

An Email to My Teacher: Digital Literacy Activities for Building Students' Self-Confidence

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ABSTRACT

Digital literacy skills help students to make the most of the opportunities and face the challenges that digital technologies and online environments provide. However, some students find digital literacy skills, particularly writing and receiving emails challenging because of their lack of confidence and experience. This study describes learning activities providing students with the opportunity to engage with the academic community to promote email communication and raise their self-confidence. The participants of this qualitative study were non-English education department students who enrolled in English course in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The data were collected by the students' emails through the use of university learning management system and their reflection collected through classroom discussion. Learning activities which involve students in real experience of writing and receiving email communication were applied. Interpreted qualitatively, the data show that all participants are able to write an email in English to their self-selected teacher in their academic community and received the response from the teacher. The result indicates that the activities enhance the students' confidence in writing English email although there are still some mistakes in the technical part of their writing. Real world practice of digital literacy skills is strongly suggested.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital literacy is indispensable in today's society since it provides access to learning resources, increases work efficiency, and enhances communication. However, there are some issues that persist such as access and equity, skills gap, ethical use, and overwhelming information. Not everyone has equal access to digital tools and internet. Many people lack the necessary skills to effectively use digital technologies (Bulya and Izzati, 2024). This includes basic computer skills, the ability to navigate the internet, and understanding how to evaluate the credibility of online information. There is also a lack

of awareness about the ethical use of digital resources (Williamson et al, 2020). The sheer volume of information available online can be overwhelming. Learning to find, evaluate, and synthesize information in any field is critical (Cormier and O'Neil, 2020).

Digital literacy skills range from basic computer use to advanced problem solving in digital environments. For students, developing these skills provides strong foundation for future learning and career opportunities. Classrooms are no longer confined to four walls; they are global, connected, and interactive. Digital literacy allows students to participate fully in this new learning paradigm which emphasizes student's agency and individualized learning paths (Kaeophanuek, Na-Songkhla, & Nilsook, 2018). It is shifting away from traditional, standardized approach to 21st-century skills like critical thinking, creativity and collaboration.

Writing and receiving emails are basic digital literacy skills that is needed by university students. Email remains a primary mode of communication in academic and professional setting (Edstrom and Ewald, 2019). While tools like WhatsApp have gained popularity, email retains unique advantages because of its formality, professionalism, permanence, and accessibility. The students need effective email skills to communicate with teachers, peers, and potential employers. Effective email communication stems from a balance of professionalism and personal touch. It's all about communicating messages in a clear, concise manner, while also personalizing email to ensure that the recipient feels valued and respected.

While email can make communication more convenient, many university students face challenges in email communication such as using appropriate language, structuring emails correctly, and understanding timely responses which can hinder their academic and professional interactions (Konuk, 2021; Kim, Preston, Braga, & Fankhauser, 2023).

The challenges were also faced by some university students in Jambi, Indonesia. Students expressed that their primary objective in learning English is to achieve fluency in both spoken and written communication. Specifically, they aspire to develop their language skills that enable them to engage confidently in real-life interactions. Students perceive that their current proficiency in English does not yet facilitate natural interpersonal communication.

Furthermore, they noted that their previous English learning experiences were largely focused on abstract goals, such as passing exams, rather than on practical language use. Additionally, they reported that their learning process has predominantly involved memorizing grammatical rules without applying them in authentic communicative contexts. The students describe their lacks experience in using English. They expressed their willingness to experience authentic interactive communication. They assert that they are not confident in writing an email.

Several studies on email writing have been conducted. Some of them focus on building competency such as Mahmoud Mahfouz (2010) who study students' perceptions of using email exchanges with native English key-pals for improving their writing competency and Shaitan & Zakhidova (2021) who explore university students' pragmatic competence with writing a formal email in English. Some others focus on writing quality and strategy instruction such as Wang (2016) who examine the effects of email modeling and scaffolding on the social writing quality of students with cognitive disabilities and Uso'-Juan (2022) who explore the role of strategy instruction on learners' ability to write authentic email requests to faculty. None of the previous studies report on building confidence, the emotional aspect, through email writing to the college professor.

To address this gap, a study on digital literacy activities in writing and receiving email to build student's self-confidence was conducted. This study describes learning

activities providing students with the opportunity to engage with the academic community to promote email communication and to build their self-confidence.

