

---

## **The Evolution of an Online Writing Test Standardisation in a Pre-service Communications Skills Course for Teachers in Singapore**

by [Mary Ellis](#)

National Institute of Education (Singapore, Singapore)

[Anitha Devi Pillai](#)

National Institute of Education (Singapore, Singapore)

and [Chan Hsiao-yun](#)

SIM University (Singapore, Singapore)

Keywords: writing assessment, writing test standardisation, increasing rater reliability,  
online standardisation

---

### **Abstract**

The National Institute of Education (NIE) is the provider of teacher education in Singapore and is an institution within the Nanyang Technological University; NIE is simultaneously accountable to the Ministry of Education in Singapore. A Communication Skills for Teachers course (CST) was introduced for all pre-service teachers at NIE in July 2005. A catalyst for the development of this course, which focuses on speaking and writing skills, was the perception that the standard of English of Singaporean teachers had declined. Since 2010, the course has been offered as a blended course and increasingly, several aspects of course administration have also been conducted online. The two main areas of assessment for the course are an oral presentation and a written test. In order to ensure that grading is consistent, standardisation meetings for these tests are important but not always possible given the tutors' varied schedules. This paper outlines the development and implementation of online standardisation for the written assessment component of the CST course. Utilising collaborative tools for standardisation saves time and reduces the need for face-to-face meetings for this important aspect of assessment.

### **Introduction**

This paper examines the use of various ICT tools for an effective writing standardisation exercise at a university in Singapore to address the problems encountered in the traditional face-to-face standardisation meetings. These meetings generally resulted in inconsistent

instructor attendance and subjectivity in comments made in meetings, which would not allow everyone's opinion to be heard or valued. Hence it was common for face-to-face meetings to require several follow-up discussions. This often resulted in a lack of standardisation.

### **Context**

The National Institute of Education (NIE) is the provider of teacher education in Singapore and has the responsibility to ensure that teachers are equipped with knowledge of the latest trends in education. An institution within the Nanyang Technological University, NIE is simultaneously accountable to the Ministry of Education in Singapore.

The Communication Skills for Teachers course (CST) was introduced in NIE for pre-service teachers in July 2005. A catalyst for the development of this course, which focuses on speaking and writing skills, was the perception that the standard of English of Singaporean teachers had declined. A 2008 review of the course resulted in some differentiation to suit participants on Diploma, Degree, and Post-Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) Primary and PGDE Secondary Programs (National Institute of Education, 2014).

A second review of the course was undertaken in 2010, resulting in the process of providing online modules for postgraduates training to become secondary school teachers. Initiatives described in *A Teacher Education Model for the 21st Century*, (National Institute of Education, 2009) about students' changing needs had an impact on this second revision. While not completely replacing the traditional classroom, online learning continues to develop as an alternative to face-to-face instruction (Marginson, 2004; Yuen & Ma, 2008). The rapid advancement of technology has resulted in "an impetus to increasingly develop online materials" (Mills, Gaynor & Harvey, 2005, p. 43) and the implementation of online learning has become particularly relevant for pre-service teachers.

As the CST course is mandatory for all NIE students (approximately 1000 students per year), both full time and part time tutors are mobilised to teach this large course, which has two main areas of assessment: an oral presentation and an email that together constitute 90 % of the final grade. (Table 1).

Oral Presentation (Individual)	Each student teacher is given 3 minutes to make an in-class individual oral presentation on a given topic. The topics are based on school contexts.  This oral test assesses student teachers on the knowledge/skills acquired from earlier tutorials.	45%
Written Analysis of Oral Presentation (Individual)	Student teachers are required to have their Oral Presentation delivery recorded for the purpose of Self analysis later.	
Written Test (Individual)	Student teachers are required to take an online written test which consists of writing an email based on a school context.	45%
Class Participation (Individual)	Student teachers are assessed on:  Attendance, punctuality, reading and preparation for discussion in tutorials – providing substantive and meaningful insights, their participation and collaboration in pair/group work activities, tutorial activities and presentations.  Promptness in uploading individual reflection blogs	10%

*Table 1: Communication Skills for Teachers Assessment Criteria 2014*

Due to the large number of teachers on the course, inter-rater reliability is a key concern when it comes to the assessments. Rater training is effective in minimising extreme differences in scores awarded and in increasing consistency amongst raters. - In order to ensure that grading is consistent, standardisation meetings for writing are important but not always possible given the tutors' varied schedules.

