

Bringing the World to Your Language Classroom: The ePals Global Community

John R. Ross

Language teachers have long had a variety of technology-based resources available to support their instruction. Language labs with audio and video recordings, texts and workbooks, and other supporting materials go well back in to the era of analog media, and the digital revolution has only increased the number and type of interesting and helpful resources available to support language acquisition in today's classroom. When I ask language teachers what needs still remain, many respond that it's difficult for them to find native or fluent language speakers that their students can interact with. Most have access to a wide range of print materials and recordings they can use with their students, but finding a way for students to really engage with fluent language speakers remains a challenge.



In researching options over the past year to determine how language teachers might use technology to address this need, my paths kept crossing with Dr. Rita Oates, vice president of education markets for ePals. I've known about ePals for years, but there was some sort of synchronicity with our crossings, from her presentations in this world at the national ISTE technology conference in Denver last summer to my attending a session she presented in Second Life last fall. When we both appeared on the roster of an online learning Ning this Spring, I thought it was a sign I couldn't resist and asked her to share some information about ePals and how educators from across the world are using ePals' services to connect schools, classes, and students, especially in support of language acquisition.

More than a Pen Pal

In the textbook I co-authored and in workshops I present, I use ePals as one example that I encourage teachers of all disciplines to investigate, because the global connections it provides support multiple content areas and learning goals. In fact, ePals may best be known for successfully connecting classrooms from across the world so students (and teachers) can learn from each other and gain a better understanding the nuances of culture, society, politics, and exploring everything from what kids in other countries do for fun, have for lunch, and learn about in school. In fact, to date, ePals has connected more than 600,000 classrooms (that's just classrooms, not people) in more than 200 countries or territories—for free! They have more than 2500 new schools sign up for their services every month.



Students from Sarah LaComb's French class in New York meeting their ePals from Arras, France

That all sounds good for some kind of classroom sharing, but in communicating with Rita, I wanted to know if ePals offered specific services that could help meet that one big need – providing access to native or fluent language speakers. She responded that this is one of the two main reasons teachers sign their classrooms up for ePals, the other being English as a second language teachers in countries where English is not the primary language looking for English practice for their students. If you think about it, it's the same reason, really, with interaction with native language speakers being the ultimate goal. Need...meet solution.

Belen Garcia - Spain - 

From: Instituto de Secundaria | Posted On: October 28, 2010 | Member Since: February 24, 2010

Project Description

Salut à tous! On est une école secondaire située au nord de l'Espagne. Il s'agit de 18 élèves (12/13 ans) dans le cours de français, niveau élémentaire, ils apprennent très rapidement et ont beaucoup d'intérêt!! On voudrait bien connaître des jeunes francophones (France, Belgique, Canada, etc) pour devenir des correspondants. À très bientôt!! Hello everyone! It is a secondary school located in northern Spain. These 18 students (12/13 years) in the French courses, elementary level, they learn very quickly and have great interest! We'd like to know young francophones (France, Belgium, Canada, etc.) to become pen pals. See you soon!

Location	Number of participants	Grades
Oviedo, Asturias, Spain	16-20	
Language	Age range	
English, French, Spanish	12-13	

[Contact](#)

Example of a French class in Spain seeking ePals

The Menu: Taste or Feast

ePals offers a variety of services for educators, many for free, with new services developed and offered based on input from the educators that participate in its programs. One of the most common starting points for new members is the *ePals Global Community*, which is the traditional classroom connection that many people associate with a pen pal connection. But, of course, it has a 21st Century twist.

The *ePals Global Community* was built by educators for educators, so the sharing has learning outcomes in mind. The primary resource for sharing is e-mail, which might be common in American schools but not so in all participating countries. ePals provides a secure, filtered e-mail environment to support communication that includes several levels of protection for students. They hold TRUSTe certification, an especially rigorous data security certification, that makes them well suited to work with children of all ages, including those younger than 13. (According to the Children's Internet Protection Act, parents must provide consent for children under 13 to enter data to an online service, which is why sites like Facebook do not allow these younger people to participate.)

Teachers can choose to moderate all, some, or no messages before they are sent, and can request to receive notification of all or just questionable communications. ePals also offers the option of an online translation solution that supports 58 languages, and that number keeps growing. Many classes go beyond exchanging short e-mail messages and share everything from poems, stories, multimedia presentations, to video. Others have incorporated videoconferencing for real-time interaction, which obviously requires some coordination depending on time zones and school calendars. You can view a short video presentation by students with emerging Spanish skills from Darlington Community High School in Wisconsin at <http://www.epals.com/media/p/236857.aspx>.

SchoolMail™ My Home | My Email | My Forums | Manage Forums | Instant Translation | My Files | Chat | Support

Welcome, Janice MacKay Use Classic SchoolMail

School News Update
A PEP RALLY will be held this coming Thursday to cheer on the Highlanders!
Location: West Gymnasium
Time: 11:30 am

Volunteers Needed
The Westwood Community Center is seeking student volunteers to help with after-school activities. Interested students are asked to contact Mr. Jones at the Guidance Office for further information.