2. METHOD

2.1 Design

The present study was conducted as part of an undergraduate English course offered in the fifth semester of coursework at a non-English Education Study Program in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The course has two academic hours per week and was aimed to support low-intermediate students' English skills. The students were introduced to genres and strategies to cope with their language-related academic matter related to their major. The instructor of the course was the authors who had several years of experience in teaching undergraduate ELT course.

This is a qualitative descriptive study employing a case study method. This method was regarded as appropriate to explore the digital activities of writing, sending, and receiving emails in an academic context. The case study approach allowed the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of students' real experiences and challenges in using email for academic communication, while also capturing the pedagogical strategies implemented to support their digital literacy and language development.

2.2 Participants

The participants were an intact class of non-English study program students who enrolled in English course in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. To ensure ethical considerations, participants were asked for consent to participate in the study. It was assured that pseudonym (P1, P2, ...P32) would be used, that no one was obliged to participate and could decide to withdraw from the study for any reason (Burles and Bally, 2018).

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The data were learning activities which involve students in authentic experience of writing and receiving email in communicating with their university teacher. The data consists of students' email and their reflection on the activities which were collected through the use of university learning management system (e-LMS) and classroom discussion.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis technique following Miles and Huberman (1994). They are data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verifying. During the data reduction stage, the researchers selected and categorized relevant information from students' emails and reflections based on recurring patterns of communication and learning engagement. The categorized data were then displayed in matrices and thematic charts to facilitate interpretation and identification of emerging themes. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified through iterative review and cross-checking to ensure the validity and consistency of the findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Case study contexts

This case study context is a non-English class consisting of 34 students. English is required in the fifth semester as part of the curriculum. Despite this requirement,

students rarely engage with English in academic contexts. Activities such as reading academic content in English, participating in discussions on academic matters, or composing emails in English are infrequently practiced. As a result, their exposure to English remains limited to classroom exercises rather than real-world applications.

A needs analysis conducted with the students in the first meeting of the course revealed a strong desire for activities that facilitate authentic English communication beyond structured classroom practice. The students expressed the need for learning experiences that support practical use of English in real-life scenarios, emphasizing that traditional classroom exercises alone do not sufficiently develop their language skills. One notable gap in their digital literacy is email communication in English, a fundamental skill in both academic and professional settings. Despite the importance, the students have never sent or received emails in English, highlighting their lack of confidence in both oral and written communication in the language.

This analysis underscores the necessity of integrating meaningful, real-world English communication opportunities into the curriculum. By addressing these gaps, students can develop practical language proficiency that extends beyond passive learning and fosters confidence in both spoken and written English.

3.2 Learning activities in email communication

To develop students' proficiency in formal email communication, a guided session was conducted to introduce the fundamental principles of formal email writing. This session took place both in a classroom setting and through the electronic learning management system (e-LMS) to ensure that students could access learning materials and to engage with instructional content effectively. The focus was on structure, tone, and etiquette to help students craft well-organized emails.

