

E-mailing to Improve EFL Learners' Reading and Writing Abilities: Taiwan Experience

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Introduction

My students in Sophomore EFL Writing at National Chung Hsing University (NCHU) have consistently written to key pals from another culture as one of the course's main activities since September 1996 when I met Malcolm Beazley, a professor at the University of Sydney, Australia, who founded Computer Pals Across the World (CPAW <<http://reach.ucf.edu/~cpaw>>).

But I did not think that my emailing projects were especially successful until late 1998 when I delivered a lecture on 'American, Chinese and German modes of making new friends: An email swapping program' to my colleagues at Feng Chia University (FCU) in Taichung Taiwan. Following the lecture, two EFL teachers told me privately that they had once tried using email with their classes and soon lost track of students' progress. They also complained that their students were lazy and wondered how I had handled the program for two and a half years. They asked for my written teaching tips.

I had been teaching emailing and was not aware of how instructions were so important until September 1998 when a student from another teacher's class asked me to arrange for him to have a key pal from another country. I asked him to write an email greeting letter to a foreign key pal and send it to my address. He wrote in Chinese without salutation, complimentary close or signature, translated into English as, "I was the student who went to you yesterday. Did you get my email?" Finally in his fifth email to me, he began to sign his name, Eric. He never used any complimentary close. My attempts to teach Eric were unsuccessful because he never answered my email directed to him. I assigned Eric to Kay, my friend in Arizona.

This article will describe briefly my experience during five semesters doing email projects, state the leading principles for the projects, offer teaching tips for English as a Foreign or Second Language (EFL/ESL) teachers of Chinese students, and finally analyze one type of Chinese email discourse to benefit people who want to know about Chinese people. Chinese transfer their native language habit to EFL/ESL communications.

My Experience

For five semesters now, I have tried letting EFL students in Taiwan use email to contact key pals from other cultures to improve reading and writing skills. Five different groups of NCHU students in Taiwan have written to people from Australia, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Romania, and the United States. The students were 18 to 26 years old and their key pals 12-60 years old, some students, some not. Age was not a barrier for intercultural communications. My students especially loved elderly key pals because they felt they could learn more from them.

Prompted by professor Beazley, at the beginning of each new program, I told my students that age should not be a barrier in email communication. In three years, they would enter society or a graduate school, where most co-workers are of different ages. At first, they are the youngest in the company. Years later, they will need to speak to young children when they become parents. Then they will become elder workers in their company and need to talk to young workers. Email between people of different ages is good practice for their future needs in communicating with people of different ages.

Thanks to Beazley again, in the fall of 1996, 13 key pals, 12-15 years old, from Wanniasa High School in the Australian Capital Territory wrote a call for key pals to me. My students began to write for authentic readers and for intercultural understanding.

In the spring of 1997, I received a package of greeting email from Romania and Czech Republic as a part of CPAW program. My

students responded to them for the whole semester. My students had authentic readers from two nations. In May, they joined the annual CPAW Writers' Week.

In the fall of 1997, my class of 10 students wrote to 20 university freshmen in the United States, ages 18-33, from Missouri Western State College (MWSC). Each of my students wrote to two key pals. During a visit to MWSC in November, 1997, I learned that they were excited to write to Chinese in Taiwan and asked many questions which they had not covered in their email.

In the spring of 1998, I contacted Brian Torode, a professor at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, to see if he could coordinate his students to swap email with mine. He forwarded my call for key pals to all his students, and 11 expressed their willingness. I had nine students; so that two of my students wrote to two Irish key pals and each of the other seven had one Irish key pal. This group of students also joined the CPAW International Writers' Week that May.

In the fall of 1998, my 15 sophomore students had two groups of key pals from Ireland, the USA, Australia, and Germany. The first group, staying with us from late September to mid-November, 1998, consisted of three Irish volunteers, who stayed over from the previous semester; 9 graduate students from University of Central Florida (UCF) in the USA, led by Tom Bayston, a Ph. D. graduate student; 3 personal friends of mine from the USA; and 3 Australian graduate students of Malcolm Beazley. The second group of key pals included five German graduate students who joined us in late November, and three Irish key pals, my three friends from the USA, and three graduate students from the UCF still stayed with us. The program finished in mid January 1999.

For the first two semesters, key pals from Australia, Czech Republic and Romania took the initiative to write. For the last three, my students initiated the contacts. Email served as a communication tool for transmitting messages between my students and their key pals and occasionally for interactions between teacher and student. The teacher-student interaction was mainly in the classroom.

