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### Pen Pal Writing: A Holistic and Socio-Cultural Approach to Adult English Literacy

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#### Abstract

This qualitative study reports the findings implementing a pen pal letter exchange project between adult English language learners and volunteer native English speakers. The pen pal project was implemented using a holistic and socio-cultural approach to English literacy development. This article presents pen pal writing as an authentic language learning strategy which promotes individualized student learning and engagement. It also discusses the benefits that the pen pal letter exchange offered to study participants, including linguistic and cultural gains. Data for the study were collected through interviews, questionnaires, field notes, and participants' letters. Study findings are presented through the following themes: Student engagement, scaffolding learning, content of the letters, mini-lessons, and suggested steps for implementation of a pen pal project.

#### Introduction

I like to receive letters every week. It's a way to get to know a new person; it is a friendly communication. With the pen pal activity I've learned how to draft and write a letter in English; it is different from other writing assignments. Composing a letter is different in Spanish than in English. Besides, I am learning how to read in English and spelling in English... because you also have to know the correct spelling and how to say your message in English! When I don't understand a word I use the dictionary, I ask my son... I ask a classmate, sometimes the teacher. (Gabi)

This opening vignette captures the students' sentiment about a pen pal project implemented in a multilevel-English as second language (ESL) class offered through a community program for adults. Pen pal letter exchanges offered real opportunities for authentic and meaningful writing to support ESL literacy development. The research questions guiding the paper include: What are the benefits for the adult ESL students involved in a pen pal writing exchange project? And how does scaffolding of the learning and teaching process take place through the implementation of the pen pal letters exchange project?

For the purpose of this project, pen pal letters are defined as friendly regular correspondence between study participants. As a literacy project this activity was

implemented using a holistic and socio-cultural approach to literacy. In a holistic teaching approach, literacy instruction is relevant, meaningful and serves a real purpose (Goodman, 1986). In holistic thinking context plays a very important role; the whole is always greater (more complex, more integrated, more meaningful) than the sum of its parts (Miller, 1992). Knowledge and learning are not segmented into pieces; learning and teaching take place in context. Language is a whole and should be approached as such (Goodman, 1986). Also, “humans are inescapably social beings...all learning occurs in social and historical environments, these environments play a critical role in an individual’s learning and development” (Moll, 1986, p. 103). All learning takes place in a social context; learning begins in the social environment and moves from the social to the individual. The social and cultural nature of literacy development (Gee, 1990) played a crucial role in the success of the project. The pen pal project experience provided participants with opportunities to interact and learn from one another. Reading and writing were not isolated tasks—they happened through group work and interactive activities.

As reported by the ESL learners, through the pen pal activity they had the opportunity to have social interaction and communication with an English native speaker. They communicated in writing with another human being, and further developed their English writing skills. This article describes pen pals as an authentic language learning strategy which promotes individualized student learning and engagement. It also discusses the benefits that the pen pal letter exchange offered to study participants, including the linguistic and cultural gains.

## **Relevant Literature**

Writing letters to pen pals is not a new concept; this strategy has been widely used at different formal educational settings; it has been used with participants of all group ages and language proficiency levels. Pen pal writing has been used for diverse purposes. For more detailed information consult Barksadale, Watson

and Park, 2007; Cote, Mosher-Ashley and Kiernan, 2003; Cuccia, 1985; Lemkuhl, 2002; Novinger and Smith, 2003; Post, 1996; Rankin, 1992; Shandomo, 2009; Stanford and Siders, 2001; McMillon, 2009, just to name a few sources. In particular, Guth (2002) explains,

Pen pals can be local or from very far away, and exchanges can include group letters, individual letters, photos, and videotapes. In addition to writing traditional letters, email exchanges can provide incentives for writing due to their rapid response time. (p. 234)

The method for implementing a pen pal project depends on the goals of the activity and the circumstances of the learning setting.

Walker-Dalhouse and colleagues (2009) report on a study where 53 elementary or early childhood majors from their university served as pen pal for 53 middle school English learners (ELs). They were all refugees from different countries. The main goal of the project was to provide the pre-service teachers with opportunities to examine their beliefs and attitudes about teaching linguistically and culturally diverse learners. Also, a study by Rankin (1992) illustrates the benefits of implementing pen pal writing with elementary school children with learning disabilities and university students enrolled in a diagnosis and correction of reading disabilities class. Another study, McMillon (2009), reports on a pen pal cultural exchange project between pre-service teachers in an elementary reading methods course and fourth graders in an urban elementary school. The aforementioned studies reported positive outcomes for both groups of learners.

