course carries two credit hours and it is taught for two hours a week. It is designed to develop students' ability to read analytically and think critically. The students need to take three tests in fulfilling the course requirements. The activities structured for the course are on reading academic materials; there is no integration of writing in the reading class. By the end of the course students should be able to apply vocabulary skills, identify and classify ideas in the text, and analyze the texts read.

Although the number of students in the class is around 25 students, only a small number of students were selected for this study. The sample of the study is small, that is, only three participants, because in a qualitative study we need to consider the multiple phases (Creswell, 2008) from the lens of the participants. Besides that the minimal number of participants used in this study is based on the suggestion made by Patton (1990) that there is no specific number of participants in a qualitative study. In addition, the purposeful sampling strategy was used as "it can lead to information that allows individuals to 'learn' about the phenomenon or to an understanding that provides voice to individuals who may not be heard otherwise" (Creswell,

2008, p. 213). The selection criteria were based on observations during class hours, their responses in the letter writing, as well as their willingness to participate willingly in the study. According to Creswell (2008) to obtain good data the participants need to voluntarily take part in the study. He further noted that the participants must willingly provide information, and have the ability to express their understanding of the task for the researcher to gain rich insights. This was how the researcher had selected the three participants based on their responses in the letter. The three selected had the ability to express their understanding well in the letter. In conducting observation for this study, the researcher took up the role as a participant observer. A designed protocol for class observation was also prepared as a guide for the researcher and other observers during the observation. The four elements under the pedagogy of thoughtfulness as well as the attributes for reading engagement were also included.

Besides that, the selection of the participants was based on their early conception of reading prior to the class. Prior to the class, the students were asked to write and tell their background such as their hometown, number of siblings in the family, their English result, English classes that they have attended, and their conception of reading and writing. The students wrote in a form submitted to the researcher on the first day of class. For the purpose of this study pseudonyms are used to mask their identities (the participant who likes to read materials in English is Ili; Wan acknowledges the importance of reading, however, he admits that he often faces difficulties when he reads; the other student, Dania detests reading English material). Hence, a qualitative case study was used for this study because it distinctively enables the researches to be involved and gain insights into the area under study.

#### *Data Collection Methods*

Three data sources were examined: observations, interviews, and students' documents. These were through videotaped class lessons, audiotaped face-to-face interviews of participant students, and document analysis in the form of students' letters as well as questionnaire given at the beginning and at the end of the semester.

Observations on class lessons were videotaped. A total of ten observations were made. The observation enabled the researcher to see things in the natural setting that might otherwise be consciously missed (Merriam, 2001). During the observation the researcher observe students' reaction toward learning and whether they are engaged in their learning and reading. The elements of engagement are adapted from the Lutz, Guthrie, Davis (2006) students' engagement list. Besides observations, the researcher conducted a 40 to 45 minute semi-structured face-to-face interview with the participants. The interview was done in the same week. The interview session with the participants were staggered throughout the week. The class session began at 4 p.m. and ended at 6 p.m. every Tuesday. Thus, the researcher decided to delay the interview for the following day. The researcher had to juggle the time in order to fit the participants' and the interviewer's time. Most of the interviews were conducted on the day when students could meet up. After negotiating on the suitability of time the 3 participants were interviewed on the day fixed by the researcher and the interview session took 2 days to cover for the 3 participants. There were a total of 12 interviews; each participant was interviewed four times. The participants were interviewed four times until the data gathered were saturated.

The interview enables the researchers to gather opinions, perspectives, and experiences directly from the participants' point of view. In addition, students' documents that are from letter writing and questionnaire were collected and analyzed. The documents collected were used to verify information gained from observations and interviews. In the initial stage, once the verbatim transcription of the interview and expanded field notes of the observations were converted into computer files, these data were saved into file folders in the computer. The data collected from the interview were later compared and contrasted with the data obtained from the classroom observation, the students' letters and the questionnaire. Each transcript was reviewed to identify themes. Then, the patterns and recurring emergent themes from the data gathered such as conception, preference, language, difficulty, learning, interest were looked at.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The most recurring themes were selected as the central phenomenon of the study. All the data from the observations, interviews and document in the form of letters gained from the participants were later transcribed and coded using categories which were used to gain a better dimension that might help to clarify answers as well as enriching the participants' responses. Several themes emerged from careful review of the three sources of data. Six major themes selected were described. The first four themes which answer the first research question relate to the participants' conceptions of epistolary writing and are explained below. The information in the brackets displays the document from which the quote was obtained; for example, the following abbreviations are used: "Int" as interview, "OCL" as the out-of-class letter, and "PostQ" as post-teaching questionnaire.

