



Available online at www.jlls.org

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(Special Issue 1), 01-17; 2021

Effects of epals practices on EFL writing. An action research study with Ecuadorian students

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APA Citation:

Vire Quezada, K., & Santillán, J. (2021). Effects of ePals practices on EFL writing. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(Special Issue 1), 01-17.

Submission Date:22/06/2020

Acceptance Date:08/10/2020

Abstract

Among the language skills, writing has been considered as the most difficult skill not only for native speakers, but for foreign language learners as well in the sense that one cannot achieve fluency and accuracy unless they become successful language users in terms of listening, speaking, and reading. This action research studied the effect of ePals practices on EFL writing of Ecuadorian students. Twenty-two junior high school students exchanged letters with American students over a four-month period. A mixed method was used for data collection and analysis. Quantitative data from pre and post writing tests and qualitative data from focal participants' interview were analyzed. Results revealed that after the intervention participants improved scores in vocabulary, grammar and accuracy. However, there was not a significant impact on the correct use of format and conventions of texts. Interviews with focal participants reported attitudes towards the collaboration and highlighted some aspects that made the experience valuable for participants and how it affected their writing performance and motivation. Results suggested that ePals practices offer ample opportunities for skills development and intercultural learning.

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Keywords: email exchange; ePals; interculturality; writing; motivation

1. Introduction

Writing is considered to be the most difficult skill to master for native speakers as well as for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Kitchakarn, 2014). For this reason, writing instructors have explored different ways to assist learners in the development of the skill. In recent years the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in writing instruction has been implemented due to the rapid advance of telecommunications technology (Sasaki & Takeuchi, 2010) which makes it accessible (Li & Zhu, 2013). Computer mediated communication (CMC), defined as communication between human beings via the instrumentality of computers Herring (1996, as cited in Fisher, Evans and Esch, 2004) include different modes such as blogs, discussion boards or wikis, chat, web-based conferencing,

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emails. CMC tools, when used in language classrooms, provide students with opportunities for interaction and learning in an online environment (Repman, 2005).

Saadi and Saada (2015) conducted research with twenty-nine Iranian students with whom computers software was used to provide electronic feedback on their writing. Results demonstrated that students gained higher scores in structure, punctuation and vocabulary. Yamac and Ulusoy (2017) reported a study with twenty six children who were part of an eight-week program with digital storytelling. Results showed a great advance in children's ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions in terms of writing quality. Kitchakarn (2014) analyzed effects of blogging on thirty-five Thai students who participated in a twelve- week project. Positive effect was reported as participants improved their writing abilities because their motivation for writing increased and they spent more time revising before publishing their texts. Awada (2016) reported the use of WhatsApp application to mediate critique essay instruction with fifty-two university Arab students. Results revealed that WhatsApp tool was useful to improve writing proficiency since students reported to have worked in an anxiety reduced atmosphere. Similarly, Alsamadani (2018), who implemented blogging in writing instruction with forty-eight Saudi undergraduates over fourteen weeks, agreed with previous results due to notable outcomes in content development, language mechanics, style, voice, word choice and other writing sub-skills observed in participants' writing.

Later research has explored CMC as a mean of written social interaction (Kern, 2006). In this context Google docs and wikis applications have allowed collaborative task negotiation, text co-construction, revision and edition in the writing process (Li, 2018). Besides, Ebadi and Rahimi (2019) in a study with three EFL Iranian university students confirmed that the use of Google Docs was an effective medium of instruction since participants improved their academic writing in terms of task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexicon, and grammatical range and accuracy.

In regard to wikis that have been another popular CMC tool, Kessler (2009) addressed its inclusion with pre service teachers from a Mexican university who participated in an online content-based course over sixteen weeks. Conclusions asserted that the creation of an autonomous environment with little or no instructor's participation provided opportunities for practice, and thus improvement of their language skills. Another wiki project with eight American Spanish majors who enrolled in an advanced Spanish writing course is described by Elola (2010). In his project, the analysis was focused on individual compared to collaborative writing; participants' interactions and their perceptions of the writing modes. Results confirmed that collaborative writing encourages students to pay more attention to grammatical accuracy; thus their overall quality of work was improved. In 2011, Chao and Lo reported the use of wikis with fifty-one Taiwanese students who were part of a five-week project which derived in development of writing skills as participants claimed to have benefited from peer assistance and self-regulation. Likewise, Chen and Brown (2012) confirmed the potential of wikis to foster writing in regard to vocabulary and sentence complexity. A group of six English learners, who participated in a sixteen-week study, confirmed that wikis motivated them to improve their written production. Finally, Li and Zhu (2013) in a study with nine college Chinese university students, whose interactions in wiki spaces over five weeks were analyzed, found wikis provide a positive learning experience. Evidently, CMC allows collaborative learning and encourages responsibility for learning because students are given a sense of control on task (Chao & Lo, 2011). Collaborative writing tasks described highlighted that to have real audience was one of the reasons for writing improvement because readers in such studies were participants' peers or instructors. However, one of the main benefits of CMC is that students can have access to native speakers of the target language (Fisher et al., 2004) and it can result in improvement of more specific areas of writing (Kessler, 2009).

