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## Teaching Email Writing through Online Teaching Platform

Alicia Philip  
*Universiti Tenaga Nasional, Malaysia*

### Abstract

Email communication has been widely used in tertiary education as a mean of interpersonal communication (Huang, 2011; Baghestan, Indriyanto & Asfaranjan, 2016; Robinson & Stubberud, 2012). However, the lack of understanding of proper etiquette in e-mail writing results to frustration because students fail to convey their message effectively and professionally, hence unable to receive anticipated feedback from their lecturers (Kim et al., 2016). The necessity of email writing as a subject for English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is essential; unfortunately, this has been rarely addressed in classrooms. In addition, conventional style of teaching that is chalk and talk, only results to ineffective teaching of email writing etiquette. This is because through the advancement of technology, the designed educational system does not suit the students of today. The current students are known as digital natives who are impatient and prefer to receive instant information. They are also great at multitasking and appreciates instant gratifications. There is a need for an effective method to convey lessons on email writing etiquette to students to ensure that they are able to grasp the lesson better and are able to write effective emails. This study will shed light on the method used to teach email etiquette to first year foundation students using online teaching platform namely Blendspace, Padlet and Kahoot!. The results indicate that with these online teaching platforms, students' etiquette to email writing etiquette improve significantly. Clearly, technological infused learning along with active and collaborative learning employed by the instructor enables effective learning to take place.

**Keywords** Email writing; Online teaching platform; Digital natives

## Introduction

Email communication has been widely used in tertiary education as a means of interpersonal communication (Huang, 2011; Baghestan, Indriyanto & Asfaranjan, 2016; Robinson & Stubberud, 2012; Merdian and Warrior, 2015). It is a useful tool of communication preferred by lecturers due to its features that require content to be more correct, detailed, and arranged (Merdian and Warrior, 2015; Baghestan, Indriyanto, Asfaranjan, 2016; Levy, 1997). As a result, there has been a significant increase in the use of email as a form of interaction in tertiary institute (Judd & Kennedy, 2010; Li, Finley, Pitts, & Guo, 2011; Littlejohn, Margaryan, & Vojt, 2010) because it is a dependable alternative interaction method for discussion about the courses with their instructors and peers (Vrocharidou & Efthymiou, 2011).

However, students' failure in conveying their messages effectively and professionally is a result of their lack of understanding of proper etiquette in e-mail writing. Consequently, students are frustrated because they are unable to receive the anticipated feedback from their lecturers (Kim et al., 2016). For this reason, it is necessary for English lecturers to provide guidance for e-mail writing etiquette, in ensuring effective communication between students and lecturers (Lancaster, 2011; Kim et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2015). This points out the necessity of email writing as a subject for English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom but this is rarely addressed in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom (Stange, 2016). Although English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers realize the importance of teaching email writing etiquette, they are left at great disadvantage with lack of materials and conventional style of teaching that is chalk and talk (Puncreobutr, 2016), which only result in ineffective teaching of email writing etiquette.

### *The Lack in Educational System*

It is important to note that over the years through the advancement of technology, the designed educational system does not suit the students today. The students in this era has changed radically. The current batch of students represents a generation that matures with the bits and bytes of the digital age. Their entire lives have been surrounded with smart devices, the World Wide Web and all the tools and devices of technology (Prensky, 2001; Sarkar et al., 2017). Notably, the average tertiary students spend more time with their computers on the World Wide Web either playing video games or watching movies and series as compared to reading. Prensky (2001) reported that digital natives lavish their spare time exceeding 10,000 hours playing video games and more than 20,000 hours watching online movies and series but they only utilize less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading. Therefore, this reflects that technologies have become an inherent part of their lives (Prensky, 2001; Samaha and Hawi 2016).

## Literature review

### *Digital Natives*

The new generation batch of students that enters our classrooms are digital natives. These digital natives possess certain attributes that varies from their predecessor generation due to their continuous exposure to digital technologies (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott 2009) that results in their brains to be wired differently. As a result, this affects their perspective and methods to learning (Prensky, 2001; Sarkar et.al 2017). Typically, the current generation of students prefer to receive instant information thus utilize most of their free time on the internet because they have access to some or all of these technologies beyond the classroom walls. Therefore, information could be accessed within the comfort of their home environment.

