

Using the E-Mail Précis for Advanced Learners: Teacher-Student Interactions

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Introduction

The e-mail précis is underused as a learning device in FL and ESL writing classes. I describe here a methodology employed with advanced learners of German at the university level. Students e-mail summaries of online radio broadcasts in the target language to the instructor; the instructor corrects them, returning the summaries with error feedback via e-mail. The outcome is improved skills in critical thinking, oral comprehension, reading and writing.

E-Mail in the Classroom

Scholarship has long recognized that e-mail is a learning tool with a firm place in the English, foreign language and English as a second language classroom (Lunde, 1990). Gonglewski, Meloni and Brant (2001) give a recent rationale for classroom applications of e-mail, listing these benefits to learners:

- Extends language learning time and place
- Provides a context for real-world communication and authentic interaction
- Expands topics beyond classroom-based ones
- Promotes student-centered language learning
- Encourages equal opportunity participation
- Connects speakers quickly and cheaply

The pedagogical value of e-mail is not in dispute. It fosters student autonomy at the same time it promotes collaborative learning; it inspires student-centered interactions and results in greater personal and expressive use of language (González-Bueno, 1998; Hoffman and Scheidenheim, 2000; Lawrence, 2002; Mansor, 2007). So flexible is e-mail in the classroom that Corio (1999) states: "Classroom applications for e-mail are limited only by the imagination of the teacher."

Especially important is the use of e-mail to increase the global awareness of students. Electronic communications help learners develop an appreciation for geography, culture, and language. Students also form friendships with e-mail partners, keypals, from whom they gather first-hand intercultural information. The most popular student site using collaborative technology to form an Internet community is ePals (www.epals.com), now in over 190 countries.

The Précis in the Classroom

Précis writing—now called summary writing—is a fundamental technique of composition, well-established in the English classroom (Cohen, 1950; Bromley, 1985). It is a learned skill requiring the ability to recognize the main point(s) of an argument and then to express these in a different way, summing up the chief thoughts with cogency and concision.

Through précis writing students learn:

- 1) to read with understanding in order to isolate the thesis sentence(s) and conclusion(s);
- 2) to use synonyms to express ideas;
- 3) to practice the art of summarizing, and abstracting, arguments; and

4) to model their own writing on a document in the target language.

The kind of summarizing in a précis improves reading comprehension and recall, encourages critical thinking, and teaches students to abstract main ideas. It is a problem-solving tool that promotes clear communication. Like e-mail, the applications of the précis are limitless (Woodworth, 1988).

Précis writing is, however, a neglected pedagogical tool, usually practiced by the English teacher or rhetorician and seldom applied to FL and ESL settings. For example, in the writing classroom MacNeill (2000) uses student summaries of news events for a class e-mail news journal.

The E-mail Précis in my Classroom

My college composition class, usually numbering 15 students, is made up of advanced German learners. Participants are usually majors or minors, and all have had a formal grammar review. The aim of the class is to guide students to authentic written communication, using the structures and idioms of the target language.

All class members are computer-literate; all use e-mail, and all surf the Net regularly. I decided to bring their talents and interests into the classroom through basic technology, at the same time hoping that their exposure to up-to-the-minute cultural events and news in Germany would bring enthusiasm to class assignments. I had not expected dramatic improvement in writing, but that was the result. Up to now, my findings are anecdotal, but strong and convincing, and it is time to lay out the method to colleagues who can adapt, and test it further.

Procedure

The Weekly E-Mail Précis

Our summary is assigned as a supplementary, out-of-class task. Intended to support the writing process, it has no necessary thematic connection to classroom writing and speaking exercises, or to the written, formal essay that is also handed in once a week. (On the goals and format of that essay, a redacted Internet short-text, see McDonald, 2007).

Once a week, at a prescribed time, students e-mail the teacher a précis of one of the stories in an online radio broadcast of news and cultural events. The usual length of the summary is five complex sentences in the target language. (See a sample student précis in the Appendix.) Recent topics include climate change, a visit of Secretary of State Rice to Germany, German film awards, the firing of a German soccer coach, and Iran's nuclear program. Students are encouraged to use an online synonym dictionary (for German, www.woxikon.de) to replace words in the online radio broadcast. Through synonyms we seek to enrich, and enlarge, the student's vocabulary.

