

The Effectiveness of the Electronic Tutorial in Enhancing Writing Skills

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Abstract

This article reports on the effectiveness of the electronic mail (e-mail) in facilitating learners to enhance their writing abilities. The e-mail provides a number of features that can help students of the Indonesia Open University (IOU) to improve their abilities as well as promote their confidence in the writing of English compositions. Writing in itself is often considered a process that involves four main stages i.e., planning, drafting, revising and editing. These four steps seem to be applicable for paper-based writing as well as for e-mail writing. They can be integrated to form the electronic-based tutorials. Although there are some constraints, the findings of this study revealed that the advantages of the electronic tutorial using the e-mail to enhance writing skills in English outweigh the disadvantages

INTRODUCTION

Many efforts have been undertaken to improve the English writing skills of students at the Indonesia Open University (IOU), either through the printed-based learning materials, or through learning materials that make use of technology including those of the electronic mail (e-mail). The usage of an electronic medium is not restricted by time, space or distance. Thus, the e-mail proves to be rather effective in many respects, especially in improving the writing skills of students on an individual basis or in a group. Bee-Lay & Yee-Ping (1991) investigated the advantages of the e-mail for two different groups of students in Singapore and Canada respectively. Both groups used the e-mail as a tool of communication. The students involved in the study discussed stories from two novels from the two countries. The findings of the research are the following:

1. The students had opportunities to cross-check their writing.
2. They learned how to write clearly, purposefully and effectively.
3. They tried to understand more about their lives and cultures.
4. They had a better understanding about the usage of the computer as a tool for communication as well as a means for more effective learning.

Another relevant research was conducted by Frizler (1995) who studied the effectiveness of the e-mail in teaching English, especially in the writing of compositions, to overseas students in San Francisco. Frizler (1995) revealed that the writing ability in English and the self-confidence of the overseas students subsequently improved significantly.

As far as the learning of English as a foreign language is concerned, there are four language skills that need to be acquired: listening skills, reading skills, speaking skills and writing skills. These skills, particularly the writing skills, should continuously be improved so that the degree of proficiency in the skills approaches that of native speakers of English however difficult this may be. One of the key issues to be kept in mind in order to succeed is the aspect of practising. With a great deal of

practising, a learner can improve his writing skills since the writing in itself involves a process of planning, draft writing, reviewing and final writing (Byrne, 1995).

Besides, the proportion of writing in a student's learning process is relatively low, compared to the other three skills (i.e., reading, listening and speaking). It is therefore necessary to enrich and improve the learner's writing through practice in the form of intensive tutorials. In addition, there is a limited amount of time available to review the writing tasks in the classroom. In contrast, the e-mail facilities play a significant role as the tasks, including the feedback requirements, can be referred to by learners at their own pace. As such, the e-mail makes it possible for the learners to learn independently, an approach that is very much in context with distance learning. Apart from this, the learning materials provided via the e-mail are likely to be learner-centred rather than teacher-centred. In addition, the e-mail seems to be an ideal solution to the students studying in a group regardless of age and interests (Scott-Tennant Basallote, 1997).

The e-mail facilities available in the IOU local network can be used by both the students and staff to improve their writing ability. This, in turn, upgrades the quality of the IOU human resources in general, and English proficiency in particular. The research question is to what extent the e-mail facilities can be deployed effectively to improve the writing ability of the students as well as some of the IOU staff. This research was conducted to analyse the scores or the participants' writing achievement in undertaking the intermediate level of writing tasks that could be monitored or assessed continuously. The monitoring instruments used were a journal of observation and a questionnaire. The achievement obtained by this experimental group was compared with the achievement gained by a control group using the face-to-face mode. Both groups were treated equally during the training.

METHODOLOGY

The population or subjects of this research consisted of 13 participants from each of the respective groups. The instrument used was specially developed to elicit the data regarding the participants' writing tasks at the intermediate level. The training lasted for seven weeks commencing on 10th July 2000 until 9th September 2001. The number of these sessions was, in fact, similar to the number of tasks given. The whole process of sending the tasks, including the provision of the feedback on the participants' writing, was conducted through e-mail facilities only.

The independent variable investigated was the participants' writing ability using the e-mail facilities. This variable was then assessed by making a comparison between the indicators associated with the types and the number of grammatical mistakes found in each of the writing tasks set forth. The dependent variable being investigated was the improvement of the self-confidence of the participants in writing English compositions.

Data were taken from the participants' writing involving the seven writing tasks. A journal of observation was also published which contained both the tutor's and the participants' experiences and their impressions during the training. The research findings are expected not only to motivate the IOU staff in general but the students as well. In this way, the quality of the human resources, particularly in the area of linguistics, of the university as a whole would be enhanced.