Moreover, our digital native students possess shorter attention span and have a penchant for multi-tasking (Sarkar et al., 2017). Digital information world (2018) reports that the average duration of human's concentration has drop from twelve seconds in the year 2000 to eight seconds today as compared to a goldfish with the concentration length of nine seconds. Therefore, information presented to these digital natives should in graphical form that is simple and easy to comprehend rather than long-winded texts (Prensky, 2001) because digital native students are unable to tolerate slow-paced environment due to their cravings for speed thus they prefer simple and easy way to digest information with activities that are done in parallel process and requires multi-tasking.

Additionally, digital native students thrive on immediate feedback, instant gratification and frequent rewards for their effort (Prensky, 2001; Sarkar et al., 2017). As a matter of fact, digital native students function best when they are networked because they show a preference for group work and connectivity to peers which explains their preference to learn through activity. Consequently, collaborative learning environments are the best learning environment for these digital native students to ensure best result in their learning processes (Prensky, 2001; Sarkar et al., 2017; Aziz, 2017, Puncreobutr, 2016).

### *Digital Natives and Teaching Styles*

The conventional style of teaching such as lectures; lengthy PowerPoint slides and notes are obsolete while technology presents a variety of novel and fresh methods to attract these digital native students in and out of the classroom so that they become dynamic, independent, and invested learners (Prensky, 2001; Sarkar et al., 2017). Consequently, there is a need for an educational reform because the conventional educational teaching method does not address the need of these digital native learners (Prensky, 2001). A paradigm shift

from traditional education system to incorporating technology in the teaching and learning would be beneficial for these students (Prensky, 2001; Aziz, 2017, Puncreobutr, 2016).

Certainly, there is a need for an effective method to convey lessons on email writing etiquette to students to ensure that they are able to grasp the lessons better and are able to write effective emails. An innovative method to teach and improve students email writing etiquette is by using technology. This is a new version of learning in line with the current buzzword education 4.0 and blended learning that promotes students centred learning. This method of learning changes the role of the educator from sage on the stage to guide on the side while peers become significant entities in their learning. This enforces peer teaching and learning where students learn together and from each while the instructor acts a guide or a facilitator in class. (Aziz, 2018). Consequently, learning becomes more collaborative through the digitalization of education where students become active creator and contributor of knowledge (Sarkar et al., 2017; Schuster et al., 2015; Aziz, 2017). Nonetheless, this will enhance students' knowledge in particular lessons and develop crucial competences needed for the working world (Sarkar et al., 2017; Schuster et al., 2015).

### **Objectives**

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the utilization of online teaching platform to teach email etiquette to first year foundation students. Therefore, the following objectives are developed to meet the aims of this study:

1. To enable students to understand the importance of e-mail writing etiquette.
2. To help students to master e-mail writing etiquette through the use of online teaching platforms.
3. To understand the effectiveness of the online teaching platforms to teach e-mail writing.

### ***Online Teaching Platform Utilized***

Realizing the need to integrate technology to adapt to the learning styles of the current generation of students, the instructor incorporated three different online teaching platform to teach email etiquette namely Blendspace, Padlet and Kahoot!.

The first online platform used to teach email writing is Blendspace. Blendspace is a learning management system that is free for lecturers to organize and annotate digital resources into bundles of interactive lessons. Multiple materials could be incorporated into Blendspace like documents, web links,

videos and images from various different resources such as Youtube, the World Wide Web or even from the instructor's own personal computers. Students can access all of these materials using an URL provided by their instructor (Fong and Por, 2014; Sarkar, 2017). In addition, Blendspace provides the opportunity for students to discuss on the materials through discussion questions posed by the instructor thus this promotes collaborative learning (Sarkar et al., 2017; Schuster et al., 2015). Consequently, it facilitates an independent learning environment where learning can occur unrestrained by time and place (Sarkar et al., 2017). Moreover, class time is repurposed for more active and experiential learning.