The teacher corrects the précis within 24 hours and returns the corrected version to the student via e-mail. The e-mail précis is graded cumulatively, that is, as a semester project which demonstrates progress in writing. Therefore, no letter grade appears on the weekly assignment.

All student e-mail summaries are drawn from the Internet site Deutsche Welle (www.dw-world.de), a high-quality information source resembling the BBC, CBC, or NPR. Since Deutsche Welle offers news and cultural information in 30 languages around the clock, it can easily be adapted for profitable teaching in FL and ESL classrooms. For similar results, ESL teachers can use BBC online radio (<http://news.bbc.co.uk>).

Variations on the Method

The e-mail précis as constituted here tests listening skills, comprehension, the ability to isolate and synthesize information, and grammar. If the teacher decides the exercise is too demanding in this configuration, I propose adaptations.

- Eliminate the oral component, replacing it with a self-selected, brief Internet text (100-150 words) from the same

website, Deutsche Welle. Students send the teacher the model text from which the précis is drawn as an e-mail attachment; this serves as a teacher-control text. Students continue to write five complex sentences in the target language.

- Students write fewer, or more, sentences than five, as decided upon by the participants of the class.
- In a paragraph equal to the e-mail précis in length, students add a critical response to the text chosen for the précis, stating agreement, disagreement or surprise, and justifying their reaction to it (MacNeill, 2000).
- The class decides to expand the use of websites for the e-mail précis, choosing, for example, Yahoo! International news (<http://world.yahoo.com>), or a combination of safe sites.
- The class creates a mailing list for the e-mail précis. Students post summaries for all to see.
- Teacher error-analysis is controversial (Van Handle, 1998). Some may choose to follow Van Handle's suggestion on an e-mail exchange between two intermediate German college classes: "Students were informed that their contributions to the E-mail project would not be graded or corrected for linguistic accuracy because their primary focus was to be on communication with their peers."

Summary

I employ the e-mail précis in advanced writing classes because I see steady improvement in written expression over the course of a semester.

These observed pedagogical benefits support the validity of the method:

- Students improve oral comprehension at the same time they learn about current events;
- Students exercise choice by selecting a topic to summarize;
- Students learn to isolate the main thoughts in a non-native language setting;
- Students learn to express themselves in the target language with concision, choosing synonyms and summarizing content;
- Students develop a world-perspective and receive current information on interactions with other countries;
- The teacher can monitor, and archive, the student e-mail précis, thus measuring progress towards authentic, written communication;
- Teachers can isolate repetitive mistakes easily, and can comment on these both in written remarks on the return e-mail and in follow-up oral, one-on-one remarks in the classroom.

Directions for Future Research

- Experiment to see if the e-mail précis can be introduced at other levels of instruction besides advanced;
- Study whether those students writing the e-mail précis have greater reading and writing skills than their peers;
- Calculate how much instructor written feedback students can tolerate and still compose e-mails freely;
- The one-on-one e-mail dialogue between learner and teacher benefits the motivated student who wants rapid feedback and wishes to know precisely which elements of grammar and syntax require correction. How does one motivate students who are careless with grammar in target language communications, or who do not improve after repeated e-mail précis assignments?

Appendix

Sample Student E-Mail Précis

Note: I correct in brackets and place a serious correction at the bottom with ***. In this case, the student made an error with the date: "On Tuesday." The topic is world climate control and the resolution of European states to lower the levels of carbon emissions.

Auf [am] Dienstag hat Grossbritanniens Regierung Pläne zum Klimaschutz vorgelegt. Die Regierung von Tony Blair will die Kohlendioxid-Emissionen bis 2060 um mindestens 60 Prozent senken. Diese Pläne wurden von Bundeskanzlerin Angela

Merkel und EU-Umweltkommissar Stavros Dimas begrüsst. Sie glauben, dass es besonders wichtig ist, beim Verbraucher mit dem Klimaschutz zu beginnen. Meiner Meinung nach ist die Umweltschutz-Gesetzgebung immer wichtiger, und jeder muss seine Schuldigkeit [seinen Teil?] tun.

***am Dienstag

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XV, No. 2, February 2009

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