There are many advantages to using pen pals. As explained by Walker-Dalhouse, Sanders, and Dalhouse (2009),

Pen pal writing can provide valuable learning experiences for students even though it does not involve direct instruction in writing. It can provide students with language skills, social skills, and an appreciation for cultural diversity. (p. 339)

Through pen pal letter exchanges ESL students learn more than just writing in English; they learn different functions of the language, grammar, vocabulary, idioms, and culture.

Pen pal writing provides the opportunity to write for an audience other than the teacher. Hamp and Heasley (2006) assert:

Few people write spontaneously and feel comfortable with a formal writing task intended for the eyes of someone else. When the "someone else" is the teacher, whose eyes may be critical, and who indeed may assign an individual assessment to the written product, most people feel uncomfortable. (p. 2)

The informal nature of the pen pal activity allows for students to take the risk to experiment with the language. If there is no grade involved and students know that they are writing for the purpose of communicating meaning and not for the purpose of writing correct English, there will be a point when they feel more comfortable with writing in ESL. Also, pen pal letter exchanges can support the development of literacy and cultural understanding (Barksdale, Watson, & Park, 2007). Through exchanging letters students are able to learn about the other person's culture and daily life.

Pairing up university students with learners from schools and other formal education programs is not new either. However, implementing pen pal letter exchanges pairing up volunteer graduate students with adult English learners attending informal ESL classes was innovative. The ESL learners received assistance from a native English speaker and motivation to write in English for authentic purposes. The graduate students were able to challenge their own assumptions about adult English language learners in their community and examine their future role in the literacy instruction of this population.

### **Setting and Project Participants**

During fall 2010, in partnership with a local school, a multilevel ESL literacy class was offered. This is a

public middle school located in central Texas and serves a student population of over 850 students (90% Hispanic) of which 25% are considered English language learners (ELLs). Thirty-two families attended the orientation meeting for the project, and thirteen of these parents agreed to participate in the study. Following IRB (Institutional Review Board) guidelines, the project participants provided signed consent allowing for their work and data to be used for publication, conference presentations, and educational purposes. All the names that appear in this article are pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Therefore, data for this article derive from the correspondence between this group of parents and six volunteer native English speakers.

### **The Adult ESL Learners**

The ESL class met once a week in the evening for two hours and lasted ten weeks. Study participants consisted of two male and eleven female adults ages 31 to 40. All of them were from Spanish speaking countries and their English language proficiency ranged from true beginners to intermediate. The English learners exchanged letters with a group of volunteer graduate students. The pen pal activity was implemented during the last eight weeks of the term and during the first 40 minutes of each class session. The goal was for these ESL learners to be able to write for an authentic purpose, to write for an audience, and to develop fluency in writing in English.

### **The Volunteer Native English Speakers**

The pen pals for the ESL study participants consisted of six native English speakers enrolled in an Adult Literacy class as part of their program of studies in a Masters in Adult Education. They were enrolled in the ESL Literacy Track to obtain a minor in teaching ESL to adults. However, they participated on an entirely voluntary base and were not graded. They were 24 to 45 years old; three of them were bilingual in Spanish and English and the other three were monolingual English

speakers. The goal was to offer them an opportunity to interact with real adult English learners.

They wrote the introductory letter for the ESL learners telling about themselves and their hobbies, and they asked a couple of questions in order to model what the correspondence interaction should look like. All graduate students corresponded with three ESL students, except for one of them who had four pen pal partners. They built an individual folder for each of their pen pal partners, putting together the letters and pictures to avoid confusion when writing the response letters.

### **English Literacy Instructors and Researchers**

Clarena served as the ESL literacy instructor for the project and was the professor of record for the graduate students. She also served as the facilitator of the pen pal project collecting and delivering the letters.

Arlene was enrolled in the Adult Literacy course as part of her program of studies and served as a volunteer pen pal partner. She also served as co-instructor and co-researcher during the implementation of the project.

As instructors and researchers, our role included reviewing the letters to monitor ethical and practical issues; however, we did not interfere in the actual communication process. We read all the letters before distributing them to make sure all students were observing the rules of respect and ethics.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This was a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009) and data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, field notes, and the participants' letters. In the interviews, we asked the participants about their thoughts regarding the letter exchange process, the benefits they saw in participating in the activity, what they learned, and the challenges they faced. Later, we transcribed the interviews, coded them and grouped the codes into themes in order to cross-compare these themes with the ones obtained through the other data sources (Merriam, 2009).

