E-teachers: Set of email activities *

Lourdes Rey Paba
Nayibe Rosado Mendinueta

Zona próxima

MANNERING, DOUGLAS. Great Works of Japanese Graphic Art

LOURDES REY PABA
MAGISTRA EN EDUCACIÓN, UNIVERSIDAD DEL NORTE, BARRANQUILLA
(COLOMBIA). COORDINADORA ACADÉMICA DEL INSTITUTO DE IDIOMAS DE
ESTA MISMA INSTITUCIÓN.
(arey@uninorte.edu.co)
NAYIBE ROSADO MENDINUETA
MAGISTRA EN EDUCACIÓN, UNIVERSIDAD DEL NORTE.
(nrosado@uninorte.edu.co)

In this paper, we will present several educational e-mail based activities that can be used in EFL classes. This is the result of the knowledge gained in this research and the support of other scholars who have also gone through this type of experiences and who have kindly shared their experience with us. We wanted to provide colleagues with a set of activities they can try in their classes and promote the use of technology in the language-learning arena. We hope to have contributed to this objective and have lit a new way in our traditional teaching scenario.

Key words: Computer based resources, Learning strategies, E-mail based activities.

ABSTRACT

Introduction

I n this article, we will present several educational e-mail based activities that can be used in EFL classes. This is the result of the knowledge gained in the research *"Analysis of the Relation Between the Use of E-mail Based activities and the Development of Positive Attitudes and Writing Abilities in English in Intermediate Level Students at Universidad del Norte* "and the support of other scholars who have also gone through this type of experiences and who have kindly shared their experience with us.

First, we would like to start by giving a brief summary of four basic ways in which the Internet can be used in the EFL/ESL class to later move on to only E-mail based activities. It is important to show the gradation from general Internet activities to email based ones since, in most cases, these are already included in the general ones. According to Grey (1999), cited in Lee (1999), there are four ways in which the Internet can function as an educational tool in institutions.

(1) Search for and receive: this category comprises activities that are based on using the Internet as a library. The purpose of these activities is to search for and retrieve information.

(2) Publish and provide: this category involves not the retrieval, but the publication of information. This publishing is, generally, done on webpages, which are the basic places where information is stored in the Internet.

(3) Talk and Reply: These are conversational activities that take place via the Internet through e-mail correspondence and in chat rooms. Strictly speaking, we can include here Internet phone conversations.

(4) Collaborate and learn. This category includes joint projects that involve students in two or more classrooms that might be thousands of miles apart. This fourth way of using Internet, usually, involves one or more of the other three previous ways. Collaboration between classrooms almost always involves the use of e-mail. Besides, it may include the joint publication of webpages or joint search activities.

Our E-mail-based project is framed in categories (3) and (4). Although for the purpose of developing reading and writing skills, we can use any of the four types of activities. Another important aspect is that these categories can mix. An example can be activities in which students are assigned a project about a given topic. This topic has to be documented with information retrieved from the web (category 1), talk and reply about decisions on what relevant information has to be selected, organization, presentation, layout (category 3) and finally, construct webpages to publish the result of their writing and reading project (category 2). Category 4 is inherent to the project since they have to work in-groups or pairs.

As regards the theme of our

research, we have found out that writing is the most used and documented of the linguistic skills in Internet. For example, Nagel (1999) and Liao (1999) agree that email conversations on the Internet provide a useful learning tool. This is because, even though such conversations may take place across thousands of miles, and between people who have never met except on the Internet, they are social activities and social activities tend to engage students' interests. According to Garner and Gillingham (1996), quoted by Lee (1999), Internet conversations can be intensely social activities. This will sometimes be the case, for example, if an email correspondence evolves so that people writing to each other become close friends. Besides, Lee (1999) adds that this type of activities "make the act of communicating in English not just a theoretical problem, but a practical one. The requirement to solve that practical problem can be a strong motivator for students to try hard to construct clear grammatical messages that communicate their thoughts".

