

# Implications of E-mail in EFL Writing Instruction

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Network communication offers to open the door for those traditionally shut out of classroom conversation, [but] without conscious knowledge of the ways technology can work against these very people, that door shuts and locks. The networks then become nothing more than another tool used to maintain the relationships of power that keep these students out.

(Takayoshi, 1994, p. 33)

## ***Abstract***

*This paper presents how EFL writing teachers apply the bits and pieces of e-mail-mediated writing instruction. First, teachers can put e-mail into use in EFL writing in many ways. Second, several lines of inquiry follow the positive claims of e-mail-enhanced writing. Third, the innovation may be of little benefit if teachers favor such innovation and leave some considerations behind. These might shed light on EFL writing instruction and teachers' professional development.*

## **Rationale**

As Singhal (1997) says, technology and foreign language teaching likely go hand in hand. In a decade, EFL teachers and researchers have considered e-mail “the mother of all Internet applications” (Warschauer, Shetzer and Meloni, 2000, p. 3). Its emergence in the teaching of composition has been expanded by leaps and bounds based on a number of claims. That is, e-mail can lead to more writing practice (Di Matteo, 1990 & 1991), enhance actual communication between the teacher and students (Cohen & Miyake, 1986; Hartman, Neuwirth, Kiesler, Sproull, Cochran, Palmquist & Zubrow, 1991; Kinkead, 1987; Soh & Soon, 1991), and facilitate peer response groups (Boiarsky, 1990; Grosz- Gluckman, 1997; Mabrito, 1991; Moran, 1991; Stroble, 1988). According to Warschauer (1995), in writing classes, e-mail provides a considerable number of advantages. First, e-mail facilitates real and natural communication between teachers and students with fast feedback. E-mail can put students, especially those in EFL contexts, in contact with native English speakers or other learners around the world instantaneously in an authentic context. Second, e-mail helps students communicate with a wider audience including their teachers or peers. Third, e-mail frees students from classroom lessons or time constraints. It can provide students with a learning tool for further study. In short, e-mail facilitates students to have more opportunities for communication and collaboration, and to gain information. For teachers of second language classrooms, e-mail can provide a great number of additional motivations including the provision of authentic communication partners (Cohen & Miyake, 1986; Paramskas, 1993), the importance of cultural exchange (So & Soon, 1991), and the teaching of language to minority students (Cummins & Sayers, 1990).

E-mail incorporated into the teaching of composition seems to work well with some native-English-speaking students, as it supplies them with learner autonomy and enables them to communicate with their actual audience. For EFL students who live in non-English-speaking environments, however, such e-mail-integrated writing instruction seems impractical due to some problems, such as their language constraints and technological barriers. Also, prior research indicates that “traditional interactions typically consist of two third to three quarters teacher talk and one third student talk” (Ruberg & Taylor, 1995, p. 1). To even the unbalanced interaction, teachers and researcher have paid more attention on the effective use of e-mail as a teaching/learning tool to understand how electronic communication facilitates foreign language learning and encourages more student interaction (Warschauer, 1997). Accordingly, I, in this paper, intend to present the use of e-mail as a teaching tool for EFL writing instruction. I also propose some suggestions, based on my teaching and researching experiences as well as literature related to the issue, on how to put e-mail into use in EFL contexts in the hope that such perspectives will in some ways assist Thai EFL teachers to promote students’ communication and to develop their own professional teaching.

