

# Collaborative Learning Via Email Discussion: Strategies for ESL Writing Classroom

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This paper explores the strategies of implementing email in ESL writing classroom. It focuses on how email can be implemented in a collaborative learning ambience incorporating the stages of writing process approach and pair work activity. Both teachers and learners hold crucial responsibilities to ensure success of the approach employed. Additionally, the learning ambience, task structure and task content contribute to the positive implication of the learning approach. It is hoped that the strategies will offer insights for further action to be explored to attain a better understanding of how learners interact in a collaborative learning environment via email discussions and the impact on their writing performance particularly in ESL writing classrooms.

## Introduction

The technical encroachments of information technology conveys impact on the English language learning as it seems to boost students' motivation, which leads increased usage and proficiency. Thus, Malaysia has embarked on the use of Internet and information technology in the educational system in order to produce a workforce that is educated, skilled in new technologies and able to face global challenges.

Furthermore, as technology increasingly takes centre-stage of our lives, there are compelling reasons for incorporating technologies into the classroom. Incorporating email in the classroom is a good step to familiarize students with computer literacy. On the other hand, there is a need to improve the teaching of writing as "ESL writers are known to face problems in developing their writing skills at university level" (Bacha, 2000). Students studying in institutions of higher learning in the medium of English, which may not be their native language, have been found to face problems mainly in writing, making them unable to cope with the institution's literacy expectations. Therefore, with new approaches in the teaching of writing, it is hoped to benefit students not only in their examinations, but also in their own experience and for future use.

Specifically, research shows that email is a very useful vehicle for teaching English (Lee, 1998; Warschauer, 1995). Email can be used in teacher-student, student-student communication including formal and informal consultations, exchange of dialogue journals and writing conferencing (Belisle, 1996). It is not easy for students to consult a teacher because of shyness or lack of time. However, studies have found that students using email wrote more, asked more questions, used more language functions and adopted a more conversational tone in their language. It enables the teacher to monitor the process of the students' writing in order to save class time (Belisle, 1996).

Further Warschauer (1995) asserts that email provides the students with an excellent opportunity for real and natural communication, and supplies opportunities for independent learning which is essential for ESL writing, and also allows the students to communicate easily with hundreds of other students. It can provide information, contact and stimulation, supplying the teacher with more effective and enjoyable teaching situations. In brief, email enables students to have various opportunities for communication, collaboration and information. It leads students to a new world of experience.

The present activity attempts to incorporate the stages involved in the process writing approach with email in a collaborative learning ambience. It seeks to adapt White and Arndt's (1991) stages of process writing approach with additional details of the writer's framework.

The stages involved are:

- Generating ideas
- Focusing
- Structuring
- Drafting
- Reviewing
- Evaluating

## **Strategies for the Implementation of Email in the ESL Writing Classroom**

Developing and conducting a well-designed collaborative learning via email discussion is not a simple endeavour. To be successful, it requires the integration of proper and adequate elements. These are proposed practical strategies for the implementation of email in ESL writing classroom:

- the teachers' role and course framework
- the learner's role
- the provision of the learning environment
- inclusion of assessment and assessment method
- task structure
- task content

## **The Teacher's Role and Course Framework**

Collaborative learning via email discussion requires conscientious preparation and arrangements on the part of the teacher in order to develop activities and devise an appropriate course framework which will help guide students through the ESL writing class.

Developing activities and devising a course framework involve the selection of topics, group discussion, the writing approach, guidance and regulations, duration and facilities for the whole task to be conducted via email discussions. The process will be jeopardized without a proper course framework.

The teachers need to equip themselves with advanced knowledge in the area of information communication technology (ICT) especially in using an appropriate email software program.

## **The Learner's Role**

Learners, too, need training which involves technical training and careful training related to the process approach involving new behaviours and new ways of thinking about learning in order to value and adopt the approach. Thus, learners need to equip themselves with skills in the area of email correspondence. A workshop could be conducted to investigate students' skills in email correspondence, before the actual implementation of the online collaborative learning via email discussions in ESL writing classroom takes place. The workshop should focus on basic knowledge regarding email correspondence required in the actual task.