We also provided the students with specific

questions in the form of questionnaires five times during the project. These were one or two focused questions that they were able to answer in writing in less than ten minutes. We asked questions such as, "what do you think about exchanging letters with your pen pal? What do you do when you find unfamiliar words or expressions in the letters? What do you do to learn new vocabulary words?"

The field notes were helpful for recording critical events, keeping track of students' questions, and for taking notes on the students' attitudes and responses about reading and answering the letters. The participants' letters illustrated the interaction and the learning processes. Analysis of these letters allowed for monitoring student learning and identifying grammatical items for mini-lessons that we designed in order to address misunderstandings and questions from students in the following class meeting.

Reading the sequence of pen pal letters several times was helpful in identifying common emergent themes (Creswell, 2007). The main focus for this analysis was on linguistic and cultural gains made by students, as well as the recurring topics discussed by the participants in their letters. We systematically reviewed the letters and made a list of topics that the participants explored in the letters and classified those topics under larger themes.

Triangulation of data sources (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2007) was another factor in deciding the themes to present in this article. In other words, we examined and cross-compared all textual data in order to be able to reduce data and present the most relevant findings. Therefore, we present study findings through the following themes: student engagement, scaffolding learning, content of the letters, mini-lessons, and suggested steps for implementation. See Appendix A and Appendix B for examples of letters written by the adult ESL learners.

### **Student Engagement**

As a research team, we were able to observe the students' response when they received their letters. As

stated by Guth (2002), “A strong incentive for writing letters...is receiving the response” (p. 234). Students were usually very excited to receive correspondence and would sometimes smile or look puzzled while reading the letters. In order to understand the responses, the ESL students would whisper questions to each other and/or look up vocabulary words in their dictionaries. Often, they would begin to write a response almost immediately. The following comments come from responses obtained through the questionnaires and summarize the ESL participants’ opinion about the activity.

It is exciting to receive the letter; I am happy to read the response to what I wrote in my own letter. (Carmen)

I like to have a new friend and I can learn how to write words to communicate better in English. I enjoy the correspondence. (Norma)

It is interesting to have a friend from the university. It is a good way to practice writing in English. (Rosa)

It is interesting. It is a way to meet people and at the same time we learn how to interact better and practice what we have been learning. (Rodolfo)

I think that it’s good because we get to know each other better and we share different opinions. It’s hard to write the letter but it’s fun to get a response back. (Marilu)

It is fun and we learn to write in English. We also learn how to write using different verb tenses, present, past and future. (Maria)

I like the pen pal activity because I learn about the person’s culture through the information in the letters. You learn something new and at the same time you share about each other’s life experiences through the questions we ask and the answers in the letters. (Adriana)

More than developing writing skills through the pen-pals activity these adults had a chance for experiencing an authentic social interaction writing in English. Jorge explains that:

Having a pen pal is a good idea; even though I am just learning how to read and write in English I am making the effort to write these letters... This is a challenging activity but it is fun. There are words that I recognize in writing but that I don’t know how to use in a sentence and sometimes I don’t know what to answer in the letter... I would like to write letters to more than one person but I still need to learn more English. For example, I would like to write a letter to the teacher that way she could give me feedback and correct my English. (Jorge)

Most of the students were motivated to learn correct forms of punctuation, grammar, and spelling. They were able to appreciate the value of writing letters in terms of learning English and connecting to another human being by making a new friend.

### **Scaffolding Learning**

The term “scaffolding” is a metaphor used to describe the effective intervention by a peer, adult or competent person in the learning of another person (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The adult ESL learners interacted with a native English speaker, their ESL classmates, and with Clarena and Arlene, in the process of reading, understanding and writing a response to the letters. Class instructors and the university pen pals served as “competent peers” in helping the learners develop English language skills. Also, the native English speakers modeled authentic uses of the language and served as a source of motivation for the adult ESL students to practice writing in English. The following are responses shared by the ESL learners in the interviews.

Writing back to answer the letter is difficult... Answering the letters I realize that I need to learn more English. I follow the directions for the activity, use the dictionary and I get curious about how to pronounce the words correctly when I am trying to read the letter out loud for the first time. Sometimes, my class partner helps me understand

the letter or explains to me how to express an idea that I find difficult to write. (Carmen)

It is important to learn how to write certain words in English; we overcome the fear to write in English.

