

Using E-mail Pal Exchanges in an Intermediate English Writing Course

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Abstract

This study explored the use of an e-mail pal activity as out-of-class language learning (Benson & Reinders, 2011) in a course of Intermediate English Writing at a national university of science and technology. The students were asked to respond to a questionnaire that examined their perspectives of the e-mail pal activity incorporated into this particular course. The results of the questionnaire revealed that most of the students in this EFL writing class did not feel it difficult to exchange e-mails in English. However, many participants (83%) did concern a lot about grammar and checked for grammar mistakes before sending out a message. Some of the participants (17%) even received help from their foreign e-mail pals who actively offered kindly assistance to correct the students' writing. During the process of e-mail interactions, a good number of students (71%) had developed friendship with their e-mail pals although so much fewer students found it easy to find a foreign e-mail pal (32%, $M=2.98$) or to maintain the connections with their e-mail pals (39%, $M=3.10$). Despite the fact that some students had ever been harassed by their foreign e-mail pals or were asked to send personal photos, a lot of the students still considered it safe to make e-mail pals on the Internet and had learned about different cultures from the e-mail pal exchange activity. In sum, the majority of the students in this class liked the experience of e-mail pal exchanges and would continue to write e-mails to their pals in their own time after the class was finished. The findings of this study had provided some insights into the use of e-mail pal exchanges as out-of-class language learning in an English composition class in Taiwan. Further research is recommended to be conducted to scrutinize and examine the relationship between the technology of computer-mediated communication and the development of learner autonomy for foreign language learners of English (EFL) in Taiwan or other countries.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication, E-mail pal exchange, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has brought a dramatic impact on the future of English, a future which will increasingly lie in the hands of L2 speakers or non-native speakers of English (Graddol, 1997). L2 speakers have already outnumbered those whose mother tongue is English by three to one (Noah, 2005). And yet, despite the fact that English serves as an international lingua franca, there has been little research to investigate the language interactions from L2 speakers of English.

Electronic mail or e-mail -- a CMC technology -- is now more commonly used for pen pal exchanges than its traditional counterpart, snail mail (Sherwood, 2007). E-mail is a ubiquitous CMC application most likely to be familiar to second and foreign language learners (Williams, 2005). Although e-mail is no longer a cutting edge CMC tool (Paulus, 2007), it is still a very popular technology used in the United States (Liu, 2008) as well as other parts of the world. E-mail pal activities can be easily applied in language learning to help learners improve writing skills (Liaw, 2002), cultivate cultural understanding (Chang, 1992), interact with people around the world (Belisle, 1996), become more autonomous language learners (Warschauer, 1995), and increase self-confidence for English writing (Basma, 2011).

In this paper, the investigator aims to examine the social dynamics of an e-mail pal activity incorporated into an intermediate English writing class. In addition to e-mail exchanges, the e-pal activity includes a ten-minute English oral presentation and a final written report for each student to reflect on this learning experience. The investigator hopes to explore the dynamics of e-mail interactions as well as the learners' attitudes towards the e-mail pal activity. To sum up, this paper is

guided by the following four research questions:

- (1) What were the difficulties for the students to exchange e-mails in English?
- (2) How were the social interactions between the students and their e-mail pals?
- (3) How secure did the students feel about exchanging e-mails with people from different parts of the world?
- (4) In what ways did the students find it interesting to exchange e-mails with their pen pals?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Electronic mail or e-mail is a textual message sent electronically via the medium of computer networks. E-mail is a popular form of asynchronous CMC which allows users to store a message and read it at a later time (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1995). The CMC technology of e-mail enables users to send and receive a message, reply to a message, forward a message, store a message, attach a document file, and send carbon copies (c.c.) to additional recipients.

Adopting the three criteria of *reliability*, *complexity* and *cost*, Lafford and Lafford (2005) evaluate the applicability of several CMC technologies such as blog, discussion board, instant messaging, and e-mail in the foreign language education. Among the CMC technologies they evaluate, e-mail appears to be the most economic one for language teaching and learning. A written form itself, e-mail resembles oral communication while retaining the reflective feature of written language. As a new mode of communication, e-mail has brought certain impact to the teaching and learning of English writing.

