

## Collaborative Learning via Email Discussion: The Impact on ESL Students' Writing Performance- A Case Study at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores the impact of students' interactions and knowledge construction on ESL (English as a Second Language) writing performance. The primary concern of this study centres on how participants communicate via email in a collaborative learning ambience incorporating writing process approach and pair work activity. The study addresses these concerns by focusing on three main areas for investigation namely; interactions, knowledge construction process and writing performance. Findings illustrate participants' interactions are focused predominantly on task-related activity and active correspondences occurred at the early stages of the writing process activity. The process of knowledge construction transpired from an interactive process focusing on three main categories analyzed; questions, clarification and support. Overall, the students' writing performance depicts improvements in the criteria included in the evaluation of the essay writing specifically the content, organization and writing style. The study offers insights for further study to be explored to attain a better understanding of how learners interact and construct knowledge in a collaborative learning environment via email discussions and the impact on their writing performance particularly in ESL writing classrooms.*

### **Introduction**

Research in second language writing (ESL) became popular following the emergence of a student-centered process approach to first language writing in English. The "process" concept appeared gradually in the ESL literature in the late 1970s. From the early 1970s to the 1980s, English educators and researchers shifted their attention from analyses of written texts to studies that also addressed learners' writing processes. The 1980s saw the gradual introduction of process writing pedagogies into the ESL profession.

Raimes (1983, 1985, 1987) and Zamel (1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1987) were among prominent researchers calling for process writing. Raimes (1991) stresses that there are parallels between process writing and recent trends in second language instruction:

There is a widespread acceptance of the notion that language teachers need to know about and to take into account the process of how learners learn a language and how writers produce a written product. Such a notion of process underlies a great deal of current communicative, task-based, and collaborative instruction and curriculum development.

The process-oriented language-learning classroom provides learners with opportunities to become aware of their learning processes and allows the teacher occasions to intervene constructively. This parallels the present study, which will focus on the process-oriented approach and student-centred approach, except for an additional tool (email) in order to enhance the process of learning.

Joy Reid (2001) states that teaching ESL writing differs from teaching other language skills, because even as late as the 1970s, ESL writing was not viewed as a language skill to be taught to learners. Instead, it was used as a support skill in language learning, for example, handwriting practice, writing answers to grammar and reading exercises, and writing dictation. During the 1980s, ESL writing concentrated on personal writing (narratives, journals), student creativity and fluency. ESL writing teachers encouraged students to use their internal resources and individuality: they presumably taught

“writer-based”<sup>1</sup> writing to the exclusion of external audiences. Emphasis was on the processes and not the product. Most ESL students were being taught process writing strategies to achieve an effective writing outcome, with differences occurring in emphasis. Gradually, ESL writing classrooms have attained a more balanced perspective of composition theory, whereby the traditional teacher-centred approaches are evolving into more learner-centred courses.

Pennington (1995) asserts that most Asian countries usually employ a traditional product-oriented, examination-centred approach, with a strong emphasis on grammar. Traditional teacher-centred approaches may reflect the teachers’ attempts to satisfy the needs and desires of students whose main interest in language study is to prepare for highly competitive standardized examinations. Such focus forces teachers away from not only process writing, but also innovations in teaching approaches, because the new practice will consume valuable time and attention away from covering the syllabus designed to prepare students for examinations. Further, there is no guarantee whether a new method will help or harm students in their preparation for examinations. Thus, there is a need to investigate and explore a new approach in writing and a general move away from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches in Asian countries, and particularly in ESL classrooms.

Furthermore, as technology increasingly takes centre-stage of our lives, there are compelling reasons for incorporating technologies into the classroom to ensure that our students will be able to function in the societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Incorporating email in the classroom is a good step to familiarize students with computer literacy. On the other hand, there is a need for an improved approach to the teaching of writing as “ESL writers are known to face problems in developing their writing skills at university level” (Bacha, 2000). Therefore, with new approaches to the teaching of writing, it is hoped to benefit students not only in their examinations, but also in their own experience and for future use.

Moreover, with the incorporation of interesting learning approaches, such as collaborative learning and an interesting learning medium, such as computer-mediated communication, the field of ESL writing research will be enriched. Consequently, this study attempts to explore the area to supplement current information with new findings. Specifically, as most of the education system in almost all of the countries worldwide is still exam-oriented and involved in evaluating students’ performance, will e-mail activities be capable of motivating students’ participation and students’ interest, which will lead to producing remarkable performance particularly in ESL academic writing skills? The present study attempts to research ESL students’ writing performance using email discussion in a pair work activity to complete academic writing essay. Does working in a computer-mediated collaborative learning environment and more specifically, working in asynchronous email discussions has an impact on ESL students’ academic writing performance?

