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Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera.

Effect of ePals Practices on EFL Writing: An Action Research Study with Ecuadorian Students.

Magíster en Lingüística Aplicada a la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera.

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Resumen:

La presente investigación acción estudió prácticas de intercambio de correspondencia de estudiantes ecuatorianos y su efecto en la escritura del inglés como lengua extranjera. Los participantes del estudio fueron veintidós estudiantes de secundaria quienes intercambiaron cartas con estudiantes americanos por un período de cuatro meses. La recolección y análisis de datos fue guiada por un método mixto. Los datos cuantitativos surgieron de un examen de escritura antes y después de la intervención mientras que los datos cualitativos se obtuvieron de una entrevista con un grupo focal. Los resultados describen el incremento de puntajes en aspectos de la escritura como vocabulario, gramática y precisión. Por otro lado, no se reporta incremento en el uso correcto de formato y convenciones de textos. La entrevista destacó la actitud de los participantes hacia el proyecto, los aspectos que hicieron la experiencia importante y la influencia en la producción escrita y motivación. Los resultados en general sugieren que las prácticas de intercambio de correspondencia ofrecen amplias oportunidades de desarrollo de las destrezas escritas y el aprendizaje intercultural.

Palabras claves: intercambio de correspondencia, interculturalidad, escritura, motivación.



Abstract:

This action research studied the effect of ePals practices on EFL writing of Ecuadorian students. Twenty-two junior high school students exchanged letters with American students over a four-month period. A mixed method was used for data collection and analysis. Quantitative data from pre and post writing tests and qualitative data from focal participants' interviews were analyzed. Results revealed that after the intervention participants improved scores in vocabulary, grammar and accuracy. However, there was not a significant impact on the correct use of format and conventions of texts. Interviews with focal participants reported attitudes towards the collaboration and highlighted some aspects that made the experience valuable for participants and how it affected their writing performance and motivation. Results suggested that ePals practices offer ample opportunities for skills development and intercultural learning.

Keywords: email exchange, ePals, interculturality, writing, motivation



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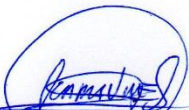
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Introduction

Writing is considered to be the most difficult skill to master for native speakers as well as for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Kitchakarn, 2014). For this reason, writing instructors have explored different ways to assist learners in the development of the skill. In recent years the use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in writing instruction has been implemented due to the rapid advance of telecommunications technology (Sasaki & Takeuchi, 2010) which makes it accessible (Li & Zhu, 2013). Computer mediated communication (CMC), defined as communication between human beings via the instrumentality of computers (Herring as cited in Fisher, Evans and Esch, 2004) include different modes such as blogs, discussion boards or wikis, chat, web-based conferencing, emails. CMC tools, when used in language classrooms, provide students with opportunities for interaction and learning in an online environment (Repman, 2005).

Saadi and Saada (2015) conducted research with 29 Iranian students with whom computers software was used to provide electronic feedback on their writing. Results demonstrated that students gained higher scores in structure, punctuation and vocabulary. Yamac and Ulusoy (2017) reported a study with 26 children who were part of an eight-week program with digital storytelling. Results showed a great advance in children's ideas, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions in terms of writing quality. Kitchakarn (2014) analyzed effects of blogging on 35 Thai students who participated in a 12 week project. Positive effect was reported as participants improved their writing abilities because their motivation for writing increased and they spent more time revising before publishing their texts. Awada (2016) reported the use of WhatsApp application to mediate critique essay instruction with 52 university Arab students. Results revealed that WhatsApp tool was useful to improve writing proficiency since students reported to have worked in an anxiety reduced atmosphere. Similarly, Alsamadani (2018), who implemented blogging in writing instruction with 48 Saudi undergraduates over 14 weeks, agreed with previous results due to notable outcomes in content development, language mechanics, style, voice, word choice and other writing sub-skills observed in participants' writing.

Later research has explored CMC as a mean of written social interaction (Kern, 2006). In this context Google docs and wikis applications have allowed collaborative task negotiation, text co-construction, revision and edition in the writing process (Li, 2018). Besides, Ebadi and Rahimi (2019) in a study with three EFL Iranian university students confirmed that the use of Google Docs



was an effective medium of instruction since participants improved their academic writing in terms of task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexicon, and grammatical range and accuracy.

In regard to wikis that have been another popular CMC tool, Kessler (2009) addressed its inclusion with pre service teachers from a Mexican university who participated in an online content-based course over 16 weeks. Conclusions asserted that the creation of an autonomous environment with little or no instructor's participation provided opportunities for practice, and thus improvement of their language skills. Another wiki project with eight American Spanish majors who enrolled in an advanced Spanish writing course is described by Elola (2010). In his project, the analysis focused on comparison of individual and collaborative writing; interaction of participants and their perceptions of writing modes. Results confirmed that collaborative writing encourages students to pay more attention to grammatical accuracy; thus their overall quality of work was improved. In 2011, Chao and Lo reported the use of wikis with 51 Taiwanese students who were part of a five-week project which derived in development of writing skills as participants claimed to have benefited from peer assistance and self-regulation. Likewise, Chen and Brown (2012) confirmed the potential of wikis to foster writing in regard to vocabulary and sentence complexity. A group of six English learners, who participated in a 16-week study, confirmed that wikis motivated them to improve their written production. Finally, Li and Zhu (2013) in a study with nine college Chinese university students, whose interactions in wiki spaces over five weeks were analyzed, found wikis provide a positive learning experience. Evidently, CMC allows collaborative learning and encourages responsibility for learning because students are given a sense of control on task (Chao & Lo, 2011). Collaborative writing tasks described highlighted that to have real audience was one of the reasons for writing improvement because readers in such studies were participants' peers or instructors. However, one of the main benefits of CMC is that students can have access to native speakers of the target language (Fisher et al., 2004) and it can result in improvement of more specific areas of writing (Kessler, 2009).