There are several advantages in using email activities. According to Belisle (1996) by using email in the EFL classes, students become familiar with a communication tool that is vital to survival in the 21st century. Secondly, he argues, a teacher can interact with a student or a group of students working on a project at times that are more convenient to the students, group or teacher. In our project, students reported that an important factor was that they always had the teacher available, since they could write to her email any time, knowing that she would provide feedback as soon as possible. The vital interaction that takes place between teachers and students over a writing task is not limited to the confines of a classroom.

Thirdly, Belisle (1996) says that by using email the teacher can monitor the individual or group writing process from the brainstorming phase to the final draft. One of the most difficult aspects to manage in writing classes is the large amount of texts produced by the students. By email it is easy to filter them and have a folder for each student with their samples classified by date/time or topic. This will allow the teacher to analyze the samples more effectively and logically since s/he can follow the process from the very beginning. It also avoids the loss of paper produced by the students.

Additionally, Belisle (1996) points out that students can use these features to organize their writing. This will help them to focus more on the tasks of communicating and collaborating with peers and teachers. His research also showed that by using computers, students become better problem solvers and better communicators. He argues "over a network, using email and sharing files, students have the chance to collaborate and work together with other classmates, peers and teachers."

Another advantage Belisle (1996) notes about the use of email is that "more writing is actually accomplished

when using email. Electronic blips on the screen are perceived to be more changeable, more ephemeral, and less inedible than traditional pen and pencil writing". In relation to students' affective aspect, he also notes that shy students have a forum for expressing themselves and asking questions more openly without fear. This can give them self-confidence and eventually improve their writing ability.

However, to try to develop this kind of activities, you have to be sure that your students are acquainted with the tool. If not, you will have to introduce them to the email and practice basic steps to make them more confident with its use.

This last section briefly describes some email-based activities that teachers can implement in their writing classes.

1. Dialoguing. This is the most basic way to use email. It's simply one more way to increase the frequency of communication between teacher - student and student-student. Belisle (1996) presents some examples of different kinds of dialoguing he has experienced in his class.

Student to teacher
- Journal writing
- Asking and answering questions
- Progress reports and updates
- Home works

Teacher to students
- Announcements
- Assignments
- Homework and feedback on homework

- Grades Report
- Mailing lists
- List serv

Students to students
- Class mailing lists
- Social events
- Peer work

A dialogue activity is to create a mailing list of your class. First, you will ask them to get an email address, if they do not have one. Most of the browsers, such as yahoo.com, mailcity.com, aol.com, etc. offer free email boxes. Go to the multimedia lab and ask them to download one of these browsers' pages. It is advisable that you have done this activity previously. Teach them how to get an email address. When you have all the addresses, if possible, ask your network administrator to create a mailing list of your group. After that, you just have to write your group login (name) and all your students will receive your message.

One of the most common ways of using email is homework assignment. Using this tool where teachers can send announcements, assignments, course syllabus, and dates of exams can save class time. Students will not be able to say they did not know because with the return receipt option, the teacher can know if they have opened and read the message. Students have to be aware that the periodic revision of email messages is compulsory.

1   Real time teacher to student dialoguing. Send a basic welcome

message followed by a question eliciting a response. When each student opens his or her mail, this message is awaiting him or her. They have to reply immediately by writing complete sentences. Answer their messages as soon as possible by making comments and add a new question. The only condition is that your class must be a small one, maximum 12 students.

2   Research Project. In this activity, the level of complexity of the project, the language used, the number of students working, the report produced can be varied. This activity also involves the utilization of the web search engines and the library. However all the activity from the brainstorming phase up to the final draft must be done electronically. The teacher can monitor the process and provide feedback. All the communication established between the students has to be sent to the teacher. This activity can be implemented with students of the same class or with pairs in another city, or country.

3   One Perfect Paragraph. This is a simple activity that helps students to practice editing short effective paragraphs looking for grammar, agreement, spelling and cohesion and coherence mistakes. The teacher prepares one practice paragraph or two with several mistakes and sends it to the group. *Instruction:* This paragraph has 9 mistakes. Find and correct them. When corrected send it back to the teacher.