Meanwhile, Padlet is a free multimedia wall similar to sticky notes but provides an online experience, encourage virtual, whole class involvement and assessment (Fuchs, 2014; Ellis, 2015). Padlet is an easy tool to use and works on a variety of smart devices (Fuchs, 2014). Padlet allows opportunities for peer to peer learning and self-assessment (Fuchs, 2014) by providing access to a vast variety of responses from classmates. It promotes collaborative learning even with shy and low esteemed students because Padlet has the choice to be unnamed. Therefore, students may seem to want to contribute in the class discussion. In addition, students receive immediate individual feedback from the instructor which shows that it creates a more targeted and genuine communication between teacher and students (Fuchs, 2014; Ellis, 2015). Moreover, instructors could use students' discussions as criteria to evaluate and improve their lessons (Fuchs, 2014).

The third and final online platform used to teach email writing is Kahoot!. Kahoot! is a free social learning tool in the form of interactive game. It is a novel student-response system that focuses on student motivation and engagement (Sarkar, 2015; Dellos, 2015). Through game-like quizzes, it engages students into learning (Byrne, 2013; Cross, 2014; Thomas, 2014). Using smart devices like smart phone, tablet or laptop, students can participate to play the game by typing a unique PIN displayed on the screen and creating username for themselves. The screen also displays the questions created by the instructor together with the answers while on the students' devices, only the answers are displayed. Kahoot! do not only promote competitive spirit in the learning process but improves engagement, motivation and perceived learning (Wang et al., 2011) because it provides students with the desired instant feedback that is preferred by digital native students (Sarkar et al., 2017).

## Methodology

This study was conducted on twenty-five first year foundation students in Universiti Tenaga Nasional. This study employs a qualitative research design in which observation and interviews are conducted between the lecturers and students. The students and lecturers are randomly selected for this study. There were five lecturers and five students interviewed. The research also observed the style of email writing of these students throughout the semester.

## Procedure

The teaching and learning of email writing etiquette is divided into three parts that are pre-class, while-class and post-class. In the first part, which is pre-class stage, the instructor utilized Blendspace as the online learning platform. This is where micro-lectures and videos replace lecture time in class. Students are to access the material via an URL link provided by the instructor through an email sent by the instructor. In addition, students are to discuss among their peers about the etiquette to email writing prior to class via Blendspace discussion section. Students learn at their own pace at an unconstraint time and place by customizing their learning experience through self-directed knowledge acquisition (Sarkar et al., 2017). Additionally, students can experience unrestrained access to learning materials that satisfies their individual needs (Sarkar et al., 2017; Aziz, 2017). This is to promote collaborative and active learning between the students and their peers while instructors can efficiently manage their digital content teaching materials (Sarkar et al., 2017; Schuster et al., 2015). The flow of the lesson before class stage is as in Figure 1:

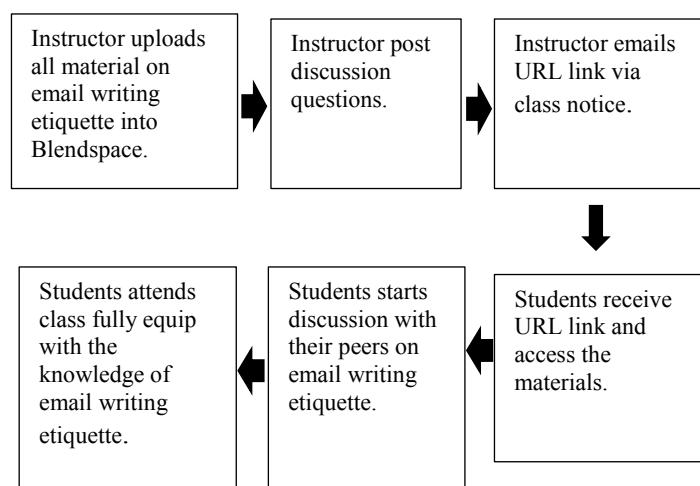


Figure 1 Pre-class Stage

The second part is the while-class part which is divided into two phase. In the first phase, active learning takes place. Students will enter class with questions and doubts about the materials that they access

in Blendspace and clarify their doubts with the instructor. The instructor acts as the facilitator in class while encouraging fruitful discussion and knowledge sharing between students and their peers. Once their doubts on email writing etiquette are cleared, the instructor divides the class into groups and provides students with sample of emails and two discussion questions for them to discuss in class. Students are to identify the poorly written emails and provide their opinions on the emails.

