E-mail Activities in the ESL Writing Class

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Introduction

This article explores the student and teacher benefits of using electronic mail (e-mail) in an ESL writing class. It also explains several e-mail writing activities and sample assignments that have proven useful in a program with first and second year Japanese English majors at Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute (MFWI) in Spokane, WA USA. MFWI is a branch campus for English majors at Mukogawa Daigakuin in Nishinomiya, Japan.

Research shows that by using computers, students become better problem solvers and better communicators. Over a network, using e-mail and sharing files, students have the chance to collaborate and work together with other classmates, peers, and teachers. Networking electronically can help learners create, analyze, and produce information and ideas more easily and efficiently. Networking people "puts an inspiring, enticing, and usable set of tools within reach of the mass of computer users, empowering them to go beyond simply processing information to repurpose, design, publish, and express" (Mello, 1996). Through this increased electronic access to the world around them, students' social awareness and confidence increases. Networking frees them from the limitations of traditional writing tools that often inhibit and restrict writing processes. Learning is then transformed from a traditional passive-listening exercise to an experience of discovery, exploration, and excitement. Students can begin to realize their full potential when they are empowered to contribute and collaborate as a team to accomplish their writing tasks more effectively.

What is electronic mail?

Electronic mail is a relatively new medium of communication that is experiencing exploding growth in the U.S. and around the world. E-mail messages can be sent across different kinds of networks, both locally and globally. Aside from the Internet there are thousands of local area networks and wide area networks that send millions more messages daily across various kinds of transmission cable. Electronic mail over the Internet, the world's largest computer network, is experiencing exploding growth daily. Reuter, a major online news service, estimates that number of American homes online will more than triple to 35.2 million by the year 2000, or a third of households in the United States (Reuter, 1996). Nearly every major university in the United States provides Internet e-mail for its staff and students. America Online (AOL), the largest commercial online service in the States, handles more than 4 million pieces of e-mail each day. Moreover, its membership is growing by 75,000 per week. (Case, 1996).

Why use e-mail in the writing class?

Using e-mail in a writing class can occur over any kind of network as long as workstations with e-mail software are readily available to the students. This could be in a lab, over a campus network, or across the Internet. There are many reasons why using e-mail is advantageous for the student and the teacher in the writing class.

First, by using e-mail in the writing class students become familiar with a communication tool that is vital to their survival in the 21st century. What was once considered a fad is now becoming the communication tool of choice of many white collar workers in industrialized countries. In the world of business, education, politics, and technology, electronic mail is quickly taking the place of voice, paper, and fax communication. Employers will require this vital skill for their employees of today and tomorrow.

Secondly, a teacher can interact with a student or a group of students working on a project at times that are more convenient to the student, group, and the teacher. The vital interaction and feedback that takes place between a teacher and student (or group of students) over a writing task is not limited to the confines of a classroom.

Another teacher-advantage of using e-mail is the ability to electronically monitor the individual or group writing process from the brainstorming phase to the final draft. Typically, teachers often receive dozens of papers, assignments, and pieces of correspondence from their students each term. These pieces of paper often get organized (or should I say disorganized) on desks, in brief cases, in filing cabinets, at home, in the office, in the classroom, and so on. The age-old hassle of shuffling, filing, and retrieving these papers is nearly eliminated. With the click of a mouse modern e-mail software allows groupings of messages by student name, by date received, or by project name. Writing assignments received can be organized electronically by any one of these categories. These types of groupings make it easier for the teacher to actually see the process which their students are using when writing. This process can be monitored and analyzed much more effectively and logically by the teacher who can also view and organize student or group work more easily and efficiently. The teacher can quickly retrieve student writing for future analyses and grading.

Additionally students themselves can use these features to organize their writing instantly either by topic or by date created, or by name of sender. This kind of organizing helps the writers focus more on the tasks of communicating and collaborating with peers and teachers. An added benefit to all this is that it can save natural resources by cutting down on the use of expensive paper and toner.

Using e-mail can also save class time for some assignments. Teachers can send assignments and announcements electronically to the group. For example, if a teacher has to remind the students of a certain assignment due or of a particular procedure, the teacher can send one message to entire group. This can save valuable class time. Moreover, with the return receipt capabilities of e-mail the teacher is able to know whether each individual student has opened and read the message. This is an important feature to help monitor the progress of the student or the group.