During a weekly two-hour meeting, I returned corrected hard copies of students' and key pals' email and reviewed grammar based on the mistakes students made. We discussed what we had learned from key pals to enhance intercultural understanding. I assigned the new topic for the week and discussed potential problems to avoid and how to enrich the content of their messages.

Rationale

Communicative approach (Hymes, 1974) or intercultural communicative approach, preparing students for future needs (Belisle, 1996; Berenfeld, 1996), and reflexive impact (Byram and Fleming, 1998: 4, 12) are the leading principles for this project. In practice, we emphasize "fluency first, grammatical accuracy second."

I believe that the purpose of university EFL writing in Taiwan is to prepare students for potential future needs to contact people who do not speak Mandarin or Taiwanese and have English as their foreign, second, or native language. Email allows my students to write to English speakers from other cultures, even if English is not their native language, because in the world there seems to be more EFL and ESL speakers than native speakers. By using email in writing class, students become familiar with a communication tool that will be vital in the 21st century. Employers who do not already require this skill for their employees of today, will tomorrow (Belisle, 1996).

To practice intercultural communicative approach, my students have real readers from other nations who do not understand Taiwanese or Mandarin. Prior to the email project, I sometimes had to guess at the real meaning of their writing by translating their English sentences into Chinese. Their key pals can not do that, so my students are forced to communicate directly.

Since 1997, 'reflexive impact' has been one of the major innovations in Taiwan and in England (Byram and Fleming, 1998: 4), and proposes that language teaching should also focus on learner's own culture and not just look outwards to other cultures. In Taiwan, we call it 'internationalization of the locality'. This is a natural consequence of 'cultural awareness', which emphasizes that it is a significant aspect of language learning, and that without cultural awareness, a language cannot be properly understood.

We understand our own culture partly through understanding other cultures. The emailing projects offer authentic sources for classroom activities. Comparisons between the learner's own way of life and that of the other language community is an essential means to better understanding both (DES, 1990: 37). Comparison of own and other cultures helps learners to perceive and cope with difference.

Teaching Tips

The following teaching tips are divided into three sub-categories: mechanical skills, English expressions, and cross-cultural knowledge.

A: Mechanical Skills

1. Chinese writers should not use a Chinese word processing program, nor Chinese punctuation conventions. Otherwise key pals cannot fully decode your students' messages.

For this emailing program, I use email as a tool, like the telephone. I do not care which telephone you use to call me as long as you call me. In the first meeting, I ask, "Who has an email account?" Usually there is at least one student with an account. Others can use a floppy to save their letter file in ASCII or "text form" and ask the classmate who has the account (or simply go to the university computer center to ask anyone available at a desk) to send the email to my account. Then I send their email to the foreign key pal. It is better for them to have their own email account as soon as possible for emailing will become basic and essential in their future professional career.

Foreign key pals send their reply to my account too. In this way, I monitor the EFL students' progress. I do not correct students' grammar or typos before sending out. Their English should be comprehensible because they are English majors, quite advanced in English learning. If it is not, they will learn that.

2. Do not leave a space between a word and the following punctuation. Leave a space following the punctuation. Chinese students often leave a space prior to and following the punctuation or omit it entirely, using Chinese punctuation habits.
3. Teach the format of English letters. I teach my students that an email begins with the salutation of 'Dear key pal (their specific name)', then the body of the letter, then the complimentary close, and finally signature. In the body of the letter, there should be a blank line between paragraphs. Teaching by model performance alone may be ineffective. Actions sometimes do not speak louder than words.

B: English Expressions

The following five points, (A) - (E), should be useful for emailing between students from any two cultures.

- (A) Express explicitly not vaguely. For example, (A-1) and (A-3) should change to (A-2) and (A-4).
 - (A-1) It has been some time since school began.
 - (A-2) It has been two weeks since school began.
 - (A-3) It is getting colder and colder in Taiwan
 - (A-4) The daily temperature here has fallen to 22-25 degrees Celsius from the usual summer temperature of 28-34 degrees.
- (B) Read the local English newspapers as much as possible, such as China Post and China News, for some terms in English. Otherwise, many Chinese will translate a term from Chinese-which are originally an English term--to English in their own way which foreigners might not understand; for example, (B-2) "meteor shower" was translated from an English newspaper into liu-xing-yu by the Chinese mass media, and some students translated it back to English as (B-1) "flowing star rain" for their key pals in the USA, saying that they spent the whole night on the grass in the wildness watching the flowing star rain.
 - (B-1) flowing star rain
 - (B-2) meteor shower
- (C) Review English tag questions. Otherwise, students might use "right?" ten times in a single letter. For example, (C-1) is the EFL student's wrong sentence and (C-2) is my correction.
 - (C-1) Are you curious about how I look? You do, right?
 - (C-2) Are you curious about how I look? You are, aren't you?
- (D) Specify the monetary unit and the measure; for example (D-2) is better than (D-1) because key pals might not know we use the kilogram for the human weight measure.
 - (D-1) In Taiwan, women and girls want to lose weight if they weigh more than fifty in general or so. It is fresh to you, right?
 - (D-2) In Taiwan, women and girls want to lose weight if they weigh more than fifty kilos (or 110 pounds). It is strange