## **E-mail-Incorporated Activities in the EFL Writing Class**

E-mail is currently of interest for practice in ESL/EFL writing. Belisle (1996) provides ten e-mail activities in the writing class. The first activity is dialoging between the teacher and activities or among students to increase the frequency of communication. This includes such activities as journal writing, asking and answering questions, progress report and updates, announcements, assignments of class mailing lists. Second, on the first class meeting, the teacher introduces students via real time teacher-to-student dialoging with a basic welcome message followed by a question "What is your favorite food?" awaiting them when they open their e-mail for the first time. Then, after each student replied the first question, the teacher responds immediately to each student's reply and asks other follow-up questions to continue the dialog. Third, the teacher uses e-mail in a process writing assignment to relate collaborative learning through electronic media. Electronically interacting with their partner, students can brainstorm for ideas, write paragraphs, rewrite the final revision and print all the correspondence out for the teacher who will evaluate both the process and the final product of students' writing. Fourth, the teacher sends one or two paragraphs with lots of mistakes to students to edit. The fifth one is a term-long pen-pal activity, in which the teacher asks students to write messages to another student in another writing class by using bogus American names. Then, the students reveal their identity in a "Meet Your Secret Pal" party at the end of the semester. Another activity is "Chain stories or sentences," where the teacher sends 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..." Then, each student has to add one sentence to the story and forward it to another student until the story is passed around to all students. Finally, the number of stories or sentences will be equal to that of students in the class. Seven, the teacher can send story puzzles, in which sentences are randomly mixed, to students to rearrange those sentences into the correct sequence. A cloze exercise is another activity where students are required to fill in the sentence with certain words such as adjectives, nouns, articles and so on. The ninth activity is international pen pals through the World Wide Web by using such search engines as Yahoo. This activity increases students' global awareness and also encourages actual communication among students around the world. The final activity is writing via e-mail a step-by-step process of how to do something such as how to use the word processor. Then, students send all messages to the teacher. Through these activities, teachers can encourage ESL/EFL students' interest in learning to write in an authentic way.

Teachers not only use e-mail as a tool for teaching writing, they can also make use of junk e-mail messages normally unexpectedly received in the mailbox. Interestingly, Ivy (1998), for instance, develops seven types of writing exercises from some junk messages (examples of handouts are available in the web). First, matching types, teachers ask students to categorize each junk mail, such as health, education, sex, business, and so on. Second, typical language, teachers have students read three junk messages to determine typical language used in junk mail. Third, comprehension exercises, teachers added a few comprehension questions at the end of a chain letter proposal, such as "What potentially wrong with the offer?" or "How does the perpetrator of the scheme make money?" Forth, paraphrases, after reading a sample junk message, students match the extracted sentences to their paraphrases. Through this exercise, students learn the language of scams. Fifth, cloze, teachers develop short cloze exercises from advertisement messages. Sixth, howlers, teachers have students spot the mistakes the junk mail writers have made. Seventh, write your own, teachers ask students compose their own persuasive junk messages. Teachers can assist students by providing them with a list of expressions necessary for those mail messages' content. For the sake of copyright, Ivy suggests that teachers change product names and delete advertiser names. Teachers also need to consider students' writing level when implementing Ivy's activities in their class. For example, the first six activities seem suitable for beginning writers while the seventh one might serve college students who are practicing argumentative writing. In one of my studies, I also developed argumentative writing topics and writing tests from some interesting critical chain messages forwarded by a circle of friends (See an example in Appendix). I found that the students, especially the less competent ones, discussed the topics in a critical multifaceted manner.

Accordingly, I couldn't agree more with Ivy that teachers can make use of even junk mail in EFL writing instruction.

Clearly, the power of e-mail is manifold. Not only do practitioners make full use of it, researchers also dig deep to find out how e-mail is of use for EFL writing.

### **E-mail and Classroom-Based Research**

In English speaking environments, there is a growing body of research quantitatively and qualitatively conducted to examine the efficacy of e-mail in writing instruction. Comparing the effectiveness of dialog journal writing between the teacher and ESL college students via e-mail and paper-and pencil modes, Wang (1993) found that the students in the e-mail group wrote more per writing session than did they counterparts in the traditional group. In similar fashion, the instructor responded more per writing session to the e-mail students than did she to the paper-and-pencil students. Moreover, e-mail increased the amount of interaction between the instructor and students in dialog journaling. Most e-mail students and the instructor had positive attitudes toward e-mail dialog journaling, which were not affected by their lack of computer backgrounds or typing skills. However, the beginning writers in both groups revealed writing problems concerning grammar and vocabulary. Overall, most findings indicate the satisfactory effects of using e-mail in writing class.

