



IS ANYONE OUT THERE? INTERNATIONAL POSTCARD EXCHANGE AS A VENUE TO INCREASE STUDENT USE OF L2 LANGUAGE

Pamila J. Florea

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea

Korean students don't often have the real life experience that a second language can offer them. Some students have been participating in student exchange programs, but this is not feasible for a majority of them. Still, students need to feel that they are utilizing real language with a real purpose. What better way to do that than to encourage international postcard exchange with people from all over the world for those students who are unable to leave their country for various reasons? The researcher is using an online venue to encourage (www.postcrossing.com) students to write and receive short letters in English from native speakers (postcrossers) the world over. Not only does this allow the students the opportunity to practice writing what they want to say, but it also opens the world to them. Using postcards as a window to the world, the researcher has been able to show students in a very real way the use of English with other people. And it's fun! The students enjoy the process and share the cards received, thus increasing the broadening of their horizons exponentially.

Keywords: Postcard exchange, Pen pal, Postcrossing.com, International.

INTRODUCTION

In Korea, English has been taught to children as a part of the official curriculum since 1997 (Cho, 2004). But there are a number of difficulties with learning the language, cultural and pragmatic. Because of the hold of Confucianism philosophy and the rote memorization that characterizes it, students are often not able to express themselves. This philosophy is the basis for the Korean educational system (Robertson, 2002). Students are often unwilling to participate in class discussions as pointed out by Zou (2004).

This reticence in EFL classrooms has been identified as a frequent byproduct of cultural beliefs that include maintaining social hierarchy and face value (Liu, 2005; Cortazzi and Jin, 1996) which can be frustrating for the teacher and crippling for the student. Brown (1994) comments on the effects of this inhibition stating that learners view making mistakes as a threat to their egos. Finally, students are not expected to spontaneously produce unique information and are thus low in their competence of productive skills as reported by Rusina (2009).

This combination makes spontaneous language usage in a classroom a near impossible feat at times for teachers looking to inspire their Korean students. Despite the efforts of the government and the school system, parents have taken the matter into their own hands.

Many Korean students have begun living abroad. According to a study by the Korean Educational Development Institute, reported by Ly (2008), in 2003 and 2004, more than 20,000

students left Korea to participate in early study abroad programs. Just 3 years earlier, she had reported in the *Washington Post* that in 2000 4,400 children left to study abroad and in 2002 that number had risen to 10,000 (2005).

What of the other students? They don't have the real world experience that a second language can offer them. The question then arises how to make the language more real for these students? To encourage productive use of language, spontaneous writing with native speakers can be an option. Students have the opportunity to interact with the language material in a very real way using their own thoughts and real life situations. By encouraging students to write and receive short letters in English from native speakers as well as people learning the language, they can meet that guideline and expand their horizons within the global community.

THE PLAN

In 2010, as part of teaching a Practical English 1 class, the researcher required students to complete a spontaneous writing assignment in the form of writing a postcard to a real person from the website www.postcrossing.com, a site the teacher had been a member of for several years. Each student was to read a postcard received by the teacher, explain what it said, find the postcrosser's profile, read and show understanding of it, and then write a responding note to the person. As part of the process, the teacher matched the students with postcards based on the students' majors, interests, and abilities whenever possible.

THE PROCESS

Students were introduced to the website www.postcrossing.com and given a short tutorial on how to use it. They were shown the following from the teacher's account:

- teacher's profile with information of types of postcards she likes.
- postcrossing mailbox with the number of cards sent and received
- postcards wall with pictures of cards noted as "favorites"
- map showing where cards had been sent to and received from

From this, the students noted that the teacher's profile matched with what they knew of her (likes poetry and maps, enjoys art, travels a lot). A short discussion period followed with students making comments about the Korean cards as well as cards from artists that were placed on the teacher's wall and the ones they recognized. They expressed surprise to see the number of cards sent and received from around the world. "Each line is a postcard from somebody?" one student asked. The teacher explained that red lines represented postcards sent by her, the blue lines represented postcards received by her.

Next each student was given a copy of the postcard as well as the actual card they would be working with. They could write on the paper, underlining words they didn't know, highlighting interesting things about the person, and making notes for their own postcards. Many practiced writing on the page before writing the actual card – also provided by the teacher.

The next step was to read the postcrosser's profile. This was done both in class and outside of class. Students helped each other by noticing different things about the postcrosser. (She knows 3 languages, he used to live in Malaysia, etc.). Students made notes from this for writing their response card.

Finally, they wrote postcards to the postcrossers. The teacher did not grade them on content but gave only a few guidelines. Because these postcards would be with actual people in mind who read and write English, students were encouraged to be creative and to use the material presented in the profiles of the postcrossers.

The instructions to the students for this portion of the task included the following:

- Say you are an English student in Pamila's class (so the postcrosser knows how they got the person's name).
- Write something about the postcrosser based on the person's profile or the postcard received.
- Follow good letter writing format.