### **Participants' Conceptions of Epistolary Writing**

#### *Positive conceptions of epistolary writing*

Data analysis has disclosed the image of engaged reader among the participants. They learned the new strategy with delight. One of the four aspects of characteristics of an engaged reader is cognitive competence referring to comprehension skills and cognitive strategies when reading text (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004). In several of the interview transcripts the participants expressed their enthusiasm in using such an approach. The participants informed that they have never done this before and they like the notion of integrating writing together with reading to facilitate reading comprehension. Dania and Wan shared their opinions on letter writing. Dania said:

"When the instructor first told me to write a letter to her in my reading class I was already excited, I asked myself 'Is this real?' 'Will she respond to me?' This is new to me."

(Int. 1. Part.3 Dania\_Aug 2010)

Wan too shared the same view as Dania when he uttered:

"Wow! Writing to my own lecture, I like the idea because this is new. I have never done this before in my reading class . . ."

(Int. 1 Part 1 Wan\_Aug 2010)

This supports the claim made by Guthrie (2004) on engaged readers. Guthrie, Wigfield, and Perencevich (2004) stipulated that readers who are engaged welcome the use of strategies to help facilitate their reading. Even the participant, for example Dania, who detested reading English materials, appreciated the letter writing approach. She explained:

“I see this as an interaction between myself and the instructor, you see in class I don’t really ask my instructor I am a bit shy and I am scared that everybody will laugh at me when I open my mouth and speak in English. So when the instructor asked me to write letter to her I like it. It is more personal and I can say whatever I want without being scared that people will laugh at me.”

(Int.2, Part. 3 Dania\_Sept 2010)

This response suggests that they have never experienced writing, particularly on writing their understanding of their reading text in the form a letter to their instructor, in their reading class. The process of writing made them realized that by writing it enabled them to reinforce their understanding of the text better. For instance Dania shared her views: “For me writing and reading is like a complete package. It is like when we write at the same time we need to adapt what we have read. It is like a combination of two” (Int. 2 Dania\_Sept 2010). Finding from the post-teaching questionnaire (PostQ) also affirms this. For instance, Wan proposed since reading and writing complement one another thus both skills should be put together. She said, “I think reading and writing should be combined together so that students can improve their reading and writing skill” (PostQ.W\_ Oct 2010).

### *Personal Interaction*

The second theme emerged is personal interaction. When participants discussed how they view epistolary writing, the response of ‘personal interaction’ often came up as reaction to the interview question: “How do you describe the letter writing in your reading class?” The excerpts from the three participants illustrate the recognition on wanting a personal interaction between the participants and the instructor. They prefer the interaction to be personal so that they are able to feel at ease while communicating with their instructor. For instance Dania said:

“It is easier for me to write a letter to you but I don’t know what I write is correct or wrong.”

(Post-Q. 2, Dania\_Aug 2010)

Wan and Ili too shared the same view as Dania. Wan reported:

“It is a way for me to communicate and interact. It is more personal. I can write what I don’t understand freely.”

(Int. 2, Part. 1 Wan\_Sept 2010)

While Ili said:

“For me, I describe this as personal interaction, only between the instructor and me. After reading, I write what I understand and send it to her. Then, she will read and respond to



me personally and provide feedback on what I have read.”

(Int. 2. Part 2 Ili\_Sept 2010)

This is particularly relevant to second language learners who are not proficient in the target language. This corroborates Duff's (2002) opinion on ESL learners reticent on using English language. Duff (2002) noted that the discomfort feeling among ESL learners to openly participate in class are due to several factors such as uneasiness at being the center of attention, their perceptions of how others view them, and second language limitations.

### *Sharing Ideas*

The next theme that emerged is space for sharing ideas. The participants enjoy the discussions, questions, and sharing of ideas with the instructor through the letter writing. As illustrated in the quotes below:

The participants shared their views. For instance, Dania uttered:

“I find the part of sharing my ideas openly with my instructor excites me. Usually in the class I only share ideas with my friends, but that also depends whether they would ask my opinion.”