Collaboration or exchange projects with native speakers apply online interaction to develop communication skills between two or more classrooms of language learners, generally from different countries (Kern, 2006; O'Dowd, 2013). Email exchanges, also known like KeyPal or ePal exchanges, have been the most popular tool for language teaching and learning through collaboration (Shang, 2007). Studies confirmed that email exchanges fostered communication skills; especially writing because the interactions are of written nature (Bourques, 2006; Edasawa & Kabata, 2007; Jou, Chao & Wu, 2007). Exchanges have resulted in development of different areas of writing. Edasawa and Kabata (2007) observed that participants' increased vocabulary because they were able to use new expressions from their partner's messages. Sasaki and Takeuchi (2010) agreed with this finding, however, they add that learning happens not only by imitation but because of noticing. With regard to sentence writing, Li (2000), Shang (2007), and Schenker (2016) informed of important improvements on participants' sentence and syntactic complexity. They confirmed that such improvement is related to the purpose of the task. In their study, participants showed excitement for responding to their partners rather than doing an assigned task. Therefore, the need for communication encouraged participants to find ways to improve their sentence writing (Sasaki & Takeuchi, 2010). According to Schenker (2016), writing improvement is the result of high motivation participants have to interact with real reader. Besides, participants of this kind of projects gain confidence in writing when they learn that errors do not affect comprehension (Patton, Hirano & Garret 2017). Using language in real life situations promotes positive learning environments and even facilitates discussion beyond classroom, as students see learning more appealing, more interesting, fun and enjoyable (Patton et al., 2017; Shang, 2007; Vinagre, 2007).

As a related effect, participants from this kind of projects have reported important gains in intercultural learning. Whether projects had a cultural purpose or not, learners developed awareness of the other culture (Bohinski & Leventhal, 2015; Bourques, 2006; Fedderholdt, 2001; Fisher et al., 2007; Korycinski, 2001; Patton et al., 2017).

E-mail exchanges have also reported to be beneficial for instructors. Patton et al., (2017) assured that instructors praised the positive effect the exchange had on their awareness of language challenges in terms of linguistic features of learners' utterances. Furthermore, as for the professional gains for teachers, who coordinated the projects, the exchange taught them how to interact with a native speaker in a professional context (Jou et al., 2007).

In the Ecuadorian context CMC modes used in English classes have rarely been reported. In higher education setting, Intriago, Villafuerte, Jaramillo, Lema and Echeverria (2006) reported action research developed with Ecuadorian university students who used Google apps and Literature Circles to create virtual learning environments. The study confirmed that students advanced their English proficiency level in terms of listening and speaking. Concerning collaboration, Sevy and Chroman (2019) reported on a study conducted with Ecuadorian university students where video chat was used to develop oral skills. Participants found the project motivating and they showed important improvement. Both projects described the use of CMC tools with English learners to promote learning in other areas than writing.

Rojas, Villafuerte and Soto (2017) conducted research with Ecuadorian university students to develop written production. The study concluded that writing development is closely linked to students' motivation which can be achieved with the use of collaborative tasks and technological means. To add support to the need for CMC tools inclusion in EFL class, Cirocki, Soto, Encalada and Cuenca (2019) who explored the use of motivational strategies in Ecuadorian secondary context, depicted the need to promote learner's autonomy and intrinsic motivation suggesting the use of technology and collaborative projects in class.

Literature has pointed out the effectiveness of CMC modes on learning (Fisher et al., 2004) and ePals have been described as popular in writing class due to its importance in language learning and their

potential to enhance international perspective or intercultural understanding (Fisher et al., 2004; Bourques, 2006; Patton et al., 2017, Korycynski, 2001; Fedderholdt, 2001; Bohinski & Leventhal, 2015; Kern, 2006). Besides, ePals are of easy access to implement (Bourques, 2006) and according to administrators of ePals site, there are over 130,000 classes collaborating around the world (O'Dowd, 2013). Previous research has also demonstrated that in the Ecuadorian context there is not report of studies that have implemented this CMC tool in in EFL class.

The present study describes a collaboration project of Ecuadorian eleven graders who corresponded with American ePals. The aim of the study was to analyze the effect of ePals practices on participants' writing skills. This study can contribute to research on secondary settings where it has been uncommon (Fisher et al., 2004; Li, 2018). Furthermore, this research could provide insights to apply in EFL class and address the need for CMC incorporation in language classes to influence students' motivation in Ecuadorian secondary institutions Cirocki et al. (2019). The following research question will guide the development of this research.

