

## EFFECT OF E-MAIL EXCHANGE ON OMANI STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS

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**Abstract.** *The present study investigated the effect of e-mail exchange on Omani grade 7 Basic Education students' English language writing skills and attitudes. It adopted a quasi-experimental 2x2 factorial design in which the factors were the treatment (authentic e-mail method/ imaginary e-mail method) and gender (male/female) supplemented with a qualitative part that dealt with the content of the participants' e-mails and the researcher's observation during the implementation period. The statistical analysis of the data indicated that high level students wrote more e-mails than low level students. It also revealed that exchanging e-mails whether to real or imaginary e-pals, improved students' writing test scores.*

**Key words:** *writing skills, attitudes, e-mail, Basic Education, Oman*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been introduced into second language (L2)/foreign language (FL) instruction through the application of different networking tools such as instant message, chat, e-mail, and the World Wide Web. This introduction has caused fundamental changes in the social dynamics of L2/FL classrooms that “tend to result in communication which is more equal in participation than face-to-face discussion, with those who are traditionally shut out of discussions benefiting most from the increased participation” (Warschauer, 1997, p.470) and have provided a context for authentic interaction that is often lacking in the traditional teacher-centered pedagogy. It has also extended language learning time and place (Gonglewski, Meloni & Margaret, 2001). CMC has led to more communicative and student-centered classrooms where learners are allowed the freedom to explore different ways to find and develop their own style of learning (Berge & Collins, 1995). In particular, CMC enables students in writing classes to move away from the limitations of traditional writing tools and transform their learning from a “passive-listening exercise to an experience of discovery and excitement” (Belisle, 1996, n.p.). This in turn increases their confidence to “accomplish their writing tasks more effectively” (Belisle, 1996, n.p.).

As a form of CMC, e-mail is being increasingly used by L2/FL teachers as a teaching tool and as a means of communication for several reasons. First, e-mail communication provides an authentic context (Gonglewski, Meloni & Margaret, 2001) for written communication, in which students interact with each other, share ideas, information and feedback to improve their own writing. Second, e-mail provides an easy and convenient means of communication

among teachers and students to offer fast feedback. Third, e-mail exchange extends language learning time and place beyond the constraints of traditional writing classrooms (Gonglewski, Meloni & Margaret, 2001). The nature of e-mail communication makes it possible for L2/FL learners to process linguistic input and produce more elaborated and complex language at their own time and pace (González-Bueno, 1998; Pazio, 2006; Shang, 2007). Finally, and most importantly, e-mail exchange in language classrooms creates an authentic purpose and audience for writing. These are elements often lacking in the writing assignments in traditional writing classes where teachers serve as the only audience for students' drafts (Choi, 2008). Writing for audiences beyond the teacher and for real reasons has been found to produce more effective writing (Slagle, 1997).

Nowadays, students, as technology natives, may learn English better in an online environment because they are familiar, and often surrounded, with technological devices early in life. Therefore, students may be more deeply involved in instruction using e-mail exchange than they would be in the regular writing teaching methods. They may also find it a very interesting and authentic opportunity to be able to communicate with native and non-native speakers of English as such opportunities are rarely found in the English language learning environment in general and in the Omani educational system in particular.

With the implementation of the contemporary educational system in Oman comprising Basic Education, since 1998 students' basic computer skills have come to the forefront of Omani education. All students study information and communication technology (ICT) as a separate subject which enables many to have e-mail accounts and experiences on the internet. Traditional libraries have been replaced by learning resource centers (LRC) and computer labs in all Basic Education schools. These centers and labs are equipped with computers in each school, 35 computers in Cycle 1 schools (grades 1 to 4) and 82 computers in Cycle 2 schools (grades 5 to ten), and have access to internet connections throughout the country (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The Framework of the English Language Curriculum of Basic Education encourages teachers to give priority to realistic and communicative uses of language (Ministry of Education, 1999). To reflect this, teachers have been trained to become more of the facilitators and creators of a learning environment that allows students to be interactive and responsible for their own learning (Ministry of Education, 2006). In addition to professional training, many teachers have undergone a national computer literacy program called "Internet and Computing Core Certificate" (IC3) that since 2009 has aimed to educate all government employees on basic computer skills. This training has enabled teachers to be more acquainted with essential computer knowledge and experience. Therefore, it has provided the basics needed to promote CMC in Basic Education schools. Even so, despite the physical and technical infrastructure available, teachers often do not use the facilities to their full potential. Unfortunately, computer labs are still limited in usage (Ministry of Education and World Bank, 2012).