Such training sessions result in a conversation amongst “groups of like-minded individuals who look for and focus on similar essay features when making scoring decisions” (Wolfe, 1998, p. 485). A common bane amongst writing instructors is that these training sessions are difficult to schedule during busy examination periods; further, some report that many face-to-face standardisation sessions result in instructors leaving the meetings feeling “anxious, confused or frustrated, and with the realisation that they have not really been standardised even though the session concluded with similar scores on the benchmark essays” (Hamp-Lyons, 2007, p. 5). Not surprisingly, this has resulted in a growing number of studies that have explored an alternative to such face-to-face sessions by moving the standardisation meeting online. Hamilton, Reddel and Spratt (2001), for instance, explored the effectiveness of online training standardisation meetings while Knoch, Read and Randow (2007) compared the effectiveness of online training meetings with traditional face-to-face meetings. The findings from the studies indicate that the instructors are slightly more consistent with their scores than those who met face-to-face and in reducing “differences between raters in terms of lenience and harshness” (Knoch, Read & Randow, 2007, p.42).

## **Background and Development of Online Writing Module and Assessment Standardisation**

This section provides the context for the evolution of online standardisation within the writing module, starting from the importance of writing skills for pre-service teachers and the assessment involved in the writing module.

### ***Importance of Writing Skills for Pre-Service Teachers***

Good communication skills are essential in the workplace and this is especially true in an educational context. Teachers are required “to use written, oral and technological communication to establish a positive learning environment” (Ellis, Chong & Choy, 2010, p. 4). Such skills are especially important in multiracial, multilingual Singapore where English is the medium of instruction in the schools. Singapore, which hopes to become a knowledge hub in the region, seeks to develop a highly skilled service sector that is proficient in (Standard) English (Rubdy, 2007). English proficiency is seen as essential in Singapore because of its service industries and English based knowledge economies. Based on the results of a 2009 quantitative study on the communicative proficiency of graduating secondary school teachers

at NIE using the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), writing was found to be the weakest language skill (IELTS tests listening, reading, speaking and writing skills).

Though the current research was a baseline study of a small segment of the student teachers at NIE, with 21% of the graduating students scoring below the requisite NIE level of IELTS 7.0 on one of the components, it is recommended that greater attention be paid to writing proficiency of incoming students. The range of scores on the IELTS writing portion suggests that more can be done in the communications skills course to accommodate the varied abilities of students. (Ellis, Chong & Choy, 2010, p. 4)

### ***Writing Module in Communication Skills for Teachers Course***

To address the changing needs of pre-service teachers, the course is regularly reviewed and adjustments made to the curriculum. As a course designed to improve oral and written skills, practice tasks are included as well as exercise and group work in processes and communication strategies in the context of text types (Pelly, Tan & Zhang, 2009). Specific objectives of the written communication component of the course are:

- Apply understanding of purpose, audience and context to written communication
- Recognise importance of tone
- Demonstrate understanding of tone in planning an effective written message
- Understand the conventions of email use in the workplace and write an effective email
- Understand essential components of effective feedback on student work
- Formulate feedback that is adequate, encouraging and effective
- Provide guidelines for revision of writing

### ***Assessment for Writing Module in Communication Skills for Teachers Course***

The written test, which serves as the formal assessment for the module, constitutes 45% of the students' final grade. Students are required to write an email based on a school context.

From 2005 to the second semester of 2012 (NIE has a January and July intake each year) the written assessment of the course was conducted as an in class, handwritten test. This required various coordination and logistics such as producing different versions of the test to be given on different days. As this was a compulsory subject taken by students from various disciplines it was not possible to schedule a common time slot to suit all the students. Student feedback

from end-of-course surveys was particularly harsh, stating that it was unrealistic to compose an email as a written test. The following comment from a July 2011 CST course survey response was typical:

Assessment on writing is not practical at all- (writing an email in an examination) and student teachers will not be able to write at their best. (Kelly<sup>1</sup>, 2011).

Initial concerns about conducting the test online (which was more logical as it was an email task) centered on concerns of plagiarism and collusion with other students. Faced with mounting criticism from students and the need for greater authenticity, the CST course coordinators decided to conduct the assessment online starting from July 2012. Students are typically given the writing test topic at the beginning of the week and are required to first submit it through SafeAssign (plagiarism detecting software) and to the teacher by the end of the week.