to you. Is it the same in your culture?

- (E) Express Chinese lunar calendar correctly. (E-2) should replace (E-1). Otherwise students might use May 5 to represent the fifth day of the Chinese fifth lunar month, which is the Dragon-Boat Festival. (A-1), (A-3), (C-1), (D-1) and (E-1) were the mistakes all five groups of students committed.
 - (E-1) January 15 is the Chinese Lantern Festival.
 - (E-2) The fifteenth day of the first lunar month is the Chinese Lantern Festival.

C: Cross-cultural Knowledge

Three points are worth teaching. First, write more about yourselves. If you want to know how old your key pal is, first share your age. If you want to know how much he/she earns, tell how much you earn as a part-time worker or how much your parents earn, etc. Reveal yourself in whatever aspect you want to know about your key pal.

When we Chinese reveal ourselves, the key pals, especially the USA ones (perhaps not the Germans), will generally reveal themselves. If they do not, either they do not want to (we respect their choice) or they forget (it is fine). Chinese people generally follow the format of asking questions in getting to know new friends. Foreigners are surprised by all those personal questions. In emailing, we don't need to encourage Chinese students to ask questions.

Davis (1998) also cautioned students in Japan not to ask personal questions, but he did not say what students should do if this is what they really want to know. He indicated that "What do you do for a living?" "How do you like your job?" "Where are you heading" are appropriate in conversation with your next-seat new friends in an airplane. The three questions are still personal. He did not state what other questions were allowed. My solution is to talk about self in expecting the other to do the same. By talking about yourself, you trigger the other side to ask questions too.

I do not think the Chinese format of asking questions to get to know a new friend is bad. But key pals may not know this cultural difference and feel offended. In cross-cultural communication, the one who knows the cultural differences should adjust to the one who does not. In the next section I will elaborate more to emphasize the importance of encouraging students to reveal more about themselves. EFL/ESL teachers in another country may have the chance to meet Chinese and it will mainly benefit them.

Second, note that sometimes English as native speakers (ENL) also make spelling errors and write ungrammatical sentences. Some, not all, aspects of their English can be learned or imitated. They are like Chinese people in Taiwan, who sometimes write wrong Chinese characters. We need to be flexible and tolerate the imperfection of our key pals.

Third, key pals, especially when they are volunteers, may be too busy to reply. When they do not reply, we need to be patient and take the initiative to write again to them, especially when students are required to write on a weekly topic.

One Type of Chinese Email Discourse

This section is for key pals who have Chinese key pals. When your Chinese pal does not answer your questions, repeat them. When they don't offer information about themselves, ask questions. It is also good for EFL/ESL teachers for Chinese students to understand more about one common Chinese communication style and adjust their teaching strategies.

The following six letters, (1) - (6), were written within nine days between October 26 and November 3, 1998 by Eric and Goo Hahn, from Australia, who was required to write as part of his assignment for the course of Computer in Communication. Each of them wrote one letter every other day, except for the weekend. Eric's writing style may stand for one typical way of Chinese communication to know a new friend.

We need to teach Chinese EFL learners how to write an email to a key pal. Otherwise, most of them will soon be forced to stop because the other side do not answer them. What worse is that Chinese might be labeled as impolite or rude. Eric was lucky because his key pal was required to write.

(1) Dear Students

My name is Goo Hahn and I'm doing Master of Teaching in the Sydney University with

Japanese and French language subjects.

The reason I send this message is that I would like to make Internet pals in Taiwan. In Sydney we are in the early summer, and people begin enjoying all sorts of water sports, e.g. surfing, fishing or just relaxing at the beach. How does your country look like? I assume you may have a mild, warm climate all through the year. Any special things do you want to ask on me. Do not hesitate to contact my email by the end of this week.