A further advantage is that sometimes more writing is actually accomplished when using e-mail. Electronic blips on the screen are perceived to be more changeable, more ephemeral, and less indelible than traditional pen and pencil writing. Students who enter our program at MFWI love to have an eraser handy when writing. The reason is possibly because our students think that their writing has to be perfect the first time. They often don't understand that writing can be a way of thinking; it can actually help them with ideas, with organization, and with their thought processes. Writing involves braining storming, taking notes, preparing outlines, first drafts, revising, editing, and final drafts. Not even the best writers get it right the first time. Since computer-generated writing is much more ephemeral and less indelible, their writing becomes less static and "final" since it's perceived as more changeable, and thus the students learn to perceive it as a process.

This leads to the next point. I have found that when students communicate with each other using e-mail, their audience tend to focus almost entirely on the message itself and much less on the form, grammar, spelling, mechanics, etc. An interesting study was done by Susan Lapp, an ESL researcher, of the University of Texas Pan-American. She paired students of different ethnic backgrounds as e-mail pen pals. Prior to the pen-pal writing, she analyzed the attitudes of each of the partners towards the ethnic group of their partner. She found that in many cases there were many negative attitudes towards ethnic groups. Through the process of sending e-mail back and forth to one another, the partners began to put aside their biases and focus more on the person and what they were saying.

A final, but not least, positive aspect of e-mail is that shy students have a forum for expressing themselves and asking questions. Occasionally, some students who do not like to express themselves in a group tend to do better with writing. Since students usually generate more content electronically than with traditional pen-and-pencil methods, shy students often tend to express their opinions more openly without fear. This can give students self-confidence and eventually improve their writing ability.

Sample e-mail assignments and activities

The last section of this paper briefly describes some simple e-mail activities that I have used in my writing class during a 45-minute session in the lab or over the course of the term. For several of these assignments and activities described below I have developed student handouts. Those are indicated as "handout available". If you would like to receive a Microsoft Word copy of any or all of these files, please e-mail me at rbelisle [at] on-ramp.ior.com. I will send you the file electronically.

Please note that these assignments work best with software such as Eudora, Microsoft mail or programs like them in which the settings are personalized for the user. NCSA Telnet or certain types of communication software cannot manage large volumes of incoming or outgoing mail easily.

Dialoging

Dialoging is the most basic way to use e-mail. It's simply one more way to increase the frequency of communication between teacher and student and student and student. Below are examples of different kinds of dialoging that has taken place in the context of my writing classes.

- Student to teacher
    - journal writing
    - asking and answering questions
    - progress reports and updates
- Teacher to student
    - announcements
    - assignments
    - homework
- Student to student(s)
    - class mailing lists
    - fun, etc.
    - social events and announcements

Real-time teacher-to-student dialoging

A fun first day dialogue activity to introduce e-mail to students is a kind of real-time teacher-to-student dialoging. Prior to a lab class session, send a message to the group. (Ask your network administrator how to create groups in your e-mail software.) The message must end with simple question eliciting a response. An example might be a basic welcome message followed by a question such as "What is your favorite food?" When each student opens her e-mail for the first time, a Welcome Message awaits them. Each has to read the message and reply to the question. (Tip: Ask the students to write complete sentences for their reply.) The teacher's role is to respond back immediately to each student's reply often just pasting an appropriate answer in the reply window plus another follow-up question that continues the dialogue. This activity works best with small classes of 12 or less.

An interactive process writing assignment

(handout Available)

This is a process writing assignment which involves collaborating with a partner electronically over a simple research project (just 2 paragraphs). All the interaction with the partner, from brainstorming for ideas to writing the final draft and everything in between, must be done electronically. All the while the teacher is monitoring the writing process of the group by receiving copies (cc) of all the correspondence. The students are not only graded on the final product, but also on the process of writing and how well they follow the instructions.

One perfect paragraph

(handout available)

This is a simple e-mail activity that helps students practice editing short paragraphs looking for grammar, agreement, spelling, and structural mistakes. The teacher prepares one practice paragraph or two with several mistakes and sends it to the group.