## Objective

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of students’ interactions and knowledge construction on their writing performance. The prime interest of the study centres on how participants communicate via email in a collaborative writing process to facilitate writing tasks and writing performance.

## Methodology

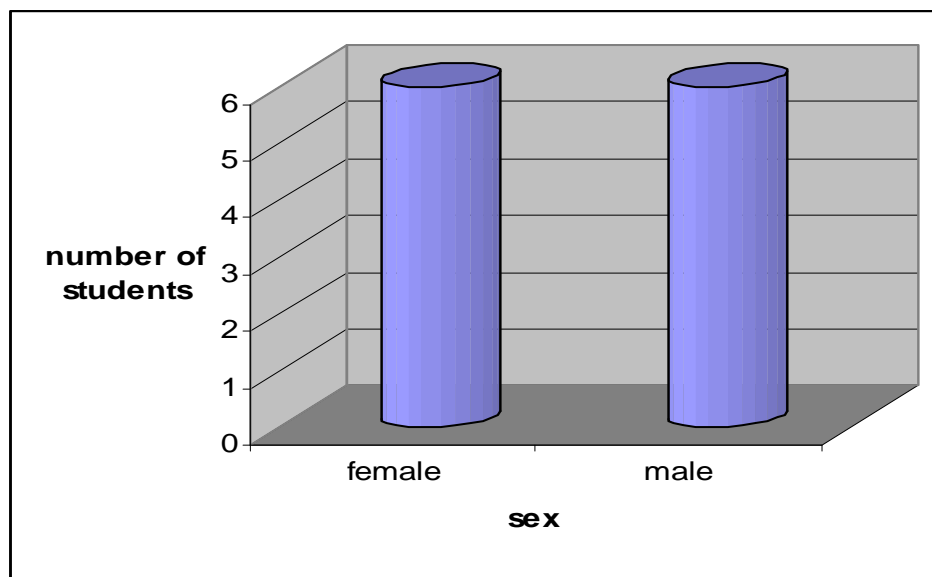
### *Research Participants*

The case study was conducted at University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) involving twelve participants from the Faculty of Management and Economics. The participants for this study were selected based on a purposive sampling. Of 54 first year students from Bachelor of Accountancy and Bachelor of Economics degrees who enrolled for the Academic Writing Skills course, 12 students (6 males and 6 females from a tutorial group) were selected (see figure 1a).

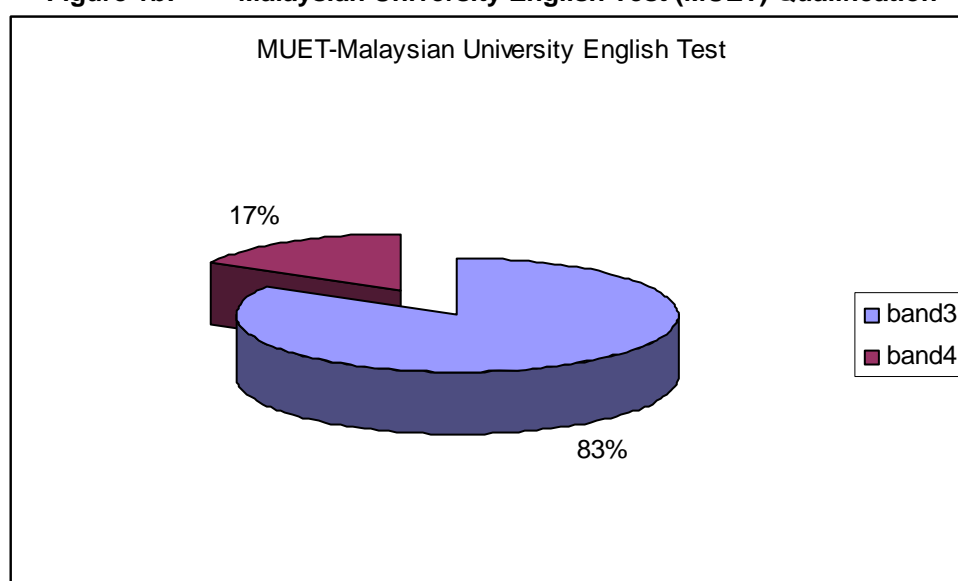
**Figure 1a: Number of Students**

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<sup>1</sup> Writer-based prose encompasses all the writing we do for ourselves and even all the writing we do for a reader before we really get to the place of putting ourselves in the reader's position.



