Write to Learn

works by students of

Faculty of English Language and Culture

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WriteToLearn

CONTENTS

We Share What We Know
魏小淇.............................1
A Faraway yet Close Friend
陈....................................2
Experience with My Epals from America
沈....................................3
I've Got Mails
叶.....................................4
Disconnected Harry Potter and the “Pho”
简.....................................6
Two Extremes Meet in One
钟.....................................8
Learning by Communication
梁.....................................10
E-mailing across the Pacific Ocean
陈.....................................11
an Intelligent Girl VS a Wandering Man
谭.....................................13

Purple Hair
鄭.....................................15
Caribbean’s April
麦.....................................16
Building the Bridge of Friendship
余.....................................17
Coast to Coast
刘.....................................18
Follow Our Hearts
何.....................................19
Friendships across the Oceans
冯.....................................21
Festivals in Their Eyes
李.....................................22
Becki is Coloring My Learning of English
李.....................................24
I conducted an experimental research project during the past semester (Fall 2006). I connected volunteers, who were and still are students in this Faculty, with a group of American high school students, who were studying at High School, San Diego, California, U.S.A. and with some English-speaking-adults. They wrote emails to each for at least two months.

Based on their emailing experiences, the students were asked to write down their reflections about the whole project, mainly what they have learned and how email-writing differed from their previously writing experience.

I would like to point out two things:

1. Some of the facts that students wrote about are just their personal individual discoveries from their epals (a brief way of saying electronical pen pals). Things that they came across do not necessarily represent the whole population. For example, just because one of their high school epals may not eat meat does not mean that all American high school students are vegetarians.

2. Email-writing is not necessarily like talking to someone. It really depends to whom you are writing and for what purpose. If you are writing to your principal, who is an authoritative figure for example via email, you must write in a formal way using formal language, unless you are a close friend of his. For business letters that are sent by email, formal writing is also required.

The purpose of publishing the students' articles in this magazine is to share what they learned from their epals with you. I thought that you might find these articles of interest, other than just for practicing their English writing. I would like to borrow from what Margaret Fuller said, "We share what we know, so that others may grow." and alter it into, "We share what we know, so that you may also know."

I must first thank Doctor Zheng Chao, who is your Vice Dean in your Faculty. Without his help and generosity, this project would not
have been possible. I would also like to thank Mrs. Candace Pauchnick, who is the teacher of Human Psychology and Sociology at High School. Without her invitation, the email exchange activity would have not been feasible. Finally, I like to express my gratitude to Mr. Andrew Gondocz, who is a professional editor in Canada. He provided a native-speaker’s perspective and offered suggested changes to the students’ papers.

Enjoy reading!

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A Faraway yet Close Friend

My high school epal is a 17-year-old lovely girl named N-. She is from San Diego, California. N- goes to the beach frequently. She is outgoing and quite enthusiastic about life. She likes making friends as much as I do. She also likes listening to music and writing. She is very capable dealing with problems, coping with different kinds of friends in her daily life, and balancing her studies and her dating.

The most significant impact that my epal has brought to me is her informal way of expressing herself. I think that it may be characteristic of all Americans. They never hide their feelings. They say what they want to say. They are frank and sincere. For example, when I asked her about her studies, she said that schooling overall seemed quite easy to her because that was all she basically knew. For many Chinese students like me, to show our humility, we usually dare not say that school is easy, even though it is.

Secondly, the atmosphere in their classrooms is much freer than ours. They can talk and ask questions whenever they like to. We can do the same thing now in the university, but not in the high schools or in the primary schools.

Thirdly, I learned that the festivals in the USA provide people with opportunities for reunions. No matter whether it is Halloween or Thanksgiving, the whole family can get together to enjoy the happy moments.
As for writing, I can write more quickly now, although my language skills and grammar have not improved much. Because writing e-mails is for me like talking to my friends, I don’t need to care about the structure or the theme of the letter. I just write what I want to say.

Of course we have to take our epal’s background into consideration. What seems quite common to us may be difficult for our epals to understand. For example, in my self-introduction, I wrote that I was studying in Guangdong University of Guangdong, Guangdong Province, China. Na asked me what a “province” was because she had no idea what it was.

Also my attitude towards relationships was changed by the influence of my epal. I used to think that a relationship would detract from a student’s study, so I was actually repulsed by the idea of having a boyfriend. But now I see having a relationship from a different point of view. My epal’s point of view is that a healthy relationship in fact can bring us much pleasure. We can share our feelings with someone; or whenever we need help, we know whom to turn to or rely on.

Generally speaking, I am happy to be one of the lucky students to attend this class. Now in my life I have one more friend with whom I can share my feelings. It’s so good to talk to someone who seems so far away yet so close to me.

The two-month-long writing period has been incredibly wonderful. It has been such a pleasure writing to my epals from America, B from High School, and A from State University.

B is 15 years old. She has a little brother who is one year younger than she is and shares the same interest with her—playing the piano! Her family is originally from Spain, but has adapted to American culture.

