

# Epals to motivate students: How a fully integrated email exchange can help motivate low-level students

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*This article describes how an email exchange (epal) can motivate low-level college students. The research involved first-year Japanese junior-college students, who were paired with Asian students for an 11-week exchange. The students were divided in two groups: the first group had partners who read and replied to their messages during regular class time, while the second group's partners did so in their own time, outside of class. The results indicate that students from the first group display greater integrative and intrinsic motivation orientations throughout, as well as at the end of the semester. Teachers wishing to introduce epal in their classes should consider the benefits of a fully integrated exchange on students' motivation.*

Email exchanges between classrooms, often called epal or keypal exchanges, have been used for quite some time in language education. Even though newer computer-mediated communication (CMC) modes such as blogging and chatting have recently been introduced in educational circles, epals remain popular with language teachers, especially in writing classes (see Kern, 2006, for a review of recent CMC developments and their applications in the language classroom). The ubiquity of email as well as its easy access contributes to its popularity. This article describes a research project which focuses on an email exchange between 59 junior college students in Japan, who corresponded weekly with Asian students as part of a required writing class. The students were divided into two groups: the first group (n=31) was paired with Taiwanese high school students, who also wrote their emails during regular class time, while the second group (n=28) corresponded with Korean and Emirati students, who wrote their emails outside of their regular class time. The results of the study suggest that a well-structured, bilateral email exchange, where teachers communicate

weekly and proceed with the activity in a similar fashion, can increase students' motivation for learning English.

### Motivation in the Language Classroom

Gardner defines motivation in the language classroom as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity. [...] When the desire to achieve the goal and favourable attitudes toward the goal are linked with the effort or the drive, then we have a motivated organism” (Gardner, 1985, p.10). In previous work, Gardner and Lambert defined two types of motivation in L2 learning. *Instrumental motivation* refers to the practical advantages of learning the language, while *integrative motivation* refers to the personal interest in the people and culture represented by the L2 group (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). This categorisation has been challenged since, as it excludes other types of motivation such as the desire to learn for intellectual stimulation or curiosity (Noels, 2001). Later models proposed a third form, *intrinsic motivation*, defined as follows: “Intrinsic orientations refer to reasons for L2 learning that are derived from one’s inherent pleasure and interest in the activity; the activity is undertaken because of the spontaneous satisfaction that is associated with it” (Noels, 2001, p. 45). It is this last type of motivation that I wished to stimulate in my students.

### Telecollaboration in the English Classroom

O’Dowd and Ritter (2006) define telecollaboration as “the use of online communication tools to bring together language learners in different countries for the development of collaborative project work and intercultural exchange” (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006, p. 623). In their review of telecollaboration exchanges, O’Dowd and Ritter identified ten reasons why such projects frequently fail, such as the organization of the course study, and the relationship between the participating instructors (O’Dowd & Ritter, 2006, p. 629). Other researchers have also pointed out the fact that email exchanges should be made an integral part of the class curriculum in order to be successful (Müller-Hartmann, 2000; O’Dowd, 2003; Warschauer, 1995).

In the Japanese context, Nozawa (2002) used a keypal exchange as a supplementary activity, where the students found their partners through keypal websites, and then corresponded with them outside of class. Many students (66%) either found no keypals, or could not engage in regular correspondence for the entire semester. Moreover, 63.9% of the students responded that they would not, or probably would not continue their keypal relationship. Among the reasons for dissatisfaction with the project, students cited the difficulty in contacting and/or keeping a keypal (Nozawa, 2002).

The study conducted by Fedderholdt’s (2001) on an epal exchange between Japanese university students and Danish high school students showed a high level of interest from the students, as well as an increased motivation for writing. In her project, students exchanged weekly emails, in English, for 10 weeks. Since the Japanese students had difficulty reading their partner’s emails and replying in the allotted class time, they composed most of their emails at home, and sent their replies during class time.

In light of these two Japanese experiences, this research aims to show that an email exchange fully integrated in all participants' classrooms, will have greater impact on students' intrinsic motivation.