In traditional English writing classes in Oman, writing is mostly done as a one-draft activity with little guidance given to students on how to improve their writings and grammar correction is often the main aim. The majority of writing tasks assigned to learners tends to target an abstract and imaginary audience and the writing generated is not meant for real or meaningful purposes. In addition, writing classes often receive less attention in language learning because of the emphasis on reading skills and grammar. Much of the writing happens in support of other aspects of language learning, such as writing down vocabulary to remember it or to reinforce new grammar patterns (Cameron, 2001). Moreover,

free writing and unguided writing are not often practiced in the Basic Education curriculum. However, students are often asked to write about picture stories, topics, and biography in the end of year exams.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Developing writing skills is an important focus of educational programs. Poor writing performance among Basic Education students is a constant issue in English teaching in Oman. Although the Ministry of Education has invested considerable efforts into developing English language teaching in Omani schools, students' level in writing continues to be weak. To determine the level of students' performance and to measure the achievement of the learning goals, The National Tests were designed by the Ministry of Education. These tests give national indications about the performance of Omani students and are used to compare their performance against international standards, which helps in the development of educational policies. The tests were applied on samples of students representing all of the eleven educational districts in Oman. The results of these tests did not count toward these students' final marks. The results of The National Tests for the academic year 2008/2009 clearly indicated that grade 4 students' writing level is lower than expected as students scored a mean of 27.2 out of 100 (Ministry of Education, 2009). A similar result was also found for grade 7 students for the academic year 2006/2007 with a mean of 21.7 out of 100. Furthermore, the results of the same study also showed that the mean of female students (30.9 out of 100) exceeded that of the male students (13.1 out of 100). In a comparison of the students' means in the writing exam between all eleven educational districts, the district of Muscat was ranked in the middle of the list with a mean of 23 out of 100 which indicates that Muscat students exhibit the same general weakness (Ministry of Education, 2007). These results document an urgent need for research on instructional methods for improving students' writing skills. The researcher did not get any recent results of the National Tests as the Ministry of Education stopped implementing them in 2009.

Generally speaking, the Omani English curriculum supports cross-cultural communication via e-mails which are introduced as regular writing activities, in cycle two course books. At this level, students are introduced to two internet clubs; International Kids Club (IKC) and International Teenagers Club (ITC). In these clubs, they are asked to read e-mails from foreign e-pals and respond to them by answering questions or providing needed pictures and information. For example, in grade 7, students are assigned to read 16 e-mail samples from different native and non-native English speakers as reading and writing activities. Though students are requested to practice writing e-mails, the curriculum does not offer the opportunity to write or receive authentic e-mails.

Considering the advantages of e-mail as a medium of communication and as a writing tool for L2/FL learners, and the context of the Basic Education system in Oman, the researcher intended to explore the potential benefits that can be drawn from using e-mail communication to improve students' writing skills. E-mail exchange could become a teaching aid to fulfill communicative goals and to motivate students to improve their writing skills. The research is designed to explore whether or not the incorporation of authentic e-mail exchange in school curricula could have beneficial effects on students' writing abilities.

### 3. NATURE OF THE WRITING SKILLS

Writing skills and their teaching only emerged as a scholarly discipline in second language education in the 1970s. Before that time, writing was rarely taught for its own sake. Instead, a lot of writing in language classrooms was used to support other aspects of language learning (Archibald, 2012), such as to write down new vocabulary or to practice grammar patterns (Cameron, 2001). The ability to write well is not a natural skill; rather, it is usually learned through a process of formal instructional situations (Byrne, 1988; Lagan, 2011). Therefore, writing skills must be learned and practiced through experience. Writing involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in different forms of narrative or description, or argumentative writing or to transform information into new texts (Myles, 2002). It is widely known that writing is a difficult and demanding task to master (Lienemann & Graham, 2006). Looking at writing from a cognitive dimension, it can commonly be defined “as a complex, dynamic process that involves the integration of multiple levels of cognitive and motor skills and processes” (Robin, 2009, p.7). It is a complex process that allows writers to explore their thoughts and ideas, and make them visible and concrete to others (Ghaith, 2002; Yarber, 1985). In addition, the social context of the writing event often imposes more demands on writing such as the purpose, goals, audience, context of instruction, and expectations of the writing assignment itself (Robin, 2009). As a result of writing’s complexity and demands, “competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers as well as for foreign/second language learners” (Hamp-Layons & Heasley, 2006, p. 2). Ghaith (2002) emphasizes that novice writers need to practice writing exercises to learn the language conventions such as spelling, punctuation, and grammatical agreement. He states that it is essential to students to “write in the language” (Ghaith, 2002, n.p.) through engaging in a variety of grammar practice activities of controlled nature. Moreover, they need to begin to write within a framework of ‘flexibility measures’ (Ghaith, 2002, n.p.) that include activities like transformation exercises, sentence combining, and idea frames.

