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ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

Electronic communication can be used to teach those who, as a result of distance or other factors, do not attend   regular classes. Distance education is not a new phenomenon. Correspondence courses in a variety of subjects have long been taught all over the world. However, the use of distance education to teach foreign language has been somewhat restricted, as most people believe that language learning involves the need for ongoing communication, and previous technologies made this difficult at a distance.

The use of e-mail and electronic discussion makes distance education for language instruction a much more viable alternative. However, the area is new and developing, with few established programs. One very interesting model of distance education was established by the English Programs for Internationals (EPI) at the University of South Carolina. Like many U.S. universities, it attracts scholars and graduate students from international universities who com for degree program or for research. The transition process can be quite challenging for these international students. First, although they may have been using English for quite a long time, they are not necessarily up to the level in listening, speaking, reading, and writing required to succeed in a U.S. university. Second, they must make many cultural adjustments during their visit to the U.S.

To facilitate both language acquisition and cultural adjustment, the EPI established a prearrival distance education program via e-mail. Visiting students who were part of the program were all invited to participate electronically in an orientation course for a period of several months before their arrival. The students completed a number of writing assignments, including, for example, their CVs and biographies, and were also sent (by e-mail) journal articles to summarize and analyze. In addition to the academic work, the students took advantage of the electronic connection to discuss with each other and with the instructor. The program was evaluated as being very successful and one of the factors that encouraged the EPI to expand their use of e-mail as an instruction tool in a number of their programs.

In some ways, distance teacher training via electronic mails is more advanced than distance education for students. One example is in the state of Hawai'I, where the spread of population to small communities over a number of islands can make centralized teacher training difficult. To overcome this problem, the university established a special course for distance education training of second and foreign language teachers. The course is taught via interactive satellite television and e-mail. E-mail is used to transmit assignments, hold electronic discussions, post and discuss teaching journals, and collaborate on assignments. This course also makes use of satellite television, but such advanced facilities are by no means necessary for successful distance teacher training. E-mail alone can provide a lower-tech way of accomplishing this task.

E-mail and other forms of electronic communication are a valuable tool for English teaching. Yet e-mail, like other forms of technology, will not itself solve

problems. It will be up to you, the teacher, to develop the right ways of using e-mail based on your general goals, your teaching style and approach, an analysis of your students' needs, and the technological tools you have at hand. The goal should be to make students autonomous users. The more they can learn how to do themselves, without having to always depend on the teacher, the more pleasure and satisfaction they will get out of the process. Some general tips follow. Before class meets:

1. Try to work with the university to make sure that any computers are as accessible.

2. Prepare a thorough and easy-to-read handout for your students that covers all the basic instructions.

3. Try to arrange for a couple of assistants the first time you introduce e-mail.

4. Send a message to your students before they log on the first time.

5. Do a sample training session with one or two students first, so you can see what problems arise before you try to train a whole class.

Many educators have noted that electronic communication can help foster a new teacher-student relationship, with the students becoming more autonomous and the teacher becoming more of a facilitator.

And the purpose of e-mail in education is to foster more effective student-student communication. Here some suggestions to help make that happen.

1. Help your students create a hospitable space and a sense of community. In the beginning of any e-mail relationship, encourage the students to introduce themselves, discuss aspects of their interests, and use the friendly, informal language.

2. If you are doing a team-teaching project, arrange for other types of communication besides e-mail.

3. As much as possible, try to include collaborative, task-based learning projects.

As the 21st century approaches, English is becoming the first truly global language. Advances in electronic communication help to get the knowledge in distance. It is not the only way, but it is fast, inexpensive, and convenient, thus allowing teachers new and exciting opportunities to help students.