



Blended Learning Approach to Teaching Writing: Using E-mail in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract: With the primary aim of bridging the gap between the traditional mode of teaching writing and the pedagogical potentials of technology integration in the language classroom, this study explored the viability of using e-mail in facilitating topical discussions via e-mail exchanges among six ESL writing classes of 198 students in a private university in Manila, Philippines during the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015. Students were first required to have their individual e-mail accounts; then, they were assigned with e-mail exchange partners whom they communicated with on a weekly basis for a total of five weeks. E-mail thread discussion topics ranged from personal to societal issues covering local, national and global concerns. Data from student reflections, interviews, survey and focus group discussions reveal that despite some motivational and technology-related limitations, using e-mail in the classroom may help develop students' interest and confidence in writing, enhance their technological and social skills, develop learners' autonomy, and improve students' attitudes towards English language learning. Pedagogical insights and implications are provided for language teachers and researchers in the light of these findings.

Key Words: blended learning; e-mail writing in the classroom; writing via e-mail

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

With the changing tides and times, come rapid developments in education. In recent years, technological advancements have been applied in education and have been playing an increasingly significant role in foreign/second language teaching and learning (Kupelian, 2001; Warschauer & Healey, 1998 as cited in Shang, 2007). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers a number of features in the improvement of foreign/second language learning, such as more language functions (Wang, 1998), greater levels of participation (Gonzalez-

Bueno, 1998) and more motivation and interest (Skinner & Austin, 1999).

While incorporating e-mail technology in the teaching and learning of English language skills has been explored in many parts of the world, research regarding the applicability and viability of e-mail writing within the ESL context in the Philippines is scarce, a similar concern that is also reported by Liaw (1998) and Li (2000) in EFL setting in Taiwan.

It is this gap that prompted the researchers to explore the pedagogical potentials of blending traditional in-class writing with the technological modern online writing via e-mail. Horn and Staker (2015) suggests different models of blended learning: rotation, flex, a la carte, and enriched virtual models. For the purpose of this study, the researchers



adopted the principle of flex model, which suggests complementarity of off-line and on-line methods in teaching. The present study investigates the usefulness of using e-mail in teaching English writing skills to Filipino ESL learners via the E-mail Project, requiring students to write online outside the confines of the classroom while attending regular class sessions.

1.2 Research Question

This study also aimed to explore the pedagogical viability of integrating technology into a traditional approach in writing in an ESL classroom setting. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do students respond to the use of e-mail as a writing platform in developing their interest and confidence in writing?
2. What are the advantages of blending traditional and technological approaches in teaching writing?
3. What are the challenges and limitations of using e-mail as a writing platform in an ESL classroom?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The participants involved in this study consisted of 198 sophomore college students (152 females and 46 males; ages range from 17 to 18 years old) enrolled in Writing in the Discipline class, from six degree programs, BS Accountancy, BS Business Management, BS Customs Administration, BS International Relations, BA Multimedia Arts and BS Psychology, in a private tertiary institution in Manila, Philippines. They have an average English learning experience of 12 years, and their English proficiency levels at the time of study ranged from lower intermediate to intermediate based on their TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores, which was administered by the university in the beginning of the semester. The course aims to develop students' discipline-specific writing skills by providing a range of genres and topics. Each class session ran for one and one half hours with two sessions per week. This study was conducted during the first semester of Academic Year 2014 – 2015, from July to August, covering five

weeks. Permission from the parents and the college was sought before the study was implemented.

2.2 Research Instruments

To gather pertinent data for this study, the following research instruments were utilized.

2.2.1 Survey

Two surveys were administered to the respondents. Prior to the implementation of the project, a 'pre-project' survey questionnaire was administered to the respondents to gather personal information and to determine their exposure to technology particularly social networking sites. A 'post-project' open-ended survey questionnaire was administered to the participants via Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.org) to determine their perceived advantages and disadvantages of the e-mail project as a writing platform.

2.2.2 Individual Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Thirty students, five from each of the class, volunteered to be interviewed individually after the completion of the study. The same students participated in the focus group discussions (FGDs) with the researchers to discuss the e-mail project.

2.3 Procedure of the Study

The E-mail Project commenced in the first semester of AY 2014 – 2015 after seeking consent from the college, students and their parents/guardians. As aforementioned, a pre-project survey questionnaire was administered to the participants. The project ran for five weeks with two e-mail interchanges on a weekly topic between e-mail partners.