What is the effect of ePals practices on EFL writing skills in the eleven graders at Calasanz High School?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

This research is an Action-research study. It was practioner's led and arose as a reflection of the researcher's own teaching practice; information was systematically collected and analyzed to make decisions for better future practice (Jhonson 2008, as cited in Mertler, 2017). Following a mixed method design the researcher explained the problem including both qualitative and quantitative data. Mixed method allows a better understanding of the impact of intervention by combining experimental results and perceptions of participants (Creswell, 2014).

2.2. Context and participants

The participants of this study were twenty eleven graders, sixteen female and six male students, at Calasanz High School in Loja-Ecuador. They were part of the International Baccalaureate program (IB) offered by the institution. They are all Spanish native speakers and range between low and intermediate level as determined by IB admission test administered at the beginning of 2017-2018 school year. Students were all EFL learners and have studied English for at least three years.

2.3. The intervention

Before this intervention, the researcher had already implemented an email exchange program in 2016, with no research purpose. For this study, the researcher had the cooperation of an American teacher from Illinois Lutheran School. The researcher and the American teacher agreed to do the exchange for four months which was the time before American summer break. Initially the researcher explained the project to her school principal, then researcher met with parents of participants to explain the exchange and have consent letters signed (Creswell, 2014). Then, students were given detailed information about ePals and the way they would exchange correspondence. The researcher and the American teacher paired students to make sure everybody had a partner thus reduce the possibility of discouragement for not finding one Nozawa (2002). Participants were administered a writing pre-test before the exchange which started in October 2018. A total of ten letters about different topics were written. The first letter of both Ecuadorian and American students was a self-introduction, and then topics included family, sports, food, celebrations, free time activities, etc. Students wrote letters during class time, they sent

them to the teacher through Edmodo or Gmail. The researcher then, downloaded all the letters and shared with the American teacher through Google drive. To ensure all students receive correspondence, both teachers shared the letters only when all students had submitted theirs. Whenever American students sent their letters, they were printed and handed in students to read and respond during class time.

The researcher and the American teacher decided to do all the logistics in the exchange to keep participants from having personal interaction with their ePals in order to protect their privacy and prevent students from translating letters. At the end of the intervention, teachers had a Skype call where students met. Students quickly introduced themselves and greeted their ePals. Some students maintained communication with their ePals, through different social networks after the project finished.

2.4. Data collection

2.4.1. Quantitative data

To determine students' writing performance before and after the intervention, students were administered a pre- and post-writing test. The test comprised two sections, A and B. For both sections, students had to choose, from a list of three, one task to write. The number of words instructed was between 70 and 150 words. For both tasks, students had to decide the appropriate text type according to the task instruction. Options of type of texts in section A were personal or professional texts such as diary, social media post, text message while in section B they were mass-media texts as advertisement, letter and speech (International Baccalaureate, 2017). Section A and B, both were scored over 15 points. The rubric to score the tests had three criteria: Criterion A, B and C. Criterion A, *language*, assessed how successfully the candidate commanded written language; explicitly, the extent to which vocabulary and grammar structures was varied and how language accuracy contributed to effective communication. Criterion B, *message*, evaluated to what extent the candidate fulfilled the tasks, focusing on the relevance and development of ideas, and the way clarity and organization of ideas contribute to the successful delivery of the message. Finally, criterion C, *conceptual understanding*, measured appropriateness of text type, register and tone, and the incorporation of conventions of the chosen text type (International Baccalaureate, 2018). Students had two periods of 45 minutes to answer the test. Reliability and validity of the tests and rubric are based on the fact that they were standardized instruments used in IB programs.

2.4.2. Qualitative data

To learn students' perceptions about ePals project, the researcher used an online randomizer to select eight focal participants for a semi-structured interview which lasted 30 minutes. The interview was conducted in Spanish to avoid the possibility that language barriers might have kept students from expressing their opinions (Mackey & Gass, 2005). First, the researcher informed students about the objective of the interview, then she conducted a conversation where guiding questions were used. The questions were about their general impressions of the study, areas students felt they improved; their opinion about authentic audience and whether they continued in touch with their ePals. Questions used were those suggested in Shang (2007).

2.5. Data processing

The pre and post-test were scored by an IB teacher to avoid bias. Results were organized in an Excel spreadsheet. On the other hand, the interview with the focal participants was transcribed and translated, as stated in Creswell (2014). Names of participants were not included. Participants were tagged as student 1, student 2, and so forth.

2.5.1. Quantitative Analysis

The data was analyzed in SPSS 22 software. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive statistics are expressed in Means (\bar{x}) and Standard deviations (SD). Inferential statistics used a non-parametric Wilcoxon test to compare matched pairs considering that the difference, between the posttest and pretest, has non-normal distribution (Field, 2013). Finally, in the case of difference, Cohen's *d* effect size was used to describe the impact of the program. When Cohen's *d* is around 0.01 it means that the effect was very small, 0.20 means small, 0.50 means medium, 0.80 means large, 1.20 means very large, and 2.0 means huge (Sawilowsky, 2009).

