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jmizzuno@uninorte.edu.co

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Rey, Lourdes; Rosado, Nayibe
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Empowering The Efl/EsL Class Through E-mail Activities

Lourdes Rey
Nayibe Rosado

próxima
edición



M.C. ESCHER, *Ondulaciones en el agua*, 1950 (fragmento)

LOURDES REY

MAGISTRA EN EDUCACIÓN, UNIVERSIDAD DEL NORTE, BARRANQUILLA
(COLOMBIA). COORDINADORA ACADÉMICA DEL INSTITUTO DE IDIOMAS DE
ESTA MISMA INSTITUCIÓN.
(arey@uninorte.edu.co)

NAYIBE ROSADO

MAGISTRA EN EDUCACIÓN, UNIVERSIDAD DEL NORTE.
(nrosado@uninorte.edu.co)

		<p>This paper analyses the effect of using e-mail-based activities on EFL learning processes for developing writing and reading skills and enhancing metacognitive strategies. Our goal is to determine whether there is improvement in these skills and whether there is a change in their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation towards learning.</p>
<p>FECHA DE RECEPCIÓN: MARZO DE 2001</p>	<p>ABSTRACT</p>	<p>Nowadays, there is a growing interest and motivation in using these activities for complementing the content of regular courses but, the questions are " will students enhance their learning through them? Will they become more autonomous and responsible for their learning process? Little research has been conducted to verify whether the use of these computer - based resources affect English learning positively.</p> <p>Therefore, we are currently carrying out a research on the systematic use of E-mail services in the EFL classroom to determine whether there is a significant improvement in the development of the writing and reading skills in English and whether there is a change in their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation towards learning.</p> <p>KEY WORDS: Reading writing skills, Metacognitive strategies, Learning process, Computer based resources.</p>

1 Introduction

Education has not remained inflexible towards the profound changes taking place in other areas of knowledge. The impact of those changes on the educational area is increasingly evident.

Factors such as the economical opening, the new communication and educational legislation, the fast evolution and availability of new technologies (satellites, simulation, multimedia, educational games, electronic networks, new methods of generation and transmission of visual and graphic information), have started to trigger the modernization of the teaching learning process and consequently started to modify the way the educational system works.

These new technologies are producing changes in the traditional pedagogical models. They have broadened the array of possibilities for the limited traditional teaching-learning process in which the teacher is the only source of knowledge, the chalk and board are the best didactic aids and the classroom is the only place where this process can be appropriately carried out.

Mastering English is very important, especially nowadays, when most of the technological and scientific information is published in this language. According to Professor Claudio Josemaría Altisen only 1,78% of the documents that are published in Internet are in Spanish. The vast majority, 70%, is in English. In spite of the fact that Spanish is one of the

most spoken languages in the world, there are more documents in German and French than Spanish ones found in the Web¹.

The previous information is very important since it indicates that English is not only a requirement for professionals to competitively participate in the distribution of grants and scholarships abroad, but also that English is necessary for any individual whose objective is to find information in the largest library of existing information: the Internet network.

In our country, the English learning process is generally limited to what students can learn during class periods. There are many reasons why we should start to profit educationally from the opportunities offered by the net to learn English. Firstly, it is convenient that students could access many more real situations of the use of English that they are currently finding in their daily lives. It is particularly important to expose them to the same situations of a person whose mother tongue is English. Secondly, it is basic to motivate students to use English for leisure outside the classes. If students are trained to use e-mail and net surfing, they will be able to continue using them in their free time. This could be achievable if academic activities that use the net as a comple-

¹ These are some of the most important conclusions drawn from a recent study carried out by La Compañía de Tecnología Digital which analyses the use of different languages in Internet, using as reference the index of documents searched in Altavista.

ment to classes are programmed and offered to students.

Research in the area has pointed out many other reasons to justify the implementation of Internet based projects. Victoria Mueshleisen referring to an experience in Japan claims that «learning to use the computer provides strong intrinsic motivation for the learning of English». Even in a developed country «the use of computers is a relatively new experience (and a highly motivating one). Therefore one finds students willing to use them as support to traditional classroom teaching».

There are some practical aspects that also motivate students to use computers. Many students think that learning to use computers is important for their majors and that developing communicative skills in English is also important for their professional development. Consequently, they are motivated to write and read e-mail messages in English. Similarly, they discover that they can use English as a means to learn about peoples of the world including those whose native language is not English. Mueshleisen exemplifies these by saying " my students are happy to discover that even if they do not speak Chinese or Thai, for example, they may be able to communicate to people from Thailand or Hong Kong via e-mail and find Web sites with the information about those places.

