



Journal homepage: <https://jll.uoch.edu.pk/index.php/jll>

Bridging Students Linguistic and Cultural Gaps in Teaching Reading and Writing

Munir Athar

Associate Professor, Higher Education Department, Punjab, Pakistan

Article Info

Article History:

Received April 28, 2024

Revised May 10, 2024

Accepted May 11, 2024

*Corresponding author:(A. Munir)

atharmunirsiddiqui1974@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper reports on the success of a cross-cultural letter-writing project that helped bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between two groups of students belonging to two different countries. This ELTeCS¹ organized project, basically, a departure from the dull and routine methods of teaching reading and writing, created authentic situations in which a group of Pakistani university students wrote to their Russian counterparts across the border for a full semester about themselves and their cultures. This paper presents the linguistic and content analysis of the letters of the participants written at the beginning of this project and towards its end. The results show a marked improvement in language, style, and content. From the data gathered through semi-structured interviews, the paper also reports on how this project has not only been instrumental in bridging the cultural gap i.e. clearing the minds and hearts of the participants but also the linguistic gap.

Keywords:

cross-cultural letter-writing project,
cultural and linguistic gaps

Introduction

Contemporary technology has significantly impacted various aspects of human life, including the realm of education. The advancements in technology present opportunities for enhancing education and improving the processes of teaching and learning (Rovithis et al., 2019; Straková & Cimermanová, 2018).

Computers and the Internet have now become part and parcel of educational institutes globally and researchers and ELT managers are using them innovatively for various educational purposes (Ali, 2004; Belisle, 1996; Chafe, 2008; Choi, 1999; Gonglewski, 2001; Ho, 2000; Kelly, 2000; Lee, 2000; and others) ranging from improving the reading and writing skills of students to bringing the real world into the classrooms. Publishing an e-journal, chatting, developing websites, video conferencing, establishing interschool contacts, setting up internet relay chats and e-mail projects are a few of the innovative uses of technology in the classroom. Such tools bring great variety to the classroom and increase the interest and motivation of students. But sadly enough, some countries like Pakistan are still heavily relying on old and outdated teaching methods in the classrooms which fail to capture the interest of students. There is a dire need to impress upon all the stakeholders the importance of this great educational tool and take steps to popularize its use in schools/colleges. This dismal situation in Pakistan is mainly because of the scarcity of information and research in this field. The present study is only a humble attempt to bridge this gap.

This paper reports on the success of a cross-cultural letter-writing project that helped bridge the cultural and linguistic gaps between two groups of students belonging to two different countries. This ELTeCS organized project, basically, a departure from the dull and routine methods of teaching reading and writing created authentic situations in which a group of Pakistani university students wrote to their Russian counterparts across the border for a full semester about themselves and their cultures.

The Importance of Computer and Internet as an Educational Tool

The popularization of computer and Internet and its increasing use in all the other fields have made researchers and teachers think about them as important educational tools. In fact, in most of the advanced countries, computers seem to supplement the teacher, if not replace them.

¹ English Language teaching contacts scheme

In Lea's (2013) perspective, the original ties of literacy to reading and writing practices often get overshadowed by competency-focused agendas that prioritize transferable skills applicable in education and digital societies. Spante et al. (2018) note that digital competence emphasized in politically influenced literature, pertains to the adept utilization of technology across various settings. They observe a geographical contrast, with digital literacy prevalent in English-speaking nations and digital competence more common in European countries like Spain, Italy, and the Nordic region.

Warschauer (1997, p. 470) observes “even a cursory glance at the programs of regional and national conferences of language teachers indicates that the number of presentations related to online learning has expanded geometrically in recent years”. Muehleisen (1997, p. 1) states two reasons behind his rationale to use Internet in the language classroom, namely to expose students to a wider range of English than they usually encounter in their daily lives and to encourage students to use English for pleasure outside class. Now the question is not whether technology should be used in educational institutes or not but rather how to maximize its positive impact.

Presently, apart from the usual methods of teaching reading and writing to the students, technology-based activities such as making classroom/school websites and uploading them on the net, publishing an e-journal by a school/class, chatting, establishing interschool contacts, setting up internet relay chat, video conferencing projects and email projects are increasingly becoming popular amongst the teachers and the taught both. As the data for my research is generated by a letter-writing project, which was carried on a line between my students in Pakistan and students from the Sociology Department of Saint Petersburg State University Russia, for the sake of relevance, I will talk about some of these new technology-based educational tools briefly and then go on to discuss in detail the effectiveness of email in helping students gain different skills.

Making Classroom/school Websites

Making classroom or school websites to improve the reading and writing skills of learners is a very popular activity with educationists all over the globe. Lee (2000) believes that one of the most potentially important and energizing Internet activities for students in the ESL/EFL classroom is to create their web pages in English and publish them on a website. Such projects are very helpful in improving the participants' reading, writing, emailing, net surfing, and other skills interestingly and funnily. Instead of feeling burdened or bored, students show a keen interest in them and are ready to work extra hours². Ali (2004, p. 252), pens down her experiences about a similar project she carried out in AKUSON³.