Collaboration or exchange projects with native speakers apply online interaction to develop communication skills between two or more classrooms of language learners, generally from different countries (Kern, 2006; O'Dowd, 2013). Email exchanges, also known like KeyPal or ePal exchanges, have been the most popular tool for language teaching and learning through collaboration (Shang, 2007). Studies confirmed that email exchanges fostered communication skills; especially writing because the interactions are of written nature (Bourques, 2006; Edasawa



and Kabata, 2007; Jou, Chao and Wu, 2007). Exchanges have resulted in development of different areas of writing. Edasawa and Kabata (2007) observed that participants' increased vocabulary because they were able to use new expressions from their partner's messages. Sasaki and Takeuchi (2010) agreed with this finding, however, they add that learning happens not only by imitation but because of noticing. With regard to sentence writing, Li (2000), Shang (2007), and Schenker (2016) informed of important improvements on participants' sentence and syntactic complexity. They confirmed that such improvement is related to the purpose of the task. In their study, participants showed excitement for responding to their partners rather than doing an assigned task. Therefore, the need for communication encouraged participants to find ways to improve their sentence writing (Sasaki & Takeuchi, 2010). According to Schenker (2016), writing improvement is the result of high motivation participants have to interact with real readers. Besides, participants of this kind of projects gain confidence in writing when they learn that errors do not affect comprehension (Patton, Hirano & Garret 2017). Using language in real life situations promotes positive learning environments and even facilitates discussion beyond classroom, as students see learning more appealing, more interesting, fun and enjoyable (Patton et al., 2017; Shang, 2007; Vinagre 2007).

As a related effect, participants from this kind of projects have reported important gains in intercultural learning. Whether projects had a cultural purpose or not, learners developed awareness of the other culture (Bohinski & Leventhal, 2015; Bourques, 2006; Fedderholdt, 2001; Fisher et al., 2007; Korycinski, 2001; Patton et al., 2017).

E-mail exchanges have also reported to be beneficial for instructors. Patton et al. (2017) assured that instructors praised the positive effect the exchange had on their awareness of language challenges in terms of linguistic features of learners' utterances. Furthermore, as for the professional gains for teachers, who coordinated the projects, the exchange taught them how to interact with a native speaker in a professional context (Jou et al., 2007).

In the Ecuadorian context, CMC modes used in English classes have rarely been reported. In higher education setting, Intriago, Villafuerte, Jaramillo, Lema and Echeverria (2006) reported an action research study developed with Ecuadorian university students who used Google apps and Literature Circles to create virtual learning environments. The study confirmed that students advanced their English proficiency level in terms of listening and speaking. Concerning



collaboration, Sevy and Chroman (2019) reported on a study conducted with Ecuadorian university students where video chat was used to develop oral skills. Participants found the project motivating and they showed important improvement. Both projects described the use of CMC tools with English learners to promote learning in other areas than writing.

Rojas, Villafuerte and Soto (2017) conducted research with Ecuadorian university students to develop written production. The study concluded that writing development is closely linked to students' motivation which can be achieved with the use of collaborative tasks and technological means. To add support to the need for CMC tools inclusion in EFL class, Cirocki, Soto, Encalada and Cuenca (2019) who explored the use of motivational strategies in Ecuadorian secondary context, depicted the need to promote learner's autonomy and intrinsic motivation suggesting the use of technology and collaborative projects in class.

Literature has pointed out the effectiveness of CMC modes on learning (Fisher et al., 2004) and ePals have been described as popular in writing class due to its importance in language learning and their potential to enhance international perspective or intercultural understanding (Fisher et al., 2004; Bourques, 2006; Patton et al., 2017, Korycinski, 2001; Fedderholdt, 2001; Bohinski and Leventhal, 2015; Kern, 2006). Besides, ePals are of easy access to implement (Bourques, 2006), and according to administrators of ePals site, there are over 130,000 classes collaborating around the world (O'Dowd, 2013). Previous research has also demonstrated that in the Ecuadorian context there is not report of studies that have implemented this CMC tool in in EFL class.

The present study describes a collaboration project of Ecuadorian 11 graders who corresponded with American ePals. The aim of the study was to analyze the effect of ePals practices on participants' writing skills. This study can contribute to research on secondary settings where it has been uncommon (Fisher et al., 2004; Li, 2018). Furthermore, this research could provide insights to apply in EFL class and address the need for CMC incorporation in language classes to influence students' motivation in Ecuadorian secondary institutions (Cirocki et al., 2019). The following research question and objectives guided the development of this research.

What is the effect of ePals practices on EFL writing skills in the eleven graders at an Ecuadorian High School?



The objective of the study is:

To analyze the effect of ePals practices on EFL writing skills in eleven graders. Calasanz High School.

Specific objectives

- a. To determine students' writing level through a pre-treatment test.
- b. To involve students in an ePals project using Google Drive for the correspondence exchanges.
- c. To determine the influence of ePals practices by comparing pre and post-test results and data from interviews of focus group.