## **Goals of the Keypal Project**

### ***1. To stimulate students' interest for English writing***

Email gives students the opportunity to communicate in the target language with an authentic audience (Fedderholdt, 2001; Fotos, 2005; Goer, 1999; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; Paira, 1999; Pennington, 2005; Warschauer, 1995) and offers students an environment low in stress, with few face-threatening situations due to the asynchronous nature of the medium (Goer, 1999; Kitade, 2006; Paira, 1999; Warschauer, 1995). The importance of the "real audience" is not to be underestimated. SLA theories have stated that in order for language learning to take place, the learners must be involved in authentic tasks (Egbert, Chao, & Hanson-Smith, 1999; Nunan, 1989; Warschauer, 2005), with an authentic audience (Egbert, Chao, & Hanson-Smith 1999), and that this relevance is essential to sustain the learner's motivation (Noels, 2002). In his work on motivation in the language classroom, Dörnyei (2001) suggests 35 motivational strategies that language teachers should use regularly. In Strategy 11, he advises: "Promote integrative values by encouraging a positive and open-minded disposition towards the L2 and its speakers, and towards foreignness in general" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 55). As for increasing students' instrumental motivation, he makes the following recommendation in Strategy 12: "Reiterate the role the L2 plays in the world, highlighting its potential usefulness both for themselves and their community" and "encourage the learners to apply their L2 proficiency in real-life situations" (Dörnyei, 2001, pp. 56-57).

The previous year, I was also in charge of the English Writing classes at the same college. The students showed neither interest nor motivation in the class, and I could see very little improvement in their writing after 13 weeks. The following semester, only a handful decided to register for English Writing 2, which was likely to be due to the previous class not being stimulating enough. The only part students had seemed to enjoy during the first semester was the diary writing, and some students said: "Because you read them and write friendly comments." An email exchange seemed like an ideal authentic and stress-free activity, which could possibly increase my students' motivation.

### ***2. To show students English is more than a school subject***

Because many English classes in Japan tend to focus on grammar translation or audiolingual approaches, most of the students at our college were new to the concept of expressing themselves in English (also noted by Fedderholdt, 2001; Johnson & Brine, 1999). In a questionnaire administered the first week of class, it was revealed that only 5.6% of students had been asked to do a written assignment in English before, and that the same amount had communicated with a foreign person on the internet, either by email or chatting. A significant number of students had in fact never met a foreign person before entering the college (35%). Since most of my students had been studying English for entrance examina-

tions only, and since most had never been in contact with people from overseas, I wanted to show them that English is primarily a communicative tool, with which they can meet and understand other people.

### **3. To increase students' familiarity with email**

Although the Japanese Ministry of Education and Culture has been promoting the use of technology since the 1980s, little of it has been used in language learning (Johnson & Brine, 1999), and technology education in general is considered a "subordinate subject in Japan since it is not one of the five areas tested in university entrance examinations" (Murata & Stern, 2006). Increasingly, however, Japanese company employees are faced with the challenges of a new global economy. Since most of our graduates aim to obtain employment in the travel, hospitality or shipping industries, I believed that a cultural email exchange would benefit their English online-writing skills as well as their future professional goals.

### **Research Questions**

Because my students' English level was quite low, I wanted to conduct the project with ESL or EFL students as I thought it would be nearly impossible for them to communicate with native speakers. Since I had 59 students, I was looking for two or three partner classrooms. My preference was for senior high school students, preferably in East Asia, as this would allow us to try synchronous communications as well. However, I could only find one teacher interested in fully integrating the email exchange in her class. She had 31 high school students, which meant I needed at least one more class. All other teachers I contacted wanted to do the activity as an extra, asking students to do it outside of class on their own time. This meant that 31 of my students would be paired with students writing during their class time, but the rest (28) would have partners doing it at leisure. However, since all of my students would be emailing during their class time, I feared the project would be unfair to the 28 students whose partners might not write as regularly.

This research had for goal to study motivation in both groups of students, i.e., my students with partners writing in their class time (Group A) and my students with partners writing outside of class time (Group B). My research question was to investigate whether or not Group A would show greater intrinsic and integrative motivation during and at the end of the study. For this effect, I kept a research diary in which I wrote short comments during the class, and longer observations after each lesson. Two questionnaires were also distributed to students, one the first week of class and the other on the last day of class. Finally, the second and last correspondence of each pair of students was also collected.

## **The Study**

### **1. The participants**

This research was conducted at a Japanese junior college. Students were all first-year English majors, and had studied English for at least six years. They were required to take a basic English Writing class, which met for 100 minutes, once a week, for 13 weeks. Their TOEIC

scores ranged from 200-400 upon entering the college, and their level of English communicability was very low. Group A was paired with Taiwanese high school students (16 – 17 years old), who read and composed their emails in class, with their homeroom teacher. She occasionally brought Japanese anime or drama to stimulate students' interest or as a class discussion activity. Group B was paired with Korean high school students (15 – 18 years old) and Emirati college students, who read and wrote their replies on their own time, outside of class.<sup>1</sup> Both groups corresponded weekly, by email only, for a period of 11 weeks.