By going through the emails, students learn collaboratively and experientially by exchanging ideas and opinion about the style and format of the email sample. This method engages students into the learning process that results to knowledge about email writing etiquette obtained through the transformation of experience in reading the email sample (Kolb, 1984). At the end of the discussion, students present their opinions and arguments about the email sample to the instructor. The instructor then gauge from the students the correct format and etiquette to write an email, thus developing an email template with the students.

In order to evaluate students' understanding and familiarity with email etiquette, the instructor uses the second online platform, Padlet. This is the second phase of the active learning in class. The instructor creates a Padlet wall and designs a situation for the students to practice writing email using the correct format and etiquette. An URL link is provided for the students to access the practice. Students access the link through their smart devices such as smart phones, tablets or laptops in class. Students' contribution to the wall occurs in real-time which enables their peers to view their answers. The instructor encourages students to comment on each other's answers because students learn best from their peers (Aziz, 2017). Consequently, this method promotes peer learning as students are granted with immediate access to peer feedback through comment response in Padlet (Fuchs, 2014). In addition, students also receive immediate individual feedback from the instructor on their email etiquette writing practice. If students were unable to write the email according to the correct format and etiquette, they are required to edit their responses. The availability of immediate feedback is one of the criterions of digital native students. According to Thompson (2013), the presence of immediate feedback could increase their motivation and interest in the learning environment that could improve learning and result to effective and efficient teaching and learning of email writing etiquette. The flow of the lesson during class stage is as in Figure 2 and Figure 3:



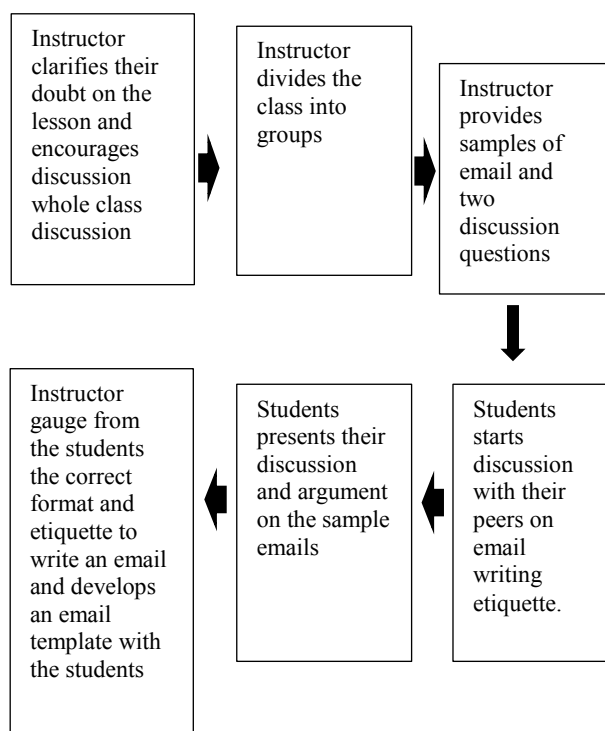


Figure 2 While-class Stage (Phase 1)

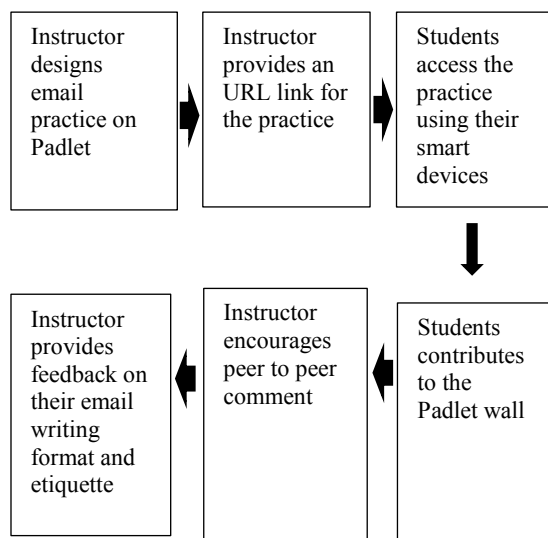


Figure 3 While-class Stage (Phase 2)

