

Keypal Project in an English Writing Course*

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Seo, Eun-Mi. 1999. Keypal Project in an English Writing Course. *Linguistics*, 7-1, 325-343. To motivate my students to write in English, I developed the keypal project for authentic and meaningful learning in English. The keypal concept involves the exchange of letters via the computer keyboard. This new term, **keypal**, resulted from the technical term need in computer technology with the appearance of e-mail. This paper encompasses a report on a semester long study where I had investigated e-mailing and the net effect it had on the English writing competency of my students. As a part of their English writing class requirements from a major Korean university, my students engaged in e-mailing as a means of exchange of correspondence with foreigners and teachers in the United States of America. (Howon University)

1. Introduction

Computers are an integral part of our lives. With computer technology, we are able to obtain vast quantities of authentic and real information in a matter of seconds. Now, people who live in small countries need not feel isolated from the rest of the world since they can easily communicate with others via e-mail and the internet.

In American universities, many of the teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) create e-mail discussion lists through the internet computer system. Their students participate in e-mail

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discussions raising issues on specific topics while interacting, and responding to those topics with other ESL students. By responding to each other, these students learn how to argue in an academic setting and how to improve their English writing skills. This method, with which teachers are able to motivate their students by establishing an e-mail discussion group, is very effective.

Many ESL teachers have emphasized the importance of using computers to motivate students because it has been found to be fun and exciting for their students. There are several benefits in using computer technology in ESL classes. According to Warschauer (1997), learning computer skills is essential to the future success of students. Pennington (1996) suggests the positive effects of writing on computers: more flexible writing process, greater number of revisions and less writing apprehension. It is not only a matter of using the internet to learn English but also of learning English to be able to function well on the internet. Many studies have proven that Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is effective for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to maintain interest in English. E-mailing in English writing classes is one of the CALL methods which has been used by teachers around the world (Chen, 1996; Muehleisen, 1997; Singhai, 1998; Tyson, 1998; Lee, 1998; Shetzer, 1998; Liao, 1999).

For Korean students, writing academic papers in English is a tedious process. Even though Korean students may learn how to write in English, they do not, however, develop their skills necessary for writing academic papers in English. Korean students need to develop their academic writing skills in order to explore and to digest what they have learned in their classes.

In my English composition class my students e-mail their friends throughout the world. E-mailing as a scaffold for them in their correspondence as 'keypal' which is what we call today's electronic penpal. In fact, the journals of my students served as a good preliminary scaffold for their e-mail correspondence. To motivate my students to write in English, I developed the keypal project for authentic

and meaningful learning in English. The keypal concept involves the exchange of letters via the computer keyboard. This new term, keypal, resulted from the technical term need in computer technology with the appearance of e-mail.

This paper encompasses a report on a semester long study where I had investigated e-mailing and the net effect it had on the English writing competency of my students. As a part of their English writing class requirements from a major Korean university, my students engaged in e-mailing as a means of exchange of correspondence with foreigners and teachers in the United States of America.

2. Writing Process

2.1. Writing in English

Writing cannot be improved in a brief period of time. Rather, improving writing skills involves much time and effort. The more we write, the more we improve writing skills. This concept may seem very simplistic, however, it appears to be true. Writing in this fashion is a recursive process. Writing involves two tasks: thinking about writing and writing itself. As such, the old adage, 'practice makes perfect' makes sense. That is why writing is called a process rather than the product and it is a very painstaking process for EFL learners.

Writing in the first language (L1) is crucial for writing skills development in a second language (L2). The interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1981) informs us with the theory that if learners write well in their L1, they will be able to transfer their thoughts into the second language or L2. Key aspects of writing are ideas and the stream of thought. We cannot expect foreign students to write perfect paragraphs. As such, Korean students need to develop their organizational skills ability to help them to coordinate and to arrange their ideas in writing.

There are several factors which influence writing skills. One of these

factors is the background knowledge of the learner's L1. Before we teachers emphasize writing in English, we must encourage students to have a wider knowledge of their L1 literacy. Without possessing a solid background knowledge in the L1 literacy, we cannot expect to write in foreign languages fluently.

2.2 Types of Writing Formats

(1) Academic writing

Academic writing involves writing research papers utilizing various sources. This type of writing format is not very familiar to most Korean undergraduate students. Korean students are familiar with summarizing a chapter or answering questions to problems that had been posed. In the Korean advanced courses, we need to have academic writing classes where students can receive instruction on how to write research papers in an academic setting.