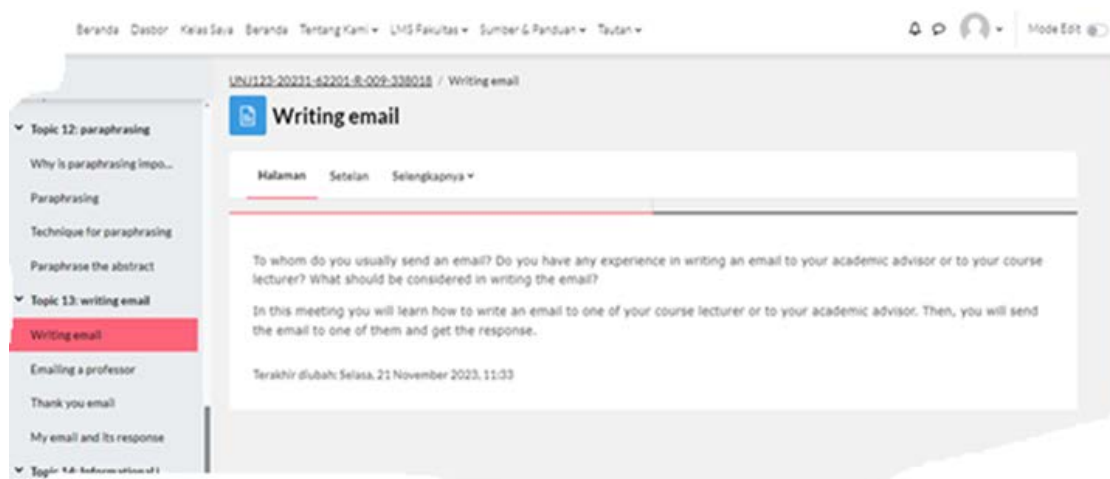


Figure 1: Screenshot of e-LMS showing the guided session activities

Following the session, students practiced drafting emails addressed to hypothetical instructors or teachers. These scenarios mirrored real-life situations, such as requesting feedback on academic performance or seeking clarification on course materials. This exercise encouraged students to apply their knowledge of formal email structure while developing their ability to articulate request in clear and respectful manner.

Once students had completed their drafts, they engaged in a peer review process. By discussing and revising their emails with classmates, students refined their writing, corrected errors, and improved the overall clarity of their messages. This collaborative step reinforced the importance of constructive feedback and effective communication in professional correspondence.

After making necessary revisions, students sent their finalized emails to a self-selected teacher and awaited responses. Receiving response email from an actual teacher/instructor provided valuable opportunity to assess the effectiveness of their communication and understand how their email was perceived. This authentic exchange helped students recognize the impact of language choices and professional etiquette.

To complete the activity, students submitted screenshots of their emails and responses to the e-LMS, where the course instructor provided additional feedback. This step ensured that students received guidance on areas for improvement and reinforced the learning objectives established in the initial guided session.



Figure 2: Email screenshot showing response on email the student received

The topics of the email communication primarily centered on academic matters, including course material, internship opportunities such as the MSIB program, and discussions related to English assignments. Additionally, students used emails to request feedback in formal written communication. Importantly, students had the autonomy to select their own topics, allowing them to engage in subjects relevant to their academic interest and practical needs.

Despite grammatical errors in their emails, students successfully conveyed their messages and engaged in meaningful interactions with their self-selected teachers. This process illustrates their ability to navigate written communication in English, even while working through linguistic challenges. The experience provided valuable opportunities for students to apply their language skills in authentic academic settings, reinforcing the importance of practice and real-world application in developing proficiency. students have been able to communicate through email with their self-selected teachers.

Finally, students reflected on their experience by answering the question: "What did I learn from writing email to my teacher?" Through this reflection, they examined how the process enhanced their communication skills, professional awareness, and

confidence in formal writing, the overall activity not only strengthened their ability to compose professional emails but also highlighted the importance of effective communication in academic settings.

3.3 Students reflection of the activities

Students reflect on their experience in writing email and getting responses from their teacher are positive.

I learned how I should convey my message so that the recipient understands. How to introduce myself formally and how to start building confidence in what I thought impossible (P1)

There are some minor grammar issues in the use of 'the recipient understands'. It should be 'the recipient understands'. Despite the grammar issue, the data show that P1 has developed an understanding of how to communicate effectively to ensure that the recipient understands her message. She has learned to introduce herself formally and started to build confidence in herself, especially in the areas she previously deemed impossible. The participant is reflecting on a transformative learning experience, highlighting growth in communication, professionalism, and self-confidence; the skills needed in 21st century.

From writing emails to lecturers, I learned that everything can be done as long as it is intended. I also learned that you shouldn't say you can't do it before it's done (P10)

P10 gained experience in email writing as a formal written communication. It suggests improved professionalism, tone management, and confidence in academic interaction. The statement "everything can be done as long as it is intended" reflects a belief in intentionality and effort, core ideas in the growth mindset theory (Dweck & Yeager, 2020; Bai, Wang, & Nie 2021) which imply that P10 is recognizing the value of goal setting and persistence in achieving tasks. This reflection reveals growth in the participant's communication skills, an evolving mindset, and a developing sense of resilience. The data underscore how a practical activity of email writing led P10 to deeper insight into effort, intention and self-belief.

From the experience of sending email to the academic supervisor, namely Mr. Iska came to know he had a sense of care and concern for me as his academic guidance and because of this assignment I met him (P4)

The act of sending an email demonstrates an initiative and proactive engagement in the academic progress of P4. It shows emotional and relational aspect between student and teacher where P4 perceived her supervisor as caring and concerned in her academic journey. The experience of sending an email facilitates meaningful connections between students and supervisors. Email writing does not just assess knowledge; it can also shape social interactions and learning experiences that extend beyond academic content.