2.5.2 Qualitative analysis

For the analysis of qualitative data the hermeneutic software Atlas ti 7 (Wolff & Silver, 2017) was used. Categories were created around the central one of the analysis; ePals practices. The categories emerged from recurrent ideas from the focal participants of the interview. The ideas were condensed into quotes that were differentiated into six categories, namely: communication strategies, new learning, interculturality, limitations, interaction and keeping in touch. The weight of each category is illustrated with a number of citations and the number of connections the category has with others. The software facilitated the creation of a semantic diagram that summarizes, visually, the categories in a family of codes.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative data

3.1.1. Pretest

The pre-test presented information about the writing proficiency level before the intervention. In Table 1, the results express the mean and standard deviation of the students' performance.

Table 1. Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard deviation (SD) of the writing pretest

	TASK A		TASK B	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Criterion A: Language (6 p)	4.14	1.55	3.73	1.61
Criterion B: Message (6 p)	4.05	2.08	3.77	2.11
Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.86	0.99	1.64	1.09
TOTAL (15 p)	10.05	4.38	9.14	4.61

In task A, students had to write a personal or professional text (blog, invitation, or diary) and in task B, students had to write mass media texts (article, letter, personal statement, report, article or speech). There were similar results in Task A and Task B. In task A students scored 4.14 in language criterion; 4.05 in message and 1.86 in conceptual understanding. In task B students got 3.73 in language; 3.77 points in message and 1.64 in conceptual understanding. The total sum of student's performance was 10.05 points for task A and 9.14 points in Task B; both over 15 points.

3.1.2. Post-test

The post-test reflects results of students' writing proficiency level after the project of exchanging letters. Table 2 presents means and standard deviation of students' writing performance.

Table 2. Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard deviation (SD) of writing posttest.

CRITERIA	TASK A		TASK B	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Criterion A: Language (6 p)	4.64	1.22	4.41	1.10
Criterion B: Message (6 p)	4.50	1.47	4.27	1.70
Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.96	0.90	1.68	0.89
TOTAL (15 p)	11.09	3.32	10.36	3.47

The means increased slightly in Task A and Task B. In task A, the result was 4.64 in language criterion; 4.50 in message, and 1.96 in conceptual understanding. While task B resulted in 4.41 for language; 4.27 message and conceptual understanding 1.68. The total sum of the three criteria was 11.09 for task A and 10.36 points for task B.

3.1.3 Differences between pre and posttest

Table 3 reveals the differences between the pre and posttest.

Table 3. Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard deviation (SD) of the differences between the writing pre and posttest.

		Pretest		Posttest		Difference		P
		\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	
TASK A	Criterion A: Language (6 p)	4.14	1.55	4.64	1.22	0.50	0.91	0.020*
	Criterion B: Message (6 p)	4.05	2.08	4.50	1.47	0.45	1.22	0.068
	Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.86	0.99	1.96	0.90	0.09	0.81	0.593
	TOTAL (15 p)	10.05	4.38	11.09	3.32	1.05	2.26	0.064
TASK B	Criterion A: Language (6 p)	3.73	1.61	4.41	1.10	0.68	1.04	0.005*
	Criterion B: Message (6 p)	3.77	2.11	4.27	1.70	0.50	1.34	0.103
	Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.64	1.09	1.68	0.89	0.05	0.84	0.796
	TOTAL (15 p)	9.14	4.61	10.36	3.47	1.23	2.52	0.046*
TOTAL		19.18	8.77	21.45	6.55	2.27	4.06	0.032*

Note: *There is a significant difference between pretest and posttest because p value is less than 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$).

There was a significant difference in Task A. It occurred in Criterion A of language, which increased 0.5 points after the intervention ($z = -2.326$, $p = 0.020$, Cohen's $d = 0.35$). According to Cohen's d the significant difference represents a small effect size. In Task B, there was also a significant difference in Criterion A which increased 0.68 points after the intervention ($z = -2.28$, $p = 0.005$, Cohen's $d = 0.48$). It means that the program had a medium effect size. Increase of scores in the language criterion implies students improved their command of written language.

In Task B there is a significant difference in the sum of the three criteria. The total increase is 1.23 points ($z = -2.828$, $p = -1.993$, Cohen's $d = 0.29$) which means that the magnitude of the effect was small. For task B, students were required to write different types of texts according to the instruction. Text types most frequently used were letter and article. Topics of tasks included waiter job application; report on a volunteering program at school and advice for final school examinations. The general result, sum of Task A and Task B, likewise reported a significant difference of 2.53 points ($z = 2.149$, $p = 0.032$, Cohen's $d = 0.28$), which represents a medium effect size.

3.2. Qualitative data

3.2.1. Interview with focal participants

Qualitative data which resulted from a semi-structured interview with focal participants served to contrast quantitative results. After a first analysis of students' impressions of the study, six categories emerged.