(2) Journal writing

One of the trend in writing classes today is journal writing. There are many benefits when using journal writing in English classes. Even though journal writing is not a familiar format for Korean students, it has, however, made a significant impact in improving writing skills. Journal writing, a type of reflective writing, is often employed when teachers ask their students to write about what they have learned during the class. Harmer (1995) states that students can comment on the experiences that they are having by writing about their personal lives as well as many other topics of interest.

(3) Free Writing

This writing format allows students to write about whatever they want within a limited amount of time. Teachers may chooses the topics or students can choose whatever topics they want. In this type of writing, fluency is more emphasized than accuracy. Therefore, this style of writing offers the students viable opportunities to improve their fluidity in writing.

(4) E-mailing

Winn (1998) informs us that pen pal exchanges between classes offer familiar techniques for increasing the motivation and fluency of students in reading and writing.

Electronic mail is a relatively new medium of communication that is experiencing exploding growth in the U.S. and around the world (Belisle, 1996). E-mail exchange is also one of the fun ways to motivate students in writing and reading. Students are fascinated by the great speed with which they are able to e-mail their keypals in foreign countries. Students learn to write for communicative purposes when they are writing to someone from a different culture (Wong, 1997). By having fun, students are able to gradually realize that they can improve their writing skills. E-mailing offers many motivating factors for the students including the broadening of their geographical scope. Once they e-mail in English, students like to read and write letters. Some students like to check their e-mail everyday to read their e-mail partner's message.

3. Computer Assisted Language Teaching

The usage of computers has become widespread in schools and homes so much so that their use has expanded dramatically. As a result, many language teachers have been thinking about the implications of computer usage for language learning (Warschaur, 1996). As Bauman (1998) points out, students who are in high schools and universities are spending more of their lives in a world of fast, cheap easy-to-use electronic communication.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) involves the use of the computer as a tool rather than as a delivery means for instructional material. Many claim that CMC is the most revolutionary development in computer-assisted language learning. CMC is the only computer approach which involves human-to-human communication rather than that of human-to-machine.

CMC has only recently become wide-spread in the last five years. Its greatest impact has been on language teaching. For the first time, language learners are able to communicate directly, inexpensively and conveniently with other learners or speakers of the target language 24 hours a day. This communication can be asynchronous (not simultaneous) through tools such as electronic mail. In e-mail, participants compose messages on their own time and at their own pace. E-mail discussion groups which are known as lists or listserves, are also good examples of CMC. Keypal involves the use of e-mail between two individuals. Another program Multi-User-Domains Object Oriented (MOO) can be synchronous (real time) (Sanchez, 1996). With MOOs, people all around the world are able to have a simultaneous conversation by typing at their keyboards. Also MOO not only allows one-to-one communication, but also one-to-many communication. Both the teacher and the students can share a message with a small group or an international discussion list of hundreds or thousands of people.

CMC allows users to share not only brief messages, but also lengthy documents, graphics, sounds and video. Using the World Wide Web (WWW) students can search through millions of files around the world within minutes to locate and access authentic materials.

The Internet can be used to help create an environment where authentic and creative communication is integrated into all aspects of the course.

4. Research

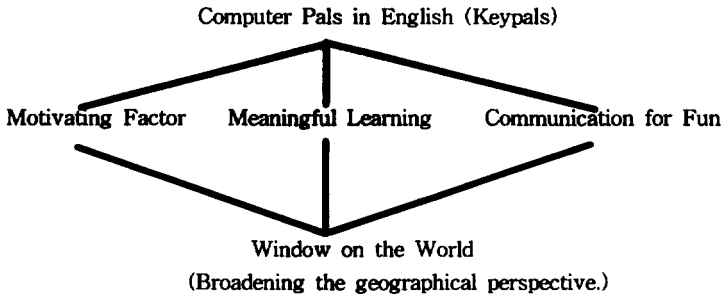
4.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study has been formulated based on various theories and a pilot study

The assumption of this theoretical framework is that students become more aware of people around the world by sharing their experiences

with foreign friends. Students will have confidence in using English after this study is over because the emphasis is on fluency rather than grammatical accuracy.

Figure 1. Keypals to Connect the World



4.2. Methods

During the spring semester of 1998, the major data for this study were collected from a senior English majors class of students enrolled in an elective course entitled Advanced English composition in the Department of English at Howon University. These students had already studied English composition during the previous two semesters. There was only one student who had been experienced in e-mailing when he had studied English in America for a year. Several students had tried computer chatting in Korean.