Facilities to use Internet are frequently available to students in Colombian universities. At Universidad del Norte, for example, there are six rooms

equipped with computers, which are already connected to Internet. Those computers have software for e-mail and WWW surfing and students can use these services in their free time.

Therefore, it is essential to carry out projects that improve the abilities and knowledge of Colombian English teachers about how to integrate to teaching the opportunities offered by the net as an essential communication environment in the acquisition of English as a second language.

2 General Objective

This report analyses the effect of using e-mail-based activities on EFL learning processes for both developing writing and reading skills in English and enhancing metacognitive strategies such as learning responsibility and autonomy.

3 Integrating technology into teaching

The first question that underlies the educational use of the Internet is of course why teachers and educational institutions should abandon at all their traditional- well tried and usually successful methods and participate in what some still consider a craze? If one considers the little hard evidence related to its contribution to learning processes, the answer would probably be negative. By now, however, it is becoming evident that the Internet is here to stay and that it will influence society, as we know it. It is impossible to predict exactly what effects the

Internet will have in the future, but based on the few experiences so far it would be reasonable to conclude that it will acquire great significance. Moreover, the idea is not to ask teachers to abandon traditional teaching methods absolutely. The Internet should be seen as a very useful complement to conventional teaching, not as a replacement.

As we advance towards this new century, societies are transforming into information societies at different rates. In these incipient societies Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is playing an ever-increasing role. As Janis Folkmanis (1998, cited in Graus, 1999) points out, the question arises as to whether educational institutions can be allowed to fall behind in its role of educating our population in things that are becoming a core element of economic and social life. It is self-evident that educational institutions cannot ignore these developments. In the information society, there is a need for new skills and a basic understanding of the underlying technology (Folkmanis, 1998). To achieve this, it is becoming imperative that learning to work with computers and understanding new technologies is assimilated into the curriculum and into teaching methods.

From this perspective we could gather that educational institutions in Colombia and in the rest of the world are facing two major challenges in the 21st century. First of all, they will have to prepare their students for the information society and second they will have to make effective use of ICT

to provide better education (Van Assche, 1998). It is almost impossible to ignore the Internet. At the moment it is used by an estimated 50 million people in 152 countries. It is an invaluable source of information, which can be very useful in educating young people.

We agree with Van Assche (1998) when he argues that the use of the World Wide Web and the Internet can have several potential results and benefits. We adapted our own list as follows:

- Educational institutions will be able to cope better with the challenges of preparing the students for the information society. Learning to work with the information highway is a prerequisite today. A new term has been introduced, viz. ICT illiteracy. In our society a division is starting to be observed between people who are ICT literate and those who are not, especially if we talk about employment possibilities. Educational institutions cannot afford to produce ICT illiterate students in a society in which expressing oneself in any multimedia form is becoming a prerequisite.

- Educational institutions and teachers that exploit ICT will hopefully contribute to improve the effectiveness of the education process. If education shifts from 'being told' to 'exploration' that could lead as a result in a much deeper understanding. Of course, this aspect is hard to see in our context in which only now institutions and teachers are becoming aware of the

existence and of the possibilities of using computers, and consequently computer-mediated communication.

■ It is among the responsibilities of educational institutions to help students develop values, such as tolerance and respect for other cultures. The Internet could be used for exchanging ideas with other cultures and help eradicating prejudices against minorities. (See Colombian Standards for language teaching below).

Finally, the use of the Internet will hopefully link the abstraction of teaching material with real life in the outside world. One of the reasons why many children fail at school is the dramatic lack of links between these two aspects (Roger, 1998). For instance, what is the use of learning to speak a foreign language if you can only talk to your teacher, who by the way speaks your mother tongue anyway? It is another story when the Internet brings the world to your doorstep and opportunities to communicate are ample. All of a sudden languages change from being school subjects to exciting challenges for communication. This is also in agreement with Colombian standards for language teaching.

Other reasons we may add for defending the use of Internet based resources in our class are:

■ *Authenticity.* As Leloup & Ponterio (1996) point out, there are a number of aspects that are inherent to the Internet which make it particularly suitable for teaching foreign languages.

First of all, the World Wide Web is a 'veritable treasure trove of authentic materials for the FL teacher' (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1996). For instance, a myriad of tourist information can be found on the Net: photos of daily life in London, museums such as the Louvre, cathedrals, underground guides to the London tube, etceteras. Teachers are always looking for authentic materials, but their resources are limited. Some have neither the time nor the money to make regular trips abroad. Others are geographically isolated from any target language contact. For them the Internet is a real boom.