These are:

- Exposure of email features
- Registration of an email address
- Sending an email
- Replying an email
- Sending attachment files via email
- Forwarding a message

At the end of the workshop, an assessment could be conducted to evaluate students' comprehension.

For example;

- in sending an email to the students involved which include a question that needs them to respond via email
- in assigning a task which needs them to forward a message to their friends
- in assigning a task which needs them to send a file as an attachment file

It is hoped that this programme could be an added value for the actual implementation of collaborative learning via email discussions and further enhance its efficacy in ESL writing classroom. Additionally, students also need to understand their responsibility in a collaborative learning environment in order to ensure consequential participation and interaction. Further, they are also required to gain in-depth knowledge of the writing genres involved, exploit their experience and attempt to attain a high level of critical thinking in order to ensure success in the knowledge construction process.

## **Learning Ambience - Setting a Multimedia Language Laboratory**

The most vital element needed to conduct an online course is the electronic classroom, laboratory or workstation which has a proper networking system for the students to execute the assigned task. The researcher's suggestion would be to establish a multimedia language laboratory in which a course could be conducted as a class. This would enable the students to overcome problems of time management and lack of facilities. A multimedia language laboratory is a multi-purpose, multimedia, versatile teaching and learning laboratory. Through the multi-media language laboratory, real time teaching and learning with real time performance outcomes will be able to be produced, thus negating the lengthy duration required in conducting the collaborative learning via email discussions. Thus, it involves the responsibility of the organization to provide the necessities required to implement online courses. Lack of facilities will impede the efficacy of conducting collaborative learning via email discussions in ESL writing classroom. Nevertheless, problems can be overcome by preparing proper schedules for students to utilize the facilities needed for their online learning.

## **Assessment and Assessment Method**

MacDonald (2001) stresses that assessment should play a crucial role in helping students to develop in effective online collaborators. Thus in online collaborative learning via email discussions, it is recommended that assessment should include both email discourse and students' individual work produced from their discussions. With this method, it is hoped to inculcate interest and positive attitudes which further enable students' contribution in ESL online learning. Consequently, the writer would like to propose a marking scheme for the email discourse in the writing classroom, and the marking scheme to assess students' individual writing assignments. It is hoped that these marking schemes could assist the instructor or the teacher in the allocation of marks for the activity. The table below illustrates the proposed marking scheme.

### **Marking Scheme for Email Messages in Writing Classroom**

Stages	Overall Content (100%)			Frequency of Participation (100%)			Total	Remarks
	Excellent (10)	Good (7)	Average (5)	Excellent (10)	Good (7)	Average (5)		
Generating Ideas								
Focusing								
Structuring								
Drafting								
Evaluating								
Reviewing								
Total								

## The Task Structure

The task structure for this activity embraces elements of a constructivist learning environment which promotes interaction and collaboration focusing on the student-centred and the process-oriented approach. These are incorporated with a detailed framework devised for this activity together with precise email instructions at each stage of the writing process approach. As time commitment in the asynchronous communication is open-ended, this activity requires a time frame which demands positive participation. Further, the pair work discussion activity will help the participants to focus on a task-related activity rather than a non-task-related activity. Overall, the task structure could be enhanced with more detailed elements in order to promote the efficacy of conducting collaborative learning via email discussions in the ESL writing classroom. The diagram below illustrates a framework, followed by email instructions proposed by the writer.

### Framework for Incorporating Process Writing Approach and Collaborative Learning via Email Discussion

		Writing process Activity			
Writing Genre (argumentative, narrative, descriptive etc.)	Stages	Duration (one or two weeks at each stage)	Email Instructions	Approach (pair work or group work discussion)	Output
	Generating Ideas				Main ideas Supporting ideas
	Focusing				Thesis statement
	Structuring				A paragraph sample
	Drafting				Essay draft/drafts
	Evaluating				Feedback
	Reviewing				Final comments

## Email Instructions

### Stage One - Generating Ideas

My dear students,  
 Stage One – Generating Ideas  
 (23rd August – 29th August)

Here is the prompt for your argumentative writing. You may start your discussion via email. Please do not forget to "cc" your email messages to me. You are given 5 weeks to complete the assignment. Your first stage of discussion is "Generating Ideas" (brainstorming for ideas). You should complete your discussion by the date given above. Enjoy your discussion.