Students created a class web page, which developed their basic word processing, web researching, and writing skills. It also provided opportunities for students to read (material on how to create web pages), make use of their aesthetic sense (when they chose the background, etc., for the web page), and practice oral and emailing skills (when they asked people in information systems for help and wrote to other students who had created similar web pages...I wanted them to enjoy the process and they did it.

But the task of creating a web page is not entirely plain sailing. The potential problems could be lack of familiarity with the technology of creating a web page, insufficient knowledge about which website offers free space for web page hosting and under what conditions, and how much material can be uploaded on the net free of cost.

The same researcher admits that her students spent a full month to find the right Internet site that offered free web pages but that did not work because after a week there was a server error. Now admittedly this is a very useful way of improving the students reading, writing, and other skills but as mentioned earlier for successfully creating and hosting a web page a strong technological background knowledge, information, and access to a very speedy Internet connection is needed which may be difficult to manage especially in smaller cities.

Chat Groups

It is a synchronous form of communication, which is carried out online between two or more participants allowing people to communicate with other members of the chat group directly and instantly. At present there is a bewildering variety of chat groups offering serious discussions on professional matters to just killing time. Chat groups also provide authentic opportunities for language use in which participants express their opinions, argue, persuade, convince, and discuss with others in writing. This can be of enormous help to serious language learners because besides honing the reading and writing skills of students, it brings additional benefits too, like improvement in keyboarding skills, higher order thinking skills, and a broader world vision. But this is not altogether risk-free.

² For a detailed discussion how to create a web page, please read Kelly's article “Guidelines for Designing a Good Website for ESL Students” Muehleisen also gives a few tips regarding creation of a web page in “Projects Using the Internet In College English Classes”

³ Aga Khan University School of Nursing

Robertson (2003) while recommending using chat groups in the language classroom warns, (Canagarajah, 2018; Douglas Fir Group, 2016). They argue that everyday communication, such as email requests, should be viewed in the context of powerful internet communication tools that facilitate connections among increasingly diverse individuals. Despite physical distances staying the same, advancements in technology enable students to interact with their instructors on a personal level, transcending geographical constraints.

Margaret Gonglewski *et al.* (2001) enumerates five pedagogical reasons behind introducing e-mails in the language classroom namely, an extension of language learning time and place, authentic communication, a debate of topics beyond classroom-based ones, student-centered language learning, equal opportunity of participation, quick and cheap. But whatever reasons one may put forward for using e-mails in ESL/EFL classrooms, it is a reality that its use energizes and motivates the students besides adding spark and fun to learning English.

Traditionally, within the discipline, two categories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are acknowledged—synchronous (SCMC) and asynchronous (ACMC). However, the capabilities of modern communication technologies are blurring the distinction between synchronicity (Kitade, 2013). Email, a primary form of ACMC, is extensively utilized in both professional settings (Pew Research Center, 2014) and educational environments (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Kitade (2013) highlights that email communication from students to professors represents one of the most prevalent forms of ACMC. Additionally, email's popularity stems partly from its ability to function with minimal reliance on internet technologies (Blake & Guillén, 2020, p. 76).

As a teacher, you need to be very careful using chat rooms with students. You cannot always be sure who your students are talking to so if you plan to use a chat room try to find one that has been set up by a reliable organization for use by school students.

Emails

Unlike chat groups, which allow participants to communicate only immediately, and instantly, electronic mail commonly known as e-mails transcend space as well as time and the receiver and sender can at leisure tackle them. Research shows that e-mail is a very valuable vehicle for teaching English (Gonglewski, 2001, Lee, 1998; Warschauer, 1995). Singhal (1997) strongly advocates using emails in the language classroom for they help students develop communicative, and thinking skills, can provide authentic communication foster awareness of both the language learner and the languages they are learning, and are easy to use inside as well as outside the language classroom.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014) among 1,066 full-time and part-time adult workers, email has become the favored method of communication outside official duties, both in professional and academic contexts.

Belisle (1996) while rationalizing the use of emails in English language classrooms states that it familiarizes the students with a communication tool that is vital to their survival in the 21st century for an increasing number of employers require this skill from their employees.

Applied linguists have been examining the influence of technology and migration on language learning more frequently (Canagarajah, 2018; Douglas Fir Group, 2016). They argue that everyday communication, such as email requests, should be viewed in the context of powerful internet communication tools that facilitate connections among increasingly diverse individuals. Despite physical distances staying the same, advancements in technology enable students to interact with their instructors on a personal level, transcending geographical constraints.