Are there any differences between the two cultures? For example, are the origins of Christmas and the ways people celebrate it different? In Spain, Santa Claus is replaced by the “Three Wise Men,” but of course they are just different versions of Santa Claus to B and to me.

Although her dad works for a granite company, he is not a workaholic like my dad is. (My dad is an alcoholic and often comes back home late as drunk as a lord - Just kidding!) B’s dad is nice. He takes them out to restaurants on weekends.
My other epal is A...! At first I was confused by her nickname "tiger," which, in China, represents the husky male. I still remember the excitement when I typed "A..." on Google. The search returned an exact match—she is a frequent buyer on amazon.com. It is amazing how enthusiastic she is about Christian music.

I had her name and the college that she attended. I then tried searching for her on "facebook"! Bingo! I found her. I checked the pictures of her with her friends and also checked some pictures taken of her at a Pizza Hut where she was working part-time. Most American college students are independent. They have to learn how to earn money themselves to support their schooling and lives and to buy what they need.

A... has many interesting stories to tell. She belongs to the "Medieval Combat Club" where she can dress up as any character she likes and can use weapons made of foam to fight. In my university we do not have interesting clubs like that. We merely have academic and sports clubs. The varieties of American college students' clubs are incredibly abundant.

I could always relate the current issues that I read from magazines to A... I thought it would have been great if she could tell me what her opinions are about the various topics. So we freely discussed many issues. For example, one issue was about "egg donation." I agreed with her that the possibility that a child could inherit the egg donor's genes is high. Women therefore should think carefully before they donate their eggs even though they would be extremely well-paid.

Sometimes the topics that we discussed were inspired from my daily life. I put these inspirations into my thoughts. I remember one day when I was sitting in the cafeteria and having my breakfast, my eyes wandered to the bug zappers that were hanging on the wall. I immediately thought about whether pests could learn how to avoid being killed after millions of times' "sacrifice?" Could they pass on the genes that would enable their offspring to quit killing themselves? A...'s major was genetics at her university; she might be able to offer me answers. But she had no idea either. I knew it was a kind of paradoxical question that was hard to answer. However, I enjoyed our intellectual conversations and felt happy that someone could share her opinions or thoughts with me.

Besides the fun e-mail writing part, we also had special guests from America and UK who gave us wonderful presentations about the versatile cultures in these two countries. We truly experienced the British way of living, for example, the fox hunting, their traditional breakfast and the traditional practical jokes for the freshmen—the so-called "baptism". It was a little pity that we didn't have them earlier and had to cancel a presentation of Canadian culture.

I have benefited much from this writing class. It has opened doors to me for a better understanding of the American and British cultures. My epals have shown me their values of family, of independence, and of responsibility that are deeply cherished in my heart.
Having watched the romantic film You’ve Got Mail, I’m not unwilling to be the lucky Tom Hanks finding his soulmate through email. That is of course a little fancy just for fun. Actually I have got mails from two pals, one from the United States, and another from the United Kingdom.

**Lauren Anderson**, a girl from the United States, is really a special girl with an amazing designer instinct, who also has her own understanding of family and marriage. When I saw her photo for the first time, I was amazed that students in American high school could dress up and wear all kinds of jewelry. Previously, I did consider the U.S. to be a country of freedom, but I never imagined that they could dress up like that even in high school.

We exchanged our hobbies, interests and opinions on favorite topics such as food, pop stars, etc. Her replies confirmed my opinions about what kinds of food Americans prefer. It’s really hard to imagine that they are so strong even though they do not eat rice. Their daily diet mainly consists of potatoes, beef, and salad, which can be easily found at McDonald’s.

When I was younger, there had always been a prevailing prejudice that Westerners, particularly Americans, had very different views from Chinese, especially about relationships and marriage. Later, when I had more access to American culture in general by watching their soap operas, my understanding and opinions changed a little bit. Lauren allowed me to have a close look at what an American high school student’s daily life looks like.

The very thing that most struck me is her attitude towards family and marriage. Once, she told me that she is definitely not going to get married, which shocked me tremendously. Later, I found out about her family background. Her mother is in her second marriage and Lauren is living with her mother, her step-father and a step-brother. Considering it to be rude to violate her privacy, I did not ask why her mother divorced her father. I can somehow understand that the failed marriage of her parents undoubtedly has had a strong negative effect on her expectations of relationship and marriage. As a result, she distrusts marriage. On the other hand, she also is learning the importance of self-independence, which is a positive effect brought by the misfortune.

Her case reflects a contemporary American society in which teenagers are much affected by their family backgrounds. Their personal beliefs gradually form their attitudes towards their own family and marriage perceptions.

**Philip *Smith* is a junior at University, England and is majoring in statistics. Although I am terrible with mathematics, our common enthusiasm about football brings us closer. He is a huge sports fan, as am I. Knowing a person who has the same interest in football may not be unusual but it is certainly a rare chance that we backed the same football team: Arsenal from the British Premier League. I was so excited!!