Bloch (2002) looks at the potential of the e-mail for enhancing the social dynamics of two advanced-level L2 composition classes in which his analysis of e-mail interactions shows how cyberspace communication can break down the limitations in



time and space imposed by a traditional classroom. Cyberspace allows for an extension of social relationships beyond the classroom. Such extension encourages variety in participants' use of forms to assume multiple identities and play a variety of roles in various social contexts, the heteroglossia described by Bakhtin (1981).

Using an ethnographic approach, Tella (1992) examines e-mail pal exchanges between three Finnish senior high schools and their partner schools in Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, Japan, Iceland, Sweden, and USA. This well-documented research shows that e-mail communication allows free flow of ideas to occur and leads to a shift of focus from form to content. The quality of writing improves when learners are given the opportunities to use language for real purpose with a genuine audience.

Gonglewski, Meloni and Brant (2001) provide further insights into the pedagogical benefits of e-mail pal exchanges for foreign language learning. Firstly, e-mail offers foreign language learners an authentic context for real-world communication. Learners are able to communicate in the foreign language with people other than their own familiar classmates. It brings a feeling of reality to communicative efforts of learners that may seem artificial in a foreign language classroom. Secondly, e-mail extends *time and space* for the teacher and learners. The asynchronous nature of communication allows students to learn anytime and anywhere. It provides a great avenue for the interaction between people who live in different cities, countries or time zones. Finally, it expands the topics of writing and promotes a learner-centered classroom. Learners are able to gain more control of their learning because e-mail allows them to choose and negotiate the topics. The aim of their writing is to communicate rather than to produce a mistake-free composition.

III. METHODOLOGY

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a course of intermediate English writing at a national university of science and technology. The participants were 46 third-year college students (10 males and 36 females) of applied foreign languages who were engaged in an e-mail pal activity throughout the Fall semester of 2010. The e-mail pal activity included a ten-minute English oral presentation and a five-page English written report for each student to reflect on this out-of-class language learning experience. On the first day of the class, the students were introduced to some websites with information of international e-mail pals, but they were also allowed to look for e-mail pals from their friends or classmates.

Data Collection Procedure

The data in this study included course syllabus, all the e-mail correspondences between the students and their e-mail pals during the whole semester, the final English written reports of the students from the e-mail pal activity, and a survey questionnaire.

A total of forty-one students filled out a questionnaire distributed at the end of the semester, and there were five absentees who did not participate in the survey. The questionnaire contained twenty Likert-Scale items and four open-ended questions in which all items that were relevant to the research questions of this study were analyzed and discussed.

IV. FINDINGS

Research Question 1: What were the difficulties for the students to exchange e-mails in English?

As indicated in TABLE 1, a high percentage of the participants (83%) checked for grammar mistakes before they sent out messages to their e-mail pals ($M=4.17$). Only few students (24%) considered it difficult to compose an English e-mail due to a lack



of vocabulary (M= 2.61). Very few participants reported that it was time consuming to write e-mails in English (22%, M = 2.88) and that it was hard to gain ideas for e-mail messages (22%, M=2.51). There

were 17 % of the participants who reported that their e-mail pals corrected their writing during the e-mail exchanges (M = 2.49).

TABLE 1: Students' Language Capability

Questionnaire Item/ (N=41)	SA/A	N	D/SD	Mean
1. It was time-consuming for me to compose an e-mail message.	9(22 %)	18	14	2.88
2. My e-mail messages tended to be short because it was hard for me to gain ideas.	9(22 %)	8	24	2.51
3. I often felt it difficult to write e-mails due to a lack of vocabulary.	10(24%)	12	19	2.61
4. My e-mail pals corrected my writing in the e-mail exchanges.	7(17 %)	13	21	2.49
5. I checked my grammar mistakes before sending out my messages to e-mail pals.	34(83%)	4	3	4.17

Note: SA (strongly agree) = 5; A (agree) = 4; N (neutral) = 3; D (disagree) = 2; SD (strongly disagree) = 1.