### 4. WRITING FOR AUDIENCE

The process of writing involves communicating. Most writing in real life is written with a certain reader in mind e.g. a friend, a relative, or a colleague. When a person writes, it is “crucial to know both the purpose for writing and the audience who will be reading the work” (Lagan, 2011, p.13). Knowing the audience is important because it provides the writer with a context without which it is difficult to know exactly what or how to write (Hedge, 1988; Yarber, 1985).

In most writing classes, teachers assign writing activities that tend to target an abstract audience, and usually the writing product is not meant for real or meaningful purposes (Chen & Brown, 2012). It is believed that writing for audiences beyond the teacher and for real reasons, produces more effective writing (Slagle, 1997). In fact, ‘the power of audience’ can be considered as the first principle of getting students to take responsibility for their own work (Levy, 2008). The teacher should not be the only audience, because “teachers are so often seen as critics and mark-givers” (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006, p.137). Students would be more motivated if their writing could become authentic pieces of communication with real audiences such as other students, visitors, local newspapers, etc. This helps students think carefully about the “context which will determine the exact

message and style of their written communication” (Hedge, 1988, p.61). Providing opportunities for students to write for a variety of audiences develops flexibility and control in the writer (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 2006). In contrast to traditional writing classes, where writing may be read and evaluated by the instructor only, the learners in an online writing classroom not only write for instructors, but also for peers and other people (if published). Learners can then experience real responses. Rather than writing for an unreal reader, they can now engage in real communication.

Specifying the intended audience for students is an important step in the planning of writing in any class. The presence of potential online readers gives the learners a sense of audience in the writing process (Choi, 2008). E-mail with its asynchronous nature can give students the opportunity to communicate in the target language with an authentic audience for real purposes.

## 5. CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL NATIVES

In the age of increasing computer literacy among students in K-12 schools, educators are faced with a new challenge of how to incorporate this literacy into existing educational systems. Today's students are described as digital natives because they have grown up using technology and the internet, which helps make them feel more at home in the online world (Hockly, 2011). Eaton (2011) has identified 21 characteristics of the 21st century learners that distinguish them from past generations. Some of these features are closely related to the use of technology in their daily lives. For example, the 21st century learners often have higher levels of digital literacy than their parents or teachers. They want to connect with others in real time on their own terms. Their primary communication skills rely on texting, instant messaging and e-mail, rather than standard personal communication modes like the telephone, and one-on-one interaction (Jones, 2012). They prefer to work collaboratively, and appreciate structured, cognitive activities that support creativity (Jones, 2012; Eaton, 2011). Finally, they function best when networked (Prensky, 2001), and know where to go to find information that they not only consume but also use to produce new content and publish it on the World Wide Web (Jones, 2012). These characteristics of contemporary learners require teachers and educators to integrate the technology-rich outside world with the education world (Jones, 2012). They also necessitate a new context of learning that utilizes innovative technology, and in which teachers have to maintain students' interest, instill curiosity, and be flexible in how they teach.

## 6. COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) can be considered the only computer application to date that has had a great impact on language teaching (Warschauer, 1996). Language learners can communicate directly, cheaply, and easily with other learners or speakers of the target language, at any time of day and from any place (Warschauer & Kern, 2000). CMC is basically a medium of written discourse (Lane, 1994) but “of course, is not just a tool; it is at once technology, medium, and engine of social relations. It not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space” (Jones, 1995, cited in Romiszowski & Mason, 2004, p.398). CMC can be best defined as “a process of human communication via

computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes” (December, 1997, n.p.).