**Figure 1b: Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Qualification**



83% of them attained band three and 17% band four of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) (see figure 1b). MUET is compulsory for all pre-university students intending to enrol in Malaysian

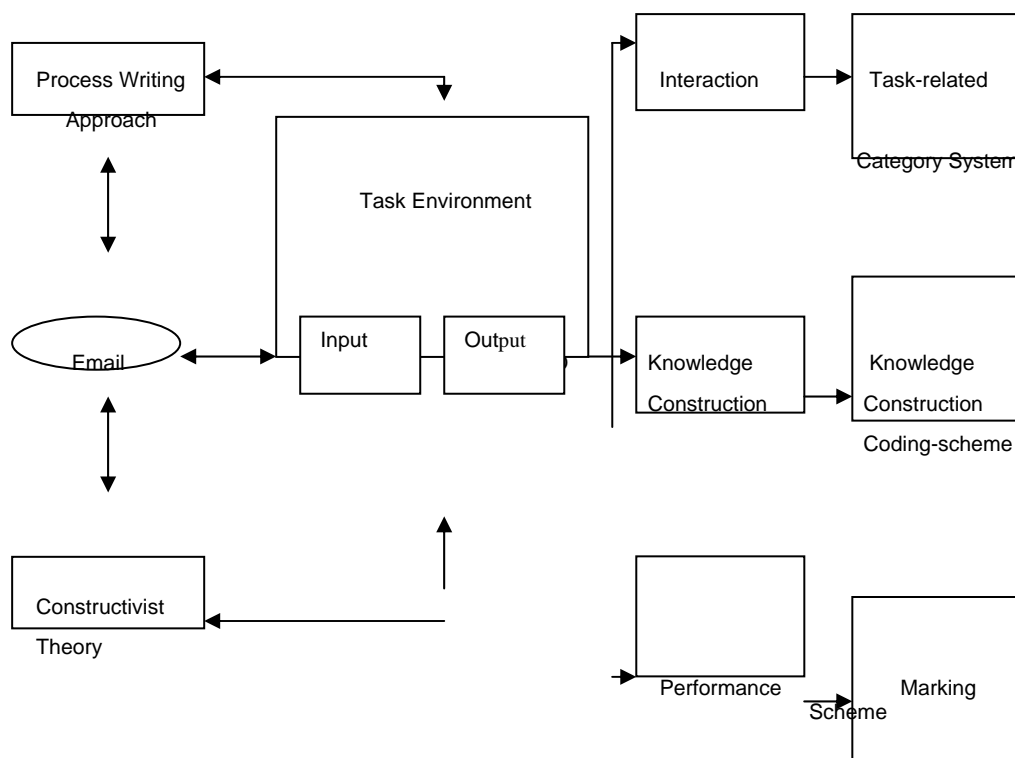
public universities. It was first implemented in the year 2000 with the purpose of enhancing the proficiency level of pre-university students. The examination comprises four components; listening (15%), speaking (15%), reading (45%) and writing (25%). The highest classification for MUET is Band Six (excellent user) and the lowest is Band One (extremely limited user). Thus the respondents' English proficiency level is classified as modest user.

### Research Analysis

The main study analysed the email messages and the essays transcripts. The email messages were posted by twelve respondents involved in a five week discussion via email. Data were collected from pair work activity on an assignment involving stages in a writing process approach and an argumentative essay. The writing process approach encompasses six stages, namely generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and reviewing.

The analysis of knowledge construction process involves a model adapted from Pena-Shaff and Nicholls (2003) (Appendix 1). The analysis of students' interaction process involves a model from Noraïen Mansor (2006) (Appendix 2). The performance is evaluated based on a marking scheme developed by Noraïen and Sharon (2000) (Appendix 3). The following is a graphical representation of the conceptual framework underlying this study.

### Conceptual Framework of Study



### Research Procedure

The research began with a pre-test involving individual work on an argumentative essay with a span of five days (Appendix 4). Participants were asked to seek arguments for and against the implementation of English language in all subjects at the university level in order to produce quality graduates. They were requested to follow the writing process approach, which emphasised the six stages of writing, namely generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and reviewing. The results of the students' writing performance were compared with the pair work activity via email discussion.