■ *Up to date information.* Information on the Internet will be up-to-date, so teachers are no longer forced to use old-fashioned and outdated material. Most web sites have so-called webmasters – people maintaining the page – who will make sure that, the information is up-to-date.

■ *Suited to visually oriented population.* Students of this day and age are becoming more and more visually oriented, whether we like it or not. 'Students who have been brought up on Nintendo, Sega, and a myriad of video and electronic games are simply not very excited by mere textbooks, no matter how colorful they have become. And we should not overlook one important aspect of all this: children who surf the Web are reading. That fact alone can be a benefit in our less literate society.

4 Context

As EFL teachers at Universidad del Norte, we have faced some problems related to the students' acquisition of English. The problem is not new, the analysis showed that a high percentage of students were not motivated to attend their English classes. That is why in 1995 we decided to carry out a needs analysis in order to identify factors that were interfering with students learning processes. Most of the students surveyed had motivational problems since they did not consider English as a priority subject during the semester. They realized it was important for their professional development, but they devoted most of their time and effort to the content subjects that had credits and therefore affected their academic record. English does not have any credits. Besides, even if they are motivated they encounter time constraints especially during evaluation periods since they prefer to dedicate their time to the preparation of midterm exams and finals of their major subjects. This is detected through several signs such as recurring absences to class, lack of attention and no preparation of English assignments and or exams, etc.

In the study, we asked them about what resources could be used to enhance their learning. Among the choices, they selected the computer as a very motivating tool to be integrated to the learning-teaching situation. They also stated they would like to have access to extra activities during their free time.

From the analysis of the gathered data several decisions were taken at the Universidad del Norte. Some self-access computer programs were designed in order to cater students needs of extra practice. A language laboratory was set up to facilitate students accessing to these services. However, the use of these tools has not been systematic. Teachers ask their students to perform different activities with the computer such as Internet surfing, grammar, pronunciation, reading, vocabulary and listening activities from different software available, but the effects of these scattered efforts is not clearly perceived as a common, institutional goal.

Students have shown great interest and motivation in doing these activities and teachers find them very attractive and useful for complementing the content of the courses. Nevertheless, the question is «are students enhancing their learning?» No study has been conducted to verify whether the use of these computer-based resources affect English learning positively.

In order to use these services more systematically, we wanted to carry out a research on the use of E-mail services. We wanted to determine if there is any improvement in the development of the writing skills in English and if there is any change in their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation towards learning after participating in an e-mail-pen pal project.

5 Experience

We set some stages to be followed in

order to carry out our research. Several decisions were taken.

We had already identified the motivation problem our students experience towards language learning. Then, we decided to choose a class that would suit our requirements for the research.

The class was chosen among the different level eight existing groups. A class meeting at 6.30 a.m was chosen and assigned to teacher Nayibe Rosado one of the researchers of this project. The choice was partly made because of the schedule.

We had already made contact with a Spanish teacher working in the United States. She was willing to collaborate in an e-mail based writing exchange. She had 12 students who would correspond with ours. She sent us her students' e-mail addresses.

The data collection process started with the application of an English proficiency test to establish the level of command students had. Later on the semester, several other instruments were applied. Interviews, protocols, attitude scales were used and students were aware of the importance of this information collection and participated willingly.

As part of our plan, students were given a writing agenda with deadlines. We emailed that plan to the teacher in USA with our students' electronic addresses. This allowed them to start the correspondence experience. Students on each side were asked to send a copy of each writing sample to their teachers. They did so. Simulta-

neously, with the activity our students attended three face-to-face classes.

The teacher had a very active role giving continuous feedback to students. She encouraged, stimulated and even scolded students participating in the project.

5.1 Drawbacks and Limitations

Some problems arouse during the experience. We will mention them here in order to report some changes that the project suffered due to these drawbacks.

■ *Non Response*: Even though there was supposed to be a one to one communication the reality was that there were not enough students in the other class to communicate with our class. One solution was to assign two of our students to one of the Spanish class. We realized later on, that the Spanish group did not have enough time (only one hour a week) or resources (computer availability) to be able to keep two key pals. So our group started to complain because some of them, couldn't «talk» to the others.

■ *Corrections before sending the message*. Students were assigned their partners and even though they were asked to send a letter to the teacher they did so, the teacher didn't give them an evaluation of their linguistic/ grammatical competence afterwards. Their peers did. We later felt it would have been better from the educational point of view to receive feedback from

the teacher as well either before or after sending the message. We will elaborate on this idea on the conclusion section.