### ***Standardisation Procedure for the Written Test (2005–2011) and Problems Arising***

For the purposes of ensuring grading was consistent, the original practice was for the course coordinator to ask tutors to survey their class papers after the in-class test and find a range of papers according to the written test grading criteria (Table 3 in the Appendix). These would be submitted to the coordinator (generally on Friday) who would look through them and bring them to a meeting usually held on Monday. This all had to be done quickly as it was towards the end of the term, which was stressful for all involved. The meeting would commence with the coordinator circulating papers and asking each person for their assessment. Disagreements would normally ensue and occasionally tutors would be asked to justify the grade they had given the paper. As the course at the time was large (650 students), several part time tutors were employed and inevitably not all would be available for the standardisation meeting. Approximately 10% were usually unable to make the scheduled standardisation meeting, which therefore affected the standardisation of grading.

### **Implementation of Online Standardization**

The use of online standardisation for the CST writing test for the Diploma cohort took place in 3 phases, which are detailed below. Phase 1 and 2 were similar as both took place before the

---

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym given for respondents on survey

test was conducted online. In both cases the tests were handwritten under timed conditions and the course coordinator had to scan and upload the sample papers in preparation for the course tutors. They also used the same rubric for evaluation (Table 3 in the Appendix) and NIE's Learning Management System, Blackboard. Phase 3 differed because the test had gone online and a different rubric was used (Table 3 in the Appendix). Google Forms (part of the Google Drive suite) were used to gather tutor feedback in addition to posting materials on Blackboard. All three phases used different tools.

### ***Phase 1: Standardisation Using Edmodo and Crocodoc***

In the August semester of 2011 the then coordinator of one of the CST courses decided to implement a partial online standardisation for the course tutors. This was a departure from the completely face-to-face methods employed since the inception of the course in 2005. An impetus for this procedural change was a desire for greater efficiency; the logistics of preparation and the meeting itself were time consuming. The writing test was still a traditional pen and paper (the online version was not implemented until 2012). The coordinator used the micro-blogging tool Edmodo as a platform for her standardisation exercise. She chose samples of test papers which seemed to be of different standards (based on the rubric in Table 3 in the Appendix), scanned them as PDFs (Portable Document Format (PDF) is an open standard for electronic document exchange), anonymised them, and then used the Web 2.0 tool Crocodoc for collaborative annotation. Crocodoc is an online tool which allows the user to annotate PDFs and share comments with others.

Tutors were sent the links to the PDFs on Crocodoc, and given a few days to look through them and make their comments. They were also asked to email their grades for these samples to the coordinator privately. This was followed by a face-to-face meeting, which was now considerably shorter than before. Traditionally, these meetings took around three hours. Tutors had been given sufficient time to analyze the samples and the coordinator also had time to consider everyone's opinions before the meeting.

Unmarked essays were then posted and tutors given a time period to mark. Final grades and comments were then posted. Feedback from tutors was positive on this new procedure. The prompt below was used for the test, and Figure 1 shows a sample paper with remarks from the course tutors using Crocodoc.

**The Prompt**

You are a teacher at Coral Edge Primary School, where there has been a recent outbreak of influenza among students. You have been tasked by your Principal, Ms Lim, to draft an email that will be sent on behalf of the school to canteen stallholders to urge them to take appropriate measures to prevent the flu from spreading further. These measures are to be based on advice by the Ministry of Health for schools and childcare centers, reproduced below.

1. Encourage care providers and children
  - To use soap and water to wash hands when hands are visibly soiled, or an alcohol-based hand cleaner when soap and water are not available and hands are not visibly soiled.
  - Advise children and care providers to cover their noses and mouths with a tissue when sneezing or coughing, and to put their used tissue in a waste basket.
  - Make sure that tissues are available in all nurseries, child care rooms, and common areas such as reading rooms, classrooms, and rooms where meals are provided.
2. Hand hygiene to prevent the spread of germs
  - a. Care providers to wash their hands
    - When the hands become soiled especially after they have sneezed or coughed on their hands.
    - Between contact with infants and children.
    - After touching surfaces soiled with saliva or nose drainage.
  - b. Children are to wash hands when their hands have become soiled. Teach children to wash hands for 15-20 seconds (long enough for children to sing the “Happy Birthday” song twice). When using the alcohol-based hand cleaner:
    - Rub hands thoroughly until the alcohol has dried, when using alcohol-based hand cleaner.
    - Keep alcohol-based hand cleaner out of the reach of children to prevent unsupervised use.

Ensure that sink locations and restrooms are stocked with soap, paper towels or working hand dryers.