The first category, *communication strategies*, groups the strategies students used to correspond with their American peers. Second category, new learning, gathers those testimonies according to which students have learned new things related to their academic training. Another category is interculturality which describes the cultural gains students got. The fourth category is limitation which refers to the organizational and psychological aspects that prevented good communication in the correspondence. There is a relationship of belonging between interculturality and interaction, which is the fifth category and finally the communication students kept after the exchange finished is described in keep in touch category.

In the illustration, red arrows depict the relationship sub categories have with the main category while black arrows show the relationship subcategories have among them. Relationships are expressed in signs: == is associated with, [] is part of, => is cause of, <> contradicts, isa = is a (Bonilla and López, 2016). Next to each sub category there are numbers in brackets. The number on the left represents recurrent citations and the number on the right give account of the relationships the sub category has with other sub categories.

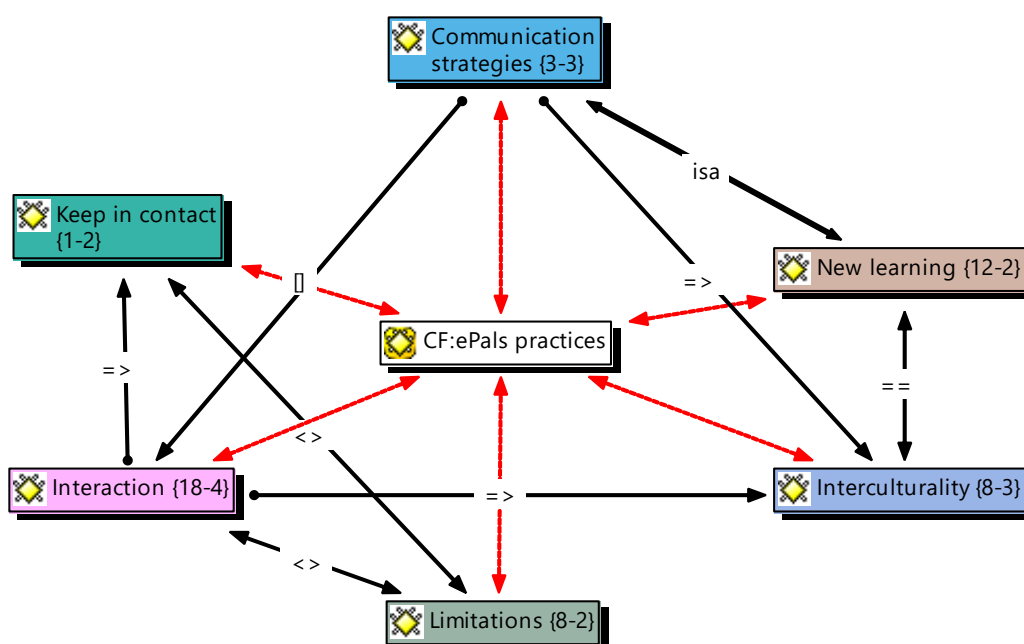


Figure 1. Semantic network of ePals practices and the family of subcategories

Several citations that make each subcategory in the semantic network are broken down. It starts with the subcategory *Communication strategies* {3-2}, then *new learning* {12-2}, *Interculturality* {8-1}, *Limitations* {8-2}, *Interaction* {18-3} and *Keep in touch* {1-2}.

Communication strategies

This code involved the ways students kept communication when they found something they did not understand. In that case, they resorted mainly to analyze the context of the letter, ask a classmate or use the online translator to look for the Spanish equivalent of to listen to the pronunciation of the word to analyze if the student had listened to it before. Those processes helped students to understand new words they found in letters.

“Sometimes, we analyzed the context of the letter to find out the meaning, and sometimes we asked classmates or used an online translator (Student 1, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“Whenever I found an unknown word, I would look it up online, to listen to the pronunciation to identify if I had listened to it before” (Student 8, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

New learning

New learning implies having achieved insights thanks to the exchange. Students reported they have learned different aspects of writing from reading their ePals' letters. First, lexicon was reported to have progressed since students had to figure out meaning of new words.

“...also helped me in terms of new words or a new way of writing a word”

“... there was a great number of unknown words. So, I wanted to understand them in a better way and ... even I was excited to look them up in a dictionary to see some synonyms” (Student 4, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Grammar was another aspect students felt they improved. They thought that the structure of the sentences from letters they received gave them insights about how to write. Concerning writing style, students recognized letters were the resource they used to reflect on their own writing. They realized they wrote extensive sentences or paragraphs that could be boring, and then they started to write shorter sentences and paragraphs, use different vocabulary and connectors in their attempt to write in similar style of their counterparts.

“I ... learned a little more about English grammatical structure” (Student 7, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

... I found the ways to adapt to write as he did. I used almost similar words that I understood, I mean, I used all the words I knew to transmit something. (Student 1, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

“... I sometimes write very extensive sentences in English” (Student 3, personal communication, April 17, 2019),

“sometimes I would write very big paragraphs that would be boring, then I separated them” (Student 6, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

The result of recognizing lack of vocabulary or their basic command of the language created in students' positive attitudes towards the language. That is, they felt motivated to research or learn more English to have better communication with their ePals.