Students' active e-mail accounts were listed in a class e-mail directory, and each student was provided his/her e-mail partner from another class. The researchers demonstrated to the class how to send an e-mail with correct weekly e-mail subject format, and they were reminded to insert their teachers/researchers' e-mail addresses in the courtesy copy section. This is to ensure that the researchers are able to track all the e-mail thread discussions of the students from all classes involved. Students were then asked to send a sample introductory e-mail to their partner to test whether

the e-mail accounts provided to them were active. Unsuccessful attempts were reported and fixed until everybody was ready for the project.

For weekly e-mail interchange, students followed the following format: Student A sends e-mail to Student B on a weekly topic provided and asks a question at the end of the e-mail regarding the topic; Student B responds by answering the question posed by Student A and asks a question at the end of the e-mail regarding next topic. Student A responds to Student B's question and ask a question again about the topic. The students followed this format throughout the duration of the E-mail Project.

Students were instructed to engage in e-mail topical discussions with their e-mail partners on weekly topics provided, which included the following: Week 1 – Personal Introduction; Week 2 – National Issues; Week 3 – Open Topic; Week 4 – Global Issues; and Week 5 – Collaborative Essay on Academic Socialization. The e-mail structure, parts and functions were discussed in the class to give students a background of this genre; however, the class suggested that the tone of their e-mail discussions be conversational yet professional, but not overly formal, since one of our aims for the project was not only to write but also to socialize via e-mail.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Throughout the five-week implementation of the E-mail Project, the researchers gathered important data as regards the quantity and quality of students' e-mail interchanges about weekly topical discussions via their e-mail threads as well as students' perceptions on writing online through e-mail as an alternative writing platform.

In terms of the quantity of e-mail, the 198 participants who complied with the project sent 752 e-mail within the duration of four weeks, with an average of 188 e-mail per week, which is equivalent to 226,247 words. Among these e-mail, the maximum number of words is 1,300, while the least number of words in an e-mail is 20. On the average, e-mails are composed of 228.53 words. These figures showed the pedagogical potentialities of e-mail as to its effects in motivating learners to express their ideas, emotions and opinions freely through online writing. Despite having no 'strict' guidelines in e-mail such as paragraph structures, style and word limits, and despite the absence of any evaluative measure or

grading system for each of the e-mail, it can be seen that students manifested significant interest in writing and sending e-mail. While this can be attributed to the E-mail Project being introduced as a 'midterm project', it cannot be denied that students showed motivation and enthusiasm in writing through the frequency of their e-mail interchanges and the quantity of words for each e-mail.

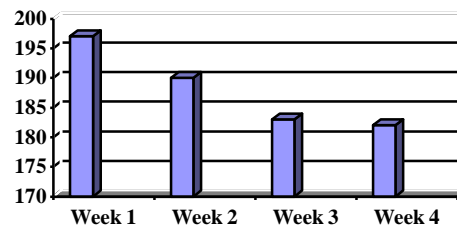


Figure 1. E-mail count per week

Figure 1 shows the e-mail count per week. This data shows a downward trend from the onset of the E-mail Project. On the Week 1 of the E-mail Project, 197 (26.20%) e-mail were sent, showing students' wide acceptance of the project, despite some limitations reported by the students such as lack of technical know-how of using e-mail, unavailability of technological resources such as personal computers at home, and weak internet connectivity at home and in the campus. Some students reported that they had to rent computers in internet shops in order to accomplish the project. Some students also confessed that they were hesitant to send their e-mail due to lack of confidence of their own writing and for fear of criticism from their e-mail partners. To address these concerns, students were advised to maximize the resources provided for them by the university such as free computer and internet usage at the university electronic library as well as free use of computer tablets within the library premises. There was also free Wi-Fi connection within the campus upon student registration. Individual and group student conferences were also conducted with students who reported having 'shyness' and 'fear of criticism' in doing the E-mail Project. It should be noted that with constant consultation and conference with the students, these 'inhibitions' were gradually eliminated as the project progressed.