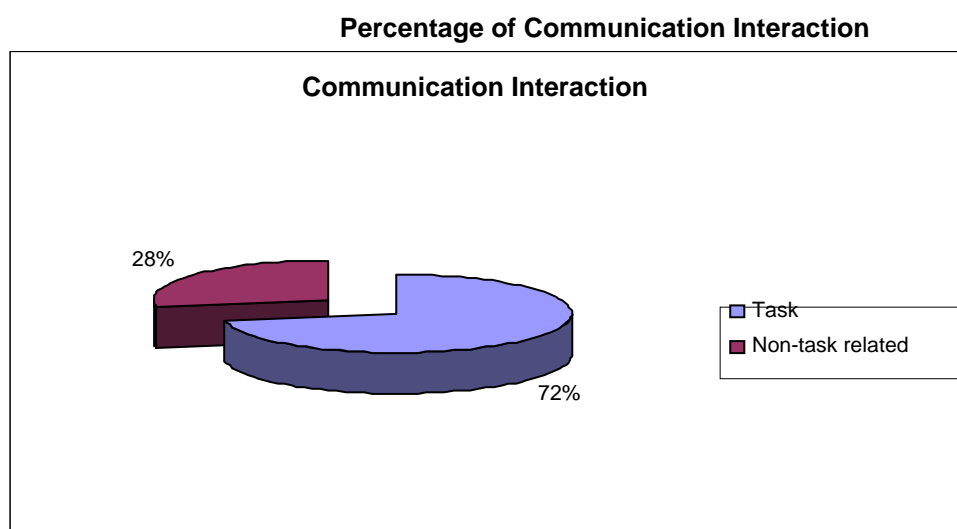
The research then focuses on the collaborative learning via email discussion. The respondents were given five weeks to complete a pair work activity on an argumentative essay. They were given the

same theme as in their pre-test. The researcher sent the instructions for each stage in the writing process approach, which consists of six stages. The respondents were given a specific duration to complete their discussion at each stage (Appendix 5). Therefore, they were requested to mail as frequently as possible. All their mail entries were forwarded to the researcher to enable a record to be kept of the messages sent and also for the messages to be collected for data analysis purposes. The respondents were placed in an unthreatening writing atmosphere, which is crucial for enhancing communication and writing skills. They were informed that they should be relaxed in their activities, as email entries would not be graded or marked. Further, the researcher assisted the activity by giving feedback, such as attending to mechanical problems encountered by the respondents without jeopardising the concept of student-centred activity. For example, any concepts or issues that required further clarification should be discussed among the participants involved and not directed to the researcher for 'express' answers.

## Results

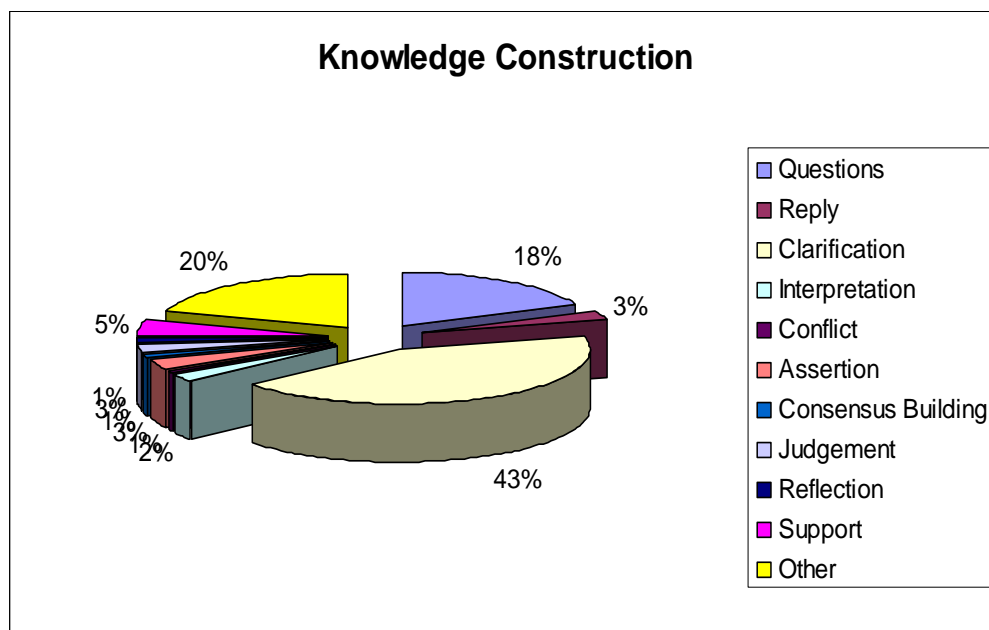
Overall, it is not too ambitious to impart that implementing the modest email as a tool to initiate discussion amongst ESL students writing in a collaborative learning ambience is an encouraging effort to initiate positive impact even though constraints emerged and need to be encountered.

- The findings revealed that students' interaction is focused predominantly on the task-related activity as depicted in figure 1a with 72% on task-related and 28% on non-task-related activity.