The third and the last part of teaching email etiquette is the post-class stage. This stage occurs in the next class before the instructor starts a new lesson. In this stage, the instructor utilises Kahoot! as the online learning platform. Kahoot! Is utilised as a revision for the lesson email writing etiquette. The

instructor creates a set of ten multiple choice questions for the students. The students will be asked to access into Kahoot! using their smart devices and enter in the PIN and user name. The questions and answers will be shown on the projected screen while only answers to the questions are displayed on the students' device in the form of symbols and colours. Students are to choose the correct answer within a time limit of twenty seconds. The use of Kahoot! could reinforce email writing etiquette lesson by developing students' competitive nature thus they gain valuable learning experience. Kahoot! tap into their intrinsic motivation, encourages curiosity among students especially when a question is incorrectly answered which allows for more discussion between the students, their peers and the instructor. The immediate feedback from Kahoot! enables students to evaluate their understanding on the lesson. This is because feedback is critical in the learning process especially for digital natives as it is their preferred learning style (Dellos, 2015). Consequently, Kahoot! promotes a fun learning environment and tests students in the learning process (Icard, 2014). Furthermore, Kahoot! provides opportunity for instructor to identify areas of weakness in content and delivery so that the lesson on email writing etiquette could be better improved. The flow of the lesson after class stage is as in Figure 4:

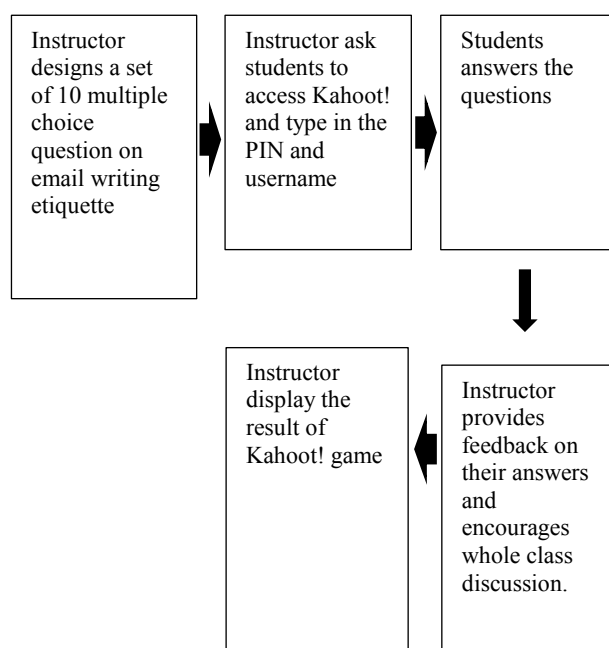


Figure 4 After Class Stage

## Results

### *Students' and Lecturers' Feedback on Email Writing*

The outcome of using these three online teaching platforms Blendspace, Padlet and Kahoot! improved the student's etiquette to email writing. Clearly, technological infused learning employed by the instructor

enables effective learning to take place Sarkar et al. (2017) claims that the paradigm shift employed by educators to integrate technology in their teaching is appropriate to the cognitive learning pattern of digital native students. Prensky (2001) explains that the current generation of students are different from their predecessors, thus educators need to reform their methodology and style of teaching to fulfil the requirements of these students to ensure that learning is made effective. Therefore, the use of these three teaching platforms show that effective learning has taken place. Students are seen to be participative in class through collaborative learning as they control their learning and the instructor acts as a guide to help them in areas that are unclear or doubtful and encourage meaningful discussion among their peers.

Consequently, the active, experiential and collaborative learning environment created by the instructor enables students to write better emails. This could be seen from the following excerpt of emails:

### Email Excerpt 1



Tue 6/30/2015 12:17 PM

Syed Amirul Fikri <syedjr97@gmail.com>

Absent English ENNF 103 class

To: Alicia a/p Philip

Dear Miss Alicia,

I, Syed Amirul Fikri bin Syed Ahmad Mustaffa, student ID, AP 94543, from Section 07 would like to say sorry for not attending English ENNF 103 class on 29th June 2015 from 1 pm to 4 pm. I had an accident on the same day around 11.20 am near the CIMB bank Abu Bakar Baginda. In that case, I have to skip your class to have my treatment and made a police report. Therefore, I cannot seat for the English test. Later, I will give you my medical certificate. I am sorry again because I delay my email to you as I felt weak yesterday. Other than that, I will try my best to learn from my friends for what I had missing in yesterday's class.