## **2. The technology**

The Japanese students received an iBook computer with Wi-Fi internet access during the first week of the semester, and used it every week to compose their messages in *M.S. Word* and sent/received them using *Entourage*. All classes were conducted in a classroom equipped with a projector and Wi-Fi internet access.

## **3. How the project was conducted**

The first class was spent setting up email accounts, explaining the project, and introducing Taiwan, Korea and the UAE. Students picked their partners' names and email addresses from a hat, and then wrote their first introductory email. Finally, they were asked to fill in Questionnaire I (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was bilingual, with English on the recto and Japanese on the verso.

For the rest of the semester, we spent the first 60 minutes of each lesson on paragraph writing, grammar, or vocabulary, and devoted the last 40 minutes to the keypal project (with the exception of weeks 4 and 11 when we worked on compositions). During this assigned time, I would usually spend 5-10 minutes introducing the topic, either with media, brainstorming, or pair-conversation activities. The students would then spend the next 10 minutes freewriting on the topic, in their paper notebooks. Finally, the last 20-25 minutes of the class would be spent checking and reading messages, as well as replying to them. The students were instructed to first read their partner's message, reply to his/her questions or comments, and then write about the assigned topic of the week (See Appendix C for weekly topics). While students were working on their emails, I walked around the room and helped with computer or language-related questions. Most students had enough time to reply and compose their short emails in the given time, although a few students sometimes finished them either during the break or lunchtime. The Taiwanese teacher and I decided on the topics before the semester, and corresponded weekly to ensure the good progression of the project. A list of the topics was forwarded to the Korean teacher, who then passed it on to her students. Since the Japanese students initiated the exchange by writing the first email, most of the Korean students adhered to the topics, although they were free not to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> All research data included in this paper was collected from the Japanese students. At the end of the exchange, a questionnaire was sent to the Taiwanese and Korean students for informational purposes, however the results are not included in this paper.

## Results and Discussion

### *The class atmosphere*

The Japanese students were divided in two groups: Group A (N=31) was paired with high school students in Taiwan who were also reading and writing their emails in class; Group B (N=28) was paired with high school students in Korea and college students in the UAE, who corresponded during their free time, outside of class. At the beginning of the semester, most Japanese students could not write more than a few lines per week, although they had received lengthy emails from their partners. The first week, some of them showed little interest in the project: "Although there was still ten minutes of class left, three girls or so decided to turn off their computers...most students only wrote one or two sentences in that whole time! I couldn't believe it!" (Extract from research diary, week 1). In fact, a review of all week 2 emails shows that students wrote on average 75.6 words. However, as the project progressed, I noticed that they were much more enthusiastic as they stopped chatting with their neighbours, and typed earnestly on their iBooks: "Today things went much better. They were all typing quietly away, and it was amazing! Their emails were quite long too, some wrote about one B5 page" (extract from research diary, week 3) and here is an observation from week 5: "I'm finally starting to see some progress in the keypal project! Everyone was independently working on their iBooks for a whole 30 minutes, and for once they wrote quite a bit."

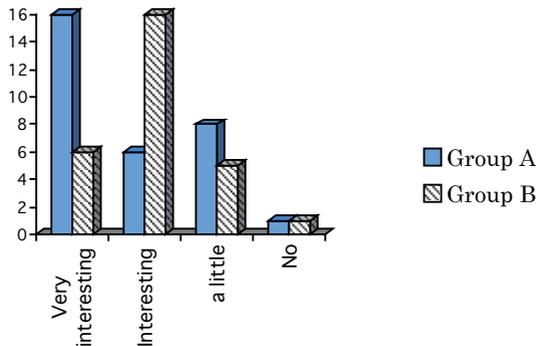
However, around week 7, some students started feeling disappointed with the project. Five students from Group B had yet to receive a message from their partners and 13 (5 from Group A and 8 from Group B) had only received one email. Since all Japanese students had to send a message to their partner every week, regardless of the amount of emails they had received, some felt it was unfair and discouraging. I contacted all teachers regarding the matter, and unfortunately, only students paired with Taiwanese pupils were able to resume communication. (In most cases, wrong addresses had been exchanged.) Although the Korean and UAE teachers reminded their students of the importance of keeping a regular correspondence with their keypals, there was no improvement in the situation during the rest of the semester for Group B. Three of them decided that they did not want to continue the project.