- The process of knowledge construction conducted in this study transpired from an interactive process focusing on three main categories – question, clarification and support

### Knowledge Construction Process Analysis



## Results - Writing Performance

The analysis commences with the participants' writing performance focusing on three focal categories namely;

content

organization

writing style

The "content" element incorporates the evaluation of the introduction, support, paragraph construction and conclusion which is drawn from the marking scheme used for the evaluation. Introduction entails the thesis statement and the main ideas stated in the introductory paragraph. Support embraces the reasons or arguments with evidence or examples. Paragraph construction encompasses the topic sentences, supporting ideas, concluding sentences and conclusion and emphasizes a strong concluding statement for the argumentative essay. The "organization" element focuses on coherence and the "writing style" element accentuates on writing style. Coherence covers the method of organization and transitions used to connect sentences and ideas. Finally, writing style concentrates on the clear flow of sentence, correct grammar and sentence structure, generically appropriately descriptive language and argumentative language used. The analysis of the writing will be focused on the collaborative assignment via email discussion and the individual assignment. Two lecturers from the University College of Science and Technology Malaysia were involved in evaluating the participants' argumentative essay. Both of them evaluated the individual and collaborative assignments. Finally, the average results of the individual and collaborative assignment via email discussion were obtained. The details of the writing performance are illustrated in Table 1.

### Content

**Figure 1: Writing performance - Content**

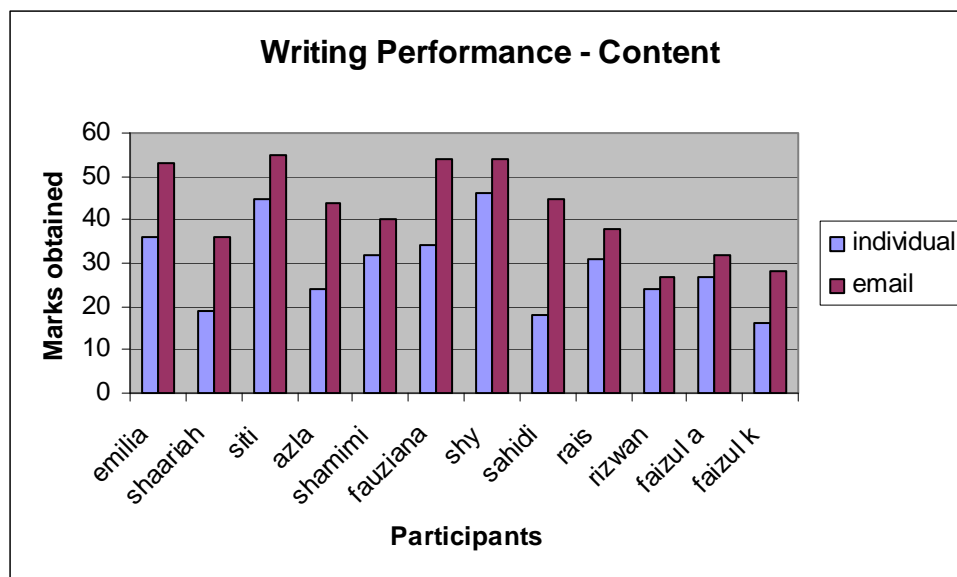


Figure 1 above clearly demonstrates the positive results in collaborative learning via email discussion. All the participants involved showed encouraging improvement in the content element which embraces the introduction, support, paragraph construction and conclusion. Four participants attained 53-55 marks out of 70 marks allocated for the content element. Collaborative learning via email discussions had relieved their struggle to produce a strong central idea or thesis statement that is related to the assignment and is clearly stated in the introductory paragraph.

Finally, the participants conclude their arguments with a better concluding statement compared with their individual work. Nevertheless, the participants lack of sources from the web pages to strengthen their arguments with citations from online published articles. They should put more effort to enhance their essays with more examples from the websites as examples of websites are given in the email instructions. Furthermore, they are involved in an online activity, which enables them to access the Internet with a vast body of information made available.

### Organization

Organization, which is marked by a clear method of organization and transitions used to connect sentences and ideas resulted in positive findings, as all the participants involved achieved 50%-80% of the total marks allocated for the organization element. The participants help to bridge between sentences with transitions such as “therefore”, “moreover”, “hence”, “on the other hand”, “thus”, “also”, “but”, and “so”. Additionally, the paragraphs were well organized with the use of connectors such as “firstly”, “secondly”, “thirdly” and “finally” from one paragraph to the other. Figure 2 illustrates the findings.