In spite of the reported advantages of CMC, a few researchers have called attention to some potential drawbacks in using computer network technologies for language teaching (Riasati, Allahyar & Tan, 2012; Vi, 2005; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Computer network technologies themselves erect some barriers. Lack of access to technology resources that require an internet connection is one significant challenge. Students often meet with difficulties when technology is not always as reliable as it should be, and internet access is not always available. Many researchers believe that lack of training, lack of knowledge and lack of practice, are issues that prevent the successful use of the internet for teachers and learners (Riasati, et al., 2012; Vi, 2005). Time is an issue caused by the need to master technology as well as the changing dynamics of the online classroom and long-distance exchanges. Such exchanges can be extremely complicated in terms of coordinating goals, schedules and plans, especially when involving teachers from different countries or educational systems (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Moreover, searching for materials online can be time consuming and frustrating. Many learners find it difficult to read papers on a computer screen. It can also create a time burden, as a teacher’s e-mail box becomes flooded with messages from students (Riasati et al., 2012; Vi, 2005; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Financial barriers are another factor, as there are certain startup expenses related to implementing new technologies in education that include the cost of setting up a network in the school (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Financial barriers also include a training investment (Vi, 2005; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). In addition, the use of networked computing environments in language classrooms will lead to the different ways of teaching and learning, moving from traditional blackboard classrooms to computer labs. This changes the position of teachers to being more like facilitators, and to learners becoming more active and more autonomous (Vi, 2005) which may be a challenge to many teachers and students.

O’Dowd and Ritter (2006) developed a structured inventory of 10 different factors which may lead to cases of failed communication in online exchanges at four different levels: individual, classroom, socio-institutional, and interaction. The first level, the individual level, refers to the learner’s expectation and motivation, psycho-biographical and educational background. The classroom level (or methodological level) represents factors like task design, themes, sequencing of content, learners matching procedures, and pre-exchange briefing. The socio-institutional level refers to the technology used in the communication, such as the type of tools, accessibility, and to the general organization of the course of the study. The final level of the inventory is the interaction level which refers to possible misunderstandings and tensions that arise as a consequence of any cultural differences in communicative style and manners between e-pals. According to O’Dowd and Ritter (2006), these factors lead to low levels of participation, indifference, tension between participants, or negative evaluation of the e-pal’s culture. They recommended that it was essential for educators to understand the possible reasons for failed communication. They also suggested that educators needed to engage their students in a classroom analysis of some examples of failed communication and to get feedback from them. This will help students understand possible problems that they may face. In addition, teachers need to follow a precise approach to communication with their partner teachers to enable both to understand the socio-cultural context in which the e-pals class is operating.

## 7. THE STUDY

This study utilized a quasi-experimental 2x2 factorial design in which the factors were treatment (authentic vs imaginary e-mail) and gender (male/female). It was supplemented with a qualitative part that dealt with the content of e-mails and the researcher's observation during the study period. The sample of this study was divided into two groups; the experimental group (male and female grade 7 Basic Education classes) who wrote e-mails to their e-pals and sent them online, and the control group (male and female grade 7 Basic Education classes) who wrote e-mails to imaginary characters of their choice but did not send them.

### 7.1. Population and sample

The population of the study consisted of grade 7 students in Omani Basic Education Schools Cycle 2 in the academic year 2012-2013. The age group of grade 7 is between 11-12 years old. Grade 7 was chosen because seventh graders potentially have basic skills of English as a Foreign Language, and ICT knowledge that can enable them to communicate via e-mails with non-Arabic speaking e-pals after having studied English and ICT subjects since grade 1. In addition, e-mail writing is introduced in Cycle 2 EFL curriculum starting from grade 5. Therefore, grade 7 students have a clear idea about e-mail writing. Since Cycle 2 schools are gender-separated, a non-random sample of 129 students from two grade 7 classes in a female school and two grade 7 classes in a male school was included in the study. They represented 1.70 % of the total students (7549) enrolled in Muscat in grade 7 for the academic year 2012-2013. The region of Muscat was chosen because it is the capital city of Oman, and therefore, it provided larger numbers of community schools that use English as a medium of instructions. In addition, it provided more students who had access to computers. There were four grade 7 classes in each school. The two classes were randomly selected from the two schools and were assigned randomly to be the experimental and the control groups in each school. There were 62 students in the experimental group, and 67 students in the control group.