In general, there was a consistent downward movement of e-mail interchanges throughout the E-



mail Project, as indicated in the weekly e-mail count: Week 2 (190 e-mail, 25.27%), Week 3 (183 e-mail, 24.34%), and Week 4 (182 e-mail, 24.20%). Week 5 was solely dedicated to e-mail interchanges among student participants for an embedded task, the Academic Socialization Project, where students had to interview a prominent figure in any field or profession, and write a collaborative essay as their final output. Hence, the researchers only included the topical discussions from weeks 1 through 4 and excluded the e-mail interchanges for week 5. This downward trend can be attributed to several factors such as increasing school tasks and projects to attend to in preparation for the midterm grading period, pressing concern for technology-related limitations, students' lack of motivation in doing e-mail interchanges regularly, and students' negative attitude towards English writing via e-mail.

In terms of quality of students' e-mail interchanges, the researchers observed diverse yet relevant topical discussions on the weekly general topics provided. Students observed basic structures of e-mail as well as employed conversational and personal but not overly informal style in writing. The tripartite structure of e-mail that consisted of introduction, body of the message and closing was generally followed in all of the e-mail interchanges, although there is variation in terms of length in writing, as some students tended to provide explanations and examples to their points, while some students tended to answer questions posed but did not provide elaborations. Since this study is only exploratory in nature, the researchers will not present content analysis of the e-mail interchanges; rather, only general observations of the E-mail Project will be discussed. Whether there is a significant effect of using online writing via e-mail in students' English writing skills is worth another research and investigation and hence will not be dealt with in this paper.

3.1 Learner-perceived Advantages of the E-mail Project

Students' reflections as well as the results of survey, individual interviews and focus group discussions revealed that all of them "enjoyed" the E-mail Project overall. When asked about the benefits of the project in their English writing skills, reasons why they enjoyed the e-mail interchange, and what

they learned from the project, students reported a variety of responses. Of the 176 total responses, forty-four (25%) students agreed that they enjoyed doing the e-mail interchanges because they believed that the project was a good way to develop their English writing skills. Their weekly e-mail discussions with their e-mail partners provided them an opportunity to practice and enhance their writing skills. Thirty-four (19.3%) students shared that the project promoted socialization with other students in other colleges and disciplines through their constant interactions via e-mail. Some of them even reported connecting with their e-mail partners in other social media sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*, and even met with them personally for project-related discussions and socialization. Eighteen (10.2%) students agreed that the project is an innovative way of teaching the English language; they mentioned that it was a "new and exciting experience" for them to engage with other students online via e-mail while developing their English writing skills. Table 1 presents all the students' responses regarding the benefits of the E-mail Project.

Table 1. Benefits of E-mail in English Writing Classroom

Advantages/Opportunities of the E-mail Project	Responses	%
Develops, enhances and practices English writing skills	44	25
Promotes socialization	34	19.3
Is an innovative way of teaching writing	18	10.2
Develops ICT skills	17	9.66
Is fun/enjoyable	12	6.82
Promotes knowledge sharing via online discussions	12	6.82
Is a new experience	9	5.11
Is interesting, exciting and challenging	6	3.41
Develops self-confidence	5	2.84
Motivates to write more	4	2.27
Is hassle-free way of writing	4	2.27
Develops collaborative skills	3	1.7
Helps learn new words	3	1.7
Promotes learners' autonomy	2	1.14
Encourages self-expression	2	1.14
Develops critical thinking	1	0.57

skills		
Total	176	100

3.2 Limitations of the E-mail Project

Despite having perceived benefits and advantages of doing e-mail interchanges in developing their English writing skills, students' reflections, survey, interview and FGD results reveal some of the limitations and challenges encountered by the students while doing the E-mail Project, as reflected in their varied responses. Thirty-nine (19.7%) students reported that despite their strong interest in accomplishing the E-mail Project, they were limited by lack of personal computers and internet access at home or in the campus. They had to do the project in the computer shops, which incurred them additional expenses and required more of their time after school. This concern, according to them, affected their other school tasks and duties at home. Twenty-four (12.12%) students stressed that their performance in doing the E-mail Project effectively was due to the lack of motivation and active participation of their e-mail partners. They reported that despite their prompt sending of their e-mail to their partners, they would usually receive delayed responses, which were sometimes very short and poorly done. As a result, their enthusiasm in finishing the project decreased, and they gradually believed that it was impossible to accomplish the project successfully. Table 2 presents all the challenges encountered by the students while doing the E-mail Project.

