

# ELECTRONIC MAIL, AN EXTENSION OF MY SPANISH CLASS BOUNDARIES?

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The primary objective of this investigation was to evaluate whether outside of class e-mail communication with native speakers is beneficial to students studying a foreign language. The independent variable tested differed between the control group and the experimental group, while the dependent variables were agreement mistakes and use of idiomatic expressions. The control group and the experimental group were given a pretest at the beginning and a post-test at the end of the semester. The method consisted of pairing each student in the experimental group with a native speaker from Peru so that they could informally communicate in Spanish. The students in the experimental group had to bring copies of their e-mail letters to obtain class participation points. There were 100 students who were voluntarily involved in this project, 50 American students and 50 Peruvian students. Both groups were university students, male and female, ranging between 19 and 23 years of age, and registered in Elementary Spanish II at a Mid-west University. Partners were assigned randomly. Peruvian students were living in Lima and studying at a local university in Lima. There were 50 students in the control group as well. These students did not participate in e-mail communication. Data were entered and analyzed into a statistical computer program. Results showed that students who participated in this study performed significantly better on the post-test exam than the students who did not participate. The conclusions were that students may improve their accuracy and increase their use of idiomatic expressions by using electronic mail with Spanish native speakers.

This study queries the efficacy of electronic mail as an integrated task in the L2 class at the college level. Is the Internet an essential

component in second language acquisition (SLA) at the turn of the millennium?

At the beginning of the semester a pre-test was given to both the control and the experimental group by the researcher. The instructor gave each of her students in the experimental group an e-mail address from a college student in Peru. Prior to the beginning of the semester, contacts were made with students in two different universities in Lima, Peru. These students sent two lists of e-mail addresses which American students and Peruvian students could use for the purpose of acquainting themselves with each other. This task was voluntary though the students who pursued this activity received more participation points toward their final grade.

These e-mail exchanges were monitored during one semester by asking students to forward to the researcher their letters, both the ones that they sent and the ones they received from Peru. It is worthwhile mentioning that the researcher was also the instructor of both the control and the experimental group.

### **Research questions:**

Do students who have e-mail communication with native speakers of Spanish

1. decrease their subject-verb and article-noun-adjective agreement mistakes?

2. increase their use of idioms?

Julian Linnell stresses the point that negotiation of meaning could stimulate learning and sustain it over time (83-103). Linnell believes that through the native speakers requests for clarification, the non-native speaker monitors his grammatical errors. The use of e-mail refines language skills (Connelos and Oliva 527-534; Sutherland, Anderson and Van Handle 8-10) and the integration of this tool with other more traditional teaching aids, such as textbooks, films and lectures promote learned competence by combining learning and acquisition (Oliva and Pollastrini 551-563).

E-mail is an individualized, interpersonal, interactive, and interchangeable task which allows students to gain active learning experiences beyond the traditional classroom and reach outward beyond

this environment. E-mail application can support the theoretical perspectives and principles of foreign language acquisition and learning (Lee 410-427). Also, the Internet can uphold the hypothesis for proficiency-based instruction suggested by Omaggio-Hadley (1-35). There is greater grammatical accuracy and coherence of ideas because of the frequent contact with native speakers (Kern 457-74). Computer network resources help students improve their language skills in a manner similar to an immersion program or a study abroad course, but are based more heavily on written communication (Oliva and Pollastrini 551-563).

### **Communicative task**

Among the Internet tools, e-mail is perhaps the most popular communication tool in foreign language teaching. The need for more opportunities to use the target language beyond classroom settings has been highly emphasized by empirical researchers (Ellis 34-35; Swain and Lapkin 2-9). E-mail creates a non-threatening atmosphere, communicative opportunity to express, negotiate, and interpret meaning within a pointed context (Sutherland, Anderson and Van Handle 8-10; Beauvois 455-464). Never before has the opportunity for authentic communication with native speakers been so open and easily accessible to students studying a foreign language in a classroom setting (Oliva and Pollastrini 552). Ultimately, the electronic medium provides opportunities to develop oral-like language not likely to be encountered during in-class oral activities for reasons of hashfulness (González-Bueno 55-70).

### **Method**

The method used in the experimental group was electronic mail communication and the instrument to measure the students progress in writing skills in both groups were a pre-test at the beginning of the semester and a post-test at the end. Thus, the independent variable was electronic mail communication with native speakers of Spanish and the dependent variables were subject-verb and article-noun-adjective agreement mistakes and use of idioms. The pre-test as well as the post-test were identical. They focused on agreement exercises and use of idiomatic expressions, since these two elements represent one of the most

crucial problems in students learning Spanish as a foreign language.