Some factors, however, come into play when teachers implement the innovative use of e-mail in writing instruction. Yagelski and Grabill (1998), who delve into the relationship between electronic and face-to-face discourse in two college writing classes and examine the potential influence of in-class discourse and frequencies of student participation in online discussions, found that the level and nature of students' participation in online discourse were closely related to such factors as the nature of in-class discussions, the way in which the teacher devised the use of technology, the structures of the courses and students' perception of the salience of computer-mediated communication. For example, in-class discourse of one of the two courses seemed teacher-centered because the discourse was dominated by teacher lecturing, questioning or responding to students' questions. As such, simply putting students online neither increased the amount of participation in course-oriented discussions nor produced their empowerment unless E-teachers take such factors into account.

Some researchers also explore e-mail as a medium of peer-reviewed writing instruction. Mabrito (1991), investigating how the writers with high and low apprehensions responded to peer responses via face-to-face and e-mail interaction, claims that the high apprehensive students in e-mail sessions took more part and provided more directive feedback than those in face-to-face meetings did. Also, such students reported that their revision resulted from group comments received more via e-mail than face-to-face meetings. In a similar vein, Tannacito (1997) found that her research participants liked participating in electronic peer responses and felt that they could build close and supportive communities in their groups. The students also revised closely to what had been suggested, and both quantity and quality of comments and revisions were found improved. However, the teacher in this study revealed stress while implementing electronic peer responses. This seems to signify a downside of a wired activity and likely consistent with that of Stroble's (1988), which indicates another drawback of e-mail-integrated instruction. That is, the writers in e-mail sessions received a less number of positive comments addressing specific and substantive features of their writing than those in face-to-face sessions. The students also asserted that they preferred the traditional mode of communication to the electronic one. The mixed findings by these researchers likely point toward the need for further studies.

While e-mail-assisted writing instruction in L1 contexts is still controversial, there is some effort to explore its use in Thai classroom contexts. In 2001, I theoretically introduced the innovative use of e-mail to Thai EFL writing teachers at the Thailand TESOL international conference (See Thongrin, 2001). A year later, I qualitatively conducted a multiple case study research with nine Thai college students enrolled an advanced discourse level writing. The participants responded to their peers' writing via e-mail over a four-month period. Through the students' responses, artifacts and learning log, interviews and my research log, the data revealed that the innovation not only opened new possibilities, but also created critical problems. Some

students strongly revealed their writing fluency and responding-thinking skills and positive attitudes toward the innovation, whereas a few showed resistances to the activity due to some Thai cultural concepts, such as the discrediting of peer talk, the beliefs in teacher authority and some technical problems. This is in sharp contrast with the theoretical stance borrowed from L1 writing. Despite such mixed results, e-mail seemed to play multiple roles in my study: enhancing group interaction, increasing the quality of peer feedback, promoting social construction of knowledge, minimizing Thai cultural barriers, supporting time/space management and supporting responses closer to both written and spoken discourse (See details in Thongrin, 2002). As such, the findings in my study suggest whether the innovation lent the EFL students either opportunities for democratic and self-reliant learning or frustrations and resistance depended mostly on how teachers put the innovation to use and manipulated it with cultural accommodation, techno access and power structure.

Another similar conclusion has been reached by Chetchamlong (2003), who quantitatively examines the effectiveness of e-mail in basic writing. In the study, the students wrote short sentences or paragraphs with simple structures. Throughout eight weeks, the students wrote e-mail at least once a week. The researcher, however, did not mention as to whether the students sent their e-mail to their group members or the teacher. He found that the students' writing competency was significantly improved.