(Int. 2. Part. 3 Dania\_Sept 2010)

Ili too expressed her view on this:

“I never thought reading can be shared. I always think for reading you need to do it alone. When I write letter to my instructor I am able to share my understanding with her. That is good.”

(Int. 2. Part. 2 Ili\_Sept 2010)

This is another characteristic of engaged readers which Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich (2004) refer to as social interactive in learning. Students who are engaged readers do not perceive the process of learning as isolated; they like the idea of socializing and interacting with others as they acquire knowledge. Ili who initially perceived reading as a solitary process described the approach as exhilarating; she shared the experience of relating her reading experience to the instructor and receiving feedback from the instructor as one that she would await with anticipation every week.

### *Negative conceptions of epistolary writing*

The data indicate that one theme emerged from the analysis. The theme that emerged indicating the negative conceptions of letter writing showed that out of the three participants two participants were not motivated readers. Motivation is another characteristic of an engaged reader (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004). Initially, the participants admitted the benefit of letter writing; they like the process. Nevertheless, the two participants, Ili and Wan, noted that the act of writing is time consuming especially when the semester comes to an end. Ili said: “I enjoy doing letter writing but it is taxing for me, especially when there are so much work to do, quizzes to take, assignments to finish.” (Int. 3. Part. 2 Ili\_Oct 2010).

Their initial preference of letter writing has not increased their motivation to be engaged readers. As stipulated by Guthrie (2004) engaged readers are not easily discouraged; they will be motivated to continue the reading task assigned even when they face challenges. This is particularly true for Ili as compared to Wan. Ili lamented that the process of writing letters has taken a toll on her. She reiterated that reading the article especially when it is long and difficult makes her unable to enjoy the process of learning. Ili shared her opinion on this:

“If I can digest what I read a lot faster than it is not so time consuming especially when the article is long and difficult to understand. You see I have to read several times than before I write letter I have to draft the letter before I submit them to my instructor. I know it is good but I have to focus with other subjects too.”

(Int. 3. Part. 2 Ili\_Oct 2010)

Although, Wan too admitted that letter writing is time consuming, he realized the benefits of such approach. In Wan’s case he realized what he can gain from this approach, he would want to continue if he is not pressed for time which he admitted is much of his fault. Thus, he blamed himself rather than the shortcoming of the approach. He uttered:

“In the beginning when there were not much assignments and quizzes I enjoyed doing them. I would spend time doing, now when the semester is coming to an end I do not have much time to concentrate on the letter I just simply do it for the sake of doing it. It has affected my time. Actually, I blame it to myself for unable to manage my time well.”

(Int. 3. Part. 1 Wan, Oct 2010)

This supports Guthrie’s (2004) notion on disengaged reader. Guthrie, Wigfield & Perencevich (2004) and Olson (2007) describe this kind of student as a disengaged reader; this type of reader is less willing to make the necessary investment required for genuine engagement. They adopt defensive tactics and avoidance behaviors, and ignore strategies that they perceive require much effort on their side as reader or student (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004; Olson, 2007; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991).

### *Pedagogical Perspective*

The other two themes, learning space and pedagogical space, emerged respond to the second research question that relates to how epistolary writing contributed to the participants’ reading engagement. These two themes concern the role of epistolary writing in engaging the students in their reading.

### *Learning space*

The theme of learning space appeared when the participants discussed how epistolary writing contributes to their engagement in reading. In this context, the participants view letter writing not only as a tool to engage them in reading particularly academic reading materials. After they read an article they began to reflect and interpret what they understood from the text. The simultaneous reading and writing process encourage them to reread and rewrite their

understanding. Their interpretations grow as they pause, review and rethink of their understanding of the article that they are reading (Tierney & Pearson, 1983). Besides viewing letter writing as a tool, they perceive it as a learning space for them to practice and employ the strategies. For example, Dania noted in on one of her letters, she explained how she had used the strategies employed. Dania said

“In the beginning I wasn’t sure what ‘den’ means, I did what you taught on finding meaning of words through contextual clues, I read the sentence after the word, it indicates a deep large underground, that has helped me to understand. I can imagine where the wolves stay. Although some of the terms used were difficult but I managed to guess some of the words which helped me a lot.”

