

E-MAIL PENPALS: ARE THEY REALLY LEARNING?

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Introduction

There is little doubt that ESL e-mail exchanges are meaningful ways of learning a second language. The more crucial question for language teachers, however, is how valuable this technology is as a learning resource for their students. This study examines ESL e-mail communication in three discourse genres and concludes that not all e-mail communication is equally productive. In fact, certain types of online exchanges may be more linguistically challenging than others. Also, the extent to which learners are so challenged may also be modified by another factor, the keypals' level of intimacy.

Learners writing to a keypal may communicate about a wide range of topics. They may introduce themselves, describe their school or community, narrate a story, or discuss an issue in their community. Thus, the writing may fall along a range of various discourse genres or topical areas. If we assume that learning a second language requires exposure and practice to certain syntactic structures, then writing certain types of messages which are identified with certain discourse genres could be more productive as a learning activity by virtue of the fact that these grammatical features occur with greater frequency in those genres. In fact, a search of the research literature of written discourse in conventional (non-online) writing seems to support this view. Numerous studies (Crowhurst and Piche 1979; Perron 1976; Rosen 1969; and San Jose 1972) have demonstrated that mean length of T-unit, a common measure of syntactic complexity, varies depending on the mode of discourse. It tends to be greater for argumentation than for

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description, with exposition and narration falling somewhere in between (Dvorak 1987). This study will attempt to ascertain whether rankings of syntactic complexity in computer-mediated discussion via e-mail correlate with those reported in conventional writing within the same discourse genres.

The study examined the effect of discourse genre on the lexical and syntactic complexity of the message that the learner composes. It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between genre and grammatical complexity of the message with the assumption that the higher the complexity of the message the more useful it is as a learning activity for the ESL student.

Subjects in the study were 150 students who are taking a required course called Basic English at the University of Puerto Rico, Humacao campus. The students take computer lab once a week and they regularly send and receive e-mail messages either to each other through in-class email or to keypals in other countries through Dave's E-mail Connection (the address of this webpage appears in the list of references). Dave's E-mail Connection provides what it calls a guestbook list of some 50 to 100 e-mail messages from ESL learners who want e-mail keypals. The messages are usually capsule personal introductions where they tell about themselves and express a desire to communicate with other ESL learners. Learners choose keypals from the list and carry on e-mail exchanges on topics of their choice. The students during their weekly computer lab also communicate with each other by posting messages in electronic mail. While both forms of communication can be defined as "non-synchronous" since neither was done in real time, the in-class exchange of ideas requires posting a message and waiting for a reply, which usually arrives within minutes, as opposed to e-mailing foreign keypals where the reply is usually delayed for several days. Since in-class exchanges take place over a shorter span of time, it is, therefore, more immediate and comes close to that of synchronous, real time communication. Receiving and posting messages to foreign keypals, therefore, preserves a unique characteristic of e-mail, which allows the learners more time to reflect and analyze ideas and to pay attention to grammatical accuracy (Warschauer 1997).

Most of the time students were free to choose their keypals (either a classmate or a foreign keypal), to choose the topics they