Thank you.

Syed Amirul Fikri (AP 94543)

### Email Excerpt 2



Wed 12/13/2017 5:10 PM

Abdul Qayyum <ayum375@gmail.com>

Permission For Not Attending English Class

To: Alicia a/p Philip

**i** You replied to this message on 12/18/2017 8:45 AM.



IMG-20171213-WA0005.jpg  
66 KB

Dear Mdm,

I am Abdul Qayyum bin Mohd Sabri PC96662 section 2 ENNF103. I want to ask permission for not attending English class at 3 to 6pm 14/12/2017 due to my representative in hockey tournament that will be held in USM this weekend. Here I inserted a document from USK, UNITEN. Hope to hear from you soon.

Thank you

Your faithfully,  
Abdul Qayyum b Mohd Sabri  
PC96662  
Section 2 ENNF103

### Email Excerpt 3

From: jasmin irisha <jasminirisha99@gmail.com>  
 Sent: Monday, November 19, 2018 11:04 AM  
 To: Eszleen Bt Sies <Eszleen@uniten.edu.my>  
 Subject: Special semester subject

Good afternoon Madam,


Greetings

My name is Jasmin Irisha binti Suhaimi, id AK97186, and a student in foundation of computer science. The reason for this email is because I would like to make an appointment with you regarding the special semester subject. I would like to make the appointment on Thursday at 11 a.m. if possible. Please email me if the appointment time is not suitable for you and the appropriate time to make an appointment with you.

Thank you for your time Madam and have a nice day.

Sincerely,  
 Jasmin Irisha binti Suhaimi  
 ID AK97186

### Email Excerpt 4

 Mon 5/6/2019 1:25:44 AM  
 Shatesh Raj <shatesh.raj@gmail.com>  
 Absent to class  
 To: Alicia a/p Philip


Good evening Ms. Alicia,

I'm sorry to say that I won't be able to attend class tomorrow and the day after as well due to my family having the 36th and 37th day prayers for my late grandmother. I will try my best to make it to class but it will be a bit late because the prayers will be for a short while and depends on traffic.

Thank you.

Regards,  
 Shatesh Raj  
 AK97235  
 ENNF1003

### Email Excerpt 5

 Fri 5/24/2019 9:52 AM  
 Nurul Alysha <uni.alysa@gmail.com>  
 Regarding MUET Textbook  
 To: Alicia a/p Philip  
 You replied to this message on 5/24/2019 3:20 PM.

Dear Miss Alicia Philip,

Good morning.

I am Nurul Alysha (ID : AK97440) and I am currently in your ENNF103 class of Section 01. The reason I am writing this email is to ask you whether is it alright for me to use Ace Ahead MUET 10th Edition as my textbook rather than the 11th Edition? This is because my senior is giving it to me since she has graduated last month.

Thank you.

Sincerely,  
 Nurul Alysha,  
 AK97440.

These excerpts of emails inform that students are now able to write good email with the right format and etiquette. Students have the ability to convey messages effectively and professionally after receiving replies from their instructors and lecturers. There are also less complains from the instructors as email messages are clear and concise with the right tone and formatting. The emails are now not laden with grammar errors. The following are the feedback from the instructors:

*Instructor 1*

My students write good email with proper email etiquette unlike the previous semester students. Their emails are so bad I don't even want to reply.

*Instructor 2*

There are improvements in email writing etiquette among foundation students. I am glad that now the emails make sense and I know what I should do to reply these emails. The emails are good with good grammar, right tone and also very polite.

*Instructor 3*

Foundation students' emails are pleasant to read. There are almost no grammatical errors. Most importantly, they introduce themselves and I know whom I am responding to.