For my e-mail project, I set the same goals as did Beazley (1989). The goals were:

- a) to provide students with a real context in which they could improve their written communication;
- b) to provide an opportunity for cultural exchange through reading and writing; and
- c) to motivate the linguistically less interested students

I registered in the International Classroom Connections

(<http://www.stolaf.edu/network/iecc>) asking help for my keypal project. This is the message which I sent:

Project: E-mail project to share Korean culture

"I would like to have an e-mail project for my students. They are interested in exchanging e-mail with foreign students. I would like to use the result of this study for my research."

Jeanne Elmhurst (jelmhorst@tvi.cc.nm.us) from a college in New Mexico, Dr. Thomas Vogel (vogel@euv-frankfurt-o.de) from Frankfurt, Germany, and other teachers from Japan and Mexico showed interest in my project.

Excerpts from teachers' response

Vogel wrote me:

(1) "Could your students please write short introductions of themselves together with their e-mail addresses and send them to me. This is how we could get started." (April 27, 1998).

Raciel Hernandez from Mexico wrote me about my keypal project:

(2) "We knew about your penpal project because of FORUM Journal Vol.35 No.4 October 1997.we found out Keypal opportunities for students 'The Intercultural E-Mail classroom Connections (IECC) project' so we visited their web page and found you."

I exchanged e-mail with them several times to discuss my ideas. They encouraged me and gave me some suggestions. I also tried to search the internet for an e-mail project. Through the internet, I located some resource materials.

There were more than 56 countries which participated in the international e-mail classroom connections (IECC) project, however, Korea was not involved.

During the spring semester of 1998, I tried using various techniques

in my English composition class. These techniques involved making a portfolio, exchanging letters with Chinese students, e-mailing with American friends and teacher-student e-mail exchange.

(1) Making a Portfolio

Not being given any specific topic, the students had to write one essay in the spring semester. Several students consulted me on choosing possible topics.

I asked my students to make a portfolio. They kept all the drafts they wrote. I did not want to see only the final copy but also the initial and earlier copies. At the end of the semester, I asked them to submit all these drafts in order for them to see their thinking process. I was not so interested in their final product as I was in the draft process which led up to the final product.

(2) Exchange Letters with Chinese Students

Two Canadian teachers in China and I exchanged e-mail correspondence several times to initiate my project. At first, I explained my project to them and they liked it very much. They supported my project by matching their Chinese students with my students. Students exchanged letters several times. Since Chinese students were not able to access e-mail, they had to exchange messages by snail mail. It was good in a sense that Korean students were able to see the handwriting of Chinese students together with their writing style. Even though this exercise was a very basic step in writing, the initial beginning was important for my students. They experienced a broader sense of the world. Some of them exchanged cards and photos. It was the first experience for my students to exchange letters with foreign students. They seemed to experience a kind of fulfillment. A very interesting fact was that Chinese students used very thin paper, which appeared to reflect their economic situation. My students were very happy to receive letters from China. When the semester was almost over, I could not continue this project. I simply asked my students to continue exchanging letters with Chinese students even though I would have no way of checking on the number of letters each student would have sent

and received..

(3) E-mail Project with Friends from America

E-mailing with American friends presented a challenge - that of pairing my students with American friends. At first, I asked my friends in America whether they were willing to exchange e-mail with my students. They were quite cooperative with my project. Each student had one keypal from America. Most of these keypals were my friends. The e-mail partners of my students were graduate students who were older than my students. By exchanging e-mail with a foreign keypal, each students were able to have a glimpse into American culture. They also used English to express their own ideas and opinions via e-mail. Students had the opportunity to write for authentic readers and for the sake of intercultural understanding. As in a Lioa's (1997) study, age was not a barrier for intercultural communication.

(4) Teacher and Students' E-mail exchange

I asked my students to e-mail me as often as possible. Shy students preferred to use e-mail to discussed their feelings, they expressed their problems and asked questions more easily this way. I tried to answer all of the students' questions asked even though this was a burden for me. This type of e-mail exchange was effective because it allowed me to narrow the formal gap between the students and their teacher. It is important for students to have comfort zone where they can write without worrying about their writing ability. It is teacher's responsibility to make comfortable atmosphere. I could see the writing ability of the students improving. Notwithstanding that their grammar was not perfect, at least, they were able to express what they wanted. I did not correct their writing unless they had contextual errors which skewed the whole meaning. Some students e-mailed me very often, while others were reticent to do so. I noticed a significant difference between the diligent students and the reticent. Students who were mere curious kept trying to e-mail me and their partners in America and in other countries.