The e-mail software used for this research was the Pegasus mail system. It was developed by David Harris in 1990. This software was one of the main communication software tools previously used within the IOU local area network. It was installed on the novell netware operated under the dos version 3.0 system or above with the requirement of 384 kb ram (Pratmoko, 2000). Unfortunately, this old system is no longer used at the IOU and has since been replaced with the windows-based e-mail system. On 2nd July 2000, an English training programme using the e-mail was offered to some

of the IOU staff and students. The training aimed to develop the participants' writing skills and also to raise their self-confidence in writing. There were 18 participants enrolled in this programme. This training programme was used as a case study reported in this article.

Prior to the training sessions, the participants underwent a placement test in order to determine whether they belonged to the intermediate English level. From the 18 participants, only 13 participants belonged to this group. They comprised both staff and students. During the training, the participants never met each other in the face-to-face situation. However, on a number of occasions, outside the e-mail-oriented type of communication, the author informally discussed with them the problems or difficulties they faced, in the technical or non-technical aspects.

The Electronic Mail

Before the commencement of the training, a mailing list, writing@omega.ut.ac.id was developed by the Computer Unit of the IOU. This facility was one of the communication facilities used during the process of training. The author also used another facility available in the e-mail, called the distribution list. This acted as a back-up facility whenever there was a technical failure on the IOU mail server or on the Internet bandwidth that prevented the mailing list from functioning properly. Figure 1 shows the working procedure of the mailing list.

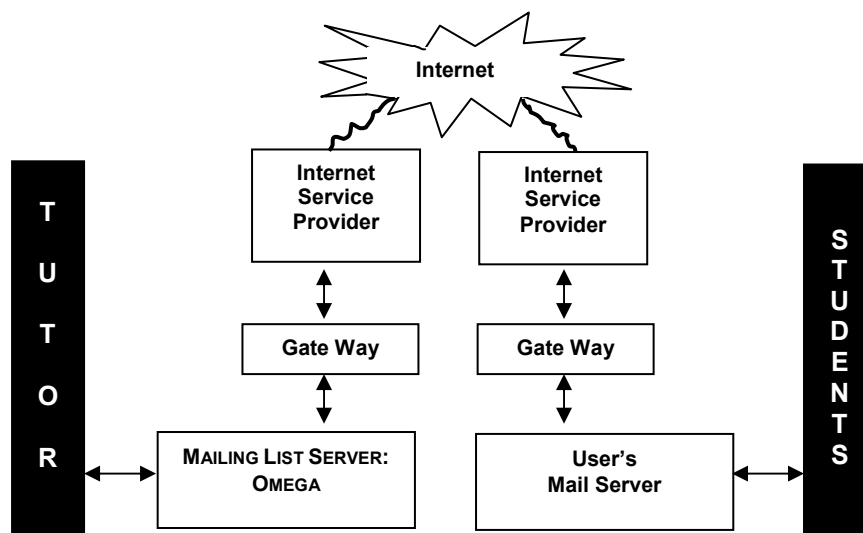


Figure 1: Mailing list – writing@omega.ut.ac.id

Figure 1 represents the process of the training. A tutor prepared a set of writing tasks and distributed it to all participants. The writing tasks were in accordance to the training curriculum planned beforehand, through the mailing list. The communication channel between the tutor and the participants was as follows:

Tutor ↔ Mailing List ↔ Gate Way ↔ Internet Service Provider ↔ Internet ↔ Internet Service Provider ↔ Gate Way ↔ User's Mail Server ↔ Participants (collectively)

The Distribution List: An Alternative Facility

The mailing list was used to send messages or distribute the writing tasks to all participants collectively. The next process after the distribution was that the participants were required to send their writing assignments to the tutor for correction and feedback. This is indicated by the opposite direction of the arrows shown above. In this respect, another support facility was required – the distribution list (see Figure 2) which was used to send the training materials to the participants if the mailing list did not function. At this point, a two-way communication took place -- from the participants to the tutor and vice versa. The responses were overwhelming when the tutor forwarded some of the participants' good work to serve as models via the mailing or distribution list, so that other participants could comment and share ideas.