Methodology

Research design

This is an action-research study. It was led by the researcher and arose as a reflection of the researcher's own teaching practice; information was systematically collected and analyzed to make decisions for better future practice (Jhonson as cited in Mertler, 2017). Following a mixed method approach the researcher explained the problem including both qualitative and quantitative data. Mixed method allows a better understanding of the impact of intervention by combining experimental results and perceptions of participants (Creswell, 2014).

Context and participants

The participants of this study were 22 eleven graders, 16 female and six male students, at a High School in Loja-Ecuador. They were part of the International Baccalaureate program (IB) offered by the institution. They were all Spanish native speakers and ranged between low and intermediate level as determined by IB admission test administered at the beginning of 2017-2018 school year. Students were all EFL learners and have studied English for at least three years.

The intervention.

Before this intervention, the researcher had already implemented an email exchange program in 2016, with no research purpose. For this study, the researcher had the cooperation of an



American teacher from Illinois Lutheran School. The researcher and the American teacher agreed to do the exchange for four months which was the time before American summer break. Initially the researcher explained the project to her school principal, then the researcher met with parents of participants to explain the exchange and have consent letters signed as suggested by Creswell (2012). Then, students were given detailed information about ePals and the way they would exchange correspondence. The researcher and the American teacher paired students to make sure everybody had a partner thus reduce the possibility of discouragement for not finding one (Nozawa, 2002). Participants were administered a writing pre-test before the exchange which started in October 2018. A total of 10 letters about different topics were written. The first letter of both Ecuadorian and American students was a self-introduction, and then topics included family, sports, food, celebrations, free time activities, etc. Students wrote letters during class time, they sent them to the teacher through Edmodo or Gmail. The researcher then downloaded all the letters and shared with the American teacher through Google drive. To ensure all students receive correspondence, both teachers shared the letters only when all students had submitted theirs. Whenever American students sent their letters, they were printed and handed in students to read and respond during class time.

The researcher and the American teacher decided to do all the logistics in the exchange to keep participants from having personal interaction with their ePals in order to protect their privacy and prevent students from translating letters. At the end of the intervention, teachers had a Skype call where students met. Students quickly introduced themselves and greeted their ePals. Some students maintained communication with their ePals, through different social networks after the project finished.

Data collection

Quantitative data

To determine students' writing performance before and after the intervention, students were administered a pre and post writing test. The test comprised two sections, A and B. For both sections, students had to choose, from a list of three, one task to write. The number of words instructed was between 70 and 150 words. For both tasks, students had to decide the appropriate text type according to the task instruction. Options of type of texts in section A were personal or professional texts such as diary, social media post, or text message while in section B, they were mass-media texts as advertisement, letter, or speech (International Baccalaureate, 2017). Section A and B were scored over 15 points each. The rubric to score the tests had three criteria: Criterion



A, *language*, assessed how successfully the candidate commanded written language; explicitly, the extent to which vocabulary and grammar structures varied and how language accuracy contributed to effective communication. Criterion B, *message*, evaluated to what extent the candidate fulfilled the tasks, focusing on the relevance and development of ideas, and the way clarity and organization of ideas contributed to the successful delivery of the message. Finally, criterion C, *conceptual understanding*, measured appropriateness of text type, register and tone, and the incorporation of conventions of the chosen text type (International Baccalaureate, 2018). Students had two periods of 45 minutes to answer the test.

Qualitative data

To learn students' perceptions about ePals project, the researcher used an online randomizer to select eight focal participants for a semi-structured interview which lasted 30 minutes. The interview was conducted in Spanish to avoid the possibility that language barriers might have kept students from expressing their opinions (Mackey & Gass, 2005). First, the researcher informed students about the objective of the interview, then she conducted a conversation where guiding questions were used. The questions were about their general impressions of the study, areas students felt they improved; their opinion about authentic audience and whether they continued in touch with their ePals. Questions used were those suggested in Shang (2007).

Data processing.

The pre and post-test were scored by an IB teacher to avoid bias. Results were organized in an Excel spreadsheet. On the other hand, the interview with the focal participants was transcribed and translated which was validated by a bilingual colleague. Names of participants were not included. Participants were tagged as student 1, student 2, and so forth.

Quantitative Analysis

The data was analyzed in SPSS 22 software. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used. Descriptive statistics are expressed in Means (\bar{x}) and Standard deviations (SD). Inferential statistics used a non-parametric Wilcoxon test to compare matched pairs considering that the difference, between the posttest and pretest, has non-normal distribution (Field, 2013). Finally, in the case of difference, Cohen's *d* effect size was used to describe the impact of the program. When Cohen's *d* is around 0.01 it means that the effect was very small, 0.20 means small, 0.50 means medium, 0.80 means large, 1.20 means very large, and 2.0 means huge (Sawilowsky, 2009).

Qualitative analysis

For the analysis of qualitative data, the hermeneutic software Atlas ti 7 (Woolf & Silver, 2017) was used. The software facilitated the creation of a semantic diagram that summarizes, visually, the categories in a family of codes which will be referred as categories to facilitate understanding. Categories were created around the central one of the analysis: ePals practices. They emerged from recurrent ideas from the focal participants of the interview. Ideas were condensed into quotes which were classified into six categories, namely: communication strategies, new learning, interculturality, limitations, interaction and keeping in touch. The weight of each category is illustrated with a number of citations and the number of connections the category has with others.

Results

Written test

Pretest

The pre-test presented information about the writing proficiency level before the intervention. In Table 1, the results express the mean and standard deviation of the students' performance.