4.3. Analysis

I analyzed the various responses of the students. Content was more important than grammatical mistakes. My students had improved their written discourse. Their e-mail with me was analyzed. They expressed their feelings about their lives very honestly. One student even commented about my class. They showed great interest. I printed out the e-mails my students sent written to me to analyze their writing process.

They were proud of the computer skills they had acquired. Working with the computer was one of the advantages they received from this writing class. Students who were from a small city now had the satisfaction of knowing they were not living in a limited world. Most communications of my students were about their personal matters. They liked talking to me about their problems, worries and concerns about the future. This personal sharing was good for me to understand personal problems of my students. The personal communication between the teacher and the student plays a very important role in building a trusting relationship. In this way, teachers can help establish trust with students.

(1) Excerpts from student' e-mail to the teacher:

(a) "Teacher, please tell me, I am very pretty and clever and so on."

"I wrote my friend Rose now. Rose sex is female. I am afraid that she will dislike me." (Korean female commenting about her American keypal, Rose)

"I want to talk about my pen letter. I did not receive answering mail."

"At last I received the mail from Rose. My mouth goes until my ears. If someone asks me 'How are you feeling now? I will shout him very, very good. I am happy now."

Although the e-mail message of my female student was not grammatically correct, it was, however, understandable. She needed

encouragement from her teacher to be confident about her English. She expressed great joy when she received the e-mail message from her keypal.

(b) "I received their e-mail just now. I was very happy to got it for the first time."

(c) "Ha, ha, ha! I received my answer from him so I am happy. I did not reply him. But I will do him tomorrow."

"Today I taught senior, Seo Sang Joun how to send e-mail. He wrote in Korean so I told him, 'send in English.'"

"I tried to write you in this week but my business prevented me from writing you. For example, a table of PC room and my schedule had different time each other so I couldn't."

"The weather was bad but we went to the zoo on Friday.....For brothers, Yongjun, Youngseok, Taeyoung and Jungwhan decided by kawibawibo (scissors, paper and rock) some one to go in order to get rice rolled in dried laver from them."

(d) "Have a nice tomorrow. Your answer received today. I worried my mail are sende you or not. But you received my message safely. I am comfortable. I'll try to achieve my wishes."

"I read your e-mail after my classes. When I know someone leaved me e-mail I am wonderful. I have not a special penpal yet, so I want a new penpal. Please introduce new penpal."

"I received another penpal's answer. You know the penpal is Frankim."

"I can read Kinaai's e-mail today. I am so happy. It is very interesting."

One student finished her letter by saying that "I will stop writing." This is not an appropriate expression. She had to say "I have to go."

I had to teach students these basic phrases in order for them to have better communication with their e-mail partners. In the beginning, fluency was more important than accuracy. However, students needed to pay attention to the correct expressions if they wanted to communicate

better foreign friends. Incorrect expressions cause potential miscommunication

(2) Questionnaires

I gave the following questionnaires to the students, then analyzed their responses after having completed the pilot study. 17 students answered the questionnaires. The questionnaires were used to elicit opinions of the students regarding computer usage to improve their English ability.

How many times did you exchange e-mail with your penpal?

How many times did you e-mail your teacher?

How did you feel when you received e-mail from your foreign penpal?

Did you enjoy communicating with your Chinese penpal

What did you learn from penpals and keypals?

What would you recommend to improve this activity in writing activity?

Five students did not exchange e-mail at all even though e-mailing was a requirement. They did not care for either my project nor their grade. One student e-mailed her keypal fifteen times. She showed her eagerness to improve her writing skill and was willing to share her ideas with her keypal.

Most students enjoyed exchanging letters with the Chinese students. Many of them expressed the fact that this was their first letter that they had ever received from a foreign country. It was a good opportunity for them to understand about Chinese culture. Some of them exchanged small souvenirs or photos for the memory. Since some of my students knew how to use some Chinese characters, they were able to share some things in common with the Chinese, other than the English language. This activity motivated students to write more to improve their writing skill. It was meaningful learning for students because they used English to communicate with foreigners.