Despite a quantitative-qualitative dichotomy, the findings by Thongrin and Chetchamlong brought to light the phenomena that the participants not only learned writing from e-mail-incorporated instruction in terms of language and word choice, but also built up their social contact with authentic audiences like teachers and friends. Then, the findings of these studies could serve as springboards for Thai EFL teachers to further investigate the bits and pieces of the innovation in writing instruction. However, this innovation is not a blanket approach for all. It is necessary that teachers consider functions of e-mail-incorporated activities and roles they can take in a wired class.

### **Functions of E-mail-Integrated Writing Activities**

Should e-mail function as an add-on or as core in EFL writing instruction? Answering this question seems important for teachers to set goals of teaching and manage class activities. According to the results of my research and teaching experiences, as well as the literature review, e-mail-integrated activities could serve as support activities to interest and excite students. Teachers could, once in a while, switch from teacher-directed writing activities to those constructivism based. This implies that the use of e-mail in EFL writing instruction does not replace formal classroom instruction, but rather complements it for several fronts. First, EFL, Thai included, students, still need to learn writing based on the cognitive framework. They need instruction on how they convert thoughts into written discourse effectively and successfully. At the same time, social constructionist writing is also important for these students as e-mail-enhanced interaction among groups helps them hear collective voices to assist their writing skills. As such, e-mail likely functions best as add-on activities. Second, to be fair for those without the Internet and computer accessibility, teachers should not let an electronic medium completely occupy the whole of class activities. The instruction could not be otherwise democratic as the tenet of e-mail-assisted instruction inherently is. Third, a variety of activities helps students learn better and create favorable attitudes toward learning English. E-mail-integrated activities may therefore help teachers to rock the class once in a while. Consequently, e-mail provides teachers with various activities to enthusiastically move in instruction. With the combination of both teacher and student talk, writing instruction, more so than opinion, might gradually be less teacher-centered and more student-oriented.

### **E-Teachers' Roles**

Because e-mail-enhanced interaction is constructivism-oriented, teachers are believed to implement techniques that help students learn and gain social experiences in rich environments and to empower them to control their learning pace. The questions are: How can teachers create techniques to foster students' social experience and knowledge? How can teachers ensure that the

authority they are lending students, who have long been educated in teacher-centered classrooms, will enable them to productively learn with the democratic approach like e-mail-supported communication? To answer these questions, I suggest teachers about multiple roles in extending the classroom electronically.

First and foremost, I view teachers as initiators who plan classroom management beforehand. Teachers need to plan about the type of electronic mediums to be used as a communication tool. For inexperienced initiator-teachers, I recommend familiar friendly e-mail, such as Hotmail, Yahoo, Free-mail or Webmail. This can prevent any technical problems that might impede teachers' exploration and students' task accomplishments. This is because the use of e-mail is to facilitate learning/teaching activities rather than to get students stuck in a technical barrier. Once teachers have more experiences in managing wired activities, and students gain an increased experience in learning writing via e-mail-assisted activities, teachers can move on to more complicated electronic tools, such as e-mail list serve (e.g. [www.onelist.com](http://www.onelist.com)), synchronous e-mail like ICQ, MSN Hotmail or such softwares as Daedalus or Eudora to develop a depth, a breadth and an automaticity of cognitive, social and procedural competencies and performances. All in all, the extent that students will be absorbed in knowledge does not rest on the complexity of technology; rather, it really depends on well-tailored teaching/learning activities no matter what kind of support technology the teachers use.

Second, explicit modeling might be one of the teachers' responsibilities if they are applying e-mail in the teaching of EFL writing. Teachers might demonstrate on how to run any e-mail-integrated activity. Also, face-to-face discussion can be helpful for the class to ask any clarifying questions. In addition, teachers, when seeing students encountering problems, might intervene in their learning process by explaining how students can solve such problems. When students get lost, teachers might monitor groups to assist them to accomplish the tasks. Without training or explicit instruction, teachers could not expect students to make transition from newcomers to the Internet to more experienced hands.