Since Philip is from the U.K., maybe he has been to Wimbledon to watch the tennis matches, which has always been my dream, He
Disconnected Harry Potter and the "Pho"

M and J are my epals. My emailing experience with each of them is very different.

M, a 26-year-old final-year PhD student in University, England, was extremely busy between her studies and finding a job when we wrote to each other. Nevertheless, there were a
few topics that brought us together.

When I first emailed her, I mentioned that my favorite book was Harry Potter, which seemed to be rather childish. It turned out that M replied with a surprisingly detailed analysis about the whole story and provided her prediction that indeed delighted me; a delight that all other Harry Potter fans globally experience when meeting on websites or bbs. I did not expect it at all. Joanne Kathleen Rowling, the author of Harry Potter, helped us tremendously to be good friends.

I did not realize what family relationships were like in the U.K. until we wrote about them. We both have very old granddads and they are both in poor health. Since we are living on campus most of the time and cannot meet them regularly, M and I missed them very much and we shared the same feeling.

Living with three generations is difficult, but M and her parents and her grandparents mostly seem to get along well. At times when there were frictions, her poor mother was always the one who was caught in the middle.

Occasionally, M complained that her parents were being old-fashioned. The feeling was mutual. My parents too can be old-fashioned. I thought that Westerners would keep up with the times and had never realized that the generation gap exists beyond the geographical boundary until our exchange of emails.

It is precious to have a friend thousand miles apart with so much in common. It is said, “Share sorrow is half sorrow and share joy is double joy.” We did share and taste the joy from exchanging emails. I felt regret to have lost contact with M. I wish we could do more brainstorming related to the upcoming last Harry Potter novel—Deathly Hallows, and have a better understanding of each other.

Joanne is a slim lovely Vietnamese-American girl from High School in San Diego, California. She is my first overseas epal.

Both of us had a great passion for food. We fancied good cooking especially homemade-cooking. I shared with her my preference for the “Slow food movement” — a popular slower eating habit in the U.S. — and surprisingly she was one of the advocates as well. She told me about a special Vietnamese food “Pho”, a kind of bread made of a type of rice with sweet ingredients. It was wonderful for us to “taste” food through emails.

Writing emails in English is new for me. It is not until recently, after I had reread all the emails that I discovered how the emailing has changed my writing.

I often followed my epals’ writing style. Take for example. She did not care much about the formality of emails, such as capitals. She also expressed herself in a rather oral way. I then imitated her style and wrote informally. I think between two epals, a similar writing style in tone and phrasing could, more or less, make us feel close to each other and enable communication to become more efficient.
I also found myself far from satisfied when I had no idea how to reply appropriately when my epals chatted passionately about something that I did not know much or that I was not interested in. However, in order not to let my epals down, I tried to answer their questions as clearly as possible. Consequently, I have come to be more capable of making my letters more understandable, particularly when explaining certain topics that I was not familiar with.

In comparing to my former traditional writing, email writing is like talking via words. What I got to “say” was much according to what my epals had asked me and what I wanted to tell them further. The biggest difference between the academic writing and the email writing is that the latter is "I am writing at my will".

We were required by the former writing teacher to write on certain topics; the range could be something related to the aero craft or process of making tea. Although the compulsory training work did help us with composing at the primary stage, the fixed topics, however, drove us to strange areas millions of miles away from our daily lives. In Email writing, the topics are related to our lives, so that we can express our thoughts naturally and use any words freely.

I do not think I have learnt much about American and British culture or their lives, but the precious opportunity and experience opened a new door for me. I learnt to write in a refreshingly new style of writing and communicate with others more efficiently, which is much more than I expected.

Another unforgettable experience was that I sent my first Christmas cards to overseas and I tasted the great joy of blessing. Although I have not heard from them ever since, I do hope the friendship between my two epals and me would be much enhanced and marked

Two Extremes Meet in One

Chiana is an American high school student from High School in San Diego, California. She emigrated to the U.S.A. from Mexico. Chiana is another Canadian high school student and lives in Vancouver, Canada.

Though both of them are third-year high school students, they are quite different. Chiana is a fun-loving girl. In her spare time, she hangs out with her friends, goes to the beach, watches movies, etc. Chiana by contrast, is a hard working, meditative, and more mature student than Chiana perhaps because she comes from a split family.

I always had a stereotype that Western young students were
accustomed to indulging themselves in entertainment, were free from the tons of homework that Chinese young students have, and were born to be worry-free about many things as if their futures were secure. I discovered from C that I was very wrong. In Western countries, there are also a large proportion of young people who are striving for their dreams. In order to make themselves superior and stand out in the very competitive and rigorous societies, they work very hard. It was not clear to me how independent a Western young student could be until I got to know C. She is from a broken family. Both of her parents remarried, which brought her five step-siblings and four grandparents. I thought this kind of family life was too complicated to deal with for a child. However, with C’s independence from parents and family, she got through all these hardships. She not only grew up quickly but also concentrated on her studies.