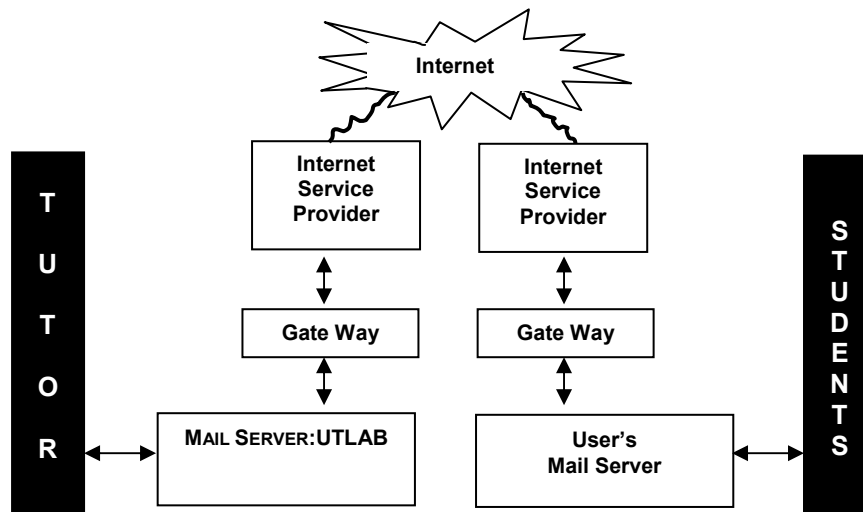


Figure 2: The Distribution List

Figure 2 shows the individual communication channel between the tutor and each participant during the training. Each writing task and feedback was sent to the individual participants through the following channel:

Tutor → Mail Server UTLAB → Gate Way → Internet Service Provider → Internet → Internet Service Provider → Gate Way → Participants (individually)

Put in the other hand, the channel used by participants to send their writing materials to the tutor was as follows:

Participants → User's Mail Server → Gate Way → Internet Service Provider → Internet → Internet Service Provider → Gate Way → Mail Server UTLAB → Tutor

The distribution list, nevertheless, was slightly different from the mailing list in terms of their appearance. In the mailing list, there was no listing of the participants' addresses in the incoming mail, whereas in the distribution list, a participant could see other participants' addresses which were made available on the top of the screen. The combination of the two facilities made communication much easier during the training.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Software Evaluation: Technical Difficulties

During the training, several technical difficulties occurred on the IOU mail server. However, the training was continued using another alternative e-mail facility – the distribution list. Another difficulty faced by the researcher was that some participants did not receive the tasks that were sent to them through both the mailing list and the distribution list. A solution to this problem was that the tasks and feedback were sent again manually via the e-mail to the participants concerned. The third difficulty encountered was the software incompatibility. The participants could not extract the attachments which contained the materials for the placement test, the training schedule and the writing tasks which were typed using the MSWord version 6.0. Matters were made more complicated when participants outside the IOU local network saved their documents using the Windows operating system, and not under the DOS operating system. This caused difficulties for the tutor when he attempted to open or to extract the files attached.

Pedagogic Aspects

Although the participants were not provided with grades for this training, their writing assignments were assessed on the basis of three main ratings: average, good and very good. Below were the approaches used to provide feedback to the participants:

Identify errors (represented by I).

Do the corrections and group the errors (represented by C).

The tutor first sent each task to all participants via the mailing or distribution list. A week later, the tutor received the participants' writing assignments although not all the participants sent them back on time. After printing the e-mail messages, the tutor then replied to them. Feedback on the assignment was sent within one or two days. The extract of the e-mail below indicates a sample of the feedback provided to the participants.

From: Self <UTLAB/KARNEDI>
 To: "PP4" <UTLAB/PP4>
 Subject: Feedback on Task 4
 Date: Wed, 18 Sept. 2000 12:50:34

Dear PP4,

Below are some comments on your writing (Task 4).

I	=	In 2001, Indonesia has the best leader in his history. [TENSES]
C	=	In 2001, Indonesia will have the best leader in this history.
I	=	He can build clean government. [ARTICLE]
C	=	He can build a clean government.
I	=	We can work nicely everyday, and there are no demos again.
	[ADVERB +	FUTURE]
C	=	We can work nicely everyday, and there won't be demos anymore.

I = Every countries respect to this government, they would like to help our country.

[SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT]

C = Every country respects this government; they would like to help our country.

VERY GOOD!

Best regards,
Karnedi

Notes:

I: ... [...] an extract, either in the form of sentence or phrase found in the participants' writing followed by error identification {e.g. SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT/CONCORD]

C : ... correction for the errors.

It was expected that the participants could learn from the feedback provided. If they wanted to know more about the grammatical aspects raised in the feedback, they were encouraged to look up the appropriate grammar books independently. The feedback, as expected, would refresh their understanding or knowledge about aspects of English grammar that they might have learned before. The point was that some grammatical factors could have been forgotten because of infrequent usage. One of the advantages of this training was that it improved language competency and self-confidence in writing.

Below is an analysis of the participants' writing associated with the types and the number of grammatical mistakes they made. The mistakes are divided into five categories as follows:

1. Errors in the use of English
2. Errors in subject-verb agreement/concord
3. Errors in the use of pronouns
4. Errors in the use of articles
5. Errors in the use of tenses

Task 1 was not analysed because it was the easiest one in which the participants were not asked to write but to rearrange some sentences to construct a short personal letter. Apart from this, it was also intended to make them feel at ease. All of them completed this task. The analysis revealed that there was a significant improvement on the participants' writing performance, particularly in the use of subject-verb-agreement/concord, article and tenses.