Table 1. The E-mail of the Students to the Teacher and to their Keypal

Number of subjects	Number of e-mail messages sent to the teacher	Number of e-mail messages sent to the keypal
1	6	7
2	10	15
3	0	0
4	3	2
5	6	4
6	3	2
7	7	7
8	2	7
9	1	2
10	2	1
11	10	1
12	5	5
13	5	0
14	0	0
15	0	0
16	0	0
17	1	1

5. Limitations and Implication

5.1. Limitations

(1) The computer lab was not always available for the students in Howon University. Many times they had to wait to use computer lab and then only for limited periods of time. In most cases, they were able to use the computers after school was over. This inconvenience made my students reluctant to e-mail. However, some diligent students did

not mind this and showed great improvement in their writing. Many students had computers at home so they liked to use a chatting program in Korean. However, it was a different situation when they had to write letters in English and e-mail. Also most students did not have e-mail addresses at home.

The other problem was the fact that not all of the students enjoyed the computer and the internet. I had expected all the students would like to learn the computer and to e-mail. However, my expectation was not correct. Some students did not like to use the computer and hated going to the computer lab. Some of them did not have enough knowledge about e-mail and the internet. I let them explore the use of internet and e-mail by themselves. I did not give them specific guidelines. This fact proved to be one of the weak points in my study because the lack of guidelines appeared to be a demotivating factor for my students. As a result, many did not sign up for my class the next semester. Another possible problem was that students who felt they were not proficient in English would ask their friends to e-mail or to write for them. Therefore, it was not easy to check individual e-mail senders.

(2) Teacher - Student Collaboration

This project demonstrated that it was possible for a teacher to be a collaborator with the students. It is beneficial for teachers to share their writing experiences with their students. It is important for teachers to share their feelings and thoughts with their students. In this way, students are able to feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts. I tried to answer most of the e-mail messages from my students. In a way, I believe that I narrowed the communication gap between my students and me.

5.2. Implications

Based on my pilot study and other related studies, I discovered that it is imperative to provide clear guidelines for topics when in e-mailing

foreigners. According to Warschauer (1997), greater involvement on the teacher's part in creating learning activities is needed to get maximum benefit from internet exchanges. I should have provided clearly defined formats for my students to follow when they were exchanging e-mail. Some of the topics the students discussed were not culturally appropriate to ask Americans. For example, Korean students like to ask personal questions about a person's age, marital status and monthly salary. These questions are not culturally appropriate to ask Americans.

If students are given special topics and guidelines, they will be able to avoid cultural problems. Korean students are for to have specific guidelines when they have to write in English. It would also be wonderful to be able to send photos of the keypals as an attachment to the e-mail. There are many different approaches students can experience via e-mail.

It would be also helpful for teachers to share their teaching ideas and problems with fellow teachers around the world by e-mail. As Bowman (1999) suggested, ongoing round table discussion by e-mail would lead teachers to reflect their teaching problems. It is important to have effective network with teachers around the world.

5.3. Current Situation

Even though, I had wanted to develop my keypal project further, unfortunately, the writing course was cancelled for the fall semester of 1998. This left me with the only one writing course in the evening. Continuing this project for evening students was difficult. These students did not have time to use the computer lab. In my Freshmen English class in the Tourism Department, I encouraged students to e-mail me as much as possible. They did quite well. However, they were unwilling to exchange e-mail with foreign students since they were not confident about writing letters in English.

Currently, in the Korean daily newspapers, the newspaper reporters include their e-mail addresses at the end of their report. In this way,

readers can have access to the reporters at any time. This illustrates the rapid change regarding computer technology and the role of the internet in Korean society.

Once a week, there is a special section on computers and computer information in the daily newspapers in Korea. There are many websites and homepages for English programs listed. Students are able to take advantage of these materials to enrich their English ability. Teachers can utilize this information for their students to develop and enhance interest in English.

6. Conclusion

As Warschauer (1996) pointed out, computers can fulfill a variety of needs for language teaching. They can act as a tutor offering language drills or skill practice or can provide the stimulus for discussion and interaction. They can be used as a tool for writing and research as well. With the advent of the internet, computers can also provide the medium of global communication and the source for limitless authentic materials.

The present study was not as successful as I had expected. Compared with the effort I put forth, I did not gain what I wanted from my students. However, overall, most students experienced a great excitement when they received e-mail from their keypals. This exercise provided their first experience in receiving e-mail from abroad. They expressed their happiness in this connection. In this sense, they were using authentic English which was meaningful for them. Students improved their typing and writing skills in English. They discovered that communicating with foreigners was not as difficult as what they had expected. This was the primary benefit for my students that I discovered from this preliminary study.

In conclusion, this project might offer many creative possibilities that would have a positive meaningful impact on students in writing classes.

However, the positive impact would only come about as a result of the careful planning and design of the course structure initially.

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