Margaret Gonglewski *et al.* (2001) enumerates five pedagogical reasons behind introducing e-mails in the language classroom namely, an extension of language learning time and place, authentic communication, the debate of topics beyond classroom-based ones, student-centered language learning, equal opportunity of participation, quick and cheap. But whatever reasons one may put forward for using e-mails in ESL/EFL classrooms, it is a reality that its use energizes and motivates the students besides adding spark and fun to learning English.

Traditionally, within the discipline, two categories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are acknowledged—synchronous (SCMC) and asynchronous (ACMC). However, the capabilities of modern communication technologies are blurring the distinction between synchronicity (Kitade, 2013). Email, a primary form of ACMC, is extensively utilized in both professional settings (Pew Research Center, 2014) and educational environments (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Kitade (2013) highlights that email communication from students to professors represents one of the most prevalent forms of ACMC. Additionally, email's popularity stems partly from its ability to function with minimal reliance on internet technologies (Blake & Guillén, 2020, p. 76).

In the past many research projects were carried out globally to evaluate the effectiveness of incorporating e-mails in language classrooms. In 1993, a long-distance e-mailing project was run between undergraduate students at Taiwan's National Kaohsiung Normal University (NKNU) and students at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC). The study carried out by Davis (1993) cited in Singhal (1997) shows that this e-mailing project

and the associated activities led to a better understanding of the English language and improved writing skills of the students both in organization and fluency.

In a British Council initiated e-mail project in 1997, two primary and two secondary schools from Singapore collaborated with an equal number and level of schools from Birmingham for two months. This collaborative project which produced a website as an end project with the details of the voyage of a British warship HMS *Illustrious*, on route from the UK to Hong Kong via Singapore made the participating students research various sources of information including CD ROM, encyclopedia, and e-mail to the crew members and their project pals across the border. This project enlisted the technical and financial cooperation of the BC and the active involvement of crew members who read and answered the e-mails sent to them by the participating students. The study carried out by Ho (2000) which was limited to Robin Hood Primary School in Birmingham and Xinmin Primary School in Singapore asserts that the project was a great success and 'The pupils' confidence, awareness and understanding of their own and their correspondents' cultures were enhanced in this intercultural and cross-curricular project'.

A small-scale e-mail project was carried out between 5th graders from a Slovakian school and 3rd graders from a Korean school from 17th May to 26th June 1998. The project, which had non-native speakers of English on both sides, was planned and implemented at Warwick University by Choi as part of her MA. The data collected from the teacher and pupil questionnaires and the letters of the students showed that the project not only helped greatly improve reading skills but also other language skills. They also sharpened their IT skills and took more interest in learning the language.

Emailing Projects in Saint Petersburg State University Russia

E-mailing as an educational tool has been more popular in Europe and other technologically advanced countries like America, Japan, Korea, and Italy. However, the popularity of e-mailing projects as an add-on in different Russian colleges and universities is constantly on the increase and Saint Petersburg State University Russia is on the forefront in this innovative use of computer and Internet and this is evident by the number of online projects this university initiated and participated. One senior teacher of the university won the prestigious ELTeCS Innovation Award, 2004 for one of her online cross-cultural e-mail projects.⁴

In the fall 2002, the Department of Sociology of St. Petersburg State University and the University of Kansas launched an e-mailing project titled "Deepening U.S.-Russian Cultural Understanding through Student E-Mail Dialogue". The project which aimed at deepening the level of cultural awareness and understanding between Russia and America involved undergraduate students into direct correspondence. Students on both sides of the border were motivated by different considerations. Russian students were keen on polishing their English language skills besides getting knowledge about American cultural and political life whereas their American counterparts wanted to understand Russian history and culture. This semester long e-mailing cross-cultural project was a great success and as Nuzha (2007) points out, '.....enabled them to go beyond cultural stereotypes and prejudices and thus understand each other as well as to get new insights into different aspects of life in modern America and Russia.'

Another cross-cultural letter writing project, which was aimed at brushing the students' reading and writing skills, was organized between a group of 2nd year students of the Faculty of Sociology of St. Petersburg University and their Spanish counterparts from Caceres University in November –December 2003. During this e-mailing project students exchanged personal as well as academic information. Shevchenko (2004), the participating Russian teacher sums up the outcomes of the project in the following words, "Students were genuinely interested in the project and enjoyed the process..... They did more writing than 2nd year students normally do and what is most important they were motivated to write".