When I was writing to them, I was in an active position where I needed to answer the questions that were raised by them and, at the same time, asked them questions that I had. Moreover, the topics that we wrote about the most were related to our daily lives. Thus I became very interested in communicating with them. Unconsciously, my communicating abilities enhanced my writing abilities.

My regular writing teacher, by contrast, always gave us fixed topics that were not related to our daily lives. I felt that I was restricted by the topics and felt it was very difficult for me to write. Sometimes I even had nothing to write about.

In addition, I learned some authentic expressions that I could not pick up from my daily studies. The style of our emailing was very informal; the expressions we used therefore were very colloquial. I realize now that the daily English written by native speakers of English can be very flexible and casual. For example, C wrote that her biological mother and step-father were not keen on sports and she described them as “laid back”. She wrote,

“My dad and step-mom are very athletic whereas my mom and step-dad aren’t, they’re more laid back.”

I had also learned some useful conjunctions that I was aware of before we exchanged our emails but was not able to apply. For example, I used to use “because” instead “in that”. The context C used “in that” was so vivid which seems to etch into my mind and I am now able to use it undoubtedly. She wrote,

“At my school, there are many choices you can make. It is almost like a university in that you can choose from tons of different subjects.”

As a whole, I am very happy to have joined this project that has allowed me to broaden my horizons and to pay more attention to other countries’ social phenomena and cultures. More importantly, I can now write long English composition naturally.
My High School epal is San. She was born and raised in San Diego, California, with all of her family extremely close by. She lives five minutes away from her school. We talked about music, entertainment, movies and so on. Once when we talked about fast food, San told me about her awful experience in McDonald. I found that McDonald is disliked by many people in the USA whereas it enjoys high popularity in China. Children are attracted by their free toys and teenagers always gather for friends’ reunions at McDonalds.

Ella who is another epal of mine, a 27-year-old middle school (6, 7, 8th grade) teacher and teaches Italian and Spanish as she can speak 3 languages: Italian, English and Spanish. Ella lives in Bronx, New York. Both of her parents were born in Italy and then they immigrated to the United States.

Since Ella is a middle school foreign language teacher, I asked her for advice what the best way of learning English is. She really thinks that I should be going to the English speaking country and be amongst the people. Maybe get a job there and stay at least a year. In that way, I will never forget the people or the language.

From Ella I also learn about what the Roman Catholicism is. The Roman Catholic religion was started many thousands of years ago by Jesus Christ. The Pope is the leader of the church. They don’t believe in contraception or abortion or pre-marital sex. Though, I myself am not a Roman Catholic, and I have no religion. But everyone has his free right to choose his religion, and I can understand their behavior.

To be honest, I do not think there is much difference between e-mail writings and my academic writings. I just take my academic writings a little more seriously. But after we have communicated for about two months, I found it was hard for me to raise questions, or to be exact, to choose certain specific culture-related topics. I later realize that I did well in asking questions, but maybe because I did not have much life experience. I have several friends abroad, I could always ask them about the cultural differences. I therefore did not have great enthusiasm in writing e-mails with my epals. So our communication stopped gradually.

To sum up, although I did not learn too much from my epals, still I enjoyed the writing process. And I also realize that I am obliged to broaden my horizon so that I can communicate with others better and learn more from others.
E-mailing across the Pacific Ocean

The exoticness of Western culture adds to its own exhilarate with me. It has always been my dream to have an English-speaking e-pal to communicate with so that I can have a better perspective about the West. Finally, my dream came true with my becoming one of the volunteers of the English e-mail class given by Tina. I have been writing email with three e-pals from the USA – R, C, and J. Across the Pacific Ocean, we share with each other our interests, our dreams and our ways of living.

From C, I experience the Western politeness as well as the art of addressing people. When I told her about my favorite novelist and one of his novels, she offered that she would read it since I had recommended it to her. An active and curious girl, C often has series of questions to ask. I thought I would become badly bored by her questions, but to my great surprise, I was doing my utmost to answer her questions patiently. And I found that it was because of the way she addressed me. In the middle of the letter, before she was to raise questions, she called me “S”. I felt kind of inspired and ready to help because this way of addressing people is quite different from that of the culture I grow up with, where we rarely address each other directly after our conversation has already begun. C’s addressing me directly led me into such a good mood that when she began asking questions, I was so happy and willing to help. The art of addressing people is so fascinating, I think.

Besides, through writing emails with them, I can get some first-hand information about the exotic culture. For example, I thought all Westerners celebrated Halloween. But later I was told that as a Christian, R did not go to any Halloween parties, although she did go “trick or treat” with other children to get candy from the adults. Apart from that, my wondering about whether teenagers in the U.S. go to church as often as they used to, was also shed light on when R told me that in fact she knew little about the Biblical creeds. She became a Christian because her families are Christians.