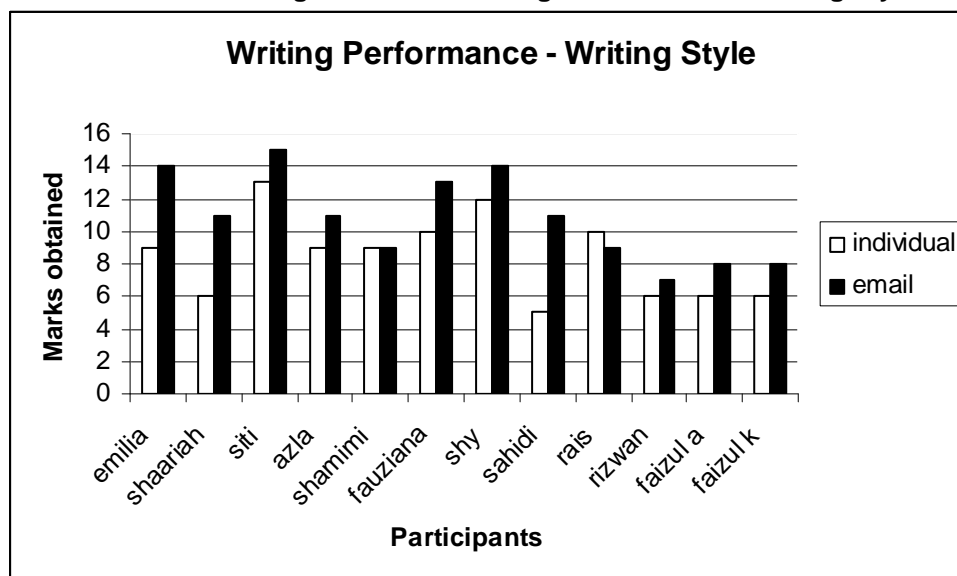
**Figure 2: Writing Performance - Organization**



### Writing Style

Of all the elements evaluated, writing style, which concentrates, on the clear flow of sentence, correct grammar and sentence structure, descriptive language and argumentative language, did not produce impressive findings. Only 58% of the participants involved attained 50%-75% of the total marks allocated for the writing style. Nevertheless, their performance is better compared to their individual task wherein only 33% of the participants involved attained 50%-75% of the total marks allocated for the writing style. Therefore, collaborative learning via email discussions generated better results compared with individual learning even though the participants did not use vivid and effective vocabulary, their word choice is appropriate. There are quite a number of spelling errors and minor punctuation errors but these did not distract the reader from the overall gist of the message. Figure 3 illustrates the performance of the participants' writing style.

Figure 3: Writing Performance – Writing Style





## Writing Performance

Overall, the students' writing performance via email discussions demonstrate improvements in the criteria included in the evaluation, namely in their content, organization and writing style. All the participants involved attained higher grades compared to their individual task. Thus the results of this study, which incorporates collaborative learning via email discussions and a writing process approach involving argumentative genre, were fruitful.

The outcomes that working in a computer-mediated collaborative learning environment, specifically working with asynchronous email discussions indicate positive and encouraging impact on students' writing performance. The use of email provided the students with a need to communicate and discuss a given task, specifically through the writing process approach which guided them to complete their task all the way through stages of the writing process. The task focused on a student-centred approach and the role of the instructor was to trigger and support the students' venture as it manifested itself. Once the correspondences were up and running, the social intervention from the instructor was minimal, only focusing on technical assistance. The students pursue the discussions progressively striving in accomplishing the task within the duration specified. Table 2 depicts the final results of the writing performance.

**Table 2: Final Results for Writing Performance**

Group	Name	Individual	Grade	Email	Grade
1	Emilia	50	C	74	B+
	Shaariah	28	F	52	C
2	Siti	64	B-	79	A-
	Annur	38	F	61	B-
3	Shamimi	47	C-	55	C+
	Fauziana	49	C-	74	B+
4	Sahidi	27	F	62	B-
	Shy	64	B-	78	A-
5	Rais	46	C-	53	C
	Rizwan	34	F	40	D

6	Faizul A	37	F	45	C-
	Faizul K	25	F	42	D

## Conclusion

The findings from this study are based on the limited data size, comprising email messages and writing transcripts from twelve participants involved in collaborative learning via email discussion. Thus, this study may be limited as it may not necessarily be representative of all existing email discussion. There is no claim to be made for the generalisation of findings from this study. However, the data from this study has its own interest and which could supplement existing knowledge, as the main findings have not been previously reported, particularly in the research context of Malaysian ESL classrooms. Although the findings for this study cannot be over-generalised as it has been conducted with only twelve respondents in one particular context, they do, however, provide a basis for further research and directions for a larger study. It is hoped that more studies in computer-mediated communication will generate more insights, knowledge and information that will lead to a broader understanding of the paradigms in network language teaching and learning specifically focusing on students' interactions and knowledge construction. In conclusion, it is hoped that educators and researchers will benefit from the information that yields from this study. It is desired to provide valuable insights for the future research in computer-mediated communication and collaborative language learning environment which is crucial and prevalent in the breathing age of information and communication technology.