### *Students' interest*

On average, Group A students had received 2.8 messages by Week 5, while Group B had received 1.7 messages. In fact, throughout the semester Group A received significantly more messages than Group B (See Table 1), and they seem to have enjoyed the exchange more. In the final questionnaire, 51.6% of Group A said they found the exchange "very interesting," while the figure was 19.4% for Group B (See Figure 1).

**Table 1: Number of messages received at Week 12**

Messages received	Number of students in Group A	Number of students in Group B
0 -3	4	13
4 - 6	6	9
7 - 9	20	5
10 +	1	1



**Figure 1. Did you find the keypal interesting?**

Moreover, when asked to give positive and negative points regarding the exchange project, 60.7% of Group B wrote "not receiving messages" or "late replies" as negative comments.

**Table 2. Good and bad points about the keypal exchange**

Comments	Number of students from Group A	Number of students from Group B
+ Learn about other cultures	8	8
+ Make foreign friends	8	6
+ I'm better at writing in English now	10	8
+ I want to study English more	0	1
+ It was "fun", "interesting" or "enjoyable"	7	3
- I don't like it when I don't get mail	7	17
- It's difficult to write in English	3	2
- Computer problems	1	2
- The topics were boring	1	0

### Motivation to continue the exchange

Gardner (1985) defines *motivational intensity* as “the amount of effort the individual expends (or, in some instances, is willing to expend) in order to learn the L2” such as “the amount of effort spent on homework” as well as a “willingness to take on special assignments” (Gardner, 1985, p. 53). In this respect, Group A showed a greater motivational intensity at the end of the project since 29% of them expressed a willingness to continue emailing their partner, compared to 25% of Group B. Furthermore, a significant number (83.9%) of Group A students said that the exchange made them want to study English a lot more, or more, while only 35.7% of Group B said it did.

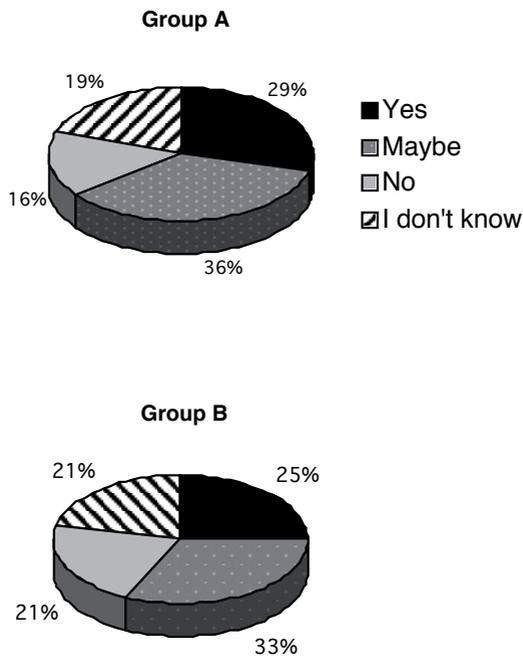


Figure 2. Will you continue emailing your partner after our class is over?

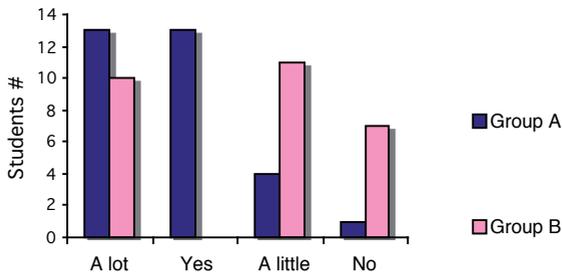


Figure 3. Did the exchange make you want to study English more?

## Conclusions

This research attempts to show that an email exchange where both classes read and compose their messages in class increases students' motivation. The Japanese students were divided into two groups, A and B, where A's partners corresponded in their regular class time, while B's partners did not. The results suggest that the intrinsic motivation of Group A was higher than that of Group B, as Group A showed more interest in the activity. Class observations further showed that a number of students from Group B were discouraged from the activity after five or six weeks since they were not receiving regular correspondence from their partners. Secondly, positive feedback indicate that twice as many students in Group A chose the words "fun," "interesting" or "enjoyable" to describe the project.

Although this research did not intend to study L2 exposure, it is important to note that since Group A received almost twice as many emails as Group B, they were exposed to a greater amount of input. Furthermore, since Group A received longer and more frequent emails, they might have felt more inclined to study English further, which could explain why they showed more interest in pursuing the exchange.