While emailing across the Pacific Ocean provides me with a better view of the western world and helps me get a better understanding about it, it also opens a door through which I have come to know myself and my life better.
I found that writing email, to some degree, is like having a conversation with a person. People have to figure out what kind of person they are writing to, and what they would like to share with their e-pals. And most importantly, they have to make sure that they themselves are interested in what is presenting so as to keep their e-pals from getting bored. As a result, they are negotiating with themselves and exploring both themselves and their lives.

As Bai Yansong, a famous CCTV host once said, “Life, in fact, is plain in a proportion of 90%, while happiness and sadness share the rest 10% equally.” But people tend to pursue happiness, that is, a little amount of 5% of life, without realizing that they have turned their back on the most important thing in their life that they should have cherished—the plain things they tend to take for granted. But to keep my e-pals from getting bored, I have often found myself in seeking from the plain part of my life something that was worth presenting. In an e-mail, while I was listing to

By email-writing, I have also developed a precious friendship with J. While R and C delight me with their humorous and polite way of communicating, J makes a good friend to share my inner feelings with. We love the same movie such as “The Sound of Music”-“Smile whenever you can”-and share the quality of sensitively caring about the feelings of people around us. I was surprised at Tina’s comment on my writing that she could feel I must be very good at coping with people from the way I wrote my emails, notably those to J. And I was somehow flattered when J appraised how maturely I had written in English in one of the emails to her. I felt really inspired and I felt like writing more. Subsequently, as if something flowing out of my mind through my typing fingers, I came up with the longest email that I could never have dared to imagine-2000 words. Now I think maybe it is because it was J to whom I was writing that I managed to come out with that long article.

Finally, by writing emails with them, I have also come to realize that the efficient way of communicating with people is to perform sincerely and cheerfully, which enhances a good atmosphere for communication and thus helps further communication.

Therefore, by emailing across the Pacific Ocean, I have learned a subtle way of communicating, developed a better understanding of myself as well as my life and also made three beloved friends.

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In the E-pal program, I had two E-pals, An and Al.

An is quite a legendary figure, or weird. He is a 36-year-old man with dual nationalities: the U.S. and the U.K. With a British father and an Italian American mother, An was born in India, was raised in New York and London, and finally settled in England. Considering his middle age, I had expected him to be a father of two and to live a normal life with a steady job. In fact, An's life was far from my imagination. He has a carefree disposition and seems to enjoy his unconventional life style.

An seems to be a born-traveler. Before he was five years old, he frequently traveled back and forth among India, England, and the USA with his parents. After he grew up in England, he had also traveled around Europe. He used to work in London and he now works in New York. He enjoys his life there very much and is thinking about moving there. Due to his frequently-traveled life, he has delayed his replies. He would hardly respond within a month which made me feel uncertain and frustrated sometimes.

He likes philosophy, and he admires Lao Zi (老子). He regards Lao Zi as an "awesome Chinese mystic, very old but still wise". His main passion is for spiritual practice, and he is with a spiritual organization that studies the evolution of consciousness. The first time I read his letter, I was scared. It was as if he were promoting the spiritual organization. On the other hand, though, I heard that Confucius and other Chinese philosophers were popular among some Westerners. I did not expect that I would meet one.

From what he has been telling me, I have gained the perspective that life does not necessarily have to follow the orthodox way. It can also be great fun when you try to live an unconventional life. Follow our hearts and be happy.

Al is a sixteen-year-old high school girl who lives in San Diego, California. My impression of her is quite the opposite to my stereotyped image of American high school students, who seem to me party frequently and do not take their studies seriously.

She had an extremely busy school schedule. She was
taking three AP (Advanced Placement) courses: AP United States history, AP English and AP biology. Meanwhile, she also took classes such as Human Psychology, sociology, pre-calculus, and physical education, as well as colorful extra-curriculum activities. Those AP courses were as hard as university courses with great amounts of homework and reading. If she passes a test in the end of the year, she will get university credits and she will not have to retake the class in a university. I really envy her for she had such a wide array of course choices. She could choose the ones corresponding to her level and interests, which is unlikely to happen in China.

Heavy workload, she still displayed her positive attitude toward life and handled well her studies and pastime. In her spare time, she loved sports, music, movies and hanging out with friends. I was overjoyed when I was allocated a straight-A yet mature and straightforward student. However, there has been a cultural imbalance between us. Nothing she mentioned in her letters was new to me, such as festivals, social problems, etc. Conversely, it seems that she has never been informed with anything about Chinese culture at all, not even about basic things like religion, clothing and why Chinese would be sad at funerals.

Generally speaking, I enjoyed the process of writing emails immensely, though there were times of frustration with AI in particular. I tried to send her the same email three times while she kept wondering why I did not respond at all. Also, I still find it is hard to explain myself in an efficient and natural way. Email writing was fun, but gradually when I became conscious that there was no way that I was going to become friends with my E-pals. I was a bit disappointed. I realized that there was not much a chance of making friends in such a short time without personal contact.