Table 1

Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard deviation (SD) of the writing pretest.

	TASK A		TASK B	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Criterion A: Language (6 p)	4.14	1.55	3.73	1.61
Criterion B: Message (6 p)	4.05	2.08	3.77	2.11
Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.86	0.99	1.64	1.09
TOTAL (15 p)	10.05	4.38	9.14	4.61

Results in table 1 show that students performed similarly in both tasks. A little difference is observed in task A which probably means that for students it was easier to write a personal or professional text. Instructions for task A were related to personal topics such as offering concert tickets to a friend or reflecting and posting about daily incidents. Text types suggested for task A were blog, invitation or diary. For task B students were instructed to report about job incidents, promote charity activities and offer music lessons using an appropriate text type such as advertisement, letter or speech accordingly.



Both tasks were scored considering three criteria and total scores were over 15.

Post-test

The post-test reflects results of students' writing proficiency level after the project of exchanging letters. Table 2 presents means and standard deviation of students' writing performance.

Table 2

Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard deviation (SD) of writing posttest.

CRITERIA	TASK A		TASK B	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Criterion A: Language (6 p)	4.64	1.22	4.41	1.10
Criterion B: Message (6 p)	4.50	1.47	4.27	1.70
Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.96	0.90	1.68	0.89
TOTAL (15 p)	11.09	3.32	10.36	3.47

The means of students' performance increased slightly in Task A and Task B. In task A, students wrote about attending a music festival, describing holidays or reflecting on sports competition. While in task B students were instructed to write applying for a job, reporting a volunteering experience or giving advice for exams success. Results keep coherence with results of pre test where higher scores were observed in task A. Total sums of three criteria were 11.09 for task A and 10.36 points for task B.

Differences between pre and posttest

Table 3 reveals the differences between the pre and posttest.

Table 3

Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard deviation (SD) of the differences between the writing pre and posttest.

		Pretest		Posttest		Difference		P
		\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	
TASK A	Criterion A: Language (6 p)	4.14	1.55	4.64	1.22	0.50	0.91	0.020*
	Criterion B: Message (6 p)	4.05	2.08	4.50	1.47	0.45	1.22	0.068
	Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.86	0.99	1.96	0.90	0.09	0.81	0.593
	TOTAL (15 p)	10.05	4.38	11.09	3.32	1.05	2.26	0.064
TASK B	Criterion A: Language (6 p)	3.73	1.61	4.41	1.10	0.68	1.04	0.005*
	Criterion B: Message (6 p)	3.77	2.11	4.27	1.70	0.50	1.34	0.103
	Criterion C: Conceptual (3 p)	1.64	1.09	1.68	0.89	0.05	0.84	0.796
	TOTAL (15 p)	9.14	4.61	10.36	3.47	1.23	2.52	0.046*
TOTAL		19.18	8.77	21.45	6.55	2.27	4.06	0.032*



Note: *There is a significant difference between pretest and posttest because p value is less than 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$).

There was a significant difference in Task A. It occurred in Criterion A of language, which increased 0.5 points after the intervention ($z = -2.326$, $p = 0.020$, Cohen's $d = 0.35$). According to Cohen's d the significant difference represents a small effect size. In Task B, there was also a significant difference in Criterion A which increased 0.68 points after the intervention ($z = -2.28$, $p = 0.005$, Cohen's $d = 0.48$). It means that the program had a medium effect size. Increase of scores in the language criterion implies students improved their command of written language.

In Task B there is a significant difference in the sum of the three criteria. The total increase is 1.23 points ($z = -2.828$, $p = -1.993$, Cohen's $d = 0.29$) which means that the magnitude of the effect was small. The general result, sum of Task A and Task B, likewise reported a significant difference of 2.53 points ($z = 2.149$, $p = 0.032$, Cohen's $d = 0.28$), which represents a medium effect size.

Interview with focal participants

Qualitative data which resulted from a semi-structured interview with focal participants served to contrast quantitative results. After a first analysis of students' impressions of the study, six categories emerged.

The first category, *communication strategies* groups the strategies students used to correspond with their American peers. Second category, *new learning*, gathers those testimonies according to which students have learned new things related to their academic training. Another category is *interculturality* which describes the cultural gains students got. The fourth category is *limitations* which refers to the organizational and psychological aspects that prevented good communication in the correspondence. There is a relationship of belonging between *interculturality* and *interaction*, which is the fifth category and finally the communication students kept after the exchange finished is described in *keep in touch* category.

In the illustration, red arrows depict the relationship sub categories have with the main category while black arrows show the relationship subcategories have among them. Relationships are expressed in signs: = is associated with, [] is part of, => is cause of, < > contradicts, isa = is a (Bonilla and López, 2016). Next to each sub category there are numbers in brackets. The number on the left represents recurrent citations and the number on the right give account of the relationships the sub category has with other sub categories.