Prompt for stage 1:

There has been a heated discussion about the issue of "English Language" in the readers' column in an English newspaper. Some people think that all subjects at the university level should be taught in the English language to produce quality graduates, whereas others believe that not all subjects should be taught in English. Now the editor of the newspaper is calling for the readers' opinions. Suppose you are writing for the readers' opinion column. Take one of the positions described above, and write your opinion in English.

Best wishes,  
 Noraien Mansor

### Stage Two - Focusing

My dear students,  
 Stage Two – Focusing  
 (30th August – 5th September)

This stage focuses on developing a thesis statement for your essay. To help you with the development of your thesis statement, please go to the website shown below. Then talk with your partner about a thesis statement for your essay. Your thesis

statement must be different from your partner's, but both of you can advise each other.

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/thesis.html>

Best wishes,  
Noraïen Mansor

### **Stage Three - Structuring**

Dear students,  
Stage Three – Structuring  
(6th September – 12th September)

This stage focuses on the developing of a paragraph which should include the topic sentence, supporting sentences and a concluding sentence. You are to discuss with your partner on how to develop the paragraphs for the ideas in your first discussion. The discussion can be in point form but you need to develop one complete paragraph as an example for your partner to review.

This website will help you with argumentative paragraph writing.  
<http://www.santarosa.edu/~dpeterso/permanenthtml/tutorial/unifee.htm>

Best wishes,  
Noraïen Mansor

### **Stage Four - Drafting**

Dear Students,  
Stage Four – Drafting  
(13th September – 19th September)

This website will lead you to obtain samples of argumentative essay for your reading before you start your draft.  
(<http://www.eslplanet.com/teachertods/argueweb/frntpage.htm>).

You can start with your own essay individually. You are given only one week to complete your essay and once you have completed it, email it to me and your partner. Ask for comments or advice from your partner. If you can finish the essay earlier, it is better but make sure your partner complete his/hers before you let him/her see your the draft of your essay for comments or advice.

Best wishes,  
Noraïen Mansor

### **Stage Five - Evaluation**

My dear students,  
Stage Five – Evaluation  
(20th September – 23rd September)

Attached is the evaluation checklist for you to complete when you evaluate your partner's draft. Please submit it to me once you have completed the evaluation of the draft and the checklist.

Best wishes,  
Noraïen Mansor

## Stage Six - Reviewing

My dear students,  
Stage Six – Reviewing  
(24th September – 26th September)

This is the final stage of the pilot study. What you need to do is to give your final comments either positive or negative on your partner's essay so you each have the opportunity to enhance your essay writing. Then, submit your final essay to me.

Best wishes,  
Noraïen Mansor

## The Task Content

The task content focuses on the writing genre and the theme chosen to challenge the students' discussions. Additionally, it includes the assessment of the writing assignments which entailed three essay writing criteria namely organization, content and writing style. Further, at each stage of the process writing approach, the students are required to complete specific elements of the writing assignment, for example, the first stage (generating ideas) required students to produce their ideas and those supporting them. The task content for this study could be enhanced if more recurrent and interesting topics were given for the students to choose from. The topics could be taken from various fields of interest namely politics, economics and society. Given these subjects, it is hoped that students would be able to gain the opportunity to explore the relevant topics of interest in an enthusiastic discussion which further could increase participation and interaction and enhance their knowledge construction process.

## Conclusion

The strategies proposed may provide a basis for further research and directions for a larger study. Incorporating the stages of writing process approach and pair work activity in a collaborative learning ambience via email discussion is a practical strategy to be implemented. The task structure and task content designed will aid the teachers and learners to employ the learning approach. In short, email offers a host of possibilities for further study in order to enhance students' learning, increase students' language proficiency, promote students' positive attitude and interest, and improve students' performance particularly in ESL writing classrooms. It is hoped that more studies in computer-mediated communication will generate more insights, knowledge and information that will lead to a broader understanding of the paradigms in network language teaching and learning.

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