Emails as an Educational Tool in Pakistani Colleges and Universities

Until now, no serious consideration has been given to the idea of using e-mails as a useful educational tool in Pakistan and indeed very few e-mails cross-national or cross-cultural projects have been carried out here. And regrettably, out of these very few projects, none has published its finding so far. The researcher was lucky enough to get access to a private and unpublished report about a cross-cultural project. Originally initiated as a video conferencing programme, this virtual global linkage between Pakistan, America, Venezuela, and Nepal was soon limited to e-mails and chatting due to repeated technical problems in Pakistan. A total of 10 students were selected from the Department of English by interviewing the interesting candidates in the light of guidelines provided by

⁴ The title of her award winning project is 'Students Writing Across Continents'. For a detailed description of the project and the award, visit <http://britishcouncil.org/learning-eltons.htm>

Professor Barb Steadman of the Ball State University. The participants were to follow a set curriculum about cultural issues and this was to be achieved through a number of activities like lectures/presentations by faculty members of each university through videoconferencing, classroom discussions through videoconferencing, participants' pair discussion through chats and e-mails, and writing of assignments and final collaborative paper. But as Ahmad (2006) points out in his report that when every effort to do video conferencing met with constant failure, alternate ways like e-mails and chatting were adopted to meet the objectives of the programme. But even this limitation did not hinder the success of the project and it did a great deal to clarify the misconceptions in the minds of participating students. According to one participant quoted in the report (Ahmad, 2006).

We read in the newspaper that the attitude of the Americans is not good towards Pakistan and the Muslims. My experience is different: I could not reply to two or three e-mails of my partner as I could not have access to computer for a couple of days, and my American partner got worried that I was sick. This shows that the Americans are caring and are good human beings.

This project also helped to present a true and realistic picture of Pakistan to their American friends. According to another participant as quoted in the same report”

My other class fellows and I felt that there have been misconceptions in the minds of the Americans that Pakistan is a very orthodox country where women are not allowed to get education. We conveyed that Pakistan is a country that is diversified in terms of culture. In a very few cultures of Pakistan, women could not have been encouraged to get education, but generally speaking there is no restriction on women to get education. We can not say that the culture of a very small tribe is the culture of the entire Pakistan. (Ibid)

Ahmad (2006) believes that this virtual link is all the more important in the Pakistani scenario where in the absence of a reading culture, the majority of the population relies on news and information provided by others and consequently spread of information through word of mouth travels very fast here. He claims that the participants of this programme are still in contact with each other and the nature of their relationship shows that they will remain friends in future as well.

Though basically a cultural project, it also improved the language skills of students. One of the participants of this virtual global link, who later joined the cross-cultural letter-writing programme with Russia rationalized her decision to join the latter wrote, "I am eager to participate in this writing venture run by you because I have a very positive experience of such projects... The virtual global link established between Bahauddin Zakaria University and the Ball State University, broadened my world view as well improved my keyboarding and reading and writing skills".

The Context of the Study

During one of the training sessions at Hornby Summer School, Karachi, 2005, one of the Tutors, Lyudmila Kuznetsova mentioned that a couple of her colleagues from the Saint Petersburg State University, Russia were looking for partners for a writing project via Internet. The researchers found the idea very appealing as, unlike the traditional methods of teaching writing where the students would write stories, letters, poems and essays without any communicative purpose in mind, this cross-cultural letter-writing project aimed to create real life situations in which students would write to a real person about real issues and would get feedback. The researchers consented to be part of this cross-cultural letter-writing project and discussed the rudimentary things about the upcoming letter exchange with her during the lunch breaks. After getting back to his native town one of the researchers administered an IELTS⁵ type test focusing on reading and writing modules only to select 40 students to communicate with an equal number of Russian students of almost of the same age group and language level from the Department of Sociology, Saint Petersburg State University Russia. For convenience students were divided into two groups, 15 students with a high level of language proficiency (IELTS level 06-6.5) were placed in group 01 whereas the remaining students with a comparatively low level of proficiency (IELTS level 05) were placed in group 02. The first group was called Svetlana group and the second one was named Elena group after the names of in charge Russian teachers.

The researchers and the participating Russian teachers agreed that students would write to each other once a week for a full semester (of two- and- half months), about themselves, their college/university, city, culture or anything their partner was interested in to get to know about each other. It was agreed that this email exchange project would take off with the first group and the second group would join a little later. After the rules for communication were set, email addresses of our students were exchanged and each Russian from the Svetlana group and Elena group was allotted a pen pal from Pakistan.

Method

The overarching research questions that guided this research were (a) How far the creation of real-life situations contributes to improving the writing skills of students? (b) To what extent projects like cross-cultural

⁵ International English Language Testing System

letter-writing between Pakistan and Russia are successful in broadening the cultural knowledge of students by exposing them to a foreign culture?