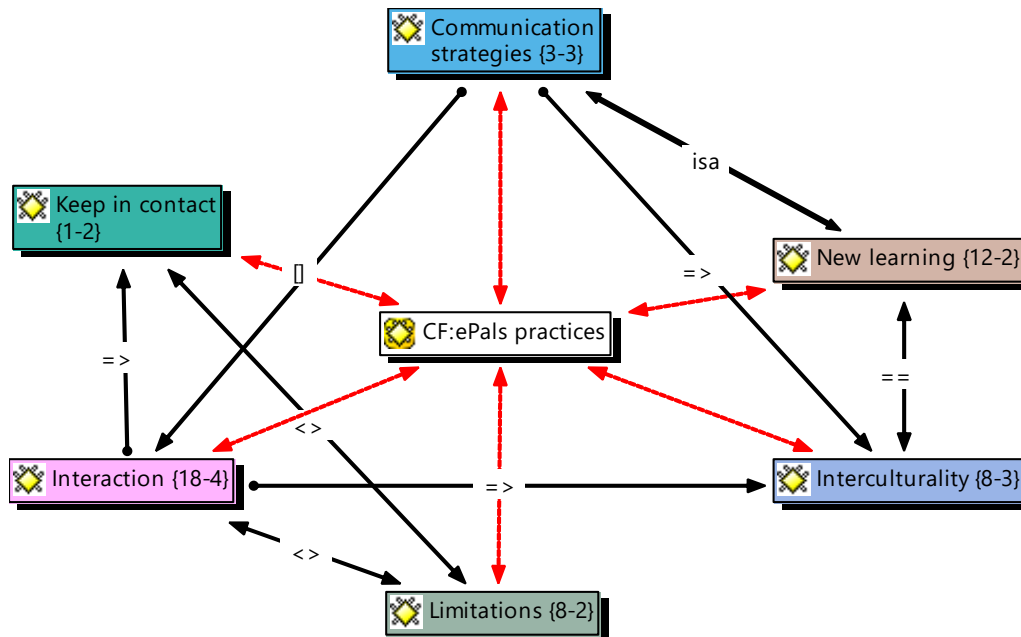


Illustration 1 Semantic network of ePals practices and the family of subcategories ¹

Several citations that make each subcategory in the semantic network are broken down.

It starts with the subcategory Communication strategies {3-2}, then new learning {12-2}, Interculturality {8-1}, Limitations {8-2}, Interaction {18-3} and Keep in touch {1-2}..

Communication strategies

This code involved the ways students kept communication when they found something they did not understand. In that case, they resorted mainly to analyze the context of the letter, ask a classmate or use the online translator to look for the Spanish equivalent of to listen to the pronunciation of the word to analyze if the student had listened to it before. Those processes helped students to understand new words they found in letters.

¹ Atlas ti uses codes and categories to present data; however, to facilitate understanding, this study will refer to subcategories to those codes that emerged around the main category: ePals practices.



“Sometimes, we analyzed the context of the letter to find out the meaning, and sometimes we asked classmates or used an online translator (Student 1, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“Whenever I found an unknown word, I would look it up online, to listen to the pronunciation to identify if I had listened to it before” (Student 8, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

New learning

New learning implies having achieved insights thanks to the exchange. Students reported they have learned different aspects of writing from reading their ePals' letters. First, lexicon was reported to have progressed since students had to figure out meaning of new words.

“...also helped me in terms of new words or a new way of writing a word”

“... there was a great number of unknown words. So, I wanted to understand them in a better way and ... even I was excited to look them up in a dictionary to see some synonyms” (Student 4, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Grammar was another aspect students felt they improved. They thought that the structure of the sentences from letters they received gave them insights about how to write. Concerning writing style, students recognized letters were the resource they used to reflect on their own writing. They realized they wrote extensive sentences or paragraphs that could be boring, and then they started to write shorter sentences and paragraphs, use different vocabulary and connectors in their attempt to write in similar style of their counterparts.

“I learned a little more about English grammatical structure” (Student 7, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

... “I found the ways to adapt to write as he did. I used almost similar words that I understood, I mean, I used all the words I knew to transmit something” (Student 1, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“... I sometimes write very extensive sentences in English” (Student 3, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“sometimes I would write very big paragraphs that would be boring, then I separated them” (Student 6, personal communication, April 17, 2019).



The result of recognizing lack of vocabulary or their basic command of the language created in students positive attitudes towards the language. That is, they felt motivated to research or learn more English to have better communication with their ePals.

...in the letters they sent us, they had new words that we did not understand and we wanted to find what those words meant (they all agree), thus when we wanted to learn more because when we wanted to express ourselves we realized that our English was very basic" (Student 5, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

"It made me want to study more English because the letters he wrote to me contained new words and new phrases I did not understand" (Student 3, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

We used a very basic level of structure, whereas they used a more advanced one and that was novel and interesting. That is why it motivated us to research in order to understand what the other person wanted to show us or express. (Student 8, personal communication, April 17, 2019)

Interculturality

In this category, several metacognitive and reflection aspects that students have regarding culture are described. Such aspects are associated to the way the exchange boosted participants' intercultural awareness which contributed for project engagement. Students found very interesting to learn about the American culture through the information their counterparts shared in their letters.

Students enjoyed learning about their ePals' lifestyles, opinions about certain topics, and they discovered that despite they live in different countries, they shared similarities. They also recognized that with the exchange they were not only discovering a new world but the world was learning about them. They realized English was a universal language that became a bridge to exchange knowledge about both cultures.

"It was an exchange of cultures, it was something interesting" (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

"...to learn their ideas and how they come to think or do their daily activities, their culture and everything was something that I liked a lot and I learned several things from that activity" (Student 7, personal communication, April 17, 2019).