The pen pal activity is fun and we learn English and more because I feel several people are helping me, I am not alone trying to learn... (Rodolfo)

The English class helps me to understand the content of the letters...the class gives me the basics. In my opinion, exchanging letters with my friend from the university is good; she writes words that I was wondering how to use and how to spell. It feels good to read the letter and understand the message and that she understood enough to be able to answer my previous letter. (Gabi)

I think it is a good activity because we make the effort to learn new vocabulary words and try to understand written messages. I have learned many new vocabulary words...also, I feel motivated and I do want to write the letter for my pen pal. (Jorge)

The success of the letter exchange activity was due to the fact that many *language experts* were helping the students in the writing process, not just the class instructor. Writing a letter in English was challenging and interesting for the students. They had the right motivation to use English in writing and they felt supported in the process.

### **Content of the Letters**

Students wrote about trivial topics such as the weather, free time activities, sports, TV programs, and pets. They also wrote about very personal topics such as family stories and family issues, jobs, immigration, religion, politics, language ideologies, and the death of a family member. In addition they wrote about cultural topics such as holidays, food, music, and different traditions and geographical places. They asked for advice about what books to read and what events to attend in the community. They highlighted similarities when they discovered they had the same taste in music,

food or family traditions.

The length of the letter was proportional to the language proficiency of the student (see Appendix A and Appendix B). When the students were true beginners, they would write very short and very controlled sentences. When they were at intermediate language proficiency, they would write longer letters and more complex sentences. Almost all the ESL learners followed the model of the structure of the first letter; however, by the third letter they were writing in a more personalized style and all letters looked different. They started to share recipes, pictures, and more personal topics in their writing. The last letter was an emotional letter; they thanked each other for the friendship and sharing of ideas, the learning and the advice. They wished each other the best for the approaching holiday and the graduate students wrote a sentence or two encouraging their pen pals to continue learning English.

### **Mini-Lessons**

Reading all the letters before distributing them gave us the opportunity to identify topics for mini-lessons. We looked for the most frequent mistakes made by the ESL learners to address in class. The goal of the mini-lessons was to provide intense, direct instruction in a skill or understanding that the learners would use immediately after the moment of instruction (Hoyt, 2000). For example, the students were having difficulty formulating questions; therefore, for three weeks in a row we practiced asking questions orally through games and in writing using worksheets. In class, we also discussed the mechanics of formulating questions for the students to have a chance to clarify their doubts.

The mini-lessons lasted 10 to 20 minutes and provided extra practice for each grammatical point. This practice took place through games, dialogues, and worksheets. Some of the mistakes made by the students included using the incorrect verb tense or verb usage such as “I haven’t went to the beach”; “I had a bird but it flow away” and “do you talk Spanish?” They also used false cognates such as “sincerely” instead of “to be

honest”; “thank you for animate me to continue learning” instead of “Thank you for encouraging me to continue learning”. Another common mistake was to add an “s” in order to pluralize the adjective in the sentence (e.g., visits to the museum are expensives), which may be considered “interference” from the students’ native language; in Spanish, it is necessary that the noun and the adjective agree in number. Besides, formulating questions in writing was a challenge for almost all the adult ESL students. They also made spelling and grammar mistakes in their letters.

### **Suggested Steps for Implementation**

The following steps are suggestions that ESL instructors should keep in mind in order to implement a pen pal project.

1. Identify a group of English-native-speakers or a more advanced group of ESL learners to volunteer as pen pal partners.
2. Figure out a system to collect and deliver the letters; allocate class time to implement the activity.
3. With the help of the volunteer (native or advanced) English-speakers, prepare an introductory letter. Take pictures of the participants, develop and distribute them among participants.
4. Deliver the first letter and provide the ESL students with guidance on how to respond. For example, recommend them to ask one or two questions to keep the conversation alive.
5. As the class instructor, decide your level of involvement in the process and how to address writing mistakes. Prepare a set of questions for reflection at the middle and end of the term.

Implementing learning activities such as the pen pal provides adult English learners with opportunities to use language for authentic communication purposes. This type of activity allows the instructor to foster a functional view of language as English is learned and used beyond the classroom setting.

### **Conclusion**

The pen pal project provided the participants with opportunities to interact in English and communicate ideas in writing. All of them agreed that writing and receiving a letter is exciting even in the age of the internet; this realization is in agreement with study findings presented by Campbell-Rush (2008). Also, the study participants were engaged in the pen pal letter exchange project and made the most out of it. A good amount of incidental learning took place and the ESL students learned more than just writing in English. There was spontaneous language production and training for communicative competence. Communication was the focus and at the same time students learned about language structure, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and culture. “Because writing is a skill, it makes sense that the more you practice writing, the better you will write...” (Lagan, 2000, p. 14); this was true for the ESL students. They made fewer spelling and grammar mistakes at the end of the project and they were able to formulate questions making fewer mistakes in the sentence structure. In addition, the socio-cultural approach to English literacy development added value to the writing experience. Scaffolding English literacy learning occurred in a variety of ways – not just through the class instructor.