In order to find answers to the research questions, triangulation technique was employed. The research tools that were used to gather data were: (1) Semi-structured interviews with the participants, (2) Linguistic and content analysis of participating Pakistani students, and (3) Content analysis of a few of the letters written by Russian participants was undertaken as well to get answer to the second question pertaining to broadening of cultural knowledge

Findings and Discussion

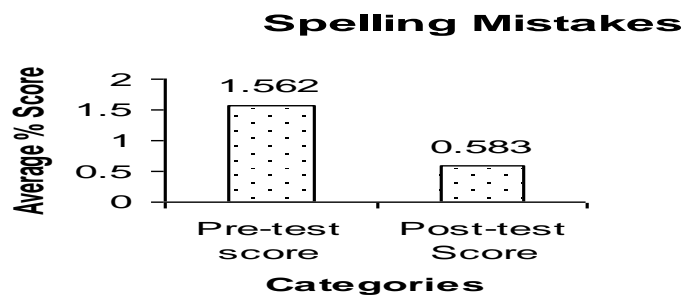
A careful analysis of the letters written by Pakistani shows a marked improvement in their grammar towards the end of the project. The various grammatical and spelling mistakes which were in abundance in the beginning are seen as decreasing gradually with more practice towards the close of this writing program. If we sub categorize grammatical mistakes typical of Pakistani they mainly fall into three groups: Spelling mistakes, Punctuation mistakes and use of Netspeak, and tense mistakes.

Spelling Mistakes

Amongst all the aforementioned categories, spelling mistakes are the most widespread. They seem to be omnipresent in the letters of almost all the participating students in their opening letters. Sometimes these mistakes just seem to be the result of carelessness/and poor keyboarding skills. For instance, a Pakistani student wrote, 'My deare friiend'. The same student used both the words again a little later but this time with the correct spelling. Now it cannot be assumed that the student does not know the spellings of such a common word. What happened was that the student was careless and did not proofread the letter.

Examples of these types can be very easily replicated from the letters. But as the project advanced, the students became more involved and exhibited more responsible behavior and proofread the letters. This is confirmed by the decreasing number of spelling mistakes in the ending letters. A comparison of the average percentage of mistakes in the beginning letters and the ending letters of Pakistani students (as represented by the bar chart below) clearly shows a marked improvement in the spelling mistakes.

Paired *t-test* was applied to get and compare the average percentage of spelling mistakes in the beginning and ending letters of participating Pakistani students. The total number of students whose initial and ending letters was used was 25. The average percentage of spelling mistakes in the beginning letters of students as shown in the figure 1.1 was 1.562 which came down to 0.583. Now statistically this is a considerable improvement. Again keeping in mind the availability of such a short time (one semester) for communication, this is a great progress.



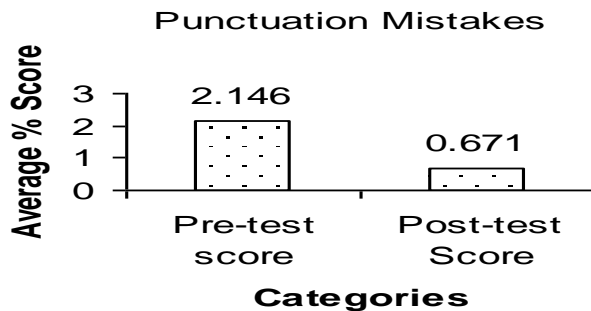
Punctuation Mistakes and Use of Netspeak

Another equally serious issue that the researcher noticed while going through the initial letters of participating Pakistani students is punctuation mistakes and great use of netspeak. In fact most of the participating students at least from Pakistan seem to be using Net speak in their beginning letters. According to Crystal (2001:17) Netspeak is an alternative to 'Netlish', 'weblish', 'Internet language', 'cyberspeak', 'electronic discourse', 'electronic language', 'interactive written discourse', 'computer mediated communication' (CMC), and other cumbersome locutions'. It was only afterwards when their attention was drawn to the fact that they were to write properly and use proper punctuation marks in their letters they became careful and used appropriate punctuation marks. Many students, who did not bother to punctuate their letters in the start, began using it later in the project and the frequency of net speak also began to decrease as shown below.

I fond ur letter very interstng first of all I want 2 give u anw of d quest u askd me i spnd my spr tme rading books listening muic and by shoping.i am also fond on intenert whenever i m free I like 2 chat on fone with my friends.on every Sunday I go to market 4 shopping."(Extract from the letter of a Pakistani student written in the second week of the project.)

Hello! How are you? I got your picture. You are really good looking and the same as I thought in my mind....Your previous mail was very interesting and I got to know about men's and women's day in your country. I was also surprised to know that you celebrate Christmas n 7th January." (Extract from the letter of the same Pakistani student in the second last week of the project.)

Now one very obvious difference in the afore quoted letters is the frequent use of the features of Netspeak like 'u', '2', 'ur', 'spnd', and '4' and the absence of proper punctuation in the first letter is replaced by the use of standard English and proper punctuation marks in the second letter. Now this is great progress within a very short period of a semester. This improvement looks all the more great as the students were participating in this letter-writing venture voluntarily and were not attending any special remedial course on writing. While taking part in this project, they were participating in the usual university activities like attending classes and taking examinations like their other fellows who were not a part of this venture.