The e-pals were 41 male and female non-Arabic speaking grade 7 students from two community schools in Muscat (the researcher had originally 55 students from the Indian School Ghubra and the Pakistani School Darsait, but 14 students dropped out at different times during the experiment. As a result, 41 e-pals participated, though some did not send e-mails every week during the exchange period). There were 23 male and 18 female students from both schools.

### 7.2. Research instruments

In order to collect data for the quantitative analysis, two instruments were used: a writing test taken from The National Tests for grade 7 (implemented in 2007) to assess the participants' scores on their English writing skills and an attitude survey adapted from Jou's (2008) to assess the experimental group's attitude towards e-mail exchange. In addition, content analysis of all participants' e-mail correspondence and the researcher's observation notes during the exchange period were used for the qualitative part of the study.

### **7.3. Description of the e-mail exchange**

The experimental and control groups were taught by the same instructor in each school, and students wrote e-mails on the same weekly topics but addressed to different audiences. The experimental group wrote e-mails to non-Arabic speaking students in two community schools in Muscat. The control group wrote e-mails to imaginary characters of their own choice such as celebrities or characters in their text book. To encourage students to write more, their instructors agreed to give up to five points for participating, based on the number of written e-mails, in accordance with the MOE's assessment document in the writing section. The two groups were motivated to write independently and to get support from peers, family members, their teachers or the researcher. Throughout the semester, the groups received the same encouragement from the researcher and their instructors to write the e-mails as an out-of-class work.

### **7.4. Challenges of the e-mail exchange**

The researcher encountered some challenges during the implementation period which could have affected the e-mail exchange. "It is often impossible to rely on a single factor to explain an exchange's lack of success. Instead, reasons usually include a combination of interconnected factors from different areas" (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006, p.625).

The first challenge was the difference in school calendars between the community schools and the Omani schools which negatively affected the number of e-mails received weekly. "The misalignment of academic calendars is one of the social and institutional factors which educators found to influence any e-mail exchanges" (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006, p. 625). This challenge affected the number of sent e-mails, as the experimental group received fewer e-mails than they sent. Therefore, the experimental group did not receive the intended number of e-mails in this exchange (a total of 10 received e-mails for each participant) which perhaps negatively affected the flow of interaction and so provided fewer authentic readings and fewer writing practice opportunities than expected.

The second challenge was the frequent withdrawal of many e-pals (originally, the researcher had 55, but towards the end of the exchange, the number dropped to 41 e-pals). These withdrawals forced the researcher to re-pair the experimental group and the e-pals several times. In some cases, the researcher had to pair two or three students from the experimental group with one e-pal. This could perhaps have affected establishing and sustaining bonds between students and had negative effects on the interaction between groups (O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006). Such shortcomings were recognized in previous studies. For example, some researchers found that enthusiasm can be high at the beginning of the e-mail exchange, and then, generally, the number of e-mail communications between the learners tends to drop off and sometimes stops completely (Chen, 2008; Foss & McDonald, 2009; Tella, 1992; Warschauer, 1997).

Other challenges were related to the mechanism of writing e-mails. For example, the researcher noticed that quite few participants from the two groups wrote their e-mails in Arabic first and then got them translated into English using translation programs. In addition, quite a few participants sent e-mails that were totally written by others and not by them. Those students were not able to read their own well-written e-mails or write e-mails on the spot when asked to do so by the researcher.

The researcher faced technical challenges mostly with the experimental group. Most problems were related to e-mail accounts, internet accessibility and the word processor.



For example, some students kept forgetting their passwords and therefore kept creating new accounts. On the other hand, the researcher faced one technical problem with the control group related to word processor issues, such as requesting support on changing the font type or saving the document.

The researcher also faced a challenge in keeping track of all student exchanges during the process. The experimental and the e-pal groups had communicated indirectly via the researcher's e-mail. This was followed in order to ensure the quality of language and to assure parents that the exchange was being done in a safe environment. As a consequence, the researcher had to read each e-mail and to send it between each pair of students every week. In addition, the researcher had, also, to follow the e-mails of the control group that were typed and saved in files every week in the computer lab. Sometimes, students were absent on their assigned day for sending e-mails, which delayed sending e-mails until the following week because many students did not have internet access at home. Finally, though deadlines for submission were specified, many students were not punctual which created a load on the researcher who had to keep track of new and late e-mails. All of these challenges might have had the unintended effect of limiting the effects of the e-mail exchange experiment.