There were several limitations to this project, including the duration of the exchange, which was relatively short. Future research should look at long-term effects of the exchange, and study whether or not participants continue emailing after the project. Secondly, the small scale of the study limits the application of the results to other population. Finally, class-video observations would have been more accurate than a research diary, as the researcher was also a participant in the study.

## Summary

This paper shows that language teachers interested in email exchanges should consider the benefits of keypal integration into classroom curricula. Too often, keypal projects are introduced as an extra activity, to do at home or in the lab. However, if students cannot find a partner, or cannot keep the correspondence on a regular basis, they are likely to lose interest in the activity, and might not want to try it again in the future. This is especially true

in the Japanese context where most students have little chance to practice their L2 outside of class, and where most students have never taken part in such exchanges. When all participating teachers strive to ensure the smooth progression of the exchange, the experience is likely to be memorable for students.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire I

1. Have you ever used a computer for:

- |                         |                                |                               |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| a) Email                | b) web search                  |                               |
| c) video call (web cam) | d) Writing reports in Japanese |                               |
| e) reading the news     | f) internet shopping           | g) Writing reports in English |
| h) downloading music    | i) watching movies or TV shows |                               |
| j) Other: _____         |                                |                               |

2. Do you have a computer at home?                      YES                      NO

3. Do you have Internet at home?                      YES                      NO

4. How often do you use a computer?

- |                     |                             |                    |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| a) Once a week      | b) once a day               | c) 2-5 times a day |
| d) 6-15 times a day | e) more than 16 times a day |                    |

5. Before college, had you ever communicated with someone from another country:

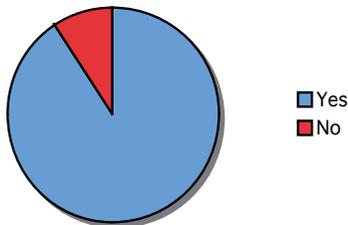
- |                   |                   |                        |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| a) Never          | b) yes, in person | c) yes, on the phone   |
| d) yes, by letter | e) Yes, by email  | f) yes, in a chat room |

## Results

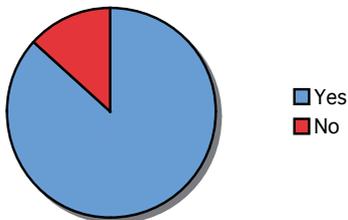
### 1. Have you ever used a computer for:

	Number of students
a) Email	39
b) Web search	52
c) Web cam	3
d) Writing reports in Japanese	11
e) Reading the news	21
f) Internet shopping	18
g) Writing reports in English	3
h) Downloading music	9
i) Watching movies or TV shows	12
j) Writing a blog	1
j) PowerPoint	1

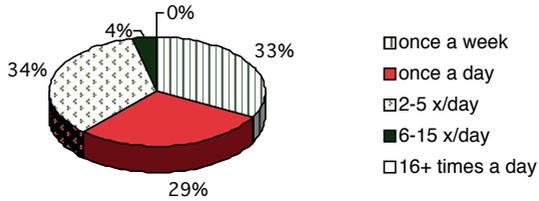
### 2. Do you have a computer at home



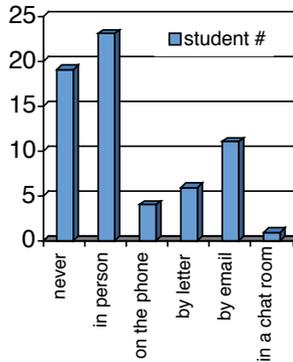
### 3. Do you have Internet at home?



#### 4. How often do you use a computer?



#### 5. Before college, had you ever communicated with someone from another country?



### Appendix B

#### Questionnaire 2

1. How many emails have you received from your keypal?

- a) 0 – 3
- b) 4 – 6
- c) 7 – 9
- d) 10 or more

2. Did you find the keypal project interesting?

- a) Very interesting
- b) Interesting
- c) A little interesting
- d) Not interesting

3. Did it make you want to study English more?
  - a) A lot
  - b) Yes
  - c) A little
  - d) No
  
4. Will you continue emailing your keypal after our class is over?
  - a) Yes
  - b) Maybe
  - c) I don't know
  - d) No
  
5. Please write down some *good* and *bad* things about the keypal.

## Appendix C

### *Weekly topics*

Week 1: Me

Week 2: My favourite novel or movie

Week 3: A happy moment in my past

Week 5: My family

Week 6: My school club/circle

Week 7: Music

Week 8: A fun memory from my childhood

Week 9: My dream home/house

Week 10: My favourite pet

Week 12: My summer holiday