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## Appendix 1

### Knowledge Construction Coding Scheme (adapted from Pena-Shaff and Nichols (2003))

Category and Description	Indicators
<b>Questions:</b> Gathering unknown information, inquiring, starting a discussion or reflecting on the problems rose.	Information seeking question
	Instruction questions *
	Discussion questions
	Reflective questions
<b>Reply:</b> Responding to other participants' questions or statements.	Direct responses to information-seeking questions
	Elaborated responses that includes information sharing, clarification and elaboration, and interpretation
<b>Clarification:</b> Identifying and elaborating on ideas and thoughts.	Stating or identifying ideas, assumptions and facts
	Linking facts, ideas and notions
	Explaining ideas presented by: using examples, experiences
	Identifying or formulating criteria for judging possible answers or to justify own statements (Making lists of reasons for or against a position)
	Arguing own statements
	Stating agreement or disagreement on topic
<b>Interpretation:</b> using inductive and deductive analysis based on facts and premises posed. Includes reflection and analysis when originating from the clarification process.	Reaching conclusions
	Making generalizations
	Summarizing
	Proposing solutions
<b>Conflict:</b> debating peer's points of view, showing disagreements with information in previous messages, and taken to an extreme, friction occurs.	Presenting alternative/opposite positions (debating)
	Disagreements
	Friction
<b>Assertion:</b> Maintaining and defending ideas questioned by providing explanations and arguments that defend original statements.	Re-statement of assumptions and ideas.
	Defending own arguments by further elaboration on the ideas previously stated.
<b>Consensus Building:</b> Trying to attain a common understanding of the issues in debate.	Clarifying misunderstandings
	Negotiating and giving suggestions
	Reaching to consensus or agreement

<b>Judgement:</b> Making decisions, appreciations, evaluations, and criticism of ideas, facts and solutions on piece of task given.	Judging the relevance of ideas, facts and solutions
	Making value-judgements
	Making comments and criticism *
<b>Reflection:</b> acknowledging learning something new, judging importance of discussion topic in relation to their learning.	Self-appraisal of learning
	Acknowledging learning something new
	Acknowledging importance of subject being discussed in their learning *
<b>Support:</b> Establishing rapport, agreeing with other people's ideas either directly or indirectly, and providing feedback to other participants' comments	Acknowledging other participants' contributions and ideas
	Feedback
<b>Other:</b> includes mixed messages difficult to categorize and social statements	Messages not identified as belonging to a specific category
	Social comments not related to the discussions: greetings, jokes, etc.

indicates the new indicators included by the researcher for the major study.

## Appendix 2

### Task-related Activity Category System (Noraïen Mansor, 2006)

Category	Indicators	F	%
Presentation of new information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ideas</li> <li>experiences</li> <li>theoretical ideas</li> <li>problems, inquiries</li> <li>instructions</li> </ul>	382	43
Explication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>elaborating ideas and views for clarification</li> </ul>	302	34
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>asking for and giving feedback</li> <li>judgment</li> <li>other comments</li> <li>suggestions</li> </ul>	214	23

Total	898	100
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### Non-task-related Activity Category System (Noraïen Mansor, 2006)

Category	Indicators	F	%
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>planning to start a discussion</li> <li>planning to end a discussion</li> <li>planning for future discussion</li> </ul>	94	28
Technical	Messages related to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>computer</li> <li>Internet/websites</li> <li>network system</li> <li>time</li> </ul>	13	3
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>social comments</li> <li>social expressions</li> <li>greetings</li> </ul>	142	42
Nonsense	Messages not related to the task at all	89	26
Total		338	100

## Appendix 3

### Argumentative Essay Marking Scheme (Noraïen and Sharon, 2000)

CRITERIA	MARKS		TOTAL
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<b>Introduction</b> Thesis statement and main ideas are clearly stated with a confident and effective tone	1 2 3 4 5	X 2	
<b>Support</b> Arguments/reasons with evidence /examples are used sufficiently	2 4 6 8 10	X 2	
<b>Coherence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear method of organization (List of items or a time order)</li> <li>• Transitions are used to connect sentences and ideas</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5	X 2	
<b>Paragraph Construction</b> Each paragraph contains a topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence within a paragraph relates to the topic sentence?	3 6 9 12 15	X 2	
<b>Writing Style</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear flow of sentence, correct grammar and sentence structure</li> <li>• Descriptive and argumentative language</li> </ul>	1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5	X 2	
<b>Conclusion</b> A strong concluding statement is stated in the last paragraph	1 2 3 4 5	X 2	
<b>Total</b>			

## Appendix 4

### Pre-test : Major Empirical Research-email instructions

#### Stage One-generating ideas

**This is an individual assignment. You are given five days to complete the assignment. Here is the prompt for your argumentative writing assignment.**

There has been a heated discussion about the issue of "English Language" in the readers' column in an English newspaper. Some people think that all subjects at the university level should be taught in English language to produce quality graduates, whereas others believe that not all subjects should be taught in English language. Now the editor of the newspaper is calling for the readers' opinions. Suppose you are writing for the readers' opinion column. Take one of the positions described above, and write your opinion in English.