Example 1 of what to send to the group

This paragraph has about 9-10 mistakes. Find and correct them. Drag and select the paragraph with mistakes, then copy from the Edit menu. Click on Reply. Then paste from the Edit menu into your reply. Find and fix the mistakes. Send back the corrected paragraph to me. Continue this until the paragraph is perfect.

Lat months I spent two wonderful day with host family. They have 3 child and we played a lot together. We cook Japanese foods for them Saturday evening. They thought it dericious. On Sunday we wnt to the church. I enjoyed the music, but didn't understood the speech. I hope see them again in the future.

Example 2 of what to send to the group

Here's another paragraph to correct. It has about 11-12 mistakes. Find them and correct them and send the corrected paragraph back to me.

This wekend I will go grand Culee dam and Leavenworth. I looking forward to go there. I have never seen dam before. I want to go shop. I want to stay a nice hotel.

Teacher Tips

1. Copy and paste an answer such as "There are more mistakes. Please correct them and send the corrected paragraph back to me." into the reply of the e-mail message This will allow you to quickly reply to a paragraph that still needs correcting thus keeping up with all the messages students are sending to you.
2. List your messages in your mailbox window by date/time received if software allows. This will enable you to see which new messages on your list need replies.

Electronic secret pals

(handout available)

This is a term-long pen-pal activity in which students are assigned to other students from another writing class in the program. The students use bogus American names (for this activity only) and are not allowed to know the identity of their secret pal. The activity concludes with a "Meet Your Secret Pal" party at the end of the term. The teacher receives cc of all correspondence from the students.

Chain stories or sentences

This is a simple activity that help students with basic sentence level grammar reinforcing such grammatical structures as countable/uncountable nouns, prepositional phrases, and so on.

Before class send a partial sentence to the group, such as

"It was a dark and stormy night and "
or
"I went to the store and bought some "

Students then add to the story or sentence and forward it on to an assigned partner in the class. (Using copy and paste may be necessary for some e-mail programs. Other software programs append the original message to the reply.) The story is passed around to all members of the class with each adding their part. Have each student add something different each time. In the end there will be x number of stories or sentences where x equals the number of students in the class.

A strange meeting

(handout available)

Another more elaborate version of a chain story is what I call my Strange Meeting assignment. Students are asked to create phrase by phrase the skeleton of a short story (8 partial sentences) about the meeting of two individuals (male and female). What's unique about this exercise is that each person in the class is writing a sentence phrase to the story and then forwarding it (using copy and paste) on to an assigned person who then adds the next sentence phrase who in turn forwards it to another assigned person and so on. The sentence phrases are passed on to eight different people and then the last person puts the 8 sentence phrases together into a coherent, but often strange, paragraph of eight complete sentences. All the while students are sending copies of all the messages sent to the teacher who is monitoring the process.

Story puzzles

Story puzzles are stories in which sentences are randomly mixed and rearranged by the students in a correct sequence. Students use copy and paste to rearrange the randomly mixed sentences into a story and then send back the story to the teacher in the correct sequence. (Teacher Tip: Write the story in most any word processor separating sentences into paragraphs. Then select all and sort. The word processor will sort the sentences alphabetically by first letter of the sentence. Then copy and paste the mixed sentences into your e-mail message and send the mixed sentences to the group.)

Cloze exercises

Students fill in sentences with every xth word omitted, or every noun, or verb, and so on. The teacher then sends the message back to the teacher. The teacher checks and sends back for further revision if necessary. This activity can be used to reinforce the use of certain words such as adjectives, articles, nouns, etc.
Mailing lists

Students dialogue with a group on a particular topic. One e-mail address of the group can be created and a message on a certain topic asking for a response. Others send their responses to the group members. Most e-mail software programs have the ability to reply to either the original sender or all the recipients of the original message. In this case the preferences would need to be set to the latter.

International pen pals

(Internet access necessary.)

With the tremendous growth of the Internet, there are lots of opportunities to interact with students from other countries and cultures thus increasing the global awareness of students. International Pen Pals can be easily found on the World Wide Web using such search engines as Web Crawler or Yahoo.

How to page

Students write (via e-mail) a step-by-step process of how to send e-mail, use the word processor, use a CD ROM, and so on. Can be done in a group or assigned to individuals. Copies (cc) of all correspondence are sent to teacher.

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