Three excerpts were selected from the students' responses to the first open-ended question in the questionnaire: "What difficulties did you encounter when exchanging e-mails in English?" The student in Excerpt 1 felt it was a little difficult to compose e-mails in English because of the great amount of time spent on concerning about grammar in replying the e-mails.

The student in Excerpt 2, considered it rather easy to write an English e-mail but would consult the dictionary for difficult words. Another student (see Excerpt 3) also felt it easy and had confidence in her English ability although the pen pal was so nice to check whether there were any language problems or mistakes in the messages.

Excerpt 1.

"Yes. Writing an e-mail in English is a little bit difficult for me because I need to think about grammar. Therefore, I spent a lot of time replying the e-mails."

Excerpt 2.

"No. It was easy for me to write English e-mails most of the time. If I have difficulties with new words, I will look them up in the dictionary."

Excerpt 3.

"No. I think my English writing is not that bad, and my pen pal is nice. He is willing to check my English when there is something wrong."

Research Question 2: How were the social interactions between the students and their e-mail pals?

TABLE 2 reports the e-mail interactions between the students and their e-mail pals. Only one-third of the participants (32%) found it easy to find a foreign e-mail pal (M=2.98). Likewise, not many students (39%) considered it easy to keep



connected with their e-mail pals (M = 3.10). Merely 22% of the participants tended to respond to their e-mail pals promptly (M= 2.88), as opposed to 32% of the students who reported that their e-mail pals

usually responded to them promptly (M= 3.17). Nevertheless, a good number of students (71%) had developed friendship with their e-mail pals from this CMC activity (M = 3.76).

TABLE 2: E-mail Interactions

Questionnaire Item/ (N=41)	SA/A	N	D/SD	Mean
6. It was easy for me to find a foreign e-pal.	13(32%)	16	12	2.98
7. I had developed friendship with my e-pals.	29(71%)	9	3	3.76
8. I found it easy to maintain the connections with my e-pals.	16(39%)	13	12	3.10
9. I usually responded to my e-mail pals promptly.	9(22 %)	17	14	2.88
10. My e-mail pals usually responded to me promptly.	13(32%)	20	8	3.17

Note: SA (strongly agree) = 5; A (agree) = 4; N (neutral) = 3; D (disagree) = 2; SD (strongly disagree) = 1.

Excerpts 4-6 were adopted from the students' answers to the second open-ended question in the questionnaire: "How were the interactions between you and your e-mail pals?" The two students in Excerpt 4 were classmates in this class. They paired up with each other because they failed to find an English e-mail pal from the teacher's recommended websites. Nonetheless, they still considered it a great experience for them to chat with each other in English. The student in Excerpt 5 found it really hard to maintain good connections with e-mail pals, having tried the best to keep good relationship with every pen pal. In Excerpt 6, the student often shared daily life experiences with e-mail pals, just like friends.

Excerpt 4.

"Great! Although we are both Taiwanese, we chat in English."

Excerpt 5.

"I found it was really hard for me to have a good connection with my pen pals for a long

time. But I still try hard to keep good relationship with every pen pal."

Excerpt 6.

"Not bad. We would share our daily life experiences with each other. It was a little bit like friends between me and my e-pal."

Research Question 3: How secure did the students feel about exchanging e-mails with people from different parts of the world?

As shown in TABLE 3, merely 7% of the participants felt unsafe to exchange e-mails with people from different parts of the world on the Internet (M=2.34). There were 17% of the students who had ever been harassed by their e-mail pals (M=2.46). 12% of the students had miscommunications with their pals due to cultural differences (M=2.51). Interestingly, more than one-third of the students had been asked by their pals to send personal photos (M=2.68). The majority of the students (71%) had learned about different



cultures from their e-mail pal's messages (M=3.90).