“To feel identified with others, to know that we are equal but at the same time, we are different. Ehh we live in different cultures, but we are humans and despite the differences between languages we keep our similarities and learning that is nice” (Student 8, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Interaction

The category of interaction describes the dialogue engagement. Students insisted on this aspect repeatedly which makes this category the most supported one because of the recurrent citations it had during the interview. There are two aspects of the interaction to highlight. One gives information about features that made interaction interesting. For example, students experienced for the first time communication with a native speaker who was a real reader for their texts; the fact that students and their ePals' were the same age facilitated the exchange of information about their culture and interests, and students experienced a free environment to collaborate because the exchange did not involve score for their letters, writing was only for communication purpose.

“... I had never done this before, and it was interesting to see how they expressed themselves” (Student 4, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“...the fact that they were our same age helped to create a bond so that after this activity was over we could continue communicating” (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“Not being a scored task or having influence in my grades was for me something free and it was like I had all the desire to write enough to express what I felt” (Student 7, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

The other facet regarding interaction was the degree of confidence students felt they raised as the exchanged progressed. This allowed interaction of more personal and intimate nature where students shared personal concerns, feelings and both were able to show empathy.

“... my ePal told me about family issues that I did not live and did not know what to say, but I wrote from what my heart told me and I hoped that the advice I gave, would not sound bad” (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

“That day I felt incredibly bad and I did not know why but I wrote about it to see what he would tell me or how he reacted. And in the next letter he told me that ... I should not give up and that he hoped I felt better. I liked that” (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).



Initially, some students were fearful to talk about personal topics with a person they did not know directly. Then, they even admitted that getting to know a person through letters only, enhanced sincere communication. As the exchanged progressed, students were confident enough to talk about their lives and express mutual empathy. Finally, something reported by only one participant was that she kept communication with her correspondence pair once the program concluded.

... I liked it a lot because we kept exchanging interesting things that happened to us. And they were events that caught our attention because of the simple fact that we live elsewhere (Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Throughout the interview, students expressed that ePals made English learning more appealing. The fact of having to write to maintain correspondence with an English-speaking pair was not only an excuse to improve writing, but also it involved learning this foreign language together with other skills.

Limitations

This category refers to specific aspects that interfered flowing communication between one student and another. Students identified limitations in their own English such as lack of vocabulary and on the other hand, a psychological aspect of feeling fearful to interact with an unknown person.

".. in some parts, I would have liked to improve in using more words that I did not have in my vocabulary at that moment" (Student 6, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

"I mean, to know someone new creates fear that happens to me" (Student 6, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Not all aspects had to do with Ecuadorian students; some claims referred to attitudes they perceived from their foreign ePals. For some students, letters were very short which made them think that American students were not willing to communicate but they wrote because it was a compulsory task.

"There were things that I did not like very much. For example, with the person who I wrote to, I remember that the letters he sent me were not as I expected.

"Sometimes I felt like she is writing because she has to because it is a compulsory task. (Student 1, personal communication, April 17, 2019).



Finally, it was also highlighted that something that affected communication was related to the frequency of letters and topics. Due to occasional class interruption or absence of students letters were not as frequent as expected, and topics of letters were decided based on class themes, hence it interrupted some dialogues of previous conversations.

“.. I think it would be better if the letters were written more often. Also, the topics were very changing and although we answered our questions, those were not so extensive”
(Student 2, personal communication, April 17, 2019).

Keep in touch

As the last category of the analysis, only one participant reported to have kept communication with her after the exchange finished.

Discussion

The study was conducted to determine the effect of ePals practices on EFL writing. The results were analyzed considering individual tasks and overall performance. The comparison of pre and posttest revealed that there was a significant difference in task A and B in language criterion and in task B in the sum of three criteria. According to Cohen's d test the effect of the intervention was small and medium accordingly. Based on the rubric, student's progress in the language component implies the exchange affected positively the command of participants' written language. The descriptors for such performance level involve the use of varied vocabulary appropriate to the task; use of basic grammar structures and accuracy of language (International baccalaureate, 2017).

Improvement in vocabulary after collaborative projects has been reported in studies such as Alsamadami (2001), Ndemanu (2012), Edasawa and Kabata (2007) who support that frequent writing and imitation may explain vocabulary improvement. Conversely, Sasaki and Takeuchi (2010) state that lexicon gains can derive from other processes participants apply when figuring out meaning of letters. In the interview, students of this study admitted that using translators, dictionaries or asking a friend for meaning of words helped them to understand new words. Similarly, results suggest that the act of exchanging letters fostered students' use of grammar. This finding corroborates those of Chen and Brown (2012) and Elola and Oskoz (2010), where participants showed progress due to multiple drafts composition and because of the idea of real audience of their texts. According to learners in this study, their ePals' messages were models they



could notice and imitate. This can explain their development in the structural aspect of writing as in this kind of collaboration, appropriation of grammatical patterns has been a common conclusion (Ndemanu, 2012). Finally, the last aspect of language command students improved is accuracy. This finding compares to Shang (2007) and Saadi and Saat (2017); however, the reasons for improvement are aligned with Kessler (2009) who demonstrated that the need for communication with a native speaker enhanced accuracy. From students' testimonies one can infer that the fact students had to transmit a message to a real reader made them want to learn more. One of the effects was that they autonomously looked for ways to improve clarity of their compositions. Their response agrees with Fisher et al. (2004), Schenker (2016), and Vinagre (2007) conclusion that students tried harder when interacting with genuine audience. The reasons why students did not improve significantly in the message and conceptual understanding criterion is perhaps because of the nature of the tasks required to write in the posttest. The tasks required students to write about hypothetical situations in which they needed to describe aspects that they probably did not have experience about. In the letter exchange students always wrote about class-related topics based on their personal experiences. Besides, students were free to choose what information to share in their letters. Topics were given by the teacher, but she did not control the content of the letters to comment about relevance of ideas or writing style. Similarly, students did not have to observe different texts conventions and register when interacting with their American ePals because all messages were written in an email format. However, the low improvement in these criteria does not entail that the intervention was not beneficial.

