

Email and Letter Writing: Practical and Functional Skills for Real-Life Communication in The EFL Classroom

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Abstract: In today's interconnected world, the ability to write effective emails and letters is a vital skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. While many traditional EFL writing lessons focus mainly on academic essays and grammar, students also need to develop the ability to communicate in real-life situations—such as writing to friends, teachers, employers, or organizations. Functional writing, including both emails and letters, plays a key role in helping learners build practical language skills they can use in everyday life. This article discusses the importance of teaching these types of writing in the EFL classroom, explaining how they help students improve their fluency, confidence, and understanding of context and audience. The article also outlines the main differences between formal and informal communication, and offers practical teaching strategies like simulations, peer letter exchanges, and template-based writing. These classroom activities aim to make learning more meaningful by encouraging real communication. Furthermore, the article highlights the role of digital literacy and intercultural understanding in modern communication, helping students become more aware of online etiquette and global communication styles. Overall, the article supports teachers in making writing instruction more useful, engaging, and relevant to students' real-world needs.

Keywords: EFL writing, email communication, letter writing, functional literacy, real-life tasks, classroom strategies, digital literacy.

Introduction: EFL learners often associate writing instruction with academic compositions, overlooking the real-world importance of practical genres like emails and letters. However, in today's globalized world, being able to write a clear, polite, and purposeful email or letter is essential for personal, educational, and career development (Nation, 2009). Teaching these forms of communication not only builds writing fluency but also develops sociolinguistic awareness—understanding how language varies depending on context, audience, and purpose (Hirvela, 2004). Moreover, emails and letters are among the most common means of international communication. Whether a student is applying for a scholarship abroad, requesting information from a university, or simply staying in touch with international friends, their ability to express themselves effectively through writing directly affects their success and confidence.

Unlike academic writing, emails and letters demand

attention to tone, cultural norms, and formatting. For example, a job inquiry email requires a formal tone, appropriate salutations, and a clear structure. In contrast, writing a letter to a friend allows for more informal expressions, contractions, and personal anecdotes. Mastering these differences enables learners to navigate various social situations effectively in English (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017). Letters are typically more structured, often including headings like address, date, greeting, body, closing, and signature. Emails, on the other hand, may lack physical format but still require careful subject lines, digital etiquette, and clear paragraphing. Understanding these distinctions helps learners choose the right form and style depending on the situation.

Firstly, teaching functional writing helps bridge classroom learning with real-life application. Many EFL learners will eventually need to write emails to professors, employers, or international colleagues.

Others may need to send letters for scholarships, applications, or personal reasons. Equipping them with the skills to do this increases both their language confidence and their global mobility (Grabe & Zhang, 2013).

Secondly, email and letter writing fosters learner autonomy and motivation. When students understand that they are learning something they can immediately use, their engagement increases. Writing becomes more than an academic requirement; it becomes a life skill (Nation, 2009).

Additionally, these genres support the integration of various language skills. Reading and analyzing model texts, discussing purposes, practicing vocabulary, and editing drafts all contribute to the holistic development of learners' English abilities.

To make writing instruction meaningful, teachers should introduce learners to a variety of email and letter types:

- **Formal letters/emails:** job applications, complaint letters, requests, cover letters, inquiry emails
- **Semi-formal emails:** contacting a teacher, asking for information, confirming appointments
- **Informal letters/emails:** writing to a friend or family member, sending congratulations or condolences

Each type introduces specific vocabulary, tone, and organization. For example, formal letters often use phrases like "I am writing to inform you" or "I would appreciate it if...", while informal emails might include "Hey!" or "How have you been?" Teachers can also use this categorization to design scaffolded lessons that gradually move from guided to independent writing.

Classroom Strategies and Activities

1. Email Writing Simulations:

Teachers can simulate real-life scenarios such as applying for an internship or writing to a school abroad. Students are given prompts and roles (e.g., student, teacher, HR manager) and tasked with writing and replying to emails. These activities develop not only writing skills but also critical thinking and audience awareness. Simulations can be extended into multi-step tasks, such as replying to follow-up questions or rescheduling appointments.