...in the letters they sent us, they had new words that we did not understand and we wanted to find what those words meant (they all agree), thus when we wanted to learn more because when we wanted to express ourselves we realized that our English was very basic” (Student 5, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“It made me want to study more English because the letters he wrote to me contained new words and new phrases I did not understand” (Student 3, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

We used a very basic level of structure, whereas they used a more advanced one and that was novel and interesting. That is why it motivated us to research in order to understand what the other person wanted to show us or express. (Student 8, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

Interculturality

In this category, several metacognitive and reflection aspects that students have regarding culture are described. Such aspects are associated to the way the exchange boosted participants' intercultural awareness which contributed for project engagement. Students found very interesting to learn about the American culture through the information their counterparts shared in their letters.

Students enjoyed learning about their ePals' lifestyles, opinions about certain topics and they discovered that despite they live in different countries, they shared similarities. They also recognized that with the exchange they were not only discovering a new world but the world was learning about them. They realized English was a universal language that became a bridge to exchange knowledge about both cultures.

"It was an exchange of cultures, it was something interesting". (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

"...to learn their ideas and how they come to think or do their daily activities, their culture and everything was something that I liked a lot and I learned several things from that activity" (Student 7, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

"To feel identified with others, to know that we are equal but at the same time, we are different. Ehh we live in different cultures, but we are humans and despite the differences between languages we keep our similarities and learning that is nice" (Student 8, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

Interaction

The category of interaction describes the dialogue engagement. Students insisted on this aspect repeatedly which makes this category the most supported one because of the recurrent citations it had during the interview. There are two aspects of the interaction to highlight. One gives information about features that made interaction interesting. For example, students experienced for the first time communication with a native speaker who was a real reader for their texts; the fact that students and their ePals' were the same age facilitated the exchange of information about their culture and interests, and students experienced a free environment to collaborate because the exchange did not involve score for their letters, writing was only for communication purpose.

"... I had never done this before, and it was interesting to see how they expressed themselves" (Student 4, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

"...the fact that they were our same age helped to create a bond so that after this activity was over we could continue communicating" (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

"Not being a scored task or having influence in my grades was for me something free and it was like I had all the desire to write enough to express what I felt" (Student 7, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

The other facet regarding interaction was the degree of confidence students felt they raised as the exchanged progressed. This allowed interaction of more personal and intimate nature where students shared personal concerns, feelings and both were able to show empathy.

"... my ePal told me about family issues that I did not live and did not know what to say, but I wrote from what my heart told me and I hoped that the advice I gave, would not sound bad" (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

"That day I felt incredibly bad and I did not know why but I wrote about it to see what he would tell me or how he reacted. And in the next letter he told me that ... I should not give up and that he hoped I felt better. I liked that" (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Initially, some students were fearful to talk about personal topics with a person they did not know directly. Then, they even admitted that getting to know a person through letters only, enhanced sincere communication. As the exchanged progressed, students were confident enough to talk about their lives and express mutual empathy. Finally, something reported by only one participant was that she kept communication with her correspondence pair, once the program concluded.

... I liked it a lot because we kept exchanging interesting things that happened to us. And they were events that caught our attention because of the simple fact that we live elsewhere (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Throughout the interview, students expressed that ePals made English learning more appealing. The fact of having to write to maintain correspondence with an English-speaking pair was not only an excuse to improve writing, but also it involved learning this foreign language together with other skills.

Limitations

This category refers to specific aspects that interfere flowing communication between one student and another. Students identified limitation in their own English such as lack of vocabulary and on the other hand, a psychological aspect of feeling fearful to interact with an unknown person.

“.. in some parts, I would have liked to improve in using more words that I did not have in my vocabulary at that moment” (Student 6, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“I mean, to know someone new creates fear, that happens to me”; (Student 6, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

Not all aspects had to do with Ecuadorian students; some claims referred to attitudes they perceived from their foreign ePals. For some students, letters were very short which made them think that American students wrote were not willing to communicate but they wrote because it was a compulsory task.

“There were things that I did not like very much. For example, with the person who I wrote to, I remember that the letters he sent me were not as I expected.

“Sometimes I felt like she is writing because she has to because it is a compulsory task. (Student 1, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

Finally, it was also highlighted that something that affected communication was related to the frequency of letters and topics. Due to occasional class interruption or absence of students letters were not as frequent as expected, and topics of letters were decided based on class themes, hence it interrupted some dialogues of previous conversations.

“.. I think it would be better if the letters were written more often. Also, the topics were very changing and although we answered our questions, those were not so extensive” (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

4. Discussion

The study was conducted to determine the effect of ePals practices on EFL writing. The results were analyzed considering individual tasks and overall performance. The comparison of pre and posttest revealed that there was a significant difference in task A and B in language criterion. According to Cohen’s *d* test the effect of the intervention was small and medium accordingly. Based on the rubric, student’s progress in the language component implies the exchange affected positively the command of participants’ written language. The descriptors for such performance level involve the use of varied vocabulary appropriate to the task; use of basic grammar structures used and that language is generally accurate (International baccalaureate, 2017).

