

## Reaching Out and Beyond: Establishing Relationships with Pen Friends

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*Elizabeth, I never thought writing to someone abroad is so interesting. I have learned lot about Australian culture from you. I like learning from you than from books.* A Japanese student's letter to her Australian pen friend.

### Introduction

At first glance, one would think that Japan and Mexico are worlds apart, yet the nature and challenges of learning a foreign language remain the same. One case in point: While traveling or studying abroad is a dream of the majority of students, this wish often goes unfulfilled. The realities of time, money, and other obligations limit many of those who want a taste of a native culture under “authentic” conditions. As a result, some students become disheartened, wondering if their time has been wasted having studied English, yet never having opportunities to broaden their horizons by interacting with speakers of the target language. In addition, language teachers often feel frustrated, not sure how to provide these experiences for their students. Yet, one method of instruction which provides students with both language and cultural exchange is establishing relationships with pen friends from abroad.

### The Model

#### *Step One: Getting Started*

As stated by Paul (1994), “One of our primary roles as language teachers must be to narrow this gap between the classroom world and . . . reality” (p. 20). In other words, we must provide more real-life language practice, something that is hard to accomplish in EFL settings. Equally important, students must be allowed to engage in projects they perceive as valuable and interesting to achieving language mastery, especially since many EFL learners only see using English as a deferred need at best. After talking with my students about their own studies, I discovered they wanted to correspond with foreign pen friends as a way of sharing and disseminating ideas about culture and language.

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Perhaps the biggest hurdle in the beginning is building students' confidence. Up to this point, most of my students had not had much contact with foreigners outside the classroom and doubted whether they could communicate effectively with them. Students are preoccupied with the possibility that they might not be able to read what their pen friends write in letters. Consequently, I have to bridge this gulf between classroom learning and the real world by reassuring students that (a) making mistakes is an inherent part of learning, and the classroom provides an excellent haven for testing out language skills; (b) I will be with them every step of the way, both in and out of class, to assist in unraveling anything they cannot figure out themselves; and (c) many of their pen friends are also studying English as a foreign language, and the exchange of letters becomes a mutual learning experience.

I also help students discover the joys of writing letters by putting up a special pen friend bulletin board entitled "Voices from Abroad" at the start of the year. I decorate this board with letters, pictures, travel posters, maps, and other cultural realia we have received from different foreign pen friends which serves as a catalyst for generating ideas. In fact, many students from other classes come clamoring at my door wanting to participate.

### *Step Two: The Writing Process*

While it is not difficult to organize a pen friend program, careful consideration, planning, and teacher supervision are needed especially during the initial stages. In my case, the writing course I teach meets once a week for ninety minutes, of which twenty minutes in each class is devoted to issues relating to pen friends (e.g., reading letters together, giving suggestions regarding content, helping formulate responses, etc.). The actual course lasts approximately thirty weeks.

First of all, this pen friend project is an extension of my regular writing class, drawing on material from the main text to discuss basics in mechanics, organization, and style. Then, students are required to write six letters during the course about the following topics: (a) introducing yourself, (b) describing your city, (c) introducing a famous tourist spot in your country, (d) describing a traditional holiday, (e) relating a personal experience learning English, and (f) explaining a process (e.g., visiting a typical home, taking a taxi, attending a Shinto wedding, etc.). Actually, these are themes students must write about anyway as part of the class, but are then adapted to fit into letter form. My first lesson follows this format:

1. Discuss how to write the basic parts of a letter and how to address an envelope.
2. Point out differences in writing dates, salutations, and closings that are often pitfalls of foreign students. The same applies to the envelope style.
3. Pass out the contents of a letter that has been jumbled up and have students reconstruct the letter.
4. Have students send the unscrambled letter to a classmate. The other student should check it to see if it was written correctly and bring the letter to class the following week.

I provide a sample letter for each assignment which has been written by past students or pen pals, and explain how these letters can be adapted to fit an individual's own circumstances and experience. I emphasize that these models should only serve as the scaffolding to allow students to be able to produce their own original ones. Although there is a tendency for students to only copy what others have produced, I initially value more the instant success students feel when writing a letter that can be sent off without too much labor involved.

However, my students are sometimes unaware of the need to target their writing to an audience who probably knows very little about their country. In my case in Japan, students tend to assume that the reader is working with the same base knowledge of language and culture, and write, for example, Japanese words they believe are universally understood. In fact, the opposite is true in most cases. Subsequently, I ask students to exchange letters with each other and read them from the standpoint of a foreigner. Then, I have them give constructive feedback, not only regarding the more obvious spelling and grammatical errors, but apparent gaps in logic or ambiguities where an explanation would be unclear to the pen friend. Afterwards, each letter is turned in to me so I can check its style and content, and these letters are then set aside to be sent later.