Part 1

To:	Principal <py.lim@coraledgeps.edu.sg>
Cc:	vice principal
Subject:	Measures to prevent the flu from spreading further
Attached:	The prompt

Dear Ms Lim,  
The draft email to canteen stallholders is as follows, please take a look, thank you!

Dear Canteen stallholders,  
I'm Miss Wen from Coral Edge Primary School, in our school there have been a recent outbreak of influenza among students, it's very dangerous. I'm <sup>on</sup> behalf of the school to explain to all of you about taking appropriate measures to prevent the flu from spreading further please take note of

Annotations sidebar:

- unnecessary
- unnecessary
- why include this
- inappropriate
- tone
- ???
- note to P rather informal
- introduction to stallholders - nec?& from school?
- tone/register
- lang

Annotations on page:

- unnecessary - Modified today
- unnecessary - Modified today
- inappropriate - Modified today
- why include this - Modified today
- tone - Modified today
- ???
- introduction to stallholders - nec?& from school? - Modified today
- introduction to stallholder... - Modified today
- tone/register - Modified today

Figure 1: Sample Paper with Collaborative Annotations using Crocodoc

### Phase 2: Standardisation using Blackboard

The CST course offered later in the August 2011 term used a similar procedure for the online standardisation. Instead of the use of Crocodoc as in Phase 1, the platform used for the online standardisation was Blackboard. Following administration of the test, three tutors chose sample papers of different levels based on the rubric (Table 3 in the Appendix) and met to discuss a final grade and assign comments. The scanned papers were posted on the CST course site on Blackboard and typed comments added. Tutors were given a few days to look through the sample papers and contact the coordinator if they had any questions. Then, 2 unmarked papers were posted and tutors were given time to mark the papers. Finally, grades and comments which had been agreed upon by the marking team were posted and tutors were again encouraged to contact the coordinator with any questions or comments. Unlike Phase 1, there was no follow-up face-to-face meeting. This was the first time the standardisation for the writing test had been conducted completely online.

Subsequent standardisation for the writing test for CST PGDE Primary and Secondary cohorts has followed the procedure discussed in Phase 3 below.

### ***Phase 3: Standardisation Using Google Forms***

The written test had traditionally been a pen and paper test which required students to write an email of 300 words to stakeholders. While this was effective in terms of examination logistics, it was certainly not reflective of practice, where teachers would have time to edit and review their email before sending it to the recipients.

It was decided to trial the test being administered online with the Diploma cohort. The test was posted on Blackboard on a Monday morning and students had a week to respond to the prompt and to upload their emails and reflective essays. All responses were checked for instances of plagiarism using SafeAssign.

### ***Description of the New Test***

The test comprised two sections where students were required to first write an email addressing a situation that would possibly arise in their work environment in the future, such as explaining a new rule to parents and to address their concerns, as well as a rationale essay explaining the rhetorical choices that they took in order to achieve the purpose of the task. (See sample prompt below)

#### Written Test Prompt CST (2012)

##### **Context**

**Part 1: An Introductory Email to Parents** You are a teacher at Governors View Primary School/ Governors View Secondary School\*. You have been asked to take over a Core Curricular Activity (CCA) with a high attrition rate.

Write an introductory email to the parents of the students in your CCA group. The purpose of your letter is to:

- introduce yourself to the parents,
- inform them of the benefits of active participation in CCA,
- encourage them to play a larger role in the activities and events organised by the CCA group.

##### Part 1: Email

To write your email, use any relevant information given in the prompt above. You may include any reasonable additional information that you

think would be appropriate to meet your readers' needs and achieve your purpose. Write about 300 words. Include your word count at the end of Part 1.

#### Part 2: Analysis

You should use this section to reflect on the decisions that you made while writing the email as well as provide justifications for including or excluding information.

What influenced the decisions you made? Why do you think it would be an effective message to send?

Do not write more than 200-300 words. Include your word count at the end of Part 2.

#### ***Current Assessment Rubrics***

The emails and rationale essays were graded independently and awarded separate grades. The aim of the reflective essay was for student teachers to explain their linguistic choices and rationale for selection of materials and information to build or maintain positive relationships with all stakeholders. As such the essays played an important role in understanding their choices. The rubrics were then redesigned to assess the emails and the reflective essays holistically based on Content, Language Use (Accuracy & Structure) and Awareness of Audience, Purpose and Context.

The rubrics required tutors to read the second part of the response which was the inclusion of the reflective essay of 200 words explaining the linguistic choices that the student writers had made in the email. This posed an additional logistical concern for face-to-face standardisation meetings as tutors now were required to read two pieces of writing from each student before deciding on the grade.