Improvement in vocabulary after collaborative projects has been reported in studies such as Alsamadami (2001), Ndemanu (2012), Edasawa and Kabata (2007) who support that frequent writing and imitation may explain vocabulary improvement. Conversely, Sasaki & Takeuchi (2010) state that lexicon gains can derive from other processes participants apply when figuring out meaning of letters. In the interview, students of this study admitted that using translators, dictionaries or asking a friend for meaning of words helped them to understand new words. Similarly, results suggest that the act of exchanging letters fostered students’ use of grammar. This finding corroborates those of Chen and Brown (2012) and Elola and Oskoz (2010), where participants showed progress due to multiple drafts composition and because of the idea of real audience of their texts. According to learners in this study, their ePals’ messages were models they could notice and imitate. This can explain their development in the structural aspect of writing as in this kind of collaboration, appropriation of grammatical patterns has been a common conclusion (Ndemanu, 2012). Finally, the last aspect of language command students improved is accuracy. This finding compares to Shang (2007) and Saadi and Saat (2017) however the reasons for

improvement are aligned with Kessler, 2009 who demonstrated that the need for communication with a native speaker enhanced accuracy. From students' testimonies one can infer that the fact students had to transmit a message to a real reader made them want to learn more. One of the effects was that they autonomously looked for ways to improve clarity of their compositions. Their response agrees with Fisher et al. (2004), Schenker (2016) and Vinagre (2007) conclusion that students tried harder when interacting with genuine audience. The reasons why students did not improve significantly in the message and conceptual understanding criterion is perhaps because of the nature of the tasks required to write in the posttest. The tasks required students to write about hypothetical situations in which they needed to describe aspects that they probably did not have experience about. In the letter exchange students always wrote about class-related topics related to their personal experiences. Besides, students were free to choose what information to share in their letters. Topics were given by the teacher, but she did not control the content of the letters to comment about relevance of ideas or writing style. Similarly, students did not have to observe different texts conventions and register when interacting with their American ePals because all messages were written in an email format. Consequently, teacher's assistance when composing letters and explicit instruction should be considered if the aim of an exchange is to improve specific aspects of writing. Consequently, the low improvement in these criteria does not entail that the intervention was not beneficial.

Nonetheless, the sum of the scores in the criteria for both tasks report a significant difference in relation with the pretest. According to Cohen's *d*, the exchange had a medium size effect. Apart from the reasons above mentioned, the overall result from this study adds evidence to those supporting that collaboration projects provided students with opportunities for skill development because the interaction was written (Yu, 2018) and influenced by participants' motivation and confidence for writing (Bourques 2006; Chao et al., 2007; Edasawa & Kabata 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Garret et al., 2017; Kern, 2006; Ndemanu, 2012; Li, 2000; Shang, 2007; Schenker, 2016).

Qualitative analysis from the interview with focal participants accounts for their perceptions of ePals. Students thought the experience of exchanging letters with American students was interesting and exciting. For them, it was the first time they interacted with an English native speaker, therefore the idea of writing to a real person engaged them in the exchange. They recognized that their limited English encouraged them to try harder understanding and writing letters therefore it motivated them learn more English. This compares to Awada (2016), Bason et al. (1993), Bourques (2006), Chen and Brown (2012), Fedderholdt (2001), Shang (2007), Sasaki and Takeuchi (2010), Saadi and Saadat (2015), Vinagre (2007), and Yu (2018) who reported that motivation for target language learning was positively influenced by the computer collaborative projects. Another important insight students pointed out was that their motivation for writing letters was also determined by the nature of the tasks as it was not a scored activity. They expressed they felt free to write without task requirements but with the aim of communicating effectively. Students' opinions in this study corroborate results from Awada (2016), Chao and Li (2011), and Saadi (2016) where the collaborative projects created stress-free environment. Elola (2010) adds that students feel more comfortable when they have control over their writing which also happened with participants in this study as there was not teacher's intervention in the process of writing.

The intervention also succeeded in providing students with intercultural learning. Participants valued the experienced for the cultural exchange it yielded. Through letters participants learned about each other's countries and lifestyles. Intercultural learning from first-hand experienced in this study adds to previous studies (Awada & Diab, 2016; Bohinski & Leventhal, 2015; Bourques, 2006; Chao et al., 2007; Chen & Brown, 2012; Fedderholdt, 2001; Fisher et al., 2004; Garret et al., 2017; Korycinski, 2001). Students thought that to be the same age with their counterparts permitted the interaction about personal topics because their interests were similar. In the case of this study, The American teacher and the

researcher were responsible to find suitable pairs. It should be considered that for success in this type of project there should be teachers' coordination on the logistics (Nozawa, 2002).