Third, the phase of task implementation seems very critical, as students need to understand and learn from the tasks. Teachers can therefore work in concert as mentors and facilitators to help students before or while they are engaging in tasks. To get students alert, teachers might ask students "what if?" and "why do you think that?" The more teachers guide/support students to learn through such innovation, the more they can elicit students' learning and stimulate their progressive development. This might reduce the hierarchical gap between teachers and students and brings about supportive classroom environments, which then leads to productive teaching/learning.

Last but not least, e-teachers are continuous learners. It is undeniable that they need to be knowledgeable in both teaching content and technology applications. There is some room for teachers to ensure constant flows of information for their professional development by establishing contact with other teachers in any discipline via various listserv on the Net. By sending e-mail to [listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu](mailto:listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu), they can subscribe to such sublists of TESL-L as TESLCA-L (technology, computers and English language teaching), TESLMW-L (material writers), TESLFF-L (fluency first and whole language approach or TESP-L (English for specific purposes). To subscribe, leave the subject line blank and write "subscribe TESL-L Yourfirstname Yourlastname" (without the quotation marks) in the body of the message. For example, here is the e-mail message that Saneh Thongrin would send to subscribe to TESL-L:

To:	<a href="mailto:listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu">listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu</a>
From:	"Saneh Thongrin" < <a href="mailto:sthongrin@yahoo.com">sthongrin@yahoo.com</a> >
Subject:	
Date:	Mon, 15 July 2003 10:30:35

subscribe TESL-L Saneh Thongrin

Other lists for English language teachers include:

- NETEACH-L is a very active list for the use of the Internet in English teaching. To subscribe, send e-mail to [listproc@ukans.edu](mailto:listproc@ukans.edu) with “subscribe NETEACH-L Yourfirstname Yourlastname” in the message.
- CONTENT-ESL provides and shares ideas and resources for content-based teaching. To subscribe, send a blank message to [content-esl-subscribe@egroups.com](mailto:content-esl-subscribe@egroups.com).
- LLTI-L, the Language Learning Technology International List is a source for various technical questions related to software and hardware. To subscribe, send e-mail to [listserv@dartmouth.edu](mailto:listserv@dartmouth.edu) with “subscribe llti Yourfirstname Yourlastname” in the message.
- LTEST-L, provides the discussion list of the International Language Testing Association (ILTA). To subscribe, a command “info LTEST-L” to [listserv@psuvm.psy.edu](mailto:listserv@psuvm.psy.edu)
- SLART-L, the Second Language Acquisition Research and Teaching List brings together teachers interested in second language acquisition theory and practice. To subscribe, send e-mail to [listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu](mailto:listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu) with “subscribe slart-l Yourfirstname Yourlastname” in the message.
- ELTASIA-L assists the discussion, research and documentation on the teaching and learning of English in Asia. To subscribe, send e-mail to [majordomo@nectec.or.th](mailto:majordomo@nectec.or.th) with “subscribe ELT-ASIA” in the message.

Virtual collaborating with other teachers certainly encourages teacher development in terms of both teaching methodology and classroom research.

It is likely that teachers will take on multiple roles when implementing e-mail in EFL writing instruction. Whatever role they play, I suggest that they do not over control the students' groups as constructivist activities function best when students are interdependent, autonomous, and self-directed (Schmuck and Schmuck, 1992). This does not mean that teacher-directed instruction should completely be eliminated. Rather, teachers can provide direct instruction before students are on task and gradually decrease their level of participation when students become competent at learning via e-mail.

## Conclusion

Behind a practice lies a theory. EFL writing teachers who want to put students in an electronic context need to hear collective voices from both research and practice in relation to merits and demerits of e-mail-integrated activities in L1 and EFL writing. Also, it is the fact that e-mail, a communications medium in its own right, does not form a teaching approach. It, however, can be used to support many different approaches, as is evident in this paper. As such, teachers need to match its use to their own belief about teaching and learning writing. The innovation might otherwise develop the gap between pedagogical approaches and students' expectations.