It was hence decided that the standardisation could take place online using the Google Forms survey tool where tutors could review the student scripts and award bands at their own pace. This would ensure that they could revisit the scripts as many times as possible to become familiar with the test rubrics and the various types of responses. They would also provide an explanation for the scores that they had awarded.

***Annotated Student Scripts***

To minimise the negative elements of an unproductive standardisation meeting, Hamp-Lyons (2007) recommends setting a 'positive sharing culture' where one reader's analysis of an essay is presented to the rest of the team who then might embellish the initial analysis with notes on some other aspect of the writing and help them to revise their initial analysis in some cases. Apart from setting a positive tone to encourage instructors who might have been hesitant to share their scores with others without knowing the benchmark or the opinion of their peers to be more open about their own analysis, the annotated scripts provided all instructors with authentic examples from students' scripts.

In the absence of a face-to-face meeting the annotated notes described how a script conformed to a band. The annotated scripts matched the features of the writing to the marking rubrics specifically. Tutors were then provided with a set of student papers that they could grade on their own after reading the notes and assign a grade in their own time. The annotations indicated tutors' assessment of how the task requirements (TR) were addressed by the students (Figure 2).

Script 5: Humble Request for more Support in your Child’s CCA

T : Parents of XYZ CCA Group  
 c  
 C  
 C  
 Subject : Humble Request for more support in your child’s CCA

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am --- and I have been working in Governors View Primary School as a Mother Tongue (MT) teacher for the past 3 years. I am in charge of the Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) department for this semester.

Our school is popular for its variety of CCA activities. Most of our CCA activities have earned gold, silver and bronze medals in international competitions. [comment]

Active participation in CCA activities benefits your child in many ways. Firstly, it develops your child physically by maintaining the fitness and health of your child. Secondly, it nurtures your child with essential traits such as teamwork, integrity, determination and respect. Thirdly, CCA activities identify the special talent in your child and provide opportunities to stretch his or her potential. [I would like to thank all of you for being a supporting pillar for your child to participate in these CCA activities despite your hectic schedule. Our CCA committee has made some changes so that you could play a greater role in your child’s CCA.]

[We would appreciate if you could spare some time from your busy schedule to be present on the days your child is attending his or her CCA activity. The CCA committee is aware that most of you are working parents. Thus, we have decided to hold our CCA activities only on Saturday mornings. [We would appreciate if you could be present with your child during his or her CCA so that he or she would feel more motivated to excel in whichever CCA activity he or she is pursuing.

[We also strongly encourage you to take videos of your child participating in CCA events. In this way, you could identify the areas your child needs more support and coach him or her. This also gives a sense of recognition for your child.

Comment [A13]: Overly polite to the point of being obsequious

Comment [A14]: Purpose not stated

Comment [A15]: Abrupt transitions

Comment [A16]: Language use, Tone

Comment [A17]: Inappropriate language use, Tone

Comment [A18]: Inappropriate language use, Tone

Figure 2: Annotated script

A brief summative report was also provided at the end of each script to explain the grade awarded for the three components, as shown in Table 2.

Language & Accuracy	PAC	Content
<b>B</b>	<b>C+</b>	<b>C+</b>
<b>Occasional errors either slips or due to ambitious structures or odd vocabulary</b>	<b>Register and tone are often noticeably inappropriate for given audience.</b>	<b>Many points are addressed and well organised.</b>

<b>Paragraph and sentence lengths are mostly appropriate for the medium</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are occasional errors in the email</li> <li>• Positioning of information generally appropriate.</li> <li>• Paragraph lengths can be shorter.</li> <li>• Sentence lengths do not impose on reading load.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The tone of the letter is inconsistent;</li> <li>• While attempting to build rapport, it also comes across as somewhat demanding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The message will not be entirely successful since the underlying purpose for all the suggestions for parental involvement remain unclear.</li> <li>• The analysis does help the reader understand the writer's aims, though these are not made explicit in the email (e.g., winning as a motivating factor for parents and students).</li> </ul>
<b>Overall Grade Awarded: B-</b>		

*Table 2: Summative Comments on the Task*

One of the tutors involved in the exercise described the annotated scripts to be “comprehensive and ...a good indication for marking (and that) ... the coordinators have also provided good and short feedback on each script in the margins that I used for awarding marks and deciding on the merits of the scripts (sic)” (Bob<sup>2</sup>, 2013)

The annotated scripts had been shared with two colleagues who gave additional input and verified the grades awarded to each script. Detailed annotated scripts proved to be a crucial part of the online standardisation exercise as they enabled tutors to refer to the notes when in doubt, and to examine the rationale for awarding a grade. Tutors were given a week to respond to the task on a Google Form survey with a grade for each paper and their rationale for awarding the grade. The results from the survey were then generated into a report and shared with the tutors on the course. Tutors' names were not revealed.