Also, to observe the students progress in the experimental group, each participant's first message was compared with his last message. In addition, students in the experimental group filled out an anonymous survey where they gave their opinion about the experiment.

Survey questions:

1. Has this method helped you with your Spanish?
2. Has it motivated you toward studying another course in Spanish?
3. Have you learned any idioms?
4. Have you learned grammar?
5. Have you learned about Hispanic culture?
6. Are you happy about your acquaintance?
7. Has your fluency improved?

In addition to surveys, some students were interviewed and some of their opinions have been quoted in the next section. This experiment was voluntary and most participants forwarded their e-mail messages to their instructor at least once a week. The instructor and researcher kept a copy of all the messages, both the ones sent from Peru and her students' replies. These messages were analyzed at the end of the semester.

## **Results and Discussion**

The research questions were answered quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative results were as follows:

The table below presents the statistical results calculated for both groups (e-mail and control), which were respectively tested with identical pre-tests and post-tests. The results of the T-test are  $P=0.02$ , which indicate that the means of the two groups differ significantly. In other words, results show that students who participated in the e-mail experiment obtained significantly better grades in the posttest than those who did not use this medium of communication with native speakers outside of class.

## Pre-test and Post-test Results

Table 1

Group	Mean	Stdv	n	P
E-mail	75.47	13.88	50	0.02
Control	68.52	15.67	50	

\*P= 0.02 Significant

Results indicate a significant difference at the .05 level= .02, significant.

After qualitatively comparing non-native speakers first e-mails with their corresponding last ones, it could be suggested that this medium of communication was a positive, complimentary tool in the Spanish class.

## Surveys results

An anonymous survey was given to all the non-native speakers participating in this study (e-mail group).

Answer the following questions on a scale from 1 through 5:

1. Has e-mailing Spanish native speakers helped you with your Spanish?

Mean: 4.1                      SD: 1.1

2. Has the use of e-mail in the course motivated you toward Spanish language usage?

Mean: 4.1                      SD: 0.9

3. Have you learned any idiomatic expressions or vocabulary not learned in class?

Mean: 4.0                      SD: 1.2

4. Has it improved your Spanish grammar?

Mean: 3.3                      SD: 1.1

5. Have you learned Hispanic culture through these e-mail exchanges?

Mean: 2.9                      SD: 1.1

6. Are you happy about this new acquaintance?

Mean: 3.9                      SD: 0.8

7. Has your Spanish fluency improved?

Mean: 3.7                      SD: 1.1

## Interviews

Some students in the e-mail experiment were interviewed and they eagerly gave their opinions about the use of e-mail as a complimentary tool in the Spanish class.

### Excerpts:

-It makes it seem like Spanish is a little more real than just a class.

-E-mail is a good way though to get a different type of practice in a second language—its a little more personal than a composition or a paragraph.

-The use of e-mail is an excellent application to learn Spanish or any type of language.

-International friends are made and I was able to learn about a different culture.

-I learned that there is not always a direct translation between languages (I mean word for word).

-Good practice for using grammar. Helps build confidence to speak because one does not worry about pronunciation at the same time of writing e-mail.

-Able to learn idiomatic expressions used in everyday conversation, for example, *tenga un buen día* = have a nice day; *me voy* = I've got to run; *cómo le va* = how you doing? *Fue amor a primera vista cuando conocise a tu esposo* = Was it love at first sight when you met your husband?

-Good practice for reading and comprehension. It allows the professor to focus in on common mistakes.

I took what I learned in class and used it in my

e-mails. I can tell a difference from when I first wrote e-mails. They were short and simple. Now, they are longer, I use different tenses, and I feel more confident.

## Conclusions

At the end of the semester, it was found that students in the experimental group: 1) had significantly improved their use of subject-verb and article-noun-adjective agreement and they had increased their knowledge of idiomatic expressions. The last ones were not commonly presented in class or in the textbook, as shown in the post-test results in

contrast with the control group; 2) were much more motivated toward the Spanish language; 3) devoted more time and effort to other assignments as evidenced by homework and composition grades; 4) the amount of language in their compositions had increased; 5) most students' oral proficiency level climbed up from Novice-High to Intermediate-Mid according to ACTFL proficiency guidelines (1986 the researcher is an ACTFL certified Oral Proficiency tester); 6) comprehensible input had improved; 7) oral and written fluency increased and there was evidence of comprehensible input internalization through communicative activities in the classroom setting.

This paper suggests that electronic mail may provide students with valuable insights into the process of acquiring language and culture.

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