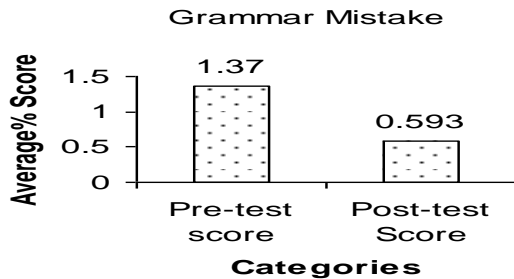


To precisely measure the improvement level in this aspect of participants' writing skill, the paired *t-test* was applied. With the help of this test, the researcher got and compared the average percentage of punctuation mistakes and the use of Netspeak in the beginning and ending letters of participating Pakistani students. Pakistani students committed an average of 2.146% of mistakes in the beginning of the project which fell to an average of 0.671 % towards the end (as represented by the bar chart drawn below) which is a great improvement within a short span of a semester.

Tense Mistakes

Another kind of mistakes which because of the frequency of appearance in the letters of Pakistani students deserves to be categorized under a separate heading is mistakes in the use of tenses. A cursory glimpse at the letters of the participating Pakistani students shows the incorrect use of tenses. Except for looking ugly and betraying the writer's poor command over language, in most cases, they do not seem to hinder the process of communication. Most students committed mistakes in the use of present indefinite tense where they omitted 's' or 'es' with the third person singular. Next, to the present indefinite tense, they mixed present with future.

The comparison of initial and final letters of the Pakistani participants also shows that the tense mistakes which were quite abundant in the beginning fell to a considerable extent with practice. In order to statistically work out the significance of this improvement, paired *t-test* was applied. The following bar chart shows that the tense mistakes which were 1.37 in the beginning came down to 0.593 which is a significant improvement.



Content Analysis of Letters

A careful analysis of the content of the letters reveals that this project not only improved the writing skills of students but bridged the cultural gap between the participants also. It led to a better understanding of each other and fostered a feeling of amity, friendship and sincerity. It also helped to clarify the mist of misunderstanding caused due to non communication and false propaganda. Young ambassadors on both sides wrote to rectify the false image. By mutual discussion they explored differences and commonalities between the two cultures and this led to a better understanding of each other.

The following extract from the letter of a participating Russian student beautifully represents what such cross-cultural letter-writing projects do to bring the nations closer which are separated by geography, culture, language, religion and other dividers.

Does not it sound strange? I always thought about your country as inhabited by fundamentalists ready to go to any extent for the sake of religion. I also thought that majority of Pakistani women, if not all, have no independence and they are living in a sort of hell. But from your letters especially after reading an account of Pakistani marriages and your relation with your family members, I understand life is not that bad there in Pakistan for women. (A Russian student to her key pal.)

In one of her letters, a participating Russian observed, "I often wondered how Pakistani women can live in such pitiable circumstances with zero choice in life. But I now think I was gravely wrong. You portrayed your sex in a better light." (A Russian student to her Pakistani key pal.)

The participating students on both sides realized the importance of the project and thought it to be a vehicle for bridging the gap. In the words of a Russian:

'It was very interesting to get to know about the ideology. Thank you. I begin to feel the use of the project! It is really an exchange of cultures. Do't you think so.'

Not only did the project narrowed the linguistic and cultural gap but it also led them to respect each other culture and religion.

"In fact, your culture is beautiful. I was very glad to learn that Islam is peaceful, because, unfortunately, we mostly learn from newspapers and TV-news about extremists and terrorists..... Russia has a lot of problems with its Southern republic Chechnya. Because of all these awful things in our country and in another Muslim countries, we sometimes think your religion is a bit aggressive. But we also know that it is very wise and offers a lot right things. And I was very glad to learn that it is not really makes you hate people of other religions".

With love,

(A Russian student to her Pakistani key pal)

This broadening of cultural horizon and its concomitant effects were not one-sided only. The participating Pakistani students also seem to take full benefit from it. One Pakistani participant wrote to her key pal,

"First I thought this project to be a waste of time and energy. Now I begin to realize its importance. I think it is a great one.....Through it, I have learned very many things about you and your country and your traditions.Your previous letter about your spare time activities was awesome.

The initial problems which the participants faced, left some of them with the false impression that this was a wastage of time and other resources but soon after the project took off and the students started enjoying writing freely to a real person about the issues they were interested in rather than the laborious exam essays, make them exclaim that it is a 'great' one." Another Pakistani participant wrote to her Russian partner,

"Sweetheart, I have no words to thank you for the giving me the wealth of knowledge about the beautiful and touristy Saint Petersburg Oh dear you are really pretty.....Now I feel that on that side of the border live a wonderful nation sharing some of our culture and traditions and they are loving and caring in their own ways.....With lots of love."

The use of words 'sweetheart', 'beautiful', 'wonderful', 'pretty', 'loving', 'caring' and the ending words 'with lots of love' can not but come from some who is sincere, unbiased and having a clear mind and heart.