Feedback from the tutors indicated that they preferred the online standardisation exercise using Google Forms as it gave them ample time to review the scripts and to review the assessment requirements. The grades and rationale submitted by the tutors were shared with them with the

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym given for respondents on survey

course chair's grades and notes on the scripts. Tutors were invited to write in to ask for clarification on the scripts. Like the instructors in Hamp-Lyons' 2007 study, the tutors found the exercise to be less stressful than having to provide clarification during standardisation meetings. For instance, one of the tutors shared the following comment:

It was not particularly useful to attend a meeting where I trial mark on the spot or to provide a grade that is then revised by a course chair (option B - online standardisation). In both cases it seems to be less efficient than simply having a comprehensive marking guide to refer to at the start. Additionally, at face-to-face meetings an outspoken course tutor may seem to dominate the meeting. Or a course tutor may be expected to justify his/her grades to the whole group. And it seems to vary by coordinator whether s/he expects the group to come to a consensus for grading or whether it is more of a "corrective" exercise. (Sally, 2013)

The tutors were more forthcoming in the online standardisation exercise than they were in the face-to-face session and provided detailed comments on each script during the online standardisation exercise. This can be seen in the feedback they gave, for instance, to support the scores they awarded for the content component (Table 6 in the Appendix).

## **Conclusion**

Based on the experience of the gradual development and eventual full scale implementation of online standardisation for the written assessment outlined above, online standardisation has been shown to have advantages over the traditional face-to-face standardisation meetings. This method has solved the issue of finding a common meeting time and allows tutors more time for marking and reflecting on the assessment process. It also has ended the sometimes confrontational aspect of face-to-face meetings.

## **Recommendations**

When using online standardisation, there are a few pointers to keep in mind. First, in order to achieve a unified understanding of the band descriptors, the answer key should also include annotated student scripts where the marginal notes illustrate how the band descriptors have been interpreted by coordinator(s). This step minimises any ambiguity tutors might have when grading their own assigned scripts in a shorter span of time.

Second, the selection of the mode of the standardisation depends on the medium of the test. For instance, if it is a pen and paper test, it might be more time-consuming to type out the papers and annotate them; in such instances, tutors could choose to work on PDF documents using Crocodoc. One also has to ensure that the selected tools are readily available and relatively user-friendly for online standardisation to be effective. Online tools such as Google Forms or the ICT tools described in this paper, which were all free of charge and easily accessed by our instructors, are examples of useful tools to use.

Digital tools should be chosen for their specific affordances. In this case, the platform Crocodoc is ideal for collaborative online annotations on PDF documents. Real-time collaboration of this kind is useful and time-saving and obviates the need to email documents back and forth. It also prevents revisions from being missed in the melee of emails. Google Forms presents users with the advantage of collating survey responses in real-time into easy-to-use formats such as spreadsheets and charts. The survey administrator can therefore quickly eyeball survey results and share them (if necessary). Neither tool requires that respondents have accounts, thus pre-empting a common barrier to the use of new technology. However, a perennial concern with digital technology is security; extra care must for instance be taken to preserve the anonymity of standardisation scripts.

## References

- Crocodoc: HTML5 Document embedding. (2014). Retrieved August 14, 2014 from <http://personal.crocodoc.com/>
- Edmodo: Microblogging for educators. (2014). Retrieved August 14, 2014 from <https://www.edmodo.com/>
- Ellis, M. E., Chong, S., & Choy, Z. (2010). IELTS as an indicator of written proficiency levels: A study of student teachers at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 60, 11-18.
- Google Forms. (2015). Retrieved August 14, 2014 from <https://drive.google.com/>
- Hamilton, J., Reddel, S., & Spratt, M. (2001). Teachers' perceptions of on-line rater training and monitoring. *System*, 29, 505–520.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2007). Worrying about rating. *Assessing Writing*, 12(1), 1-9.

