

Keypals, are they worth it?

Ask your students what they want in their "Eikaiwa class" and they will often say "more English conversation." Yet, when you try to have a conversation with them, they clam up. There is a parallel situation with keypals. They all would like to have one, but in practice, many get disillusioned.

A successful keypal program involves more than finding keypals for your students and them having them write their first e-mail message. This article will try to point out some of the stumbling blocks so you can be prepared to avoid them.

Keypal configurations

There are a number of variables. Select yours wisely;

Class partners vs. Individual partners

There are a number of sites on the web that attempt to match up entire classes of students. Here are two that have been around for awhile:

<http://www.kidlink.org/KIDCAFE-SCHOOL/>

<http://www.stolaf.edu/network/iecc>

A perennial problem with class linkages, however, is the difference in the school terms in Japan and the rest of the world. See "School Calendars Around the World" for further information:

<http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/~trobb/terms2.html>

There are many sites that allow individual students to advertise for keypals.

Heinemann Interactive

<http://www.hi.com.au/keypals/keypalslist.asp>

Linguistic Funland

<http://www.linguistic-funland.com/penpal-postings.html>

English Firsthand Cafe

<http://www.efcafe.com/chat.html>

One-on-one?

A sure way to disappoint some of

your students is to assign each student a single penpal. The odds that all pairings will work is low since all it takes is one side of the pairing to fail to write. You can hedge your bet by assigning two or more penpals to each student.

In-class vs Outside of class

It is a good idea to initiate your students into e-mail in normal class sessions, but once they understand the process, further correspondence is best done outside of class, or in unstructured time when students who are still waiting for a response can do something else. The time to respond to messages will vary considerably so you cannot expect all students to be working on messages in unison.

A common stumbling block in the past has been the number of class meetings. Japanese classes often meet only once a week, while those abroad meet two or more times. When correspondence is done in class, the frequency of response is locked to the number of times the class meets. Now that most students can gain access outside of class time, even if it is a cybercafé, this no longer needs to be a problem.

Training

Many students will already be using e-mail, which is a good start. They might not, however, be aware of some of the standard conventions for polite e-mail in English. Teach them how to create a good subject line. Show them how to quote relevant parts of the previous message and to delete the irrelevant remains of what has gone before.

Here is one resource that you could use as a basis for your own set of rules:

<http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/~trobb/netiquette.html>

Sustaining the experience

Just as in regular conversation, many students will find it difficult to sustain an electronic conversation, if left on their own. You will need to

show them how to turn the responses of their partner into more questions, or how to shift the topic just as we would in face-to-face situations.

Another idea is to make their correspondence goal-oriented. You can specify a number of topics for your students to query their keypals on, requiring a report so that your students, in groups, need to synthesize the information thus gained. For example, you could have all students attempt to find out what the normal business hours are for various kinds of shops and enterprises in the countries they are corresponding with.

Alternatives to one-on-one keypals

The Student List Project, where students participate in group discussions on specific themes, such as sports, movies and music, allows the students to receive many messages without the obligation to respond to each one. The students can send messages only when they feel that they have something to contribute to the on-going discussion, or they can nominate a new topic for discussion if they like:

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/education/sl/sl.html>

Another alternative are threaded web-based discussion lists. Here the students post their messages directly onto a web page. Instant gratification! You can start by setting up your own for internal class use with groups.yahoo.com, for example, and then have your students participate in a public one once they have become accustomed to the process. Dave's Café has a great selection of discussion topics which you might consider:

<http://escafe.com/discussion/>

Keypals can give your students the thrill of really using their English for communication. How rewarding their experience is, however, depends largely on how well you, the teacher, structure it.

Ask the Techie

This column is for you to ask your own questions about using computers and the Internet with your students. Send your questions to the editor, Tom Robb at tom@robb.net

Q: I have a projector and a laptop. When I hook my laptop to a projector, the projector works fine, but the laptop screen goes blank. How can I see both the projector and the laptop screen at the same time? (Running Win 98SE on an IBM laptop).

A: Hmm, well some people have the opposite problem -- Nothing shows on the projector. The standard procedure is to start up the projector first with the laptop connected, but off. Once the projector is on and displaying a blank screen then you switch on your laptop, or awake it if you have 'put it to sleep.' It will then start sending signals to the projector, which first has to detect the resolution and other parameters before it can start projecting.

With many WIN laptops, you also need to press a function key (F-key) or the FN key plus a particular F-key in order to have it show on both screens. The particular F-key varies from machine to machine. If you are lucky, it will be labeled!

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Q: I've got some short digital video clips that I want to put together and would like to make a menu so that I can select the ones I need in class at a moment's notice. What kind of program or techniques work?

A: The simplest and lowest tech way would simply be to place all of the clips in the same directory. Assuming that they are all the same type of clips (Quicktime, RealPlayer, Windows Media Player), simply double-clicking on them should start them up.

Another simple way would be to make a simple HTML file with a line like this for each video clip:

```
<a href="clip1.mov"
target="new">Clip 1</a><br>
```

```
<a href="clip2.mov"
```



```
target="new">Clip 2</a><br>
```

Place the html file in the same directory as the clips. All you need to do is to display the HTML file in your browser and then click once on the name of the desired file. It will play in a separate window.

Powerpoint could also be used, but probably isn't worth the trouble for something simple like this.