The good thing about the project is that it won’t be rated, so there is no pressure. Nevertheless, this is, as well, where the problem lies. When I still have schoolwork, which concerns my GPA and future prospects, I am afraid that I have to think twice whether or not it is worth the efforts to put so much energy into something which would not give me practical benefit.

I do appreciate the experimental project in which I was provided with writing opportunities. Writing a “final report” in the end is also a new learning experience. It is a good chance to learn how to edit my own article rather than just practicing English writing in a different way.
A\textsuperscript{1} is a student at University High School. She is originally from Minnesota, and is now living in San Diego, California. She has been a babysitter for a long time. She likes dyeing her hair into other colors such as purple, green, and pink.

\textsuperscript{1} not only loves music but also sings well. She has already set up a rock band with some friends and she has been in a choir for many years. She is quite different from what I had thought about her after she recommended Japanese rock music to me. I did not think an American choir girl would love the Japanese rock band named Malice Mizer. Thus I surfed on the Internet and listened to them zestfully. Once I learn something new, I pay more attention to it.

Indeed Japanese music has made an impression on her. Maybe this is a phenomenon of a “global village” in which our world is becoming smaller and people are influencing each other.

I have learned from \textsuperscript{1} that people should open their minds and respect other people from different cultures. We all know that the U.S.A. is a “melting pot” and that racism may still exist. There are still people who believe that every race is equal and that people should learn from each other, and \textsuperscript{1} is one of them. She wrote,

“when people have an open mind towards each other, you may find that indulging in another culture brings great happiness and flavor to your life.”

Furthermore, American high school students are free to do whatever they like. \textsuperscript{1}, however, implied that such freedom sometimes is not so good. She said, “Our education system here isn’t what it should be. American children aren’t pushed to what they could be.” She feels that American education does not fully help students achieve their potential. Although \textsuperscript{1} points out that there are some drawbacks of having too much freedom, I think, nevertheless, that having freedom may not be a bad thing. We could find
fresh and new ideas, if we could see things from a different angle. Her hair color is an example of such an idea. A offers me valuable information about how American high school students’ lives are like. We exchanged our thoughts and values with each other. Actually, some of her values have changed me a bit so that I am now able to think things differently. Life can be fun if we look at it from a different aspect.

Materialism is another problem among American high school students. She wrote that they “want the new cell phones, the new technology. They want nicer cars and bigger homes.” Unlike them, Aleczandra, does not appreciate this kind of value. She is eager to do something more valuable and gains satisfaction from the spiritual side of things, such as pursuing knowledge and spending time with her family.

During emailing to Aleczandra, each time I first had to think carefully, then wrote everything that came to my mind. I wrote formally which cost me a great deal of time. My letters also looked a bit serious and not so attractive. Sometimes I even found that my writing was hard to understand. Sometimes, what she wrote made me think that we do not have to be so serious about writing letters if we are friends. As for Aleczandra, at first she used a formal form; later she changed. Sometimes her sentences were not even complete. They sounded like her spoken language, showing her emotions. Mostly, her sentences are simple and easy to understand. Her writing reminds me that in communication, long sentences do not necessarily mean you can express much information. Writing long sentences may also cause confusion.

Looking back, emailing with A has changed my life to some extent. It is a whole new experience for me, a jumping-off point of my direct communication with foreigners.

Since I am from a rural countryside where we
students did not have foreign teachers around, I had only seen foreigners two or three times before I came to the University. And I never had enough courage to say hello to any foreigners whenever I met them, partly because of my not-so-fluent English and partly because of my timidity. Thus, you can imagine how happy and excited I was when I received the first email from A——I can talk to a foreigner in English! She can understand me and replies! I can be her friend. A, a foreigner, is my friend now, the first foreign friend in my life. How important these facts are to me, a student from a small village. Most of my classmates speak fluent English and can converse with foreigners confidently. I, however, with poor English, was once afraid to communicate with foreigners. But now I have been emailing with A for some time and we both enjoy the communication. And I have found myself overcoming my timidity and becoming confident in front of foreigners. This brings me a sense of achievement and makes me surer of myself. Thanks to this successful writing project, or rather, this encouraging and inspiring experience, I can enjoy making friends and communicating with foreigners.

Furthermore, A is a good friend of mine. We have many things in common: similar family backgrounds, similar weaknesses and strengths in the subjects, similar hobbies and both are English majors, to name some, which push our friendship to go further and make me think of her not just as an e-pal but as a true friend.

Besides, A is an excellent English student. She is the president of Sigma Tau Delta, a national English Honors society for excellent English students. Sigma Tau Delta stands for “sincerity, truth and design” in Greek. She composes poems too. I have learnt much from her including new words, grammar, useful daily expressions, Caribbean and American traditions, etc. For example, I noticed that A used the word “document” in a sentence, I had learnt it before, but I still did not understand the meaning of that sentence. Then, I checked the dictionary and found another meaning of this word. There are many chances of learning English in the emails. And because A is so excellent, I have tried my best to avoid making any mistakes in every single email. I am always reminding myself to study English harder and not to be left behind. Thanks to A.