- Knoch, U., Read, J., & Randow, J. (2007). Retraining writing raters online: How does it compare with face-to-face training? *Assessing Writing*, 12(1), 26-43.
- Marginson, S. (2004). Don't leave me hanging on the Anglophone: The potential for online distance higher education in the Asia-Pacific region. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 58, 74-113.
- Mills, J., Gayner, E., & Harvey, R. (2005). What makes provision of e-learning successful? Charles Sturt University's experience in Asia. *Education for Information*, 23, 43-55.
- National Institute of Education (2009). *A teacher education model for the 21st Century*. Singapore, Singapore: National Institute of Education (NIE).
- Student Survey (2011). English language and literature, Communication skills for teachers course, PGDE Primary, Course survey: July 2011. Singapore, Singapore: National Institute of Education (NIE).
- Tutor Survey (2013). *English language and literature, Communication skills for teachers course, Tutor survey: August 2013*. Singapore, Singapore: National Institute of Education (NIE).
- National Institute of Education (2014). NIE Admissions. Retrieved August 14, 2014 from <http://www.nie.edu.sg/study-nie/admissions/teacher-education-undergraduate-studies>
- Pelly, C., Tan, M. Y., & Zhang, D. (2009). *Communication skills for teachers*. Singapore, Singapore: McGraw Hill.
- Rubdy, R. (2007). Singlish in the school: An impediment or a resource? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 28(4), 308-324.
- Wolfe, E. (1998). The relationship between essay reading style and scoring proficiency in a psychometric scoring system. *Assessing Writing*, 4(1), 83-106.
- Yuen, H. K., & Ma, W. K. (2008). Exploring teacher acceptance of e-learning technology. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 36, 229-243.

**Appendix**

Table 3: Writing Test Grading Criteria

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Descriptors</b>
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The response shows full understanding of the purpose of the task.</li> <li>• There is clear awareness of the audience and context.</li> <li>• The format is entirely appropriate for the task and context.</li> <li>• All the required points are addressed in detail, fully amplified and well-organised.</li> <li>• The register and tone are entirely appropriate for the given context.</li> <li>• Apart from very occasional slips, the language is accurate.</li> </ul>
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The response shows an understanding of the purpose of the task.</li> <li>• There is awareness of the audience and context.</li> <li>• The format is appropriate for the task and context.</li> <li>• All the required points are addressed but not well developed and organised.</li> <li>• There is evidence of effort to achieve an appropriate tone and register for the given context.</li> <li>• The language is accurate with occasional errors which are either slips or are due to ambitious structures or odd vocabulary.</li> </ul>
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The response shows some understanding of the purpose of the task.</li> <li>• There is some awareness of the audience and context.</li> <li>• The format is generally appropriate but may not be completely so for the task and context.</li> <li>• Most of the required points are addressed but not developed and organised.</li> <li>• There are slips in the register with some unsuitable use of words but the tone is generally appropriate to the topic.</li> <li>• The language is mostly accurate and errors that arise do not affect clarity.</li> </ul>
D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The response shows only partial understanding of the purpose of the task.</li> <li>• There is some confusion about the audience and context.</li> <li>• The format is inappropriate for the task and context.</li> <li>• Not all of the required points are addressed.</li> <li>• There are several slips in register and the tone is uneven.</li> <li>• The language is sufficiently accurate to convey meaning.</li> </ul>
F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The response shows misunderstanding of the purpose of the task.</li> <li>• There is confusion about the audience and context.</li> <li>• There is little evidence of an attempt to adopt a specific format to suit the task and context.</li> <li>• Almost no required points are addressed.</li> <li>• The register and tone are inappropriate for the given context.</li> <li>• Language errors are frequent and serious.</li> </ul>

Table 4: Assessment Components

<b>Assessment Component</b>	<b>Focus</b>
-----------------------------	--------------

Content	Adherence of task requirements for the email Teacher's intention is clearly signaled in the email and reflective essays
Audience, Purpose & Context	Awareness of audience and the needs of the audience Purpose of the task is clearly signaled indicating the teacher's understanding of the situation/task Appropriate use of register and tone to suit the purpose of the task
Language Use & Rhetorical Structure	Accuracy in spelling and grammatical choices Positioning of Information Appropriate and varied paragraph and sentence lengths

Table 5: Excerpt from the Marking Guidelines

These guidelines are provided to assist instructors in interpreting the band descriptors with reference to the test questions. The guidelines are meant to be read with the test paper and the band descriptors for the writing test.