3.4. Real world practice of email writing contributes to self-confidence

New learning paradigm requires a move from teacher-directed to student-centered learning, from direct teacher instruction to interactive exchange with and among students,

from teaching content knowledge to equipping students with relevant skills, and from teaching content to problem solving process (Bachtiar, 2024; Trilling and Fadel, 2009). Furthermore, effective teaching in this paradigm requires a shift from teaching basic to applied skills; from teaching facts and principles to investigative questions and problems, from mere theory to practice the relevant theory, and from working with a fixed curriculum to working with authentic real-life projects. The teaching process moves away from time-slotted schedules to completion of task on-demand. From teaching that applies a one-sized-fits-all approach to all students to one that provides personalized scaffolding for learners (Irasuti, 2024; Lasmawan & Budiarta, 2020), from competitive learning to collaborative learning, from classroom tied contexts to foot-loose global learning networks, from text-book based data to web-based sources, from summative to formative assessment of students' performance, and from learning at school to learning throughout life. Digital literacy skills play pertinent part in these teaching and learning processes.

Interpreted qualitatively, the data show that all participants are able to write an email in English to their self-selected teacher (Academic advisor, teacher from previous course, teacher that the student feel confident with) in their academic community and received the response from the teacher. The students are able to exploit the advantages of email in their relationship with their teacher. Email can provide opportunities for interpersonal interactions that may not be possible inside the traditional L2 composition classroom (Bloch, 2002). The findings indicate that the activities build the students' confidence in writing English email although there are still some mistakes in the technical part of their writing (Konuk, 2021).

Writing email to teacher or instructor can significantly contribute to students' self-confidence by fostering independence and enhancing communication skills. When students compose emails, they must articulate their thoughts clearly and professionally. It requires them to organize their ideas and present them in a structured manner. This practice not only strengthens the students' ability to express themselves but also reinforces their confidence to communicate in academic setting. Moreover, the act of contacting teachers demonstrates initiative and responsibility, helping students develop a sense of ownership over their learning process (Bachtiar, 2025).

Additionally, writing emails to teachers can empower students by creating a direct channel for engagement and feedback. When students ask questions or seek clarification on course material or on academic programs, they develop a proactive approach to learning, which in turn build their confidence in navigating academic challenges. Receiving positive and constructive responses from teachers can further validate students' abilities. It assures them that their inquiries and perspectives are valued. Over time, this interaction will cultivate a growth mindset, allowing students to approach academic and professional communication with greater self-assurance.

Writing email to teachers or instructors can build students' self-confidence. This aligns with several key learning theories such as constructivism (Vygotsky in Amineh & Asl 2015), social learning theory (Bandura, 2001; Rumjaun & Narod, 2025), and self-efficacy theory (Bandura & Wessels, 1997, Bhati & Shety, 2022).

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge through experience and interactions. When students compose emails to the educators, they engage in meaningful and authentic communication processes, reinforcing their understanding of academic discourse. This real-world application of language skills fosters a deeper connection between theoretical knowledge and practical use, thereby increasing students' confidence in their ability to express their thoughts effectively.

Social learning theory, introduced by Albert Bandura, highlights the importance of learning through observation, imitation, and social interaction. Writing emails allows students to observe the communication patterns of their instructors, learn from the feedback they receive, and refine their language use accordingly. This interactive exchange builds their self-confidence, as they see their inquiries acknowledged and their communication skills validated through constructive responses.

Self-efficacy theory, also developed by Bandura, suggests that individuals develop confidence (Sheldrake, 2016) in their abilities through mastery experiences, social modelling, and feedback. When students successfully draft and send emails to their instructors, they experience a sense of accomplishment (Pajares & Johnson, 1994), reinforcing their belief in their ability to communicate effectively. Positive feedback from instructors further strengthens their confidence, encouraging them to engage in similar interactions in academic and professional settings.

4. CONCLUSION

Writing and sending email provide students with experience in the use of English in authentic context. Besides, it is basic skills in digital literacy which can be useful to build students self-confidence. Educators should incorporate email not only as a communication tool but also as a teaching opportunity. By integrating best practices and leveraging emerging trends like AI-driven automation, email can continue to be powerful asset in education. Further research can be conducted on the use of formal email to help students learn authentic English for works.

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