## 8. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the post writing test revealed that there was no significant difference between the experimental and the control groups. Further comparison between pre-and post-test scores showed that the two groups gained scores in the post-test, which supported the initial results that showed no differences in the post-test scores for the two groups. This increase in the English writing scores for the experimental and control groups could be due to regular class activities or to any or all of five common features shared by the two methods implemented for the groups: the element of technology, extra writing practice, communicating with an audience (imaginary or authentic), the element of fluency approach, and the element of students' responsibility for their learning. Additional examination indicated a relatively strong positive correlation between the number of written e-mails and the post-test scores of the experimental and the control groups. Yet another examination showed that high level students wrote more e-mails than low level students in the two groups.

Based on the results of the writing tests, there was no significant difference in the scores between male and female students in the experimental and the control groups. Additionally, the results of the writing test showed that e-mail exchange was not dependent on the interaction between group and gender. Thus, it can be concluded that e-mail exchange was not significant in the interaction between group and gender interaction.

As for the difference in the attitude towards e-mail exchange of the experimental group before and after using e-mail exchange, the findings indicated that e-mail exchange was effective in increasing positive attitudes toward the e-mail exchange method. The results also revealed that male students developed a higher positive attitude towards e-mail exchange than female students in the experimental group. All in all, there was no significant difference between the experimental and the control group in the post-test because both groups improved in their writing scores and this indicates that both methods had a positive effect on the post-test scores. However, this increase could be a result of regular class activities. In addition, the findings showed that the experimental group developed a positive attitude towards the e-mail exchange after using e-mail exchange.

The e-mail messages generated by the experimental and the e-pals groups over the 10-week exchange period revealed some positive indications about the actual implementation in the Omani context from different aspects, such as the process, the topics, possible benefits and obstacles. The procedure also demonstrated some positive results about the method used for the control group. Writing to an imaginary character can be considered simply as a good teaching method as the number, length, and the quality of the written e-mails was better than that of the experimental group. However, the experimental group had the advantage of communicating with a real audience and responding to authentic writing. Moreover, some students in the experimental group enjoyed the experience of sending and receiving e-mails for the first time in their lives.

#### 9. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In the light of the findings of this study, some recommendations are put forward for teachers. English language teachers can use e-mail correspondence either with real or imaginary audience as an effective teaching strategy and an alternative teaching method in their writing classes. Indeed, students need to be given some freedom to chat about various topics of interest to them. However, teachers should discuss the topics of the e-mails with students in class before they send them and elicit feedback regarding students' specific needs or problems and act on them. They should also ensure that students know how to use e-mail before participating in an e-mail exchange. For example, in Oman students in Basic Education schools possess some basic ICT background, nevertheless, some initial training would be useful. It is also recommended to use a trust-worthy e-pal web-sites that provide technical support to reduce teachers' time and efforts, for example, [www.epals.com](http://www.epals.com) and/or [www.e-palworld.co.uk](http://www.e-palworld.co.uk).

#### 10. CONCLUSION

Overall, exchanging e-mails whether to real or imaginary e-pals, improved the experimental and the control group's writing test scores. However, the influence of regular class activities might have been responsible for this improvement. In addition, exchanging e-mails improved the attitude of the experimental group towards e-mail exchange. E-mail can provide "a very valuable language learning experience that is potentially, indeed, almost unavoidably more time-intensive and more personal" (Gonglewski, Meloni & Margaret, 2001, p.32). Conducting e-mail interactions may be, for many teachers, an ideal environment to establish for learners, but it is not always logistically feasible and, in this study, it did not prove to have a better effect on writing skills. On the other hand, writing e-mails to imaginary e-pals can also be implemented as an alternative teaching method to improve writing skills. Looking at the common features shared by the authentic e-pal and imaginary e-pal methods on improving the writing scores, it is recommended that teachers could employ some of them in different teaching situations. For example, teachers should not be the only audience of their students' writings. Instead, they need to specify different types of readers for their students' writing to help provide the context without which it is difficult to know exactly what or how to write (Hedge, 1988; Yarber, 1985). In addition, the use of the computer as an instructional tool can "support and develop writing" (Digital Writing, n.p.) and play a motivating role toward learning processes.

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