### *Step 3: Finding a Pen Friend*

At the risk of singling out only one particular group at the exclusion of others, I would have to say that the International Youth Service (IYS) based in Finland has proven to be the most reliable pen friend organization I

have found so far.<sup>2</sup> IYS, founded in 1952, is actually the largest of its kind in the world for students, providing pen friends in over 100 countries. For a small fee, IYS will locate a pen friend for each of your students based on age (generally between 10 and 20) and interests. IYS will also try to match your students with someone from the country of their choice based on availability. When you send in the applications, IYS will send the name, address, birthday, and hobbies of your students' pen friends. From our experience, the entire process takes about a month.

We fill out and send the applications during the second week of the term. By the time we receive the addresses, my students have already completed one or two letters. If for whatever reason, someone does not receive a reply to his or her first letter within three months, the name slip can be returned to IYS, and a new address will be sent free of charge. In addition, students can receive letters from surprise pen friends from other countries on request. In most cases, we have chosen this option because it increases students' chances of finding at least one good pen friend.

#### *Step 4: Following-up with Student Journals*

I ask students to briefly record their feelings about their progress and relationship with their pen friend once every six weeks in a notebook which is then turned into me. Reading these journal entries helps me stay abreast of where each student is in his or her writing. Furthermore, it allows me to critically evaluate the program as a whole from many perspectives, providing me with clues on how to give additional support and encouragement to students as needed. Here is a sampling of past journal entries:

“Yesterday, I got letter from Rob, my pen friend from New York. He taught me some new words and a slang from his city. He is ‘cool’ person.”

“I have two pen friends now, one from Sweden and one from England. Sometimes, I like writing to Swedish pen friend more, because we learn English together.”

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<sup>2</sup> International Youth Service (IYS), PB 125, FIN-20101 Turku, Finland (Fax: 358-21-517-134).

“My pen friend told me about American high school life. For example, dances, prom, clubs, and so on. Life must be more interesting in states. More free than Japan.”

“Writing letters is fun, but after graduate, who helps me check my letters? I don’t know if I can do it by myself.”

### *Step 5: Evaluating Writing Assignments*

From past experience, I have found that when I saddled unwilling students with the task of sending letters, many did so half-heartedly or not at all, which was not fair to their foreign pen friends. Instead, I now give everyone the option of participating, but all must write the letters whether they are sent or not. In the end, students are evaluated on the completion of assignments broken down into three categories: the six letters, the letter format as studied in class, and the monthly journal entries. Students must keep a portfolio of the letters they write and receive along with their journal entries and hand this in once a month. While no one is penalized for not sending the letters, I award bonus points worthy of their efforts if they do.

However, one reoccurring problem is the inconsistency of letters flowing back and forth between friends. Thus, in assigning their final grade, I emphasize more controllable factors including their writing in class and their journals more than the actual mailing and receiving of letters.

### **Helpful Hints**

Writing creative and interesting letters is a crucial key to a successful and long-lasting pen-friend relationship. Here is a list of practical hints for your students on how to compose and shape letters.

1. Make sure your first letter is simple and short (about one page in length). Sticking to the basics is the best way to start up a friendship with someone else. Do not overwhelm your new friend with a six-page letter.
2. Give specific details when talking about you, your family, and your country. Try to create mental pictures through the use of descriptive adjectives, numbers, and figures. Assume your pen friend knows nothing about your country and go from there.

3. Try to respond within two weeks of receiving a letter. Otherwise, your pen friend might feel that his or her letter got lost or that you are no longer interested in corresponding.
4. Ask only one or two specific questions in each letter. Asking too many questions will make it hard for your open friend to respond to all of them quickly.
5. Write legibly. Handwriting styles sometimes differ from country to country and from person to person. There is nothing more frustrating than getting a letter you cannot read. Also, do not be afraid to ask your pen friend to print more clearly.
6. Include some kind of cultural artifact with each letter that will peak your pen friend's interest in learning more about your country. Post cards, newspaper clippings, small pieces of candy, popular music tapes, stamps, tourist brochures, popular teen magazines, or comic books are always welcomed treats. It is like sending part of your country through the mail.
7. Personalize your letters by sending pictures of your family, friends, school, house, pets, etc. The more your pen friend sees you as a real person, the more enduring your friendship will become.

## Reflections

One cannot overlook the inherent challenges of finding opportunities using the target language in EFL settings as I have discovered teaching in Japan. Teachers in Mexico in many instances are confronted with these same problems. Consequently, creating a link of communication between students and other English speakers is of paramount concern to EFL educators like myself. One way to accomplish this is to write to others abroad. I have been very satisfied with the results since initiating this program three years ago. More importantly, my students feel gratified at the fact that their English studies starting in junior high school culminate in a very practical meaningful, and successful experience. For them, corresponding with others has been one way to open the door on a journey of language and cultural discovery. As for myself, I know more about Italy, Uganda, Brazil, Hong Kong, and Australia than I ever thought I would through the letters of my students.

### Reference

Paul, D. 1994. "Why do so many language students fail to learn to communicate?" *The Language Teacher*. 18 (8), 20-21.