The sum of the scores in the criteria for both tasks reported a significant difference compared to the pretest. According to Cohen's *d*, the exchange had a medium size effect. Apart from the reasons above mentioned, the overall result from this study adds evidence to those supporting that collaboration projects provided students with opportunities for skill development because the interaction was written (Wang, 2015) and influenced by participants' motivation and confidence for writing (Bourques 2006; Jou et al., 2007; Edasawa & Kabata 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Patton et al., 2017; Kern, 2006; Ndemanu, 2012; Li, 2000; Shang, 2007; Schenker, 2016).

Qualitative analysis from the interview with focal participants accounts for their perceptions of ePals. Students thought the experience of exchanging letters with American students was interesting and exciting. For them, it was the first time they interacted with an English native speaker, therefore the idea of writing to a real person engaged them in the exchange. They



recognized that their limited English encouraged them to try harder understanding and writing letters therefore it motivated them learn more English. This compares to Awada (2016); Bourques (2006); Chen and Brown (2012); Fedderholdt (2001); Shang (2007); Saadi and Saadat (2015); Sasaki and Takeuchi (2010); Vinagre (2007); and Wang (2015) who reported that motivation for target language learning was positively influenced by the computer collaborative projects. Another important insight students pointed out was that their motivation for writing letters was also determined by the nature of the tasks as it was not a scored activity. They expressed they felt free to write without task requirements but with the aim of communicating effectively. Students' opinions in this study corroborates results from Awada (2016), Chao and Li (2011), and Saadi (2016) where the collaborative projects created stress-free environment. Elola (2010) adds that students feel more comfortable when they have control over their writing which also happened with participants in this study as there was not teacher's intervention in the process of writing.

The intervention also succeeded in providing students with intercultural learning. Participants valued the experienced for the cultural exchange it yielded. Through letters participants learned about each other's countries and lifestyles. Intercultural learning from first hand experienced in this study adds to previous studies (Awada & Diab, 2016; Bohinski & Leventhal, 2015; Bourques, 2006; Chao et al. 2007; Chen & Brown, 2012; Fedderholdt, 2001; Fisher et al., 2004; Patton et al., 2017; Korycinski, 2001). Students considered that to be the same age with their counterparts permitted the interaction about personal topics because their interests were similar. In the case of this study, the American teacher and the researcher were responsible to find suitable pairs. It should be considered that for success in this type of project there should be teachers' coordination on the logistics (Nozawa, 2002).

Lastly, students also recognized some aspects that prevented learning or enjoyment of the exchange. On one hand, it is the frequency of letters that could be overcome if students had direct communication with their ePals. However, this study relied on O'Dowd suggestion of incorporating ePals as a classroom-based activity with teachers' monitoring. Probably the fact that teachers are in charge of receiving and delivering the letters might have delayed the correspondence; yet, it prevented discouragement of participation since everybody received their letters when there was correspondence. On the other hand, the amount of text from letters was an aspect of concern for participants. Some letters contained few lines which was discouraging for



students. This aspect is difficult to control because teachers are respectful with students' individualities that may keep them from engaging in long conversation.

Conclusion

Computer mediated communication tools have been implemented in different settings with the aim to foster language learning. As a CMC mode: ePals exchanges have been a way to foster language learning in different settings. This study sought to analyze the effect of ePals practices on students' EFL writing and demonstrated that this type of projects offers ample opportunities for skill development as well as for intercultural learning. Quantitative analyses confirmed that ePals practices can enhance writing skills in terms of lexicon, grammar, and accuracy. The methodology of this study did not have teachers' intervention in the process of understanding and reading letters, thus, students reported to have progressed in their writing skills thanks to the processes they used independently to make meaning of messages. Therefore, it was demonstrated that ePals practices have the potential to boost students' language which is influenced by their motivation for writing (Bourques 2006; Jou et al., 2007; Edasawa & Kabata 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Patton et al., 2017; Ndemanu, 2012; Shang, 2007; Schenker, 2016). On the other hand, the exchange did not succeed in increasing students' awareness of appropriate register or conventions for different type of texts.

Another important gain from the exchange is intercultural learning. For students it was interesting to learn about American culture through their ePals. Interacting with peers who were the same age facilitated the exchange of information of personal nature that depicted their lifestyles. Finally, ePals is an effective tool to motivate students for language learning because of the idea of real readers for their texts. For participants in this study it was the first time students interacted with an English native speaker which made they value the experience as very interesting.

Results from this research cannot be generalized since outcomes of studies in the social sciences are dependent on specific contexts. However, this study adds corpus of evidence to literature related to the use of CMC tools to foster language learning. It is hoped that this study helps understand the positive effect ePals can have on EFL classes to promote language and culture learning. Epals have the potential for writing development because communication is written and different processes to make communication possible play an important role. This kind



of exchanges can also help promote autonomy in students since they are responsible for transmitting clear messages. Finally, since students interact with geographically different classes, they are given the opportunity to develop international perspective and enrich their cultural knowledge of the country their ePals are from. All these effects result in increasing students' interest for learning English because they have genuine reasons to write.

