

ESL: bring on the pen pals

Eithne Gallagher describes how writing letters can open the classroom door to new and unknown cultures

Writing letters is a very meaningful way to teach children about language and the cultural conventions that are linked to language usage in our society.

Children enjoy receiving letters from their friends and are enthusiastic about writing responses. They want their letters to look good to their new friends and all of a sudden they grasp what editing, proof reading, and drafting is all about. They have a real sense of audience and a real sense of purpose. Children view letter writing to a person for what it is: something real. It is not a response to a book or a teacher-made work-sheet but rather a vibrant burst of reality that has come into the classroom.

With the arrival of that letter from abroad comes strong motivation on the part of the learner. The reason for doing what they are doing becomes immediately apparent to the child. Children, and especially ESL children, need confidence and motivation to write. They need writing tasks that are relevant to their interests and experiences. These tasks should involve them in writing about things with which they are familiar.

Pen pal writing opens the door of your classroom to the new and unknown cultures of a foreign international school and its students. It therefore provides a framework for teachers to explore and exploit the children's motivation for learning. Children can write with confidence about things they are familiar with and have an authentic purpose for doing so. ESL children can write their first letter of introduction in their mother tongue and a translation of it in English, sending out important signals of how we value their first language as much as English.

Pen pal letters can be used as a vehicle to get children to talk about their culture and traditions. They can also be used to teach and review content. Children have a real reason to share their science, math or social studies project with a pen pal – who will not know anything about it. Too often their audience, the teacher, their partner, their class, know all about what they are going to hear. This is not what happens in real life – we read because we want to find something out. We write because we want to inform.

We now know that if ESL children are to become effective writers they need to develop control over the written genres required by the mainstream curriculum. They

need to understand the ways in which language changes according to context and purpose. Children who are literate in their own language may well be familiar with the specific features of various genres in their own language. However, genre is culture-specific so they need guidance on how to use the various genres in English.

Through pen pal writing children have the opportunity to explore the most common English genres. They can:

- recount
- describe
- report
- explain
- discuss
- argue
- write a procedure
- write a narrative

These texts contain different kinds of information and ideas. They are structured in different ways, use language differently and each text has certain individual features and conforms to certain patterns.

Competent first language users are familiar with these patterns, our ESL learners are not. In order for them to become successful writers, ESL children must have ample opportunity to develop their oral language. Teachers must also teach them the difference between the oral and written forms. Pen pal letters can be used as an authentic stimulus for such activities. They provide a real reason for children to share new knowledge with their peers.

International pen pal letters are a unique way of opening your classroom doors to a wide variety of cultures. They are also a fun way to engage children in exploring the most common English genres as well as offering opportunities for learning and revising mainstream content. Indeed, pen pal exchange between schools is a great deal more than letter writing.

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