■ *Key pal Selection:* The Spanish group was a senior group and our group was a last semester students group. This contributed to the fact that the correspondence between the group ended a little abruptly because as can be gathered from the writing samples their minds were on graduation parties on one side and on final evaluations on the other.

■ *Flexibility on topics.* Our group was told to negotiate the topics with their pals. Some of them agreed on common interest topics, but some just wrote about topics they were either discussing about in class or topics they handled well because they had studied them before. The Spanish group did not actually write about any specific topic they just gave our group feedback or comments on their writing.

■ *Technological problems.* Sometimes it was difficult for our students to open their e-mail account because the server was down. Some of the students had not activated their accounts or had lost their password. They either had to open other accounts or ask for a new password. Sometimes, their accounts were too full and therefore they did not get the messages from their partners.

■ *Deadlines missed.* They had deadlines to write their messages and to give feedback on the ones received. We ran behind because of the different problems mentioned before and also because of the Easter Holiday. Ours only had a week off while their counterparts had two. We had not considered that in our schedule.

6 Results

We will briefly outlined some of the results obtained during this experience.

■ *Skills.* In this aspect what we found from our research endeavor is in consonance with some findings by other researchers in this area. Belisle (1996) states that through electronic based communication, e-mail for our particular case, «[shy] students, *all students we think*, have a forum for expressing themselves and asking questions. Occasionally some students who do not like to express themselves in a group tend to be better when writing. Since students usually generate more content electronically than with traditional pen-and-pencil methods, [shy] students often tend to express their opinions more openly without fear. This can give students self-confidence and eventually improve their writing ability. We found this to be true, in fact, even if one of the drawbacks often mentioned is that the language found on the Internet or *produced in e-mail based communication for our specific case*, may not be correct in terms of grammar, spelling or style. However, it does

reflect the needs of the users and to an extent prioritizes content over form. This phenomenon is coherent with the tendencies of language teaching theories in recent years in which communicative proficiency is considered much more important than knowledge of grammatical rules alone». (Leloup & Ponterio, 1996).

■ *Appropriacy of e-mail as a learning/teaching tool.* In general, their attitude is positive towards the e-mail as a teaching learning tool. They are highly motivated, but, as Nagel puts it «while there is a strong motivational appeal because of the personal nature of e-mail, great care should be taken to ensure the continuous flow of messages among the respondents as a communication breakdown because of bad planning by the teachers involved in the project could lead to the project not succeeding or even worse, to students not reaching their expected learning outcomes». We found this of vital importance. We could say that the most common complaint or problem we found in this research in e-mailing was the issue of non-response and the obvious relationship it has with motivational aspects. And in accordance with the same author «While e-mail is a very stimulating and dynamic means of communication you have to ensure that you keep your students highly motivated throughout» (Nagel, 1996). We think, and students agree as shown, that e-mail is appropriate, if resources (human, technological, etc.) are carefully planned and provided for

at all phases of the project or experience. Now, we, teachers, have to be prepared for the unplanned in any traditional class, much more we have to be prepared to use contingency plans for the computer- Internet-based activities.

■ *Motivation.* Students' motivation towards this type of projects or activities may arise from various sources. A first issue seems to be technology itself. Students feel they are becoming familiar with a communication tool that is vital to their survival in the 21st century, «Motivation for language study can benefit from the association with new technological tools, showing the students that language is also a tool for the future (Leloup & Ponterio, 1996). A second issue seems to be their feeling that through this increased electronic access to the world around them, their social awareness and confidence increases» (Belisle, 1996). Using computers and talking 'live' to others motivates students. They feel they are not learning a language in a vacuum, the immediacy of the use of their knowledge in real situations has a striking effect on their motivation.

■ *Collaborative learning.* Berge and Collins (1995) claim that students are motivated by using computers and talking 'live' to others. They add the without being conscious of it, the students will no longer consider learning a language a boring enterprise. They will be encouraged to learn more. Finally, since conveying messages plays a paramount role on the

Internet, students will learn social skills and as such the Internet can be seen as an agent for socialization. In our experience this seems to be real, students engage in personal interactions that sometimes included, exchanges not only of cultural or academic information, but also personal. Besides they felt they were contributing to the learning process of others and since they corrected other peoples' writing and that gave them the sense of being collaborating, helping, enriching themselves and others learning processes.