This letter-writing project gave ample opportunities to the participants to freely discuss issues of real interest and hence help overcome many religio-cultural stereotypes. In one of the letters a Pakistani participant thanks her pen pal for telling her about a typical day in the life of a man and a woman in Russia and is surprised to know that Christmas is celebrated by certain people there on 7th January.

'Your previous mail was very interesting and I got to know about men's and women's day in your country. I was also surprised to know that you celebrate Christmas n 7th January.' (Extract from the letter a Pakistani student in the second last week of the project.)

Change in Style

A close examination of the letters of Pakistani participating students reveals some change in their style of writing. The earlier letters are written in a bit formal and bookish style which gradually changes into an informal and conversational one with the students getting to know their partners better. This is very important in Pakistani setting as the students usually get practice only in writing formal letters and essays.

Becoming Confident and Autonomous

Another very important thing that I noted while perusing the letters is that it gave the participating students a sense of confidence and the erstwhile shy students became confident about writing skills. This change in their personality was so obvious that they discussed it with their project pals also. A Pakistani student writing to her Russian key pal excellently represents the feelings of her fellows,

"How quickly can people change, I could never imagine. Take my own example. When I look back, I was very nervous and diffident in my class and what made the matters worse was my poor writing skill. Whenever, my teacher assigned any home work or class work which involved any kind of writing, I felt very bad. But now this letter writing experience has made me quite confident. I hope next time my teacher gives any writing, I will enjoy it."

Semi Structured Interviews

Data gained through semi-structured interviews also support the finding that the project honed the writing skills of students. About 80% of the interviewees acknowledged that this project had considerably improved their writing skills whereas the remaining 20% said that they had felt a little improvement in the aforementioned skill. A respondent commented,

"This project gave me a golden opportunity to practice my writing skills in an authentic setting. During this online communication, I wrote a lot. I often wonder why other schools/colleges are not following this interesting method in their institutions."

Another Interviewee remarked,

"When my project pal told me that she proudly shows my letters to all her classmates, I went through my previous letters and spotted many spelling errors. I felt ashamed and decided to write my letters in MS word to avoid grammatical mistake"

The above excerpt clearly shows a great change in the attitude of the participants towards writing. The practice of re-reading letters, spotting of spelling mistakes, feeling of shame and resorting to the strategy of using MS words to avoid grammatical mistakes shows that the students started taking their writings seriously. Now this is very significant given the short duration of the project, and given the fact that the students were not attending any special course on remedial writing.

During the interview nearly 60% students acknowledged that this writing venture has very silently made them an independent learner. Many students found it quite demanding but later got reconciled to it. A student very beautifully sums up this transformation process in the following words,

"This was truly a journey of self discovery. I never knew that the students abroad at my age are independent at home and at school to a considerable extent. I got to know this truth during the writing programme and it was hard to work independently without crutches of teacher's help. But as the time went by I changed into an independent worker."

It can also be seen that 20% respondents reported that this on-line venture did not bring about any change in their behaviour whereas the remaining 20% said they had no idea about his.

During the project, they freely discussed various cultural, social, political, educational, personal and religious issues and enlightened their minds. They not only asked and answered questions about different topics but shared their opinion on very personal matters with net buddies also. Data gained through semi-structured interviews also support the findings. Approximately 90% of the students reported that this project had also broadened their cultural outlook and they got to know a lot about their neighboring country.

Through this project, I got to know about different aspects of the Russian culture like their weddings, burial rites, dresses, films and festivals. I have also come to know the nature of relationship between Russian parents and children. This was very thrilling and interesting to know first hand about the culture of an exotic country like Russia. I now very eagerly look forward to the time when I myself go there and experience it."

(Extract from the interview of a Pakistani student.)

The bold assertion of the respondent that through this project, she got to know 'first hand' about different cultural aspects of the 'exotic' Russia from weddings to the burial rites to the nature of the relationship between parents and children is of special importance in this context given the fact that the participation in this project was purely on a voluntary basis and students were not attending any course on culture or sociology. The use of adjectives like 'thrilling', 'interesting' and 'eagerly' by the respondent serves to highlight her wish to go to Russia and

experience it on the one hand and show how these letter-writing projects can bridge the gaps between the two nations separated by geography, race, religion, language and culture on the other hand.

Another Pakistani participant echoes the same opinion during the interview,

To be honest, prior to the project, I knew very little about Russia or Russian culture compared to my knowledge about America or American culture, which I think is mainly due to the media coverage. But this project gave me a golden opportunity to explore Russian culture in an interesting and innovative way and I got to see it through a Russian. I have got insights into their culture, tradition, way of life, beliefs and much more through this project. Nonetheless; I understood my own while explaining it to my buddy.