The activities that they have had after class greatly impress me!

My high school e-pal is K (pseudonym). K told me in his third letter that he is a gay and that he has a boyfriend whom he loves very much. My first reaction was not a feeling of disgust, but feelings that are warm and positive. How genuine and open-minded this boy is! He does not mind what others think about him. By just being himself, he showed me — someone who was a still stranger to him — his real self.

He also sent me pictures of his friends, including his boyfriend. It helped me understand that true love can occur not only
between persons of different sexes, but also between persons of the same sex.

I had always thought that Western people eat a great deal of meat and other high-fat foods, especially beef, cheese burger, pizza etc. I had also thought American teenagers love to go to fast-food restaurants such as KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut etc until I got to know K. To my surprise, K is a vegetarian. He does not eat any meat nor any fast-food because he finds them unhealthy. At first, I was very amazed to find out that American teenagers were so self-restrained that they could resist the temptation of delicious fast-food. Later I learned that nowadays more and more America young people pay attention to a healthy diet because eating too much meat or fast-food can cause various diseases in their country. Many of them, as a result, have become vegetarian and have abandoned fast-food.

By contrast, in China, western-style fast-food restaurants have become the haunt for teenagers to get together without even thinking whether the foods that we are eating are healthy or not. Next time, when I go to any fast-food stores, I will be aware of what I eat.

K also raises strange pets in his house. He has one snake, one dog, two cats, and two rats. But it did not surprise me too much because I keep two dogs and a big tank of fish.

My other e-pal is M, who is easy-going and creative. He loves cars and enjoys working on old cars. He has three very old cars: one Ford Mustang (1977), and two Ford Mavericks (1972). He spends his spare time fixing them. I, too, like cars, although at present I have neither a license nor a car.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, we need to learn from American teenagers. They are more active and independent than Chinese teenagers. It seems to me that American youngsters are go-getters. When they think of something that they really want to do, they will commit themselves to do it, while most Chinese teenagers are idealists. We just sit there and think about it a lot but take no action.

Through our communications, I'm amazed to find out how thoughtful and capable my e-pals are as teenagers. These meaningful experiences not only bring me fun, but also have some profound influence on my ways of doing things. Nevertheless, the most important thing is that our communications help to build the bridge of friendship over the Pacific Ocean.

Coast to Coast

I have two American e-pals, S from High School, San Diego, California and N at College in North Carolina.

S likes keeping fish, her dream being selling fish as pets. Due to the warm sunshine in California, she often hangs out with her friends at the beach. N is a highly competent student. Though involved with all kinds of school activities — Students against Destructive Decisions, Undergraduate Alumni Association, Student Government Association etc., she can still balances herself among homework, clubs, associations and family.

E-mail writing has greatly improved my
English. For one thing, through constant mutual e-mailing, I have learned some useful and practical expressions, and some interesting idioms, which have enlarged my vocabulary. For instance, I used to mistakenly translate "chen gji" as result. But I learned later that grade is a more appropriate word. For another, e-mail writing exerts positive effects on my writing style. Practice makes perfect. I was often hesitant about which words to use or how to arrange sentences during writing, and my e-mails usually turned out to be awkward and clumsy. But the more I have written the more fluent and natural my letters have become. E-mailing is a practical, free-style kind of writing. It is a bit different from the formal writing. I can write in an informal and close-to-life way, or rather a more suitable way for writing letters to friends.

In addition, I have also gained a deeper understanding of certain type of American culture. Among all of the kinds of cultures, festivities and entertainments, I was most interested in the pub culture, which enjoys an enormous popularity in the U.S.A. I used to be astounded by Americans' craze for drinking. I learned later that this is the cultural difference. Beers are for American youngsters what teas are for Chinese. Drinking beers provides precious moments for them to enjoy themselves at their gatherings and have fun.

E-mailing also enables us to share common interests or views of life with our foreign friends. By e-mailing, we exchange ideas with each other about our favorite sports, movies, and some other kinds of entertainments. Once N told me that she had watched "X-Man3", and fancied it very much, which stirred me to watch it immediately. She also mentioned her memorable trip to Washington D.C. "It doesn't matter where you are," she wrote, "but who you are with." She made a very good point, did she not?

To sum up, writing to e-pals indeed provides me with a platform from which I can better my English, learn about American culture, share interests with e-pals and practice writing in an informal way. I really appreciate it.

Follow Our Hearts

Not much did I expect when I first wrote to my American E-pal, N, a high school student. Someone might seem to be more special to me just because she speaks English and lives in a different country. However, this idea began to leave me after exchanging several letters. Across the distance, together we shared funny stories and experiences, and we tried to learn from each other by talking about the different ways of our lives and cultures. Our e-mailing was much more successful than I originally expected. In addition to all the things I have learnt from her about the USA, in her I have found one thing that I really admire — her courage to follow her heart.

