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THE USE OF KEYPAL PROJECTS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

By Kieran Donaghy

A keypal project is like a traditional penpal writing project but uses the medium of electronic mail (e-mail) to enable learners from different countries and cultures to communicate and interact with one another. These projects are being used in thousands of classrooms across the world with great success, and there are a number of important reasons for using e-mail projects in the language learning classroom:



The Benefits of Using Keypal Projects in the Classroom

1 The main objective of foreign language instruction is to teach learners to communicate, and e-mail projects can be invaluable in achieving this goal by promoting communication between learners and native speakers in different parts of the world (Warschauer, 1996). Through the use of e-mail, learners participate in real and natural communication (Warschauer, 1995) and have a real audience and a real communicative reason for writing.

2 E-mail projects have been seen to promote intercultural awareness by enabling learners to discover at first hand different target cultures and members of these target language communities. Learners learn about others with an open mind, and also have the opportunity to explain their own culture. When using e-mail, learners tend to put aside their prejudices and concentrate more on the person they are writing to and what they are saying (Lapp, 1996).

3 E-mail projects help learners learn a skill which will be invaluable in the workplace (Belisle, 1996), and e-mail skills are already (or soon may be) a prerequisite for many jobs. The vast majority of written communication (including e-mails) today is in English, and it is quite possible that many learners will need to write and read messages in

English for work purposes at some point in their careers.

4 A number of linguistics features of L2 electronic discourse have been identified: it is lexically and syntactically more complex; it is more logically organised; it contains more questions; it uses a more conversational style. Familiarising learners with these features could be helpful in promoting successful Second Language Acquisition.

5 The messages which learners receive from native speakers can serve as a model of correct English and can help learners to notice the gap between their own language production and that of a native speaker. St. John and Cash (1995) noticed a learner of German using vocabulary and expressions that had been directly copied from the messages of a native German speaker.

6 Shy learners are often more confident when writing e-mails, as there is a less threatening environment than in face-to-face interaction (Kroonenberg, 1994/5; Wang, 1993). There is less peer pressure in this form of communication, and less confident learners feel more relaxed and tend to participate more when writing e-mails than in face-to-face interaction. These learners have been seen to produce more and express themselves more openly than in traditional writing activities (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998).

7 Teacher-learner interaction is improved, as it is no longer confined to the classroom (Belisle, 1996). The teacher can send feedback to learners at any time, and similarly, learners can send messages to their teacher whenever they want. Working in this mode, learners tend to receive more individual feedback from their teacher, and this supplies reinforcement and information. Additionally, computer-mediated communication can result in a more learner-centred classroom, especially when learners have input in the choice of topics of communication (Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997).

8 The ephemeral nature of computer-generated writing helps learners to perceive writing as a process (Belisle, 1996) rather than a product. Learners are much more likely to write several drafts, and revise and edit their written work when using e-mail. As many teachers will agree, process writing undoubtedly enhances the quality of learners' written work.



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9 In addition to developing writing skills, keypal projects have also been seen to enhance study skills, reading skills (Kroonenberg, 1994/5), and critical thinking (Roberts, Rice and Thorheim, 1994). These skills are acknowledged as being of great importance in educational development today.

10 Keypal projects are highly motivating for learners (Warschauer, 1995), perhaps partly due to the novelty value of using e-mail, which is still a relatively new phenomenon. Computer-mediated communication has been seen to enhance learners' motivation by providing them with a less threatening means to communicate (Kroonenberg, 1994/5; Wang, 1993), providing stimulating international contact (Soh & Soon, 1991), and facilitating work on meaningful projects (Barson, et al, 1993; Vilmi, 1995). Whatever the source of this motivation, learners do seem to enjoy taking part in e-mail projects and are willing to work hard to express their thoughts and beliefs to a real audience.

Finding a Keypal Group

Once you have decided that you wish to set up a keypal project, the first thing to do is to find a group with whom to exchange e-mails. This is easily achieved by visiting web site dedicated to this purpose. The best known is International E-mail Classroom Connections (IECC) which will find an exchange group for you. Their homepage is at:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/network/iecc/index.html>

Guidelines for Setting up a Keypal Project

A number of pedagogical considerations need to be taken into account if an e-mail project is to be successful, and Warschauer and Whittaker (1997) suggest 5 key guidelines to help teachers set up computer network-based projects in the language classroom:

1 It is essential for teachers to clarify their goals. It is not enough simply to put learners in a computer room and expect them to communicate effectively through electronic mail with a person on the other side of the world who they have never met. Possible goals are to teach new computer skills, to create a certain type of linguistic environment for learners, to teach writing or to enhance intercultural understanding. Once the teacher has decided on his or her goals, these must be made clear to the learners.

2 Having decided what the goals of the project are, the teacher must next integrate the e-mail project into the course curriculum as a whole. Little is gained pedagogically

by just randomly introducing a keypal project into a classroom as an add-on activity. However, when the project is integrated into the overall design and goals of a course, there can be many gains for learners. As Roberts (1995) states, "when the e-mail classroom connection processes are truly integrated into the ongoing structure of homework and classroom interaction, then the results can be educationally transforming" (in Warschauer, 1995).

3 Although both teachers and learners can learn basic e-mail functions quite quickly, it is important not to underestimate the complexity of an e-mail project. If learners do not have basic computer literacy, it will be necessary to provide some training in computer skills. Similarly, if learners have never used e-mail before, they will need to be taught basic e-mail functions. Unforeseen technical problems in the form of hardware or software malfunction, the computer system being down, or the inability to connect, should be planned for and a back-up activity ready. Bauman (1998) offers valuable advice when he states that the best way to avoid technical problems is to keep things simple by avoiding attachments, HTML, graphics, italics and other formatted text.

4 The teacher must be available to supply support to the learners if problems arise. The very nature of computer-generated communication promotes a more learner-centred classroom, and the role of the teacher changes accordingly. The teacher must be available to act as a facilitator when learners require assistance.

5 Learners must be involved in the decision-making process if they are to communicate successfully through e-mail. They need to have a say in the topics for communication and given the freedom to communicate the thoughts and beliefs that are important to them. This is an essential part of the learner-centred classroom. Such a classroom, which brings with it increased learner autonomy, does not make the teacher redundant (Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996). Indeed, the teacher continues to play a key role as facilitator, advisor, monitor, co-ordinator of group planning, and motivator.

Conclusion

Following these guidelines will help ensure the success of an e-mail project - an experience learners invariably find educationally and personally rewarding. The quantity and quality of their written work will improve, and their intercultural awareness will be enhanced. A keypal project can also be an excellent learning experience for the teacher.



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