■ *Autonomy.* Students related this aspect of autonomy with effective time management, since in this experience the teacher interact with students or a group of students working on the project at times that were more convenient to the student, group, and the teacher. The vital interaction and feedback that takes place between a teacher and a students (or group of students) over a writing task is not limited to the confines of a classroom or further more to the confines of the schedule. This gave them a sense of responsibility towards their own learning and a sense of freedom, we would say. This could be seem as a gain because we have experienced throughout our practice that students feel sometimes limited/ constrained by the schedule and other features of traditional classroom activities.

7 Conclusions

In general, institutions are facing a

major challenge in the 21st century. In addition to their traditional task, they will also have to prepare their students for a life and career in the information age. Students will have to learn to navigate the Internet and cope with large amounts of information with speed and accuracy. By using the Internet in the foreign language classroom, students will be able to develop skills that parallel those that will be commonly used in the world outside the classroom. Therefore it is imperative that learning to work with computers and understanding new technologies is assimilated into the curriculum and into teaching methods. Nevertheless, integrating the Internet in the EFL curriculum seems a logical choice, since it offers many benefits to EFL instruction itself.

In current EFL education in Colombia there is a focus on language, communication, and culture that makes the application of authentic materials increasingly important. Teachers are always looking for authentic reading material to make classroom teaching more real and attractive for their students. The Internet offers vast resources containing a wealth of authentic material. In addition, the emphasis in language instruction has shifted gradually over the years from grammar and translation exercises to a more communicative approach. Communication has become increasingly important, but if there is only the teacher to talk to, then engaging into real and meaningful conversations is virtually an unattainable goal. This is where the Internet

comes in again. Through various applications, such as e-mail and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), an exchange of ideas and opinions can take place. The Internet enables students to participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world, so that they will use the language both within and beyond the school setting. The ultimate goal of turning students into motivated life-long learners becomes much more realistic when students continue to use the Internet.

In summary, the Internet has many advantages. It is true of course that some of these, such as more learner autonomy, can also be realized without the aid of the Internet. Nevertheless, the nature of the Net itself makes it an outstanding tool for further emphasis on student-centredness and communication. The latter in combination with the ample availability of authentic language materials are among the most important features of the Internet that make it an excellent language learning tool. Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the Internet can best be used as a complement rather than a replacement to traditional teaching methods, since there are also drawbacks to using the Net in an educational context,

As regards our objective which was addressed to determine whether there were changes in the writing skills in learners after participating of the e-mail based key pal activity, we found out that in respect to the attitudinal part, students felt they did not improve very much in their writing skill. This is coherent with the result obtained from

the writing sample analysis.

We think that this perception is based on the traditional view students have regarding language learning competence. This tendency to believe that language proficiency is only grammar mastery. On the other hand, they also mentioned that their major advances were in verb tenses, coherence and specially the length of texts they could produce after the experience. In relation to the writing samples, we agree that the improvement of the two last aspects is evident in the analysis of the texts.

One of the most important findings we came across in the writing sample was that their weakest point was on their grammatical competence. They showed high scores in verb tenses misuse, punctuation marks misuse and misspelling, whereas their strongest points were found in their textual competence. To a certain extent, their texts are coherent showing a same thematic thread and cohesive devices such as connectors, pronouns, lexical repetitions.

In relation to the analysis of the participation in the e-mail activity and the change of attitude towards language learning in students who take part in it, we have to say that the participation in this type of activities motivates students highly. This is evident throughout the experience. This motivation is the result of several factors involved in this kind of activities: innovation, use of real language with real people, applicability of knowledge.

Finally, in relation to the use of e-

mail and aspects such as students collaborative learning, effective time management, self directed learning, we have to note that students felt they were contributing to the learning process of others since they corrected their key pal's writing. That gave them the sense of being collaborating, helping and enriching themselves and others learning process. This gives the classes a new shade different from the traditional passive learner to a more active one, who takes responsibility not only of his/her learning but also of others.

However, some practical decisions have to be made when engaging in this type of activities since although they are potentially attractive for students, they can have some limitations. Limitations such as students' level of language command, Lee (1999) notes that «even if most students in class can correspond at some level in English, there may be one or more who are lagging behind and who would not benefit from trying to use email».

Another factor that can decrease the pedagogical value of this type of messages is related to students' anxiety about error making. According to Lee (1999), «some students may be capable of conversing in English via email but may also be afraid of making mistakes that others will see». This can be a trigger for students' preparation of the texts they will produce. It would be recommendable for teacher to revise students production prior to their sending , if considered appropriate to the context where the experience is

being carried out.

As e-teachers, we must always have a plan B or contingency plan for cases in which technology lets us down. ■

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