4   Electronic Secret Keypal. This

is a term-long key-pal activity in which students are assigned to other students from another writing class in the program or from another class abroad. The students use bogus names (for this activity only) and are not allowed to know the identity of their secret pal. The activity concludes with a «Meet Your Secret Pal» party at the end of the term. The teacher receives copy of all correspondence from the students.

5   Chain stories or sentences. This is a simple activity that help students with basic sentence level grammar reinforcing such grammatical structures as countable/uncountable nouns, prepositional phrases, and so on. Before class, send a partial sentence to the group, such as

«It was a dark and stormy night and»
    or
«I went to the store and bought some»

Students then add to the story or sentence some new information and forward it on to an assigned partner in the class. The story is passed around to all members of the class with each adding their part. Have each student add something different each time. In the end there will be x number of stories or sentences where x equals the number of students in the class.

6   A strange meeting. Another more elaborate version of a chain story is what is called my Strange Meeting assignment. Students are asked to create phrase by phrase the

skeleton of a short story (8 partial sentences) about the meeting of two individuals (male and female). What's unique about this exercise is that each person in the class is writing a sentence phrase to the story and then forwarding it on to an assigned person who then adds the next sentence phrase who in turn forwards it to another assigned person and so on. The sentence phrases are passed on to eight different people and then the last person puts the 8 sentence phrases together into a coherent, but often strange, paragraph of eight complete sentences. All the while students are sending copies of all the messages sent to the teacher who is monitoring the process.

8 Story puzzles. Story puzzles are stories in which sentences are randomly mixed and rearranged by the students in a correct sequence and then send back the story to the teacher in the correct sequence.

9 Cloze exercises. Students fill in sentences with every word omitted, or every noun, or verb, and so on. The student then sends the message back to the teacher. The teacher checks and sends back for further revision if necessary. This activity can be used to reinforce the use of certain words such as adjectives, articles, nouns, etc.

10 Mailing Lists. Students dialogue with a group on a particular topic. One e-mail address of the group can be created and a message on a certain topic asking for a response. Others send their responses to the group members. Most e-mail software programs have the ability to reply to either the original sender or all the recipients of the original message. In this case the preferences would need to be set to the latter.

11 International key pals (Internet access necessary). With the tremendous growth of the Internet, there are lots of opportunities to interact with students from other countries and cultures thus increasing the global awareness of students. International Key Pals can be easily found on the World Wide Web using such search engines as Web Crawler or Yahoo.

These are the most outstanding ways the Internet and its services can be exploited for language learning processes. We hope to have contributed to the enrichment of your teaching practice by providing you with this summary of activities and will be glad to know about your encounters with technology.

Bibliography

BELISLE, R. (1996)
E-mail Activities in the ESL Writing Class [WWW document]. The Internet TESL Journal, 2(12). URL http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/Articles/Belisle (1996)-Email.html

BERGE, Z. & M. Collins (1995)
Computer-mediated communication and the online classroom in distance learning. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

CHAO-CHIH, Liao (1999)
E-mailing To Improve EFL Learners' Reading and Writing Abilities: Taiwan Experience. The Internet TESL Journal http://iteslj.org/Articles/Liao-Emailing.html

GREY, D. (1999)
The Internet in School. Londres and Nueva York: Cassell.

LEE, E. -K. (n.d./1998).
Using E-mail in EFL Writing Classes [WWW document]. The Internet TESL Journal, 4(11). URL http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/Techniques/Lee-EmailWriting.html

LEE, Kuang-Hu (1999)
Energizing the ESL/EFL Classroom Through Internet Activities. The Internet TESL Journal.

NAGEL, P.S. (1999)
Email In The Virtual Esl/Efl Classroom. The Internet Tesl Journal Http://Aithech.Ac.Jp/ Iteslj/Articles/ Nagel-Email.Html.)