TABLE 3: Culture and Security

Questionnaire Item/ (N=41)	SA/A	N	D/SD	Mean
11. I learned about different cultures from my e-mail pal's messages.	29(71%)	10	2	3.90
12. I often had miscommunications with my e-mail pals due to cultural differences.	5(12%)	15	21	2.51
13. I had ever been harassed by my e-mail pals.	7(17%)	14	20	2.46
14. My e-mail pals asked me to send them my photos.	14(34%)	5	22	2.68
15. It was unsafe to make English e-mail pals.	3(7%)	13	25	2.34

Note: SA (strongly agree) = 5; A (agree) = 4; N (neutral) = 3; D (disagree) = 2; SD (strongly disagree) = 1.

Excerpts 7-9 were chosen from the students' responses to the third open-ended question in the questionnaire: "How secure did you feel about exchanging e-mails with people from different parts of the world?" The learner in Excerpt 7 felt a little unsafe to exchange e-mails with people from all over the world and would use a pen name before getting more acquainted with foreign e-mail pals. The student in Excerpt 8, however, felt it safe to exchange e-mails with strangers from the Internet as long as one did not reveal the important information about one's identity such as personal address and phone number. Another student in Excerpt 9 also considered it safe to exchange e-mails with foreigners since they did not have to meet or talk face to face.

Excerpt 7.

"Actually, I felt a little unsafe to talk to foreigners from all over the world. Thus, I used a pen name for advertisement at first. After I knew someone for a while, I told them my real name."

Excerpt 8.

"I think it's safe as long as you don't reveal

your real identity, like your address, phone number and so on to your pen pal who you're not familiar with at all."

Excerpt 9.

"I think it is safe to exchange e-mails with people from different countries. It's because we don't have to talk face to face."

Research Question 4: In what ways did the students find it interesting to exchange e-mails with their pen pals?

As indicated in TABLE 4, the majority of the participants (83%) liked this experience of e-mail pal exchanges (M=4.24). A good number of students (78%) liked to make pen pals with foreigners from English-speaking countries (M= 4.07). Around three quarters of the students (73%) would continue to send e-mails to their pals even after the course was over (M=3.88). The e-mail pal activity have aroused quite a few (63%) learners' interest to write in English (M=3.88). Only 27% of the students had shown preference to exchange e-mails with people of the opposite sex (M=2.95).

TABLE 4: Learner Interest



TABLE 4: Learner Interest

Questionnaire Item/ (N=41)	SA/A	N	D/SD	Mean
16. E-mail pal exchanges aroused my interest to write in English.	26(63%)	14	1	3.88
17. I liked to make e-mail pals with foreigners from English-speaking countries.	32(78%)	7	2	4.07
18. I preferred to exchange e-mails with people of the opposite sex.	11(27%)	18	12	2.95
19. I liked this experience of e-mail pal exchanges.	34(83 %)	5	2	4.24
20. I would continue to write to my e-pals after this class is over.	30(73%)	7	4	3.88

Note: SA (strongly agree) = 5; A (agree) = 4; N (neutral) = 3; D (disagree) = 2; SD (strongly disagree) = 1.

Excerpts 10-12 were selected from the students' responses to the fourth open-ended question in the questionnaire: "In what ways did you find it interesting to exchange e-mails with your pen pals?" In Excerpt 10, the student said that it was really interesting to write to his (or her) e-mail pals. In writing e-mail, there is no need to worry about content but could feel free to write about one's own feelings. The student in Excerpt 11 also acknowledged that e-mail writing could bring benefits for enhancement of one's writing skills. Through e-mail interactions, one could guess at what e-pals would reply and make friends with people from other parts of the world. The student in Excerpt 12 also considered it interesting to exchange e-mails and often inquired about stereotypes in different countries with her pen pals.

Excerpt 10.

"Yes, it was really interesting! When I wrote to my e-pals, I did not need to worry about the content. I felt free to share my own feelings with my e-pals."

Excerpt 11.

"Yes, it could train my writing skills and I could guess what he or she might reply. I

could even make friends with those who were not from Taiwan."

Excerpt 12.

"Yes, it was quite interesting. Since we often had stereotypes about foreigners, my pen pal and I had asked each other questions which were based on the stereotypes."