(OCL. 2. Part. 3 Dania\_Aug. 2010)

Wan and Ili also indicated the same in their interview and letter writing. Ili uttered

“If I just read the article without writing what the article is about it is just like reading without understanding. But when I write back what I have read I understand it better, it is like reading it twice.”

(Int. 4, Part 2, Ili\_Oct 2010)

Wan shared his opinion on this:

“I never thought I would ever like to read English materials, because it is very difficult for me but the way the instructor explain about the strategies used to understand our reading and the use of letter writing which is a new experience for me, make me want to try to read in English.”

(Int. 1, Part Wan\_Aug 2010)

These responses illustrate that the participants attribute the letter writing as a tool for them to apply what have been taught in the class. In addition, the letter provides a space for them to learn and practice the reading strategies taught to facilitate their understanding of the reading text. The participants indicated that writing about what they have read strengthened their understanding. For instance, Wan talked about epistolary writing in the following way. He described it as an experience which makes his interest to read English material increases.

“I like this approach. When I begin writing my thoughts on what I read I began to understand things clearer. I think I do not mind reading any English materials starting from now even if it is a bit difficult to understand.”

(Int. 4, Part. 1, Wan\_Oct 2010)

Dania too share the same view:

“If there is no writing in this class of reading, I will not find the time to apply and practice what have been taught by the instructor on my own. The letter writing allows me to do this. When I do in class, most of the activities I did it with my friends but with letter writing I have to do it by myself. . .”

(Int. 3, Part 3 Dania\_Sept 2010)

The findings concur with J. Van Manen's (2007) study that writing provides the space to learn.

### *Pedagogical space*

Another emergent theme from the data is the pedagogical space. The pedagogical space as explained by J. M. Van Manen (2007) provides a space for the instructor to explore what is in the mind of the students as they read and interpret the text. In addition, the feedback provided by the instructor not only assists the students personally but is also a medium for interaction which allows closer rapport between the instructor and her students. For instance, when the participants such as Ili, Dania, and Wan have doubts about their interpretation of the text they asked for assistance and help from their instructor. Dania reported:

“The letter writing helps me to use what have been learned in the class. When I go to class sometimes I did not manage to grasp the whole strategy but as I do the letter writing I apply again what have been taught and I found it is easier for me to use them and if I wasn't sure I can always write and ask my instructor.”

(Int. 3. Part. 3 Dania\_Oct 2010)

In one of Dania's letter to the instructor:

“The article was long and a bit difficult. I read it once but I did not understand. Then I decided to use the metacognitive strategy you taught me, as I read I ask questions and monitor my reading. I understand the article better after doing that. Is my interpretation of the text correct?’ Do tell me?”

(OCL. 4. Part.3 Dania\_Sept 2010)

This substantiates Zamel's (1992) claim on the benefit of connecting writing and reading. In addition, this letter writing permitted the instructor to pedagogically monitor her students' learning. As shown in one of the instructor's response to her students:

“I admit the article is long but it is interesting. You have in a way interpreted the text quite well. I am glad that you have tried to apply what have been taught in class. Use the strategies that have been taught often. The more you practice the more you understand how to apply them in your reading.”

(OCL 4. Part 3 Dania\_Inst. Respond\_Sept 2010)

Besides monitoring her students' progress she took the opportunity to assist her students learning indirectly.

“I am glad that you told me that you are unsure what to write. I do hope from the last Tuesday class you will manage to do it. Find the important information in the first paragraph. The rest of the paragraph is just an elaboration of the main idea.”

(OCL. 3 Ili\_Inst. Respond\_Oct 2010)

The participants appreciated the medium used by the instructor to respond to the students' plight. As illustrated by Wan in his interview:

“With this letter writing it is like how I am able to connect with my reading and share what I think the article is with my instructor.”

(Int. 2. Part. 1 Wan\_Sept 2010)

The instructor took the opportunity to seek a clearer picture on the problems that the students face and give help when necessary. This pedagogical space subsumes the pedagogical thoughtfulness (M. Van Manen, 1991) that the instructor needs to be thoughtful of the students' development in the learning process.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This preliminary study provides a unique opportunity to examine aspects concerning the implementation and integration of epistolary writing in teaching reading as well as conceptualizing the reading-writing interactions. The evidence suggests that in order for instructors of reading and curriculum developers to integrate epistolary writing successfully in a reading program they need to consider several aspects such as students' language proficiency, selection of materials, and strategies taught.