#### Stage Two-Focusing

This stage focuses on the developing of the thesis statement for your essay.

To guide you to develop your thesis statement, please go to the website below.

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/thesis.html>

#### Stage Three-Structuring

This stage focuses on the developing of a paragraph which should include the topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. The website below will assist you to argumentative paragraph writing.

<http://www.santarosa.edu/~dpeterso/permanenthtml/tutorial/unifee.htm>



### **Stage Four-Drafting**

This website will lead you to obtain samples of argumentative essay for your reading before you start your draft  
(<http://www.eslplanet.com/teachertods/argueweb/frntpage.htm>).

### **Stage Five-Evaluation**

Attached is the evaluation checklist for you to complete when you evaluate your draft. Please submit it to me once you have completed the evaluation of the draft and the checklist.

### **Stage Six-Reviewing**

This is the final stage of the study. What you need to do is to review your essay so as to give the opportunity for you to enhance your essay writing. Then, submit your final essay to me.

## Appendix 5

### Email Instructions

#### Stage One-generating ideas

My dear students...

Stage One – Generating Ideas

(23<sup>rd</sup> August – 29<sup>th</sup> August)

Here is the prompt for your argumentative writing. You may start your discussion via e-mail and please do not forget to "cc" your e-mail messages to me. You are given 5 weeks to complete the assignment. Your first stage of discussion is "Generating Ideas" (brainstorming for ideas). You should complete your discussion by the date given above. Enjoy your discussion.

Prompt for stage 1:

There has been a heated discussion about the issue of "English Language" in the readers' column in an English newspaper. Some people think that all subjects at the university level should be taught in English language to produce quality graduates, whereas others believe that not all subjects should be taught in English language. Now the editor of the newspaper is calling for the readers' opinions. Suppose you are writing for the readers' opinion column. Take one of the positions described above, and write your opinion in English.

Best wishes,

Noraien Mansor

#### Stage Two-Focusing

My dear students,

Stage Two – Focusing

(30<sup>th</sup> August – 5<sup>th</sup> September)

This stage focuses on the developing of the thesis statement for your essay. To guide you to develop your thesis statement, please go to the website below. Then try to discuss with your partner on the thesis statement for your essay. Your thesis statement must be different from your partner but both of you can advise each other. Thank you and please proceed with your discussion.

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/thesis.html>

Best wishes,

Noraien Mansor

### Stage Three-Structuring

Dear students,

Stage Three – Structuring

(6<sup>th</sup> September – 12<sup>th</sup> September)

This stage focuses on the developing of a paragraph which should include the topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. You are to discuss with your partner on how to develop the paragraphs for the ideas in your first discussion. Discussion can be in point form but you need to develop only one complete paragraph as an example for your partner to review. The website below will assist you to argumentative paragraph writing.

<http://www.santarosa.edu/~dpeterso/permanenthtml/tutorial/unifee.htm>

Best wishes,

Noraien Mansor

### Stage Four-Drafting

Dear Students,

Stage Four – Drafting

(13<sup>th</sup> September – 19<sup>th</sup> September)

This website will lead you to obtain samples of argumentative essay for your reading before you start your draft

(<http://www.eslplanet.com/teachertods/arguweb/frntpage.htm>). You can start with your own essay individually. You are given only one week to complete your essay and once you have completed it, email it to me and your partner. Ask for comments or advice from your partner. If you can finish the essay earlier, is pretty better but make sure your partner complete his/hers before you exchange the draft of your essay for comments or advice.

Best wishes,

Noraien Mansor

### **Stage Five-Evaluation**

My dear students,

Stage Five – Evaluation

(20<sup>th</sup> September – 23<sup>rd</sup> September)

Attached is the evaluation checklist for you to complete when you evaluate your partner's draft. Please submit it to me once you have completed the evaluation of the draft and the checklist. Then we will proceed with the final stage and the interview.

Best wishes,

Noraïen Mansor

### **Stage Six-Reviewing**

My dear students,

Stage Six – Reviewing

(24<sup>th</sup> September – 26<sup>th</sup> September)

This is the final stage of the pilot study. What you need to do is to give your final comments either positive or negative on your partner's essay so as to give the opportunity for both of you to enhance your essay writing. Then, submit your final essay to me. Thanks and cheers.

Best wishes,

Noraien Mansor