CONCLUSION

In this particular course of intermediate English writing, the EFL learners seemed to be capable of exchanging e-mail in English with people from other parts of the world. Very few participants deemed it time consuming for them to compose an e-mail message in English or felt it hard to gain ideas for e-mail writing. There were a few participants who found it difficult to write an English e-mail due to a lack of vocabulary. Although e-mail exchange activity often aimed to shift learners' attention from form to content (Gonglewski, Meloni & Brant, 2001; Tella, 1992), the majority of the students in this EFL learning context still concerned a lot about grammar and would check for grammar mistakes before they sent out a message to their pals. Some of the participants even reported that their foreign e-mail



pals had actively offered help to correct their writing in the e-mail messages.

Although e-mail as an asynchronous communication tool could break down the limitation of time and space, only one third of the participants found it easy to get an e-mail pal from other countries. There were a few students who paired up as e-mail pals with their classmates because they failed to find an e-pal from the Internet. It seemed to be hard for quite a few of the Taiwanese students to maintain good connections with their e-mail pals as many of the students did not respond to their pen pals so promptly. Nonetheless, a good number of students had developed friendship or good relationship with their e-mail pals.

To make e-mail a secure communication tool, teachers might warn students not to reveal their important personal information such as phone number and photos to their foreign e-mail pals. A lot of people who registered on the e-mail pal website were in fact looking for a girl or boy friend, not for a pen friend. For example, several participants in this class indicated that they had ever been harassed by their e-mail pals. Other students had miscommunications with their pals due to cultural differences. There were fourteen students who

reported that their e-mail pals asked them to send personal photos. Nonetheless, the majority of the learners still considered it safe or secure to make e-mail pals on the Internet since e-mail communication was not face to face, and they did not have to reveal their important personal information or real identity.

The e-mail pal activity had motivated the EFL learners to practice writing for the purpose of communication and aroused their interest to write in English. A lot of participants in this study liked the experiences of e-mail pal exchanges. Many of them liked to make pen pals with foreigners from English-speaking countries and would continue to exchange e-mails with their pals after the class was finished. Unlike essay writing, e-mail writing could motivate the learners to communicate actively with a genuine audience outside the classroom (see Gonglewski, Meloni & Brant, 2001). The findings of this study have centered on the learners' reflections on the dynamics of e-mail interactions. Further study is recommended to take a closer look at the connection between e-mail as a computer-mediated communication tool and the development of learner autonomy for second language writers.



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電子郵件交筆友在一門中級英文寫作班之應用

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摘 要

本研究旨在探索一所國立科技大學中級英文寫作班，運用電子郵件結交外國筆友之課後語言學習活動 (Benson & Reinders, 2011)。本班同學於學期末自由填寫了一份問卷，用於了解他們對於結交電子筆友之寫作課後活動的評價與看法。我們的問卷內容包含了四個大項：學生的寫作能力、信件互動、網路文化以及學習動機。研究結果顯示：雖然本班同學皆是外語學習者，大部分的同學對於用英文交筆友並不感到困難。然而，有 83% 的學生很在意自己的文法，發信之前會做拼字檢查的動作。部分參與者 (17%) 甚至得到外國筆友主動給予改正文法的熱情協助。即使許多同學發現不容易找到能夠一直保持聯繫的外國筆友，有不少同學 (71%) 與筆友培養了良好的友情。儘管有少數同學遭到筆友騷擾或是被要求寄個人的生活照，大多數的同學仍然感到通過網路交筆友是安全的，能因此學習到不同的生活方式與語言文化。總而言之，大部分的同學喜歡這個用電子郵件結交筆友的課後寫作活動，許多參與者並表示課程結束後仍會與筆友繼續通信。本研究的成果著重在學生對於用電子郵件結交筆友的反應與實際生活運用，至於網際網路的溝通方式對於培養學生自主學習能力的影響，則有待更進一步的深入分析與探索，以能利益更多台灣或者其他國家的有志於學好英語的學生及社會人士。

關鍵字:網際網路溝通、電子郵件筆友、英語為外國語

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