The task requirements are:

1. Introduce themselves to parents (to build rapport with them)
2. Address how they would address the high turnover rate (explicitly or implicitly) ((to build rapport with them)

Note:

In expressing how they would address the high turnover rate, students may either state their concern explicitly in their email or include activities that parents could participate.

The latter implies the writer's desire to build rapport with parents and this would have to be explicitly stated in the analysis.

Provide a holistic mark for the test.

<p><b>B-</b> <i>The majority of required points are addressed and/or well organised.</i></p>	<p><u>Email</u></p> <p><i>Task Requirement 1 (Introduction):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The writer demonstrates effective selection and organisation of facts about the teacher to build rapport with parents <b>some of the time.</b></li> <li>▪ The information presented about the teacher is relevant <b>(some of the time)</b> to the job scope and will be of interest to parents.</li> <li>▪ <b>This component could have been left out completely in the email or addressed minimally. Writer could have focused only on measures on how to address attrition rate.</b></li> </ul>
--	--

<p><b>C+/C</b></p> <p><i>Many/some required points are addressed and /or well organised</i></p>	<p><i>Task requirement 2 (Addressing Attrition Rate):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Proposes actions/activities to address attrition rate. Attempts to build rapport through suggestions but proposed suggestions may read like a list of facts.</li> <li>▪ There may be one or two minor inaccuracies or ambiguity in establishing why some actions/activities were proposed.</li> <li>▪ The email may read like a short list or be ambiguous which does not clearly illustrate how the proposed activities would help to build rapport with parents.</li> </ul> <p><u>Analysis: How the writer build rapport with parents?</u></p> <p><i>Discussion about activities:</i> Writer does not clearly explain how the proposed activities will build rapport with parents. Writer may include several details that are not relevant to the purpose.</p> <p><i>Discussion about personal information about teacher that was included in the email:</i> Writer does not provide a rationale for how much personal information is revealed.</p> <p><i>Overall:</i> Writer demonstrates some understanding of how teachers could build rapport with parents.</p> <p><b>NOTE:</b></p> <p>In these bands, the writer <b>would have met only ONE of the task requirements</b>. But there would be <b>one or two details that are not relevant</b> to the purpose of building rapport with parents.</p> <p>Do not award this band, if the writer <b>does not meet at least one task requirement</b> of the task.</p>
---	---

Table 6: Tutors' Comments on Student's Script

	Grade	Comments
Tutor 1	C	<p>Introduction - includes some irrelevant information about self.</p> <p>Body- attempts to build rapport by highlighting the benefits of CCAs - reads like a list of facts; proposes actions/activities to illustrate how the proposed actions would help to build rapport with parents;</p>

		<p>Conclusion- rather general.</p> <p>Overall- The writer demonstrates some understanding of how teachers could build rapport with parents; some required points are addressed.</p>
Tutor 2	C+	Telling parents to attend CCAs with the child and video them is bizarre to say the least - and the decision to hold these CCAs on Saturday morning because of the parents' hectic schedules is a very subjective audience benefit
Tutor 3	C	The CCA group is missing and the activities are unspecific as compared with Script 4.
Tutor 4	C	<p>Content appears contradictory. Second paragraph and last paragraph appear to be thanking parents for their support yet the in between paragraphs indicate that support from parents is needed.</p> <p>The school appears to be winning medals and doing well so the purpose of this letter is unclear.</p> <p>No sign of high attrition rate indicated anywhere. Therefore, no real suggestions provided.</p> <p>The analysis does not address the 2 main questions in the prompt.</p>
Tutor 5	C+	<p>-Subject line should not sound like a desperate plea</p> <p>-Writer does not include which CCA she is in-charge of in the introduction</p> <p>-There is no focus on a specific CCA and there was no clear explanation on why parents needed to be present during CCAs.</p>

---

### **About the authors**

Mary Ellis is currently a senior lecturer at the National Institute of Education (Singapore), where she teaches Communication Skills for teachers, Academic Discourse Skills, Pragmatics and IT in the Language classroom. Her research areas include information literacy, information-seeking behavior, digital literacy, and academic writing.

Anitha Devi Pillai is a lecturer and teacher educator at the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education (Singapore). Her doctoral dissertation examined the discourse structures of student research papers and the acculturation practices of students to writing. Her expertise lies in text-analysis of student papers, development of written tests/tasks and in writing pedagogy.

Chan Hsiao-yun has taught at NIE, NUS CELC and SIM University. She is currently also a PhD student with Lancaster University. With a specialisation in language testing, she is researching the assessment of digital literacies. Find her online at <http://hsiaoyun.net/>.