Teachers! Show Your Students the World!
Test your skills at Geography Central
Quizzes • Forums • Videos • Interactives • Resources

Mail My Profile New ePals Classrooms

My Mail
You have 82 new messages

Monitored Mail
There are 4 flagged student messages Request more accounts

Authentic global collaborations
Suggested Projects and Forums

The Way We Are
What makes me who I am? In this project, students will engage in a collaborative learning experience. Through email exchanges, students learn about the daily Project Visit

The Teacher View of ePals Message Center

There are also student forums that are organized by topic and a Student Media Gallery, which provides a safe and secure place for teachers to post student work. Students can communicate with other students from across the globe on a range of topics that they find interesting, from the impression of Justin Bieber’s hairstyle to the impact cheating has on schoolwork. The forums are moderated by real people and nothing gets posted without review. Oates notes that music and sports are some of the most popular topics, however, the single most popular social issue based on student responses is “Do glasses make you a nerd?” So while the teacher-moderated communications in the *ePals Global Community* may be more formal and stress the use of academic language, the student forums provide a level of engagement through social interaction with other students with similar interests.

Teachers can choose the purpose and intensity of interaction, from once a month, once a week, or several times a week. It just depends on what they work out with the teachers they collaborate with. For example, one teacher required her students to compose three sentences twice a week to share with students in their ePals collaborating class in Italy. Oates recounted that the response from Italian students would often incorporate cognates that were familiar to them but not so much to the American students, who often had to look them up in order to reply—emphasizing the difference between academic and social language use and building connections between the two languages. (As an interesting aside to that particular story, the scores for the American students on their tests of English writing improved so much after the experience that the teacher was investigated by the state to ensure that the students hadn’t cheated!)

Browse Media

- Teacher Media Galleries
- Teacher Spotlight Projects
- Skillbuilders Library
- Video Profiles
- Teacher Ambassador Contest 2010
- Teacher-Submitted Projects**
- Videos from ePals
- Smithsonian Institution on ePals
- ePals Training Resources
- Educational Groups and Organizations
- Morning Warm-Ups
- Presentations and Conferences
- Featured Classrooms
- Student Media Galleries
- ePals SchoolMail
- Black History



Get Connected with Languages! by Elisabeth R

Filed under: Age 11-13, Age 14-18, Language Learning, Teacher-Created Projects, Elisabeth Robertson, Japanese, Australia

In NSW, Australia, high school students are required to study one language for one year. This usually happens in one of the first two years of high school, Year 7 or Year 8. I would like two classes learning the same language to connect with each other, in a secure social networking environment. For example, when both classes finish the topic of 'family', each student swaps information about their family with their ePal. As the year progresses, a range of information will be shared and, hopefully, friendships will develop. In schools located near each other, the virtual friendships could be extended into joint excursions, face-to-face, such as a visit to a restaurant or participation in a Languages Day.

I'd like to trial this program in Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean. I have attached a sample program for Japanese.

posted by ePals M
08-04-2010

Downloads: 44
File size: 81.4kB
Views: 215

Teacher request for connecting via language

How to Get Started

One of the best ways to get started is to visit the ePals website at www.epals.com. The home page scrolls the news ePals classrooms so you can see where the classes are located and view a profile with the age and grade level and number of students in each class and the type of interaction the teachers are looking for. A search feature allows you to find additional classrooms from the hundreds of thousands that are registered in the system based on location, grade, interest, and other parameters. You can also sign up your class on the ePals website but all new members are reviewed and must be approved before their requests are posted or they are able to participate in any activities.

If you're not sure how you'd like to interact with another classroom, ePals has some suggestions and offers other products and services that could serve as a focus of a project. For example, *in2books* is a curriculum for grades three through five that incorporates eMentoring, and the *ePals LearningSpace* is an online collaborative environment that encourages the sharing of curriculum and supports common Web 2.0 tools, like blogs, wikis, and forums. New services are developed and delivered based on input from ePals users, so you can have a say on what additional services might be helpful.

Digital Storytelling Classroom Project

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Digital Storytelling



Overview

In this unit, students will learn about the age-old practice of storytelling and use 21st century tools to create their own digital story. Students will explore digital storytelling as a way to tell a story, promote cross-cultural understanding and build meaningful connections with others. Students will participate in an email exchange to discuss the process. They will 1) develop a story topic 2) write their story 3) create or find appropriate images to support their story and 4) share their story and reflect on their work.

[Project Elements](#)

[Project Calendar](#)

Essential Questions

1. What is digital storytelling?
2. What are the elements of a good story?
3. Why do people tell stories?
4. How is my personal story the same or different from others?

Objectives

1. Students will understand that digital storytelling is an effective way to have their voices heard and make a meaningful connection with others.
2. Students will identify a topic, brainstorm ideas around that topic and write a personal narrative.
3. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the role images play in a story and will create or find appropriate images to support their story.
4. Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of digital storytelling. They will translate their words and images into a digital story in such a way that others will understand or appreciate their point of view.
5. Students will communicate and work collaboratively with peers, teachers and ePals.

Culminating Activity

The culminating activity is for students to create their own digital stories and share them with their peers.

Project Elements

This project has six parts:

1. Understanding Digital Storytelling
2. What makes a good story?
3. Developing a Story Topic
4. Writing the Story
5. Creating the Images

One of the many projects ePals offers participants

If you need more information, it's likely you'll run across Rita or one of the ePals team members at a conference, but in case you don't, you can attend a free webinar to learn more about ePals. Rita actually presented the webinar I attended. To sign up for the ePals 101 webinar, sign up at <http://epals.101.sgizmo.com>. Get other questions about ePals answered at support@corp.epals.com.

There are other electronic pen pal services that you can investigate, so compare and find the solution that is best for you. I do want to thank Dr. Rita Oates, however, for working with me and sharing information about the technology-based solutions ePals provides that language teachers may want to use to address the critical need of student interaction with native or fluent speakers. It was nice to move from an awareness of the program to a better understanding of how teachers are using these services in their classroom. If you've used ePals or a similar program, I'd enjoy hearing about your experiences, as well.