The instructions also included suggestions that they write the other person's name in Korean. If they knew the native language of the postcrosser, they were permitted to write a sentence or two in that language.

OBSERVATIONS

This very real task is in line with the findings of Guariento and Morley (2001) who noted the importance of using authentic materials to maintain and increase learner motivation. As they suggest, the students were given the feeling of learning the "real" language. It was real to them because it was a real postcard with an actual international stamp written by a real person. They were responding to words from someone else. Questions came up during the course of the assignment. What is "...X...?" a student asked and was directed to the internet from which he learned that the X was in fact a city in Finland. Another student asked how old the person was and went on a hunt for that information. He found the person's profile, followed the link to the postcrosser's blog, and learned that the woman had been a food critic for more than 20 years. He was able to deduce an age range for her. Another student had the postcard of a small child. She realized that she needed to keep her words and grammar structure very simple because of that.

Comments that were on the postcards themselves included:

"I wanna go to ur town."

"My favorit Malaysia food also sate. I'm crazy about sate."

"I like cats too. We have twenty cats."

"I want to be your friend."

"I want to go to (your) village... I have so much interest in China. Actually, my major is Chinese."

By creating an open task, which had the purpose of facilitating language learning as suggested by Breen (1987 p. 23), the students were able to interact with the real language and were motivated to continue.

Carl Rogers, who coined the term, taught that unconditional positive regard and the relationship between the student and the teacher is of paramount importance to facilitate significant learning in creating an environment in which students not only enjoy learning but want to learn more. (Rogers, 1969; 1983). Because the students could not fail as long as they

actually wrote something – regardless of whether it was written correctly – went far in establishing success for the students. They stated their interest in continuing with pen pals, and their pleasure at being able to join with the postcrosser about similar interests or interest in the culture.

One student in particular enjoyed finding similarities. She wrote, “I like African cultures too... I choose this postcard with cute cat because you like animals! I have 1 parrot. His name is Yangoo. He is very small and cute. (Sometimes he bites my hand, it hurts me.)

At the end of the semester, all 15 students related to the teacher through an anonymous questionnaire and anecdotally that they had liked the project quite a lot. Only one said s/he liked it only a “little bit.” Some specific responses were:

“I will remember forever”

“I want to receive an answer!”

“It was GREAT. Because my hobby is having penpals.”

SHORTCOMINGS

This paper did not discuss certain concerns about the method – students were not able to actually have pen pals or receive cards. The time frame (a three week course) did not allow for that from a practical standpoint. However, they were able to respond to previously received cards, but the question remains of how long would they continue in the project if it were in a regular 16 week class.

CONCLUSION

The use of realia created by others was a powerful tool in showing students how global the English language is as well as showing future possibilities for them. Not only did students enjoy the exercise, but they also wanted it to continue in the form of pen-pals. By matching the students to postcrossers based on their interests and skill level, the teacher was able to create a welcoming and interesting environment for the students. It sparked an interest in continued spontaneous expression of the L2.

REFERENCES

1. Breen, M. (1987). Learner contributions to task design. In C. Candlin and D. Murphy (eds.) *Language Learning Tasks*. Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall.
2. Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching, 3rd edition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents Prentice Hall.
3. Cho, B. (2004). Issues Concerning Korean Learners of English: English Education in *Korea and Some Common Difficulties of Korean Students*. The East Asian Learner Vol. 1 (2) Nov. 2004 Retrieved from: <http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/education/eal/eal-1-2/vol1-2/vol1-no2-koreanlearnersofenglish.pdf>
4. Cortazzi, M & Jin, L. (1996). Cultures of learning: Language classrooms in China. In H. Coleman (Ed.). *Society and the language classroom* (pp. 169-206). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Guarentio, W. and Morley, J. (2001). Text and task authenticity in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 55(4), 347-359.

6. Liu, M. (2005). Causes of reticence in EFL classrooms: A study of Chinese university students. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching* 1 (2)
7. Ly, P. (2008). The Early Study Abroad Trend. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, May 15, 2008.
8. Ly, P. (2005). A Wrenching Choice. *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2005.
9. Robertson, P (2002) The Pervading Influence of Neo- Confucianism on the Korean Education System *Asian EFL Journal*, 4 (2) Article 1
10. Rogers, C. and Freiberg, H. J. (1969; 1983) *Freedom to Learn* (3rd edn.), New York: Merrill.
11. Rusina, V. (2009). Catering for the Specific Needs of Elementary Level Korean Learners *in the Australian ELICOS Sector – A Case Study of a School in Sydney*. Retrieved from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta_Nov_09_vr.php
12. Student Postcards, Practical English 1, Winter Intensive course, 2010-2011. Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Yong-in South Korea.
13. Student Anonymous Questionnaires, Practical English 1, Winter Intensive course, 2010-2011. Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Yong-in South Korea. Website, www.postcrossing.com
14. Zou, M. (2004). EFL learners' perceptions of in-class relationships and their voluntary responses. In Y. Gao (Ed.), *The social psychology of English learning by Chinese college students* (pp. 149-167). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.