Another fairly interesting finding that emerged in this research was that writing assignments such as on *re-telling a story* (Task 3), *describing yourself or someone you know well* (Task 5), and *comparing two people you know well* (Task 6) gave the participants a strong motivation to write a longer piece of writing, regardless of the number of mistakes they made. This can be considered a positive point in relation to the environment of learning a foreign language in which motivation is greatly demanded.

The analysis also showed that the participants' involvement was rather low, especially within the e-mail group. This is evident since, from the 13 participants enrolled in the e-mail-based training programme, only a few managed to complete all the seven tasks given, compared to the classroom-based group. This indicated that the motivation of participants who belonged to the e-mail based

group was, in general, relatively low despite the effort taken by the tutor to encourage them to do better. Possible explanations could be the time constraint and that the participants were busy with their jobs and consequently, did not have enough time to complete their assignments.

Another instrument, apart from the writing tasks, deployed in this research was the questionnaire sent via the e-mail. The feedback from the questionnaire revealed that the usage of the e-mail in the English training programme, especially the writing aspect, was positive, as shown in the following extract:

From: "pp" <pp@utlab.ut.ac.id> | [Block Address](#) | [Add to Address Book](#)
To: "Karnedi /FISIP" <KARNEDI@utlab.ut.ac.id>
Subject: Re: answer
Date: Sun, 18 Jul 2010 14:44:21 +0700

1. Your writing skills in English BEFORE having the training.
Below average (1)
2. Your writing skills in English AFTER having the training.
Average (2)
3. Is the training helpful? (e.g., did your writing ability improve and self-confidence raised?)
Yes (3)

The e-mail, as perceived by the students and tutor, had two major advantages. first, the e-mail enabled the students to engage in the process of writing (nellen, undated) – planning (i.e., the step where ideas were formulated), drafting (i.e., the step for writing and organising the writing structure), revising (i.e., the ideas were organised and classified and their quality improved), and editing (i.e., the step where expressions were widened and the vocabulary became more varied) as naturally as possible. They could accordingly stop writing using the e-mail at a certain point of the writing process, whenever they wish as a draft of the work could be saved to be resumed at a later time. The communication between the students and the tutor via e-mail was much quicker than in the normal classroom condition. Besides, the student's identity would be kept confidential. As for the tutor, the e-mail was also user friendly. He could forward a good piece of writing written by a student as a model for other students to view and this would enhance the teaching and learning process. The students could also share their own experiences and improve their writing skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research objectives, the researcher has undertaken a study to determine the effectiveness of the e-mail facilities to help students to improve their writing skills. This was done by comparing the improvement gained by the experimental group vis-a-vis the standard of the control group based on the traditional classroom setting. Both groups were given several writing tasks at the intermediate level. The analysis revealed that the achievements obtained by the two groups were, to a certain degree, the same. The number of mistakes associated with certain aspects of the language decreased as students moved towards higher level learning tasks.

One outstanding factor that made the two groups different was motivation. The classroom group seemed to have a stronger motivation in learning, compared with the e-mail group. This could be seen from the number of participants in the former group who managed to complete all the writing tasks. This was not so in the e-mail group. This, of course, does not mean that the English training programme via the e-mail cannot be recommended. If the e-mail based training programme can contribute to the marks awarded to the final grade at the end of the semester -- like the marks given

in face-to-face tutorials -- the students might become more interested and have a stronger motivation to take part in the e-mail tutorials. However, there are physical constraints as not all students have access to computer facilities and where some of them are concerned, this technology is still considered as something rather expensive (Miller & Clouse, 1994). However, this accessibility problem has been alleviated to some extent due to the existence of the warnet (i.e., kiosks for Internet users) that can be found in big towns. The students in these towns can make full use of this public facility to participate in the electronic tutorials.

If a high degree of participation and self-discipline can be incorporated into the e-mail assisted tutorials and the tutorial contribution be integrated into the final grade, the IOU students who are spread across the country and even into remote areas, would be able to improve their writing skills within the context of self-study and distance learning. The current situation has improved greatly as there now exists a big number of wartel which also provide services for the users who need access to the Internet, including a free e-mail subscription. The most important factor is the students' strong will and their seriousness at undertaking the tasks.

Where the advantages of the e-mail facilities in relation to the rate of student participation are concerned, it is necessary to conduct further research involving other subjects within the IOU. It is nevertheless to be expected that these findings will be beneficial to IOU as a whole, especially in the efforts to increase the quality of the academic performances of the IOU graduates.

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