Lastly, students also recognized some aspects that prevented learning or enjoyment of the exchange. On one hand, it is the frequency of letters that could be overcome if students had direct communication with their ePals. However, this study relied on O'Dowd's suggestion of incorporating ePals as a classroom-based activity with teachers' monitoring. Probably the fact that teachers are in charge of receiving and delivering the letters might have delayed the correspondence; yet, it prevented discouragement of participation since everybody received their letters when there was correspondence. Furthermore, the amount of text from letters was an aspect of concern for participants. Some letters contained few lines which was discouraging for students. This aspect is difficult to control because teachers are respectful with students' individualities that may keep them from engaging in long conversation.

5. Conclusions

Computer mediated communication tools have been implemented in different settings with the aim to foster language learning. ePals exchanges have been a way to foster language learning. This study sought to analyze the effect of ePals practices on students' EFL writing and demonstrated that this type of projects offers ample opportunities for skill development as well as for intercultural learning. Quantitative analyses confirmed that ePals practices can enhance writing skills in terms of lexicon, grammar, and accuracy. The methodology of this study did not have teachers' intervention in the process of understanding and reading letters, thus, students reported to have progressed in their writing skills thanks to the processes they used independently to make meaning of messages. Therefore, ePals practices are suggested for class application as it has the potential to boost students' language which is influenced by their motivation for writing thanks to the idea of a real reader as correspondent. Conversely, the exchange did not succeed in increasing students' awareness of appropriate register or conventions for different types of texts.

Another important gain from the exchange is intercultural learning. For students it was interesting to learn about American culture through their ePals. Interacting with peers who were the same age facilitated the exchange of information of personal nature that depicted their lifestyles. Finally, ePals is an effective tool to motivate students for language learning because of the idea of real readers for their texts. For participants in this study it was the first time students interacted with an English native speaker which made them value the experience as very interesting.

Results from this research cannot be generalized since effects of social studies are dependent on specific contexts. However, this study adds corpus of evidence to literature related to the use of CMC tools to foster language learning. It is hoped that this study helps understand the positive effect ePals can have on EFL classes to promote language and culture learning. ePals are accessible and there are several classes around the world willing to collaborate. Besides, they have the potential for writing development because communication is written and different processes to make communication possible are involved. This kind of exchanges can also help promote autonomy in students since they are responsible for transmitting clear messages. Finally, since students interact with geographically different classes, they are given the opportunity to develop international perspective and enrich their cultural knowledge of the country their ePals are from. All these effects result in increasing students' interest for learning English because they have genuine reasons to write.

Educators interested in implementing ePals exchanges in their classrooms should consider incorporating them as classroom-based activity to ensure students' participation. They should be responsible from the logistics of the program to ensure success. Teachers interested in maximizing the effect on the use of conventions and register in written tasks should consider including explicit instruction using letters as

resources. Concerns that emerged in this study should be considered for future studies. Later research can focus on conducting a longer exchange program or with more frequent letters. Also, closer monitoring from teacher to guide the fulfillment of tasks, as a solution to short letters, can be considered.

6. Ethics Committee Approval

The author(s) confirm(s) that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country (Date of Confirmation: December 15, 2020).

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Epals uygulamalarının EFL yazımına etkileri. Ekvadorlu öğrencilerle bir eylem araştırması çalışması

Öz

Dil becerileri arasında yazma, sadece anadili olan kişiler için değil, aynı zamanda yabancı dil öğrenenler için de dinleme, konuşma, dinleme, konuşma, vb. Açısından başarılı bir dil kullanıcısı olmadıkça akıcılık ve doğruluk elde edilememesi anlamında en zor beceri olarak kabul edilmiştir. Bu eylem araştırması, ePals uygulamalarının Ekvadorlu öğrencilerin EFL yazımı üzerindeki etkisini inceledi. Yirmi iki ortaokul öğrencisi, dört aylık bir süre boyunca Amerikalı öğrencilerle mektuplaştı. Veri toplama ve analizi için karma bir yöntem kullanılmıştır. Yazma öncesi ve sonrası testlerden nicel veriler ve odak katılımcıların görüşmelerinden elde edilen nitel veriler analiz edildi. Sonuçlar, müdahaleden sonra katılımcıların kelime dağarcığı, dil bilgisi ve doğruluk puanlarını iyileştirdiğini ortaya koydu. Bununla birlikte, metin biçiminin ve kurallarının doğru kullanımı üzerinde önemli bir etki yoktu. Odak katılımcılarla yapılan görüşmeler, işbirliğine yönelik tutumları bildirdi ve deneyimi katılımcılar için değerli kılan ve yazma performanslarını ve motivasyonlarını nasıl etkilediğini vurguladı. Sonuçlar, ePals uygulamalarının beceri geliştirme ve kültürlerarası öğrenme için geniş fırsatlar sunduğunu gösterdi.

Anahtar sözcükler: e-posta değişimi; ePals; kültürlerarasılık; yazı; motivasyon

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