Several implications can be made from the study. The first implication is the study, in particular, extended theoretical understanding of how reading for second language learners can be approached. The study contributes to an understanding of the role of letter writing in a reading class. The pedagogy of epistolary emphasizes the notion of social interaction in making understanding. Thus, in the class the instructor needs to allow students of the same proficiency level to interact while discovering the meanings of the written text. Reading is not a solitary process. The instructor needs to portray this by providing various activities for the students to talk about texts and tasks with their peers and the instructor.

Secondly, the findings of the study also contribute to the pedagogical implications in teaching reading to L2 learners from primary, high school until university level. The instructors or teachers of reading should create curriculum that is relevant to students' lives in and out of the classroom. Reading programs must be meaningful and useful to students in order for them to see the relevancy of learning the subject.

Thirdly, writing should not be separated in the reading curriculum. Of particular importance is the potential of letter writing to empower participants through awareness. This method affords participants, instructors, and researchers with another way to gain awareness and increased understanding. In addition, selection of tasks or activities that enhance reading and writing must be considered. The students should have many opportunities to work with reading and writing tasks. These tasks need to encourage the students to engage with the text and allow them to discover the meaning of the text by themselves. In other words, the role of the instructor again is deemed necessary here. The instructor should carefully design instructional practices which cater for students' needs.

Finally, the support and assistance provided by the instructor. The instructor needs to constantly provide support and feedback to students in their journey to become effective readers. The students need to see light at the end of the journey. As educators, we need to place students' needs first before allowing them to take control of their own learning.

## CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. From the pedagogical perspective of employing epistolary writing in a reading program what can be deduced is the perspective of considering the development of students to become engaged readers. The reading and writing connection which transpired through the strategy of epistolary writing is not only viewed as a tool for students to engage and facilitate their understanding of academic reading text. The approach can be used as a learning space for students. The letter writing is seen as a learning space for students to reinforce their understanding of the reading strategies and practice what have been taught as they progress and develop as engaged readers. The evidence from the observations, interviews, and documents suggest that the students do have positive experience in employing epistolary writing (letter writing) in their reading class.

Students who are engaged and highly motivated readers view the approach as challenging yet stimulating as compared to their counterparts who are disengaged readers. This is seen in one of the participants, Dania, who initially detested reading English material but began to build interest and motivation to read in English. Furthermore, it can be used as a pedagogical space for the instructor of reading to monitor and provide help when necessary to the students. As aptly put by J. M. Van Manen (2007), epistolary writing creates a space where ideas can be explored and interpreted. She further noted that from the pedagogical perspective, epistolary writing provides the lecturer with a sensitive medium for acquiring insights into students' perspectives of reading. Although from the findings the employment of epistolary writing can foster student's engagement in reading, motivation plays a vital role in influencing students' engagement in reading. Students who are extrinsically motivated as Guthrie (2004) refers to as disengaged reader often do not take the task in reading as an engagement activity. They may have the interest to read but it does not sustain their motivation to become engaged reader especially when they face constraint and challenges to do other task assigned to them. This finding support the claim made by Guthrie, Wigfield and Perencevich (2004) that engagement in reading requires time and effort both by the students and the instructor.

The objective of connecting reading and writing to facilitate academic reading in this study illustrate that reading and writing work best when integrated. Nevertheless, the instructor or educator plays an important part here in order to help inexperienced readers to develop competence. This study reiterates that the role of instructor remains crucial in providing ways to engage students in their reading journey. The classroom should have characteristics that foster engaged reading such as by providing strategies in reading, explicit teaching on the use of the strategies, culminating activity like writing and ensuring students' motivation in wanting to learn to be good readers. It is important for reading instructors to understand the journeys that students experience to become effective and ardent readers. The insights obtained will enable educators

and curriculum developers to create or improve an existing reading course which can provide space for students to explore their journey to become lifelong readers. Curriculum developers need to see reading and writing not as separate entities but as one that complement each other which can lead to enhanced learning and practice in reading.

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