Virtual penpal projects

Webinar handout

by Melissa Thomson

What is a virtual penpal project?

If we bring this idea of penpalling into the ELT classroom, it can mean exchanging letters, posters and projects with another learner/class that is learning English. If we also include technology, we can extend the idea of penpals beyond the pen. We can include communication like posting comments on each other's work, leaving online voice messages or video messages. We could also do synchronous (live) video calls with other learners.

What are some benefits of virtual penpal projects?

My learners have reported that they have:

- had fun meeting other young people learning English
- gained confidence speaking English
- learned something about another culture (and realised something new about their own!)
- practised lots of English in a real context, with a real audience
- learned new English words/phrases and experimented with new language

What do I need to keep in mind?

Here is my advice to help your project run smoothly:

- Meeting the other teacher online will be a lot more efficient than sending emails
- Agree on a calendar of interactions, and stick to it
- Make sure you get the appropriate permissions and meet child protection standards

Here is my advice to help get the most language learning out of a project:

- Help to foster a positive *Interaction Mindset* (Sato, 2017). Have conversations and discussions with your class about the benefits/what's fun about this type of project.
- Help learners understand what effective interactional behaviour is. Positive behaviour in interactions can include inviting others to speak, showing you are listening actively,

helping others with words/phrases. Model these, look at language for collaboration, and look at/listen to examples of good interactions. These might not feature in your coursebook or syllabus, so be prepared to make time for this.

What types of virtual penpal project could I do?

There are many different formats that you could try. What you choose depends on the technology available to you, and your experience and confidence levels.

Description of penpal project	Technology needed
Speaking postcards Learners write postcards and record their voice reading these. They post photos of the postcards on a blog, and leave a URL of their voice message.	An online platform to share photos and URLs with the other class. I recommend www.padlet.com (get five pages for free). Learners need something to voice record with. (www.speakpipe.com/voice-recorder) Teacher (or learners) need a camera. They upload the photo to Padlet.
Paperslide presentations Learners make presentations to explain something about their country/culture and record their voice reading these. They post these URLs on a blog/share them with the other class.	A way to share the URLs. This could be Padlet (see above), a GoogleDrive folder, a Teams channel or even just emails between teachers. Learners need something to film with (e.g. mobile). If this isn't possible in class, this part could be done as homework.
Recorded questions and answers to camera Learners make short videos asking the other class questions. They post these videos on a blog/share them. The other class answers, adding more questions. The project can keep going for as many exchanges as you want.	A way to share the URLs. Learners need something to film with (e.g. mobile).
Live online meetings Learners meet online to talk with learners from another class from another country. Activities could include interview tasks (e.g. shopping, education, sport) and/or collaborative tasks (e.g. design an ideal, school design a cross-cultural party)	Teachers need to set up meetings on an online platform which has breakout rooms (e.g. Zoom, Teams, GoogleMeet). Learners need access to devices with camera and microphones. This could take place in class (but with headphones to limit noise) or at home.

A recording of Melissa's webinar can be found here: https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-and-events/webinars/webinars-teachers/ict-classroom-mini-event

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