*Instructor 4*

Well, there is no more venting in the emails. These students write excellent email. The tone of email is good and uses the right formatting. It is pleasant to read and to reply.

*Instructor 5*

My foundation students are good in writing emails and I now do respond to them. They are clear and polite. Very professional.

Clearly, these instructors were impressed with the professionally written email by students after being taught with email writing etiquette. As could be viewed from the excerpts, these instructors were happy with the improvement in students' style, tone and reduced number or none grammatical error in the emails they received from their students. This suggests that exposing students to the right etiquette to email writing enables students to write excellent and professional emails to their instructors.

*Feedback on Using Online Teaching Platform to Teach Email Writing*

The instructor also gathered feedback from the students on the use of these online teaching platforms. The students explain that the technology integrated teaching employed by the instructor has improved their email writing etiquette. The readily available materials provide easy access for students to obtain these materials as reference to compose effective emails to their lecturers. In addition, these materials cater to their

learning needs and matches with the characteristic of digital native students who wants easy to understand, concise and simple information. The notes on email writing etiquette are not lengthy but rather are in the form of infographic and videos. The space for peer to peer discussion encourages creative and critical thinking amongst these students as they need to be an active contributor to the lesson on email writing etiquette. This promotes active and collaborative learning. Moreover, the immediate feedback received by students helps them to retain and understand the lesson better. Instant gratification serves, as a motivation for these students be engage in the lesson and learn better. The following are the feedback from the students:

*Student 1*

I love to compete with others in class and it is really helpful for me to learn with Kahoot! Email writing activities help me to be more polite when writing an email to my instructor.

*Students 2*

The online teaching platform helps me understand the lesson better. Learning about email etiquette using online teaching platform improves my email writing skills. The in class group discussion helps me interact with my classmates and I learn to play a role in the group.

*Student 3*

Online teaching platform helps make lesson colourful. The email lesson helps me to refer to the examples when I need it in the future as it is readily available to me and I have access to it. I have also learned that writing good email is an essential communication skill. The group task helps me to learn collaboratively with my classmates. If one of us do not understand the topic, our friends can help explain. It is very effective. The class is not boring at all.

*Student 4*

In my opinion, using online teaching platform is good because students learn how to use online materials and learn better. It is also convenient. It encourages students to learn online. In addition, I can print the notes and exercise before class starts. It helps to study before class starts thus I am better prepared. The email writing lessons help me to write proper email the right way. Through the group discussion activities, I can exchange ideas with my group members. I can have discussions with them and this helps to improve my communications.

*Student 5*

The online teaching platform teaches me without me needing the teacher to be with me 24/7. I can write good email with the right etiquette and impress my lecturers so that I can get a response from them. The online teaching platform using Padlet helps me learn better as there is immediate rectification of error by my lecturer. It helps me improve my English. The group discussion is an excellent way to learn together and understand the lesson better.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Educators should realise that the majority of our students are digital natives thus there is a need for educational reform. The chalk and talk method is no more suitable for technological inclined students. Our students today are all “native speakers” of the digital language where information is readily available on their fingertips with clicks of buttons into the World Wide Web. Therefore, these students get easily switched off with the traditional method of teaching that involves lengthy lecturer slides and notes. Hence, they choose not to pay attention because they believe that the lessons are not worth their time as compared to their experience through the World Wide Web.

These digital native students want learning to occur beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. They want independence and autonomy in their learning that promotes their thinking. The current generation of students have preferences for active and collaborative learning environment which enables them to work with their peers.

In sum, as digital technology advances and the digital native population continues to grow, instructional methods must also continue to evolve to meet the needs of our students. As educators, we seek to assist students in knowledge acquisition that promotes optimum learning environment. This study has demonstrated how email-writing performance of the current generation of students can be improved through the utilization of free online teaching tools.

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### Authors' Bio

**Alicia Philip** is currently a lecturer in Universiti Tenaga Nasional. She teaches English to first semester foundation students. She holds her Bachelor and Masters of Education in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Currently she is enrolled as a PhD candidate in Postcolonial Literature in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Her areas of interest are material development, blended learning, young adult studies and re-visioning literary texts. She is passionate about teaching and constantly finds ways to improve her teaching skills.