By using the phrase 'to be honest', the respondent frankly admits her ignorance of Russian culture as compared to her knowledge about American culture and finds this project as a 'golden opportunity' to learn about Russian culture in 'an interesting and innovative way'. The further acknowledgment that she understood her own culture while explaining it to her buddy shows the remarkable role such projects play in clarifying the mist of misunderstanding. The remaining 10% complained that they could not benefit from it because their partners were very slow in responding.

Conclusion

This cross-cultural letter-writing project between Russia and Pakistan bridged the linguistic as well as cultural gap of the participating students. Linguistic and content analysis of the letters of the participants written at the beginning of this project and towards its end show a marked improvement in the language, style, content, and confidence level of the students. It also shows how this writing venture has been instrumental in clearing the minds and hearts of the participants. Data gained through semi-structured interviews also bear testimony to this finding. ELT managers and language teachers should encourage their students' active involvement in such online projects as they not only provide students authentic opportunities to practice their language skills but help clear the midst of prevailing misunderstanding.

References

- Ahmad, N. (2006) 'Report on virtual global linkage established between the Bahauddin Zakaria University in Pakistan and the Ball State University in the U.S.A.'
- Akifa, I. (2005). An Analysis of the Discourse of Synchronous-CMC with Focus on Conversational Deviations with Reference to Pakistani Sociolinguistic/Cultural Context, Unpublished M.Phil Thesis, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.
- Ali, Y., S. (2004) Experiential learning through a class web page designing project. In Mansoor, Miraj & Tahir (Eds.), *Language policy planning & practice: A South Asian perspective* (pp.244-253) The Aga Khan University & Oxford University Press.
- Belisle, R. (1996). E-mail activities in the ESL writing class. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 2(12), 56-79. Available online at: <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Belisle-Email.html>
- Blake, R., & Guillén, G. (2020). Brave new digital classroom: Technology and foreign language learning (3rd ed.).
- Canagarajah, S. (2018). Materializing 'competence': Perspectives from international STEM scholars. *Modern Language Journal*, 102(2), 1–24.
- Chafe, A. Effective use of the Internet in second language education: Benefits, challenges and guidelines for teachers. Retrieved on 2nd September, 2012 from: http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/~achafe/home_index.html.
- Choi, J. (1999). An account of a pilot key pal project for Korean children. *The internet TESL Journal*, 5(3), 25.
- Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Developing reflective skills of student teachers in the virtual learning environment. *Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 16(2), 107–121.
- Douglas Fir Group, The. (2016). A transdisciplinary approach to SLA in a multilingual world. *Modern Language Journal*, 100, 19–47.
- Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2011). "Please answer me as soon as possible": Pragmatic failure in non-native speakers' e-mail requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 3193–3215.
- Gonglewski, M., Meloni, C., & Brant, J. (2001). Using e-mail in foreign language teaching: Rationale and suggestions. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 7(3), 1-12.

- Ho, C. M. L. (2000). Developing intercultural awareness and writing skills through email exchange. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(12), 2001.
- Kelly, C. (2000) 'Guidelines for designing a good web site for ESL students. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(3), Retrieved November 3, 2012 from: <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Kelly-Guidelines.html>.
- Kitade, K. (2013). Pragmatics of asynchronous computer-mediated communication. In C. A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. doi:10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal0939
- Lea, M. R. (2013). Reclaiming literacies: Competing textual practices in a digital higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(1), 106– 118. <https://doi.org/>
- Lee, K. W. (2000). Energizing the ESL/EFL classroom through Internet activities. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(4), 1-20.
- Muehleisen, V. (1997). Projects using the Internet in college English classes. *The internet TESL journal*, 3(6), 1-7.
- Nuzha, I. (2007) Using emails at university level for cross cultural understandings Unpublished M A Thesis at Saint Petersburg State University, Russia.
- Pew Research Center. (2014). Email rules the workplace (internet & technology). Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/12/30/email-rules-the-workplace/>
- Robertson, C. (2003). Using the internet 1'. Retrieved on 24th April, 2011 from: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/using-internet-1>.
- Rovithis, E., Floros, A., Moustakas, N., Vogklis, K., & Kotsira, L.(2019). Bridging audio and augmented reality towards a new generation of serious audio-only games. *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 17(2), 144–156. <https://doi.org/10.34190/jel.17.2.07>
- Shevchenko, S. (2004). Unpublished Report “Emailing Correspondence between Russian and Spanish students” submitted to the Department of Sociology, Saint. Petersburg, University, Russia.
- Singhal, M. (1997). The Internet and foreign language education: Benefits and challenges. *The internet TESL journal*, 3(6), 107.
- Strakova, Z., & Cimermanova, I. (2018).
- Spante, M., Hashemi, S. S., Lundin, M., & Algers, A.(2018). Digital competence and digital literacy in higher education research: Systematic review of concept use. *Cogent Education*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568308.2018.1525000>
- Warschauer Mark. (1997). The Internet for english teaching: guidelines for teachers. *The Internet TESL Journal*, (3)10, pp.