Table 2. Challenges encountered by the students in the E-mail Project

Challenges Encountered by the Students	Responses	%
No internet access at home or school	39	19.7
Lack of active participation of the e-mail partner	24	12.12
Time-consuming	22	11.11
Misinterpretation of ideas; lacks immediate feedback	17	8.586
Late response from the e-mail partner	16	8.081
Limited ICT skills (e-mail know-how)	14	7.071

Lacks personal interaction	15	7.576
Weak internet connection at home/school	9	4.545
Plagiarism issues	9	4.545
Limited English proficiency	8	4.04
Requires more effort than traditional writing	8	4.04
Conflict in schedule with the e-mail partner	4	2.02
Requires collaboration	3	1.515
E-mail account problems	3	1.515
More expensive than traditional writing	3	1.515
Mismatch of interest in topics with the e-mail partner	2	1.01
No disadvantage	2	1.01
Total	198	100

From these responses, it can be deduced that students view online writing via e-mail as an academic tool that can help them develop their English writing skills in context, a social tool that provides them an opportunity to collaborate, engage and learn from and with other students, and a technological tool that gives them access to modern means of learning and improving their English communication and social interaction skills. These findings corroborate the results of the studies citing the efficacy of e-mail as a popular and useful tool in language teaching and learning (Chafee-Sorace, 1999; Levy, 1997), efficiency of e-mail which allows students to discuss and communicate directly and cheaply anywhere (Hoffman, 1994), viability of using e-mail in communicative situations with more genuine interactions involving real people (Beauvois, 1994; Hackett, 1996; Silvia, Meagher, Valenzuela, & Crenshaw, 1996; and Wang, 1998 as cited in Shang, 2007).

Furthermore, these findings echo the results of some research highlighting the pedagogical potentiality of using e-mail to develop students' writing ability by developing students' confidence in expressing their opinions on various topics more openly and without fear (Belisle, 2002), encouraging L2 writing development through increased engagement, confidence and responsibility (Strasma & Foster, 1992), providing more writing practice (DiMatteo, 1991), creating an authentic purpose and

audience for writing (Silvia et al., 1996), increasing motivational benefits (Van Handle & Corl, 1998), providing authentic and contextualized communication (Kupelian, 2001), and producing a greater amount of words as well as of student-initiated interactions (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998).

Finally, this study shares the same concern with Kupelian (2001) on the problem of peer's non-response, which may have a profound negative impact on students' motivation to participate in the e-mail project actively and successfully – a threat in the success of using e-mail in the language classroom that calls for firm commitment and well-planned activities for effective classroom implementation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the viability of integrating e-mail technology into the teaching of writing skills among English as second language learners (ESL) via E-mail Project, which requires students across disciplines to engage in weekly e-mail interchanges on different topical discussions. Findings suggest that e-mail can be an academic, social and technological tool that may help develop students' writing ability, provide a social space for students' collaboration and interaction, improve students' positive attitude towards the English language, build and boost students' confidence and interest in writing, and foster learners' autonomy. These findings resonate what Prensky (2008) posited about the role of technology in the classroom as a 'pedagogical support', optimizing language instruction by harnessing the power of technology, enabling students to learn how to use technology to learn language for themselves, and shifting the traditional paradigm for language educators as the "Sage on the Stage" to the modern perspective of being the "Guide on the Side". Furthermore, these findings also support research on ICT in the classroom that highlights the move of some educators to use technology to change pedagogy and curriculum (Means & Olson, 1995; Means, Penuel, & Padilla, 2001; Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997; and Schofield & Davidson, 2002 as cited in Kozma, 2003), an approach that moves the concept of learning beyond rote memorization of facts and procedures toward learning as a process of knowledge creation (Bransford & Cocking, 2000) as reflected in student-

initiated e-mail interchanges in a contextualized setting.

This move on *technologization* of English language education is not a panacea. As with other academic endeavours, it comes with both benefits and limitations, as reflected in the technological and motivational issues in this study. However, these challenges should not hinder educators from innovating their language instruction because these can be readily addressed with proper planning, careful implementation and reflective assessment and evaluation, which is aimed at cultivating social relationships within or across classrooms, resulting in collaborative, meaningful human interactions created in cyberspace (Liu et al., 2003 as cited in Shang, 2007).

With the changing times brought by globalization and modernization in various aspects of human activities, the landscape of English language education has to adjust to the challenges and demands of time if it aims to be relevant and responsive to the needs of the 21st century learners. Technologization of education as a modern response to this challenge is a pedagogical endeavour that is not easy to do; it is complex and complicated, yet it offers a promising, quality and meaningful English language education when delivered with caution and care.

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