

A Framework for Successful Key-pal Programs in Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses foreign language students' interaction with native speakers in light of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation. Legitimate peripheral participation is a way of understanding learning as the process by which newcomers, with increasing participation in a community and engagement with masters, become part of a community of practice. This paper summarizes problems with models of key-pal programs presented in the current literature and proposes a model of online collaboration guided by principles of the proficiency approach to foreign language instruction and the tenets of collaborative learning.

Interaction with native speakers as participation in communities of practice

Language teaching methodologies based on the Communicative Approach place emphasis on interaction, conversation, and language use over the practice and manipulation of grammatical forms (Lightbrown & Spada, 1999). In communicative language learning situations, the learners are conceived of and treated as active and creative agents who acquire the target language through the actual use of the language (Liaw, 1998). Situations where students can use the target language in a meaningful way and where there is an authentic need for exchange of information are therefore essential. Interaction with a real person especially a native speaker who can respond to and stimulate the language learner to use the language as a communication tool would be an extremely important component of this kind of language classroom.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), legitimate peripheral participation concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. In this view, learning is seen as increasing participation in this community, and engagement in practice is a condition for learning. In the foreign language learning community, native speakers are the members closer to the core. Through interaction with these masters, foreign language learners strive for full participation in the community of speakers of the target language.

The basic ideas in legitimate peripheral participation can be summarized as:

- participation is a condition for learning;
- learning is absorbing and being absorbed in the culture of practice;
- mastery is not in the master but the community;
- a teaching curriculum is different from a learning curriculum in that the latter consists of situated opportunities and learning resources viewed from the perspective of the learners.

Key issues in the learning environments for legitimate peripheral participation include:

- access to artifacts/technology and understanding of their significance;
- discourse (how to and when to talk) and practices;
- motivation & evolving sense of identity in the learner.

Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that participation as a way of learning involves absorbing and being absorbed in the culture of practice. Given enough access and time, the apprentices or students gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community. This might include who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives. This idea is perfectly consonant with our intuitive notion that the best way to learn a language is by living among native speakers of the target language. Students of foreign languages, however, suffer from the time and space constraints of a class and a lack of legitimate access to the culture of the speakers of the target language and the practices of this community.

Given that without access to the community of practice and participation in it there cannot be effective learning, foreign settings by definition cannot be effective learning environments. Networked computers and distributed learning tools can help overcome the difficulty by providing additional exposure to native speakers not afforded by the traditional foreign language classroom. Technology can bring students and native speakers together in meaningful, authentic communicative situations beyond the temporal and spatial constraints of a classroom. It affords the creation of collaborative learning environments where native speakers and students practice the target language and share the same goals in cross-cultural learning activities without being in the same temporal and physical space.

Problems with current models of key-pal exchanges

Using networked computers as a way to provide interactive communication has been used extensively and with variable degrees of success in foreign language classrooms since the late 1980s. In the past decade, a mounting body of research has shown that foreign students of many different native languages can benefit from interacting with other foreign language peer groups, native speaker mentors or peers using this technology.

Computer-mediated communication has been applied to a variety of language learning settings. It has been used in EFL (English as a foreign language) classrooms in many different countries around the world (Goodwin, Hamrick & Stewart, 1993; Kaufman, 1998; Liaw, 1998; Liao, 1999; Belisle, 1996), in various ESL classes in the United States (Thombs, 1999; Strever & Newman, 1997; El-Wardi & Johns, 1998; Li, 1998), in French classes (Kern, 1995; Kelm, 1992, Beauvois, 1992), German classes (Chun, 1994), Spanish classes (Leh, 1997), and even to learn Japanese (Lunde, 1990).

Networked computers can provide opportunities for foreign language learners to develop the discourse skills and communicative competence advocated by the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Proficiency Guidelines.

However, there are many problems with current models of language exchange. The four main barriers to the use of computer-mediated communication in a foreign language are:

- lack of response (El-Wardi & Johns, 1998; Warschauer, 1995): the partners are not reliable and do not write regularly (Wegner, 1997 in Blatt, 2000), there are demands of other activities for students' time (El-Wardi & Johns, 1998).
- lack of purpose (Warschauer, 1995): interaction wanes after the initial getting-acquainted period because participants do not know what to say to each other.
- low linguistic level (Blatt, 2000): students write carelessly repeating the same mistakes and without making any progress in their learning of the foreign language.
- logistical difficulties: lack of experience with software and/or typing (El-Wardi & Johns, 1998), difficulty accessing equipment (El-Wardi & Johns, 1998; Sela, 1997), frequent and severe technical problems (Wegner, 1997 in Blatt, 2000).

Lack of response can generally be attributed to a lack of commitment, and the lack of purpose can be explained by a lack of shared goals. Current models of e-mail exchange take the form of one-to-one or many-to-many. The one-to-one model is most prone to the lack of response problems. While the many-to-many model or class-to-class model can diminish the adverse effects of a lack of response, it does not foster the formation of personal bonds which in turn may cause a decrease in motivation to continue corresponding.