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## Appendix

### Writing Task

#### Writing Input

From: [ksriharuksa@hotmail.com](mailto:ksriharuksa@hotmail.com)

To: [ssthongrin@hotmail.com](mailto:ssthongrin@hotmail.com)

Subject: Nepali Good Luck Tantrum Totem

Date: Mon, 11 Oct 1999 09:05:17 PDT

The following is a NEPALI GOOD LUCK TANTRUM TOTUM. This tantra has sent to you for good luck. It has been sent around the world ten times so far. You will receive good luck within four days of relaying this tantra totem. Send copies to people you think need good luck. Don't send money as fate has no price.

#### INSTRUCTION FOR LIFE

0. Eat much brown rice.
1. Give people more than they expect and do it cheerfully.
2. Memorize your favorite poem.
3. Don't believe all you hear, spend all you have, or sleep all you want.
4. When you say, "I love you", mean it.
5. When you say, "I'm sorry", look the person in the eye.
6. Be engaged at least six months before you get married.
7. Believe in love at first sight.
8. Never laugh at anyone's dreams.
9. Love deeply and passionately. You might get hurt but it's the only way to live life completely.
10. In disagreements, fight fairly. No name calling.
11. Don't judge people by their relatives.
12. Talk slowly but think quickly.
13. When some one asks you a question you don't want to answer, smile and ask, "why do you want to know?"
14. Remember that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
15. Call you mum.
16. Say "bless you" when you hear someone sneeze.
17. When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
18. Remember the three R's: Respect for self, Respect for others, Responsibility for all your actions.
19. Don't let a little dispute injure a great relationship.
20. When you realize you've made a mistake, take immediate steps to correct it.
21. Smile when picking the phone. The caller will hear it in your voice.
22. Marry a man/woman you love to talk to. As you get older, the conversational skills will be as important as any other.
23. Spend some time alone
24. Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values.
25. Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.
26. Read more books and watch less TV.
27. Live a good, honorable life. Then when you get older and think back, you'll get to enjoy it a second time.

28. Trust in god but lock your car.
29. A loving atmosphere in your home is so important. Do all you can on create a tranquil harmonious home.
30. In disagreements with loved ones, deal with the current situation. Don't bring up the past.
31. Read between the lines.
32. Share your knowledge. It's a way to achieve immortality.
33. Be gentle with the earth.
34. Pray. There is immeasurable power in it.
35. Never interrupt when you are being flattered.
36. Mind your own business.
37. Don't trust a man/woman who doesn't close his/her eyes when you kiss.
38. Once a year, go someplace you've never been before.
39. If you make a lot of money, put it to use helping others while you are living. That is wealth's greatest satisfaction.
40. Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a stroke of luck.
41. Learn the rules then break some.
42. Remember that the best relationship is one where your love for each other is greater than you need for each other.
43. Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to get it.
44. Remember that your character is your destiny.
45. Approach love and cooking with reckless abandon.

Do not keep this message. The Tantra Totem must leave your hands in 96 hours. Send copies and see what happens in four days. You will get a very pleasant surprise. This is true, even if you are not superstitious.

Send this at least 5 people, and your life will improve.

0 people: You may happen to hear some bad news, or some of your beloved ones will die.

1-4 people: Your life will improve slightly.

5-9 people: Your life will improve to your liking.

10-14 people: You will have at least 5 surprises in the next 3 weeks.

15 and over: Your life will improve dramatically, and everything you ever dreamed of will begin to take shape.

Direction: If one of your friends sent this chain mail to you, would you be happy or unhappy after reading it? You might think about the detail/content of the mail, the annoying aspect of chain mail or the obligation that you are supposed to fulfill in either positive or negative ways. Then, write an argumentative essay discussing good points or/and bad points of this chain mail to the sender (Suesie). Explain how you feel after reading the mail and discuss whether or not this mail should be forwarded to others. Be sure to include some reasons to support your stance.