2. Peer Letter Exchange:

In this activity, students write informal letters to their classmates and exchange them in pairs or small groups. They can respond to questions, describe experiences, or share opinions. This promotes peer interaction and builds fluency. A variation includes pen pal programs

with other schools, either locally or internationally (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017).

3. Text Analysis and Reconstruction:

Provide students with sample emails and letters—some well-written, others with deliberate errors. Ask them to identify the mistakes, suggest improvements, and rewrite the texts. This helps raise awareness of tone, structure, and formality. Learners can also reflect on how small changes in wording or layout affect the overall clarity and impression.

4. Writing from Templates:

Beginner and intermediate learners benefit from structured templates. For example, a job application letter might include headings like Introduction, Experience, Skills, and Closing. Students fill in the sections and then write their own versions. Over time, they can move from using fixed templates to developing their own outlines and formats.

5. Cultural Comparison Discussions:

Students read sample emails or letters from different cultures and compare how politeness, directness, and formatting differ. This fosters intercultural competence and helps learners adapt their writing to global audiences (Wallace, 2003). Teachers may also encourage students to reflect on how these cultural differences might affect communication in academic or professional exchanges.

6. Email Projects and Portfolios:

As a long-term activity, learners can keep a portfolio of their written correspondence over a term. This allows them to track progress and reflect on their development. Teachers can also assign a project where students must plan and write a series of emails (e.g., planning a trip, organizing an event), integrating both language and organizational skills.

Real-World Examples in the Classroom

- A student writes a formal email to request a letter of recommendation from a former teacher, applying polite language, a clear subject line, and a concise message (Nation, 2009).
- Learners compose informal holiday letters to classmates or imaginary friends, sharing vacation plans and using expressive vocabulary (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017).
- Intermediate learners analyze a real customer service complaint email and then write a response from the perspective of the company, practicing tone and persuasion (Hirvela, 2004).
- A group project involves students collaboratively writing a series of emails between a company and a client, focusing on tone shifts and

professional vocabulary.

To ensure learners improve and feel confident in their writing abilities, assessment should be formative and task-based. Rubrics can include criteria such as clarity, tone, organization, accuracy, appropriateness to the audience, and formatting. Peer assessment and self-reflection tasks are also useful. Teachers might also assess over time by comparing early drafts with final submissions, highlighting students' growth. Portfolios and performance-based assessments (like email-response tasks under timed conditions) offer authentic measures of students' functional writing development.

As most modern communication happens online, it is essential to teach digital literacy. Students should learn how to format an email, use appropriate subject lines, avoid writing in all capital letters, and be aware of email etiquette. For instance, they should know when to use "Reply All," how to sign off politely, and how to avoid misunderstandings in tone (Nation, 2009). Teaching netiquette ensures learners communicate respectfully and effectively in digital spaces. Additionally, students should be made aware of privacy issues, the risks of forwarding sensitive content, and the importance of proofreading before clicking "Send." This prepares them for responsible communication in academic and professional settings.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the teaching of functional writing—especially emails and letters—should be seen as an essential part of EFL education, not just an optional topic. When students learn to write emails and letters, they are not only practicing grammar and vocabulary, but also learning how to express their thoughts clearly and appropriately in different real-life situations. This kind of writing connects directly to the real world, which helps students stay motivated and feel that their learning has a real purpose.

The strategies shared in this article, such as role-based simulations, peer writing exchanges, and cultural comparison tasks, give students the chance to develop both language and communication skills. These activities also encourage learners to think about their audience and adjust their tone and format accordingly. By practicing different types of writing—from formal job applications to informal letters to friends—students become more flexible and confident users of English. Furthermore, teaching email and letter writing is a great opportunity to introduce digital skills and online communication habits, which are essential in both academic and professional life today. Topics like email formatting, politeness, and cultural expectations online should be part of any modern writing curriculum.

Finally, helping students write effectively for real

purposes gives them a voice. It allows them to share their ideas, make connections, and succeed in many areas of life beyond the classroom. By focusing on functional writing, EFL teachers can empower students not just to pass tests, but to participate fully and confidently in English-speaking communities around the world.

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