

Report on a Penpal Project, and Tips for Penpal-Project Success

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Introduction

The idea of starting a penpal project occurred when Laurie Baker in Korea read and replied to my posting about online teaching on [Dave's ESL Cafe Teachers' Email](#). We are both fascinated by the Internet and email teaching, and are in search of ways to test their applicability with students.

To accomplish one of our goals, we decided to initiate a project in which our students would correspond via email. Its main objective was to help students to improve their writing and reading skills through this medium. The project was carried out in the first semester of 1997. The correspondence began after we had briefly oriented our respective groups on how to use email and assigned each participant a partner.

In our first attempt to implement the project among our students, twenty elementary-level students of English from my school - a private language institute in Sao Paulo - and twenty elementary-level students of English at a Science and Technology University in Korea exchanged personal email correspondence over the period of a month.

The project was judged to have been successful, and even though the students were writing only informal messages to each other, it was the beginning of more ambitious endeavors. Both Laurie Baker and I agreed to go on with penpal projects with new groups of students.

Due to the fact that I had only four students who could participate in the penpal project (for my group an extra-class activity) in the second semester of the same year, and that Laurie Baker had a great number of students in her class, she posted a request on a teachers' mailing list. Two more teachers - one from Japan and one from the United States - decided to join us in a three-month project. In the new project, the goal was to use email, not only to write informal letters to one's penpal, but also to permit collaboration between groups, to facilitate literacy and especially to promote cross-cultural learning.

The Brazilian students who participated in the project held in the second semester of 1997 were from low-intermediate level classes. After being taught the basic rules of email, they were asked to write informally to their pals (as often as they wished) and to share their experiences and thoughts about some pre-selected topics. Then each student had to write his/her own essay on the given topics.

All the writing topics were chosen by Laurie Baker, as they were part of her class curriculum in Korea, and agreed upon by the other teachers.

The other teachers involved in the project (including myself) did not have any program guidelines to follow. Thus, we could assign any writing topics to the students. On the other hand, we had to guide and assist our students whenever necessary, encourage them to write, and finally send the essays to Ms. Baker, who posted them on the Web.

Since this project required more work on the part of the students, and extra time to come to the computer lab to fulfill the tasks, only four students from my school were able to participate. Even though the number of students in my group was small, the project proved to be worthwhile because it gave the students the opportunity to practice and improve their reading, writing and cognitive skills.

To read the essays written by my students, point your browser to [Brazilian Students Talk](#). On that page, you will also find links to the articles written by the Korean, American and Japanese students on the same topics. The articles, except for the ones written by the Japanese group, are on the Postech University server in Korea, and will be online until June 1998.

I would like to mention that it was my decision not to correct my students' writings. This was because they did not have much time to edit and re-edit their essays, as new topics were presented to them about every fifteen days. Also, as it was my students' first attempt to communicate effectively in English to a real audience rather than the teacher, I did not want to interfere in the way they expressed their ideas and opinions.

My Experience with the Project

In my opinion a penpal project is beneficial to the students because they can practice reading and writing, and use English not to communicate with the teacher in contrived environment, but as an authentic medium for expressing their ideas, thoughts and beliefs to a real audience.

I suggest that a teacher who gets involved in this type of project consider the following:

I - Regarding Teachers

1. Choose the other teacher(s) you will be working with carefully; otherwise, you might end up being alone and encountering major difficulties with the project. The teacher(s) must be willing to work cooperatively, to share the project successes and problems and, at its end, to establish what can be done to improve it.
2. Maintain personal email contacts with the teacher(s) involved in the project. This is one of the most important items because if something goes wrong with a pal or the project, the teacher(s) can identify the problem and try to find a solution.
3. Make sure you and the other teacher(s) have the same objectives in mind. Discuss the objectives and what you want your students to achieve with the project. If you do not agree, do not carry on with the project.
4. Discuss and establish a definite beginning and end for the project with the other teacher(s). Each project has to have its time span set from the very beginning so that any necessary adjustments can be made by the teacher(s).

II - Regarding Students

1. Pair the students off according to their English level and age. This is an important factor to avoid drop-outs due to wide language discrepancy or lack of interest, as students' interests vary a lot according to their age group.
2. Give each student a pal's email address. Though it might appear unnecessary, check the email addresses carefully to avoid delivery problems.
3. Make sure all the students know how to use email. If they don't, give the necessary instructions for them to accomplish their task. Too much information about email writing only confuses students.
4. Make sure the students write to their pals regularly and reply to all email received. To avoid problems, it's a good policy to ask students to send you a copy (cc) every time they send a message to their pals.
5. Be motivated and do your best to motivate the students.
6. Assist the students whenever they need it. The students must know that the teacher is guiding them, even though s/he is not evaluating their work, and the project is not part of their class grade.
7. Make sure the students commit themselves to the project and to you. Establish deadlines for work and be strict about sticking to them. It's also important to keep tabs on the students' work, especially if you want to analyze their progress throughout a project.
8. Ask students to write a report at the end of the project about their successes and problems. The students' report can help a teacher to evaluate the project, to identify its advantages and drawbacks, and to find ways to improve it.

As I believe that email projects are one of best ways of using technology in language teaching and learning, I will continue working with them, and intend to deepen my studies of the benefits they bring to students.

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