In light of the lessons learned from previous e-mail exchange projects, successful online collaboration programs for language learning should be designed in such a way that they:

- minimize the possibility of diminished participation due to a lack of purpose;
- minimize the possibility of diminished participation due to a lack of response;
- maximize the possibility of interaction by providing easily accessible and usable tools in an electronic environment;
- maximize the possibility of interaction by allowing flexibility in the time when it can take place and in the location where it can take place;
- maximize the possibility of substantial-quality interaction by assigning meaningful tasks that elicit interaction and require a high level of linguistic performance.

A model for key-pal programs

The “4 Key-Pals” model is a framework for computer-mediated supplemental language instruction based on principles of situated learning and guided by tenets of collaborative learning. It is appropriate for use with teenage or adult language learners and native speakers of the target language.

According to Dillenbourg (1999), “the words ‘collaborative learning’ describes a situation in which particular forms of interaction among people are expected to occur, which would trigger learning mechanisms, but there is no guarantee that the expected interactions will occur” (p.7). To increase the probability of these interactions to happen, the teacher or designer of the learning environment needs to:

- set up initial conditions;
- over-specify the “collaboration” contract with a scenario based on roles;
- scaffold productive interactions by encompassing interaction rules in the medium;
- monitor and regulate the interactions.

We can, therefore, conclude that the teacher needs to play a crucial role in supporting collaborative work. He or she is not only the designer of the environment but must also act as a mediator of the interactions and as an instructor of strategies to work collaboratively and negotiate meaning in a group. Once the members of the team learn the strategies for effective communication and negotiation and can become stimulators of each other's thinking, the teacher can slowly fade.

The participants in the “4 Key-Pals” model are grouped in teams of four in which two members were native speakers and two are students. The 4-member team model can address the lack of response phenomenon that occurs frequently in e-mail exchanges. The participants correspond for approximately a semester or four months by posting messages on an electronic discussion board accessible on the World Wide Web. Each group shares a virtual space where the messages can only be seen by the members of the group and the teacher. Also, the students have their discussion forum and the native speaker volunteers have theirs. The participants, therefore, engage in solely asynchronous interaction that is conducted at each participant's convenience amounting to approximately 1-2 hours per week. The tone of the messages exchanged is informal and the content of a non-intimate nature.

Collaboration in this model is defined as a situation where the four participants are not merely working together but also have a joint commitment to the common goal of agreeing on a name for the group and producing two pieces of writing. The participants share a joint problem space, the general aim of improving the students' language ability, and the electronic tools they use to correspond. They also share cognitive responsibility for the task but do not share a common temporal or physical space.

According to Palincsar and Herrenkohl (1999), providing a set of tools to guide students is not sufficient to ensure high levels of engagement and interaction. The participants need to be given roles with concomitant rights and responsibilities. The participants of the “4 Key-Pals” program are, therefore, required to collaborate in four activities designed to foster the exchange of cultural information and promote meaningful, authentic communication in the target language. An additional reason for including these activities in the model is to mitigate the effects of a lack of purpose problem that occurs frequently in e-mail exchanges.

The first activity asks the participants to get acquainted with each other through some interview questions. Each participant takes turns interviewing another member of the group so that everyone is required to play the role of interviewer and interviewee. The getting acquainted stage is crucial in achieving convergence, the essence of collaboration. Through a process of repeated displaying, confirming, and repairing shared meanings in the messages posted on the bulletin board, the members of the group can attain intersubjectivity and find common ground. Once enough grounding (the process by which mutual understanding between individuals is constructed and maintained) is achieved, the members of the team can proceed towards collaborative activities that require more demanding cognitive tasks of collaborative writing (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 1999).

The second activity involves making up a name to identify their group. This requires that the participants think creatively, use persuasive techniques, and negotiate to mean online.

The third task involves collaboration in writing a chain story. Each member of the group continues the story by writing a few sentences or paragraphs following what the previous person wrote. The plot of the story takes unexpected turns and becomes a product of their collective imaginations.

The fourth activity asks the participants to collaboratively write a definition essay on the concept of independence. The students are assigned the role of writers and the native speakers act as mentors giving feedback and suggesting corrections. This is the most structured of all the activities with the topic, final product, and roles specified ahead of time. The activity was chosen because collaborative writing is a way to address the low linguistic level of the exchanges. Cassidy (1996) found an apparent correlation between the amount of student writing and the increase in writing proficiency. Students who regularly correspond with their native speaker partners incorporated more feedback into their revisions. Collaborative writing opens a great chance for intercultural learning by raising students' cultural and cross-cultural awareness, contribute to building up an understanding and positive attitude towards the target language and culture. It is a learning process that combines learning by doing and by reflecting and connects cognitive, social, and emotional processes (Blatt, 2000). By having to plan, negotiate to mean, and review, the task becomes goal-directed and the students become more reflective (Blatt, 2000). Communicative freewriting is writing on either a specified or chosen topic without any definite aim in mind. There is no need to evaluate or revise, so students might repeat the same mistakes and produce written material without making any progress in language learning or in understanding their partner. Collaborative writing, on the other hand, forces teams of students to work jointly on a task and meet a deadline (Blatt, 2000).

Conclusion

This paper presented key-pal programs in foreign language instruction as an example of distributed instruction and provided a framework for computer-mediated supplemental language instruction based on principles of situated learning and guided by tenets of collaborative learning. It proposed that a model combining 4-member teams and collaborative activities can address the problems of lack of response and lack of purpose that current models of computer-mediated language exchange face without sacrificing the personal touch of one-to-one partnerships.

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