Look forward to your prompt response,

Best Regards-Goo Hahn

(2) Hellow Goo Hahn,

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad to know you. You said you teach Japanese and French. I guess you are a Japanese or a French, are you? Some of my junior high school classes went to Australia. I think Australia is a nice place. Can I know more about Australia?

Thank you.

Eric

In (2) Eric did not answer Goo's question of "How does your country look like?" But he showed great interest in him, asking two questions: "I guess you are a Japanese or a French are you?" and "Can I know more about Australia?" Eric did not fully understand (1). (When Eric began to write to Kay, he asked five questions without revealing anything about himself, and later he said, "Perhaps I should ask only two questions in each letter." Kay gave him a positive answer, "That's better." He seemed to draw the conclusion that two questions are maximal and optimal for a key pal.)

(3) Hello Eric,

Thank you for your response to my request. I am a Korean, and migrated to Australia 10 years ago. I studied Japanese linguistics and literature as my major subject at Sydney university. With honours degree, I am quite comfortable in commanding the Japanese language while my French remains at an intermediate level.

Australia is a great country to live in. Her environment might be one of the best in the world as you may have guessed. Even though there are some concerns about the racism rekindled by Pauline Hanson, most of Australians are open-minded and kind.

Would you mind telling what subjects you take and about yourself.

Best regards- Goo Hahn.

(4) Hellow Goo Hahn,

I think you are so great. You can use at least four languages (Korean, Japanese, French, English) to communicate with people. Do you take exercise when you have free time. What sports do you like?

Thank you.

Eric

In (3) Goo answered Eric's two questions in (2). Reading (4), again we find Eric did not answer the question in (3), "Would you mind telling what subjects you take and about yourself?" nor reveal himself concerning Goo's counterparts. However, again, he showed his huge interest in Goo by asking two more questions, "Do you exercise when you have free time?" and "What sports do you like?" In (2), (4) and (6) the writer consistently spelled 'Hello' as 'Hellow'.

(5) Hi Eric

It's my pleasure to receive your e-mail. As you mentioned it is great to be a multi-lingual with the knowledge of various languages, we can enhance understanding of different cultures and widen our horizon of curiosity.

Actually I have two black belts in Judo and Taekwando. I also spent quite some time and effort in golf and achieved a good handy cap(about 12).

I live in Umina, about one hours drive from downtown Sydney. Umina is only 5 minutes from the beach and I usually go fishing and swimming in summer time.

What are your hobbies and what is your school life like?

Best regards- Goo Hahn.

(6) Hello Goo Hahn,

You are so amazing. You practice Judo and Taekwando. Have you ever met a bully? then you could do like the movies (protect small and weak from hurts) . Maybe I watch too many movies. One of my hobbies is playing basketball. I also enjoy watching a Japanese cartoon named " Slam Dunk". The leading players are " Hanomigy Sakulaky " and " Lukawa " , but I also like the supporting role " sendoh" . In the story , there are some unbelievable things . we got a large imaginable room and we can stay away from real life for a little while. Have you ever seen that? At last, thank you for reading my letter.

Eric

In (6) Eric did better; he answered at least one question raised in (5). He gave two of his hobbies and then continued to keep his interest in Goo, asking two more questions, "Have you met a bully?" and "Have you ever seen Slam Dunk?"

The analysis of the six letters reveals that EFL students need to reveal more about themselves (at least the counterpart of what is revealed by their key pal). Otherwise, they might be mistaken as 'selfish,' which is the impression of one American teacher I met who was teaching EFL in Japan. I could not agree with his concept. It simply reflects the most popular format of Chinese in Taiwan to know a new friend. If a key pal from another culture understands this, he can fairly apply the same question-asking format to know a Chinese friend.

Conclusion

The students' writing for my Sophomore EFL Writing class, during the email swapping periods, have been easier to understand than before. The authentic readership has contributed partly to the improvement.

For successful email swapping, teachers for Chinese EFL learners do not need to encourage students to ask questions because their prepatterned cultural background may prompt them to ask about 10 questions in one email to a key pal. Instead, ask your students to reveal themselves if they expect their key pals from another culture to do the same. The weekly topic is good practice because students may not have much to write (to a key pal stranger or semi-stranger). People in their thirties or above seem to speak automatically more in email. This is worth further research.

However, the emailing practice may not be applicable to your EFL conversation class. In the classroom, when we want to encourage students to speak, we ask questions, which might set a bad example for students who mistake it as the normal format in the daily real-life conversation. We also need to instruct EFL learners about the differences between classroom conversation and authentic conversation in the real world.

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