Educators interested in implementing ePals exchanges in their classrooms should consider incorporating them as classroom-based activity to ensure students' participation. They should be responsible from the logistics of the program to ensure success. Teachers interested in maximizing the effect on the use of conventions and register in written tasks should consider including explicit instruction using letters as resources. Concerns that emerged in this study should be considered for future studies. Later research can focus on conducting a longer exchange program or with more frequent letters. Also, it can be considered closer monitoring from teacher to guide the fulfillment of tasks, as a solution to short letters.



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Appendix A

Test rubric

External assessment

External assessment criteria

Paper 1: Productive skills—writing

Assessment criteria are used to mark paper 1, which is worth 25% of the overall mark. There are three assessment criteria.

Criterion A: Language

How successfully does the candidate command written language?

- To what extent is the vocabulary appropriate and varied?
- To what extent are the grammatical structures varied?
- To what extent does the accuracy of the language contribute to effective communication?

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2	Command of the language is limited. Vocabulary is sometimes appropriate to the task. Basic grammatical structures are used. Language contains errors in basic structures. Abundant repetition and inaccuracies interfere with meaning.
3–4	Command of the language is generally effective. Vocabulary is generally appropriate to the task, and varied. Some basic grammatical structures are used, with some attempts to use more complex structures. Language is generally accurate for basic structures, but errors occur in more complex structures. Errors at times interfere with communication.
5–6	Command of the language is effective and mostly accurate. Vocabulary is appropriate to the task, and varied. A variety of basic and more complex grammatical structures is used effectively. Language is mostly accurate. Occasional errors do not interfere with communication.

External assessment

Criterion B: Message

To what extent does the candidate fulfill the task?

- How relevant are the ideas to the task?
- To what extent are ideas developed?
- To what extent do the clarity and organization of ideas contribute to the successful delivery of the message?

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1–2	The task is partially fulfilled. Some ideas are relevant. Ideas are stated, but with no development. Ideas are not clearly presented and do not follow a logical structure, making the message difficult to determine.
3–4	The task is generally fulfilled. Most ideas are relevant to the task. Some ideas are developed with some detail and examples. Ideas are generally clearly presented and the response is generally structured in a logical manner, leading to a mostly successful delivery of the message.
5–6	The task is fulfilled effectively. Ideas are relevant to the task. Ideas are developed well, providing details and relevant examples. Ideas are clearly presented and the response is structured in a logical manner, supporting the delivery of the message.

External assessment

Criterion C: Conceptual understanding

To what extent does the candidate demonstrate conceptual understanding?

- To what extent is the choice of text type appropriate to the task?
- To what extent are register and tone appropriate to the context, purpose and audience of the task?
- To what extent does the response incorporate the conventions of the chosen text type?

Marks	Level descriptor
0	The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below.
1	Conceptual understanding is limited. The choice of text type is generally inappropriate to the context, purpose or audience. The register and tone are inappropriate to the context, purpose and audience of the task. The response incorporates limited recognizable conventions of the chosen text type.
2	Conceptual understanding is mostly demonstrated. The choice of text type is generally appropriate to the context, purpose and audience. The register and tone, while occasionally appropriate to the context, purpose and audience of the task, fluctuate throughout the response. The response incorporates some conventions of the chosen text type.
3	Conceptual understanding is fully demonstrated. The choice of text type is appropriate to the context, purpose and audience. The register and tone are appropriate to the context, purpose and audience of the task. The response fully incorporates the conventions of the chosen text type.



Appendix B

Interview guiding questions

1. Did you find the epals interesting? Why
2. Did the exchange make you want to study English more? How?
3. In which areas do you feel you have improved?

I L2 writing, L2 reading, email use, computer use

4. Email exchanges allowed you to

Improve writing

Vocabulary and idiomatic expressions

Structure and language functions

Mechanics of writing

5. How did you feel about writing to a native speaker/ writing about you?
6. Will you continue emailing your partner after our project is over?



Appendix C

Letter exchange sample

Hi Anna

Last week, in my high school we celebrate the institutional parties that are commemorated in honor of our patron "San Jose de Calasanz" but the great reason is that we celebrate the 421 years of Foundation of Pias Schools around the world.

They last 1 week in which we didn't have classes. Teachers and students we have programs in which you could observe the talents of some of our companions (dance; singing, sports and more...)

On this occasion the programs were very interesting as they were held in the two language English and Spanish. We also choose the student council, there was a fashion show in which the suits were made whit recycled material.

It was a very fun week 😊😊😊

I would like to know if your school celebrates something similar.

Hiiiiiiii It's me again. We saw your Facebook pictures of your party, it was very cool, but I do not know what pictures you are in haha. We don't have parties for our school anniversary, but we still celebrate the anniversary of our country. We take pride in blowing things up and eating hot dogs. ;-)

(The 4th of July) We also celebrate the birth of the Savior Jesus on Christmas (December 25) and celebrate the rising of Jesus on Easter. (April 21) Then we also have a day where nobody works in honor of the veterans who served our country (Labor Day, May 27) We also celebrate New Year's Eve and New Year's day to celebrate the coming of the New Year (December 31st) We also have a day where we thank God for everything we have and eat good food, that day is called Thanksgiving. People normally eat Turkey/Ham, and mashed potatoes on that day. Thanksgiving Day is also when pilgrims sailed over to our country and made peace with Indians when our country was first founded, we just also take the time to thank our Lord for everything we have.