

Research Note

E-Pal Exchanges: A Way to Connect Preservice Teachers and English Language Learners

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Pen pal exchanges have been used for years to promote cross-cultural communication. In educational settings, pen pal projects have served additional purposes. One is providing English language learners (ELLs) with a safe but realistic context in which language skills can be practiced and learner motivation increased. Barksdale, Watson, and Park (2007), for example, examined pen pal exchanges between middle school students learning English in Malawi and middle school students in the United States, while Larrota and Serrano (2012) investigated letter exchanges between adult ESL students and preservice teachers in the US. Other studies have examined how pen pal projects can help prepare preservice teachers in the US. McMillon (2009), Moore and Ritter (2008), and Wilfong and Oberhauser (2012), for example, examined pen pal exchanges between preservice teachers and urban, predominantly African-American, elementary and middle school students, which aimed at preparing teachers for the diversity they will likely encounter in their classrooms. Similarly, Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, and Dalhouse (2009) studied letters

exchanged between preservice teachers and middle school refugee ELLs, which helped future teachers improve their dispositions towards culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

While the studies above examined pen pal projects between K-12 American students and students abroad or preservice teachers and local students (refugee, urban, or adult ESL), no study, to our knowledge, has investigated the benefits of a pen pal project between preservice teachers in the US and English as a foreign language (EFL) students. The overarching question for this study is: What do American preservice teachers learn through e-pal exchanges with Brazilian EFL students?

The study

Every semester, Education majors in an Introduction to Applied Linguistics class taught by the second author at a liberal arts college have the option of participating in an e-pal project with intermediate level EFL students in Brazil. The main goals for this assignment include providing firsthand experience on language issues covered

in the course readings and lectures and getting to know a non-native speaker of English.

The college professor pairs the students in collaboration with the language school coordinator in Brazil. The e-pal pairs exchange emails throughout the semester and the college students then write a reflection on their experience. The grade earned on this reflection then replaces their lowest quiz grade, amounting to less than 3% of the total course grade. The guidelines for the assignment include logistics (e.g., reply to emails within a week, thank e-pal when ready to finish project), suggested topics (e.g., hobbies, holidays), and ideas for the reflection (e.g., overall experience, language issues in e-pal's emails and their effect on comprehension).

For this study, the first and third authors, who have both taken this course in the past, independently analyzed 18 reflections qualitatively searching for recurring themes (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). They then met, discussed their findings, and agreed on the three major themes presented below. This study complies with the rules for protection of human subjects and all names are pseudonyms.

What Preservice Teachers Learned

Three major themes were identified in the reflections:

1. *Reflection on language issues in the email exchanges.* Following the assignment guidelines, 100% of the college students identified patterns of language issues in their e-pals' emails (e.g. use of articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions). Additionally, they sometimes thought about how

to address (or not) these language problems in a classroom or tutoring setting. For example, Abby stated:

The incorrect use of an indefinite article was [an] aspect of [my e-pal's] composition ... which had some errors. ... In order to explain this to her I can tell her that we use the indefinite article "a" before a noun or an adjective that begins with a consonant [sound] and we use "an" before a noun or an adjective that begins with a vowel [sound].

2. *Greater confidence with communication.* Most of the college students (67%) found that their e-pal's language errors did not affect comprehension. They negotiated a meaningful interaction with an ELL despite language errors and noted increased confidence in communicating with ELLs in general. Debbie, for example, explained the following:

When I first emailed my pen pal, ... I was most concerned about [being able to] communicate with someone from another country along with being able to understand and relate to my pen pal. Yet, after getting my first response, I knew I would definitely enjoy the process. ... Although her English was not perfect, I could fully comprehend what she was saying.

3. *Empathy and understanding.* The majority of the college students (78%) empathized with their e-pals by drawing connections to their own language learning experiences. They were impressed by their e-pals'

motivation to learn English, and had a renewed understanding of the difficulty of learning English. In Fran's words:

I learned that English is a very hard language to learn. So many lessons I just know from growing up in an English [speaking] country. But for English learners, there are lessons that are hard to master. ... Personally, I only took 3 years of French in high school but my teacher did not push us hard to learn the fundamentals of the language. For me, I learned words and not sentences.

Regarding the EFL students' motivation, Ellie commented, "I was really moved by her passion for English and her willingness to go to a [language] school just to learn it."

"I have a whole new perspective for what English learning is like, ... and I cannot wait to apply what I learned in this project to my teaching career."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to investigate what preservice teachers taking an Introduction to Applied Linguistics course learn from exchanging emails with Brazilian EFL students. Considering the course's focus on Linguistics and the assignment guidelines, it is not surprising that a common theme regarded the language issues in their e-pals' writing. This project allowed the college students to develop a deeper understanding of the specific language challenges that ELLs face, giving them an opportunity to focus and analyze the language patterns of their e-pals in a way that will be difficult in a future classroom with

numerous students needing attention. As Catie mentions, "[this project] helps [with] learning the concepts of Linguistics through a real person instead of just the book."

The second theme regards the college students' realization that their e-pals' language issues did not affect comprehension. The pen pals conducted meaningful conversations despite these challenges. This is particularly relevant because, as Debbie's quote above illustrates, preservice teachers may have a concern that they will not be able to communicate with ELLs. As Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, and Dalhouse (2009) explain, preservice teachers need "authentic experiences with linguistically diverse students" (p. 339) in order to enhance their communication skills with ELLs, and thus become more effective teachers.

Lastly, the e-pal exchanges allowed the college students to form a relationship with an ELL and, in turn, develop more empathy and understanding for these students. The college students reflected on their own difficulty learning a second language and acknowledged the difficulty of learning English as a foreign language. Moore and Ritter (2008) support that pen pal projects give preservice teachers the opportunity to interact with students from diverse backgrounds and prepare them to understand linguistically and culturally diverse students as individuals with unique personal histories.

In general, the e-pal project was very well received by the college students, who referred to it as "beneficial" (Catie)

and “amazing” (Abby). Some of them mentioned they wanted to continue their communication with their e-pals and, “if given the opportunity, I would do it again” (Debbie). In addition, some of them reported a shift in perspective as a result of the project. Fran remarked that “this experience grew me as a person to pay more attention to other countries instead of just focusing on what is going on in the United States,” while Abby stated that “not only does [this project] make me want to go visit Brazil, but it makes me want to become fluent in a second language.” It is important to note that, even though students generally made very positive remarks about the project, these reflections were written for a grade, which may have had an effect on what students wrote. This should be interpreted as a limitation to this study. Anecdotally, however, some students have mentioned to the second author that they still exchange emails with their pen pals after the semester has finished,

which indicates that they truly enjoyed the project.

Considering the success of this e-pal project, we argue that other teacher education programs should consider incorporating similar projects to increase future teachers’ preparation for working with ELLs. Besides putting the linguistic topics learned in class into action through interaction with an actual language learner, e-pal exchanges can help future educators develop an awareness of the difficulties faced by language learners as well as the cultural differences that may exist between student and teacher. As a result, future teachers become more confident in their ability to integrate ELLs in their classrooms and respond to their needs. As Ellie insightfully noted, “I have a whole new perspective for what English learning is like [...], and I cannot wait to apply what I learned in this project to my teaching career.”

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