This pen pal project was implemented using a holistic and socio-cultural approach to literacy. Both groups of students were able to envision language learning as a whole and as the product of interacting with others. They wrote complete letters and in doing so used all aspects of the language and all types of grammatical structures and vocabulary words. The ideas communicated in the letters were product of the spontaneous use of language as in a real conversation or an email message sent by a friend or colleague. The ESL students wrote in English to gain fluency and confidence writing in the language they were learning. Even though the pen pal participants did not meet in person they were able to establish a friendship through the correspondence. They were able to identify similarities and differences in lifestyles that allowed

them to relate to one another as people who live in the same geographical region and community. They were able to learn from one another. They asked questions and got answers on a wide range of topics, similar to a normal communication occurrence between any two adults.

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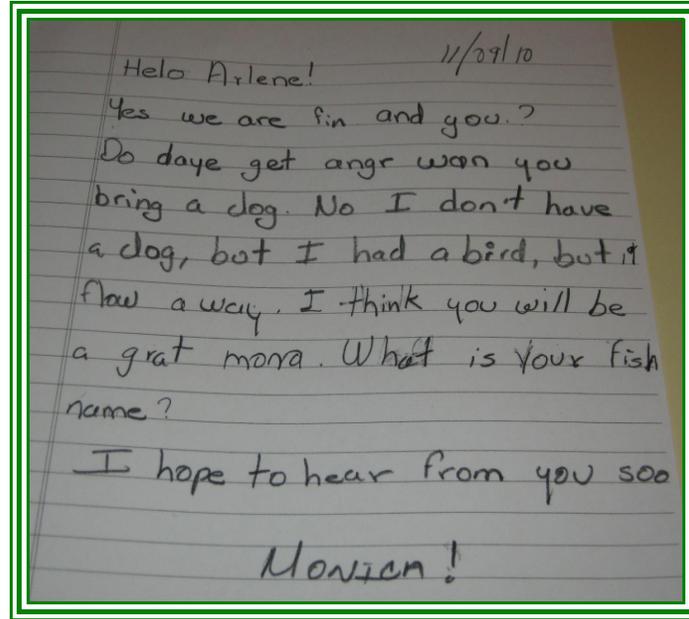
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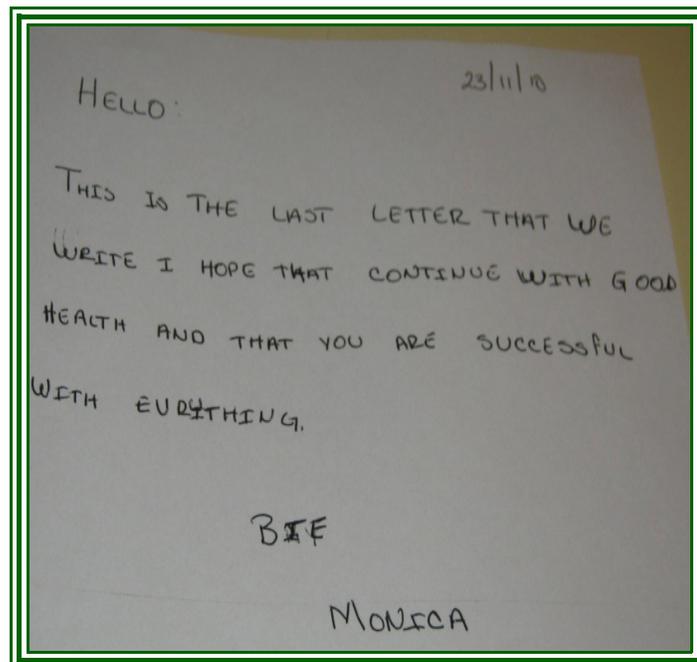
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## Appendix A

### Letters Written by a Student at Beginner English Language Proficiency



Helo Arlene! 11/29/10  
Yes we are fin and you?  
Do daye get angr wou you  
bring a dog. No I don't have  
a dog, but I had a bird, but it  
flaw a way. I think you will be  
a grat mona. What is your fish  
name?  
I hope to hear from you soo  
Monica!



HELLO: 23/11/10  
THIS IS THE LAST LETTER THAT WE  
WRITE I HOPE THAT CONTINUE WITH GOOD  
HEALTH AND THAT YOU ARE SUCCESSFUL  
WITH EURYTHING.  
BEE  
MONICA

## Appendix B

### Letters Written by a Student at Intermediate English Language Proficiency