Though our e-mailing has been over for two months or so, still I remember- the profound astonishment I felt when she told me that she would become a probation officer- the officer of the American court who supervises
individuals who are on probation. It was a
dream she had been striving for, she said, a job
through which she thought could lend her help
to those in need. At that moment an image of
her flashed in my mind — a girl with a brave
heart who was not afraid of how people think
about the profession she chose and of how she
just followed her decision and will. More
importantly, she reminded me of the dreams
that I had abandoned, and the things that I
have wanted to do but have not done. For the
first time I felt like a coward.

"Follow our hearts" may not be an alien
phrase to our ears, but it may be alien to our
minds. To some, it is like visualizing the stars
in the distant nocturnal sky, while others may
regard it as a childish fantasy that is too
beautiful to come true. Why? It is because
reality is always more complicated than we
expect, and a dream may be too far to be
reached. As a result, we dare not believe that
we are capable to do the things we have
wanted to do, to be the places we have
dreamed to be. Our eyes are so blurred in the
rain of life that we lose our faith in the sun.

Sometimes, however, something exists as
long as we believe it is there. Like a child who
raises his innocent eyes towards the sky,
believing that there is an angel watching over
him from the heaven, we all once dreamed
that our dreams could come true.
Unfortunately it turned out that they crashed
as the years went by. Time after time, the
strikes from reality have forced us to give up
the decisions that we made and to surrender to
the power of our fates. Day after day we are
descending to be the slaves of reality. So often
are we put under its pressure and walk in its
shoes that we forget why we are here and
where we are heading.

Why do we stay in cages as if we were
birds? We are supposed to break the chains
and fetters and fly freely into the infinite blue
sky. We should sing in the dawn and laugh in
the dusk; we should view the field greened by
the spring breeze and touch the leaves
yellowed by the autumn winds. We shall not
care about the wind and rain; we shall cast
aside the fears and pursue our hearts. The
journey may be too lonely and the destination
may be too far, but still we must march ahead
for it is the only way to find our true selves
and our freedom.

We are born to be the masters of our lives,
not slaves. The rope of life's boat must be
clenched by our hands instead of by destiny.
Our lives may not be perfect but, if we follow
our hearts, at least we can live our lives in our
own way. If only we are brave enough to
challenge and persistent enough to carry on, in
the end we will accomplish the completion of
life that others can only admire.

Youth will be withering and slipping away,
day after day.
We must start before it becomes too late.
Therefore, why do we wait?
Leave our fears and doubts out of our way,
and try to follow our hearts all the way.

When our hairs turn grey,
Looking back, proudly we can say:
"I have tried to find my way.
I have lived my life in my own way."
Friendships across the Oceans

Hannah, who is from San Diego, California, is in the 11th grade and wants to become a photojournalist. Lisa, who loves music and movies, is a graduate student majoring in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language (TESOL) at University. She is also from California.

I enjoyed writing to both of them. With Hannah, the high school student, we mainly talked about school, family and some festivals. Hannah was quite looking forward to getting into college so that she could have more freedom which, I think, is very important to many Westerners.

In the United States, there are public schools, which are free to everyone and last for thirteen years, from grade 1 to grade 13. There are also private schools, which are more expensive. Many of them are religious. Most schoolchildren go to public schools, so does Hannah. The reason she likes it is that she can meet people from all different races and from different cultures. High School is actually like a small "melting pot".

She has traveled to London and Paris with her sisters and she paid for the trips herself. I envy her traveling very much for my parents would never allow me to do so, even if I could pay for the trip myself and get myself some companions. Many Chinese parents often overprotect their children. They just cannot stop worrying and let go.

In addition, I have learnt more about Western culture as well as about our own Chinese culture. I believe it is the same with Hannah. When we were exchanging information about

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1 Public education in the United States is free and compulsory for grades one to twelve. Some students may leave with parental or guardian permission. Other students may leave when they turn 16- to 18-years old. Most school districts offer free kindergarten for 5-year olds. Some school districts offer pre-school classes for 4-year olds.

(Note: This short footnote message is offered by Mr. Andrew Gondocz. I would like to thank him for providing this information.-Tina.)
each other’s traditional festivals, we had to do some searches, either from the Internet or from books, so as to make sure that the information or explanations we offered were correct and understandable. In doing so, we are able to understand our own culture better after the searches have been done.

With L, the graduate student, we usually talked about music and movies. I learnt some new expressions from L. Below are just two examples: a) be “into” something—“Many of my friends are into Asian culture such as Japanese animation and caricature” and b) get somebody hooked onto—“This was the movie that got me hooked onto Chinese films.”

Besides, now I can tell sitcoms from soap operas and TV drama serials. Since we often talked about TV programs and movies, I, therefore, checked those words up on the Internet or in a dictionary in advance so I would not get those words mixed up.

All in all, I have had the chance to write to two native speakers and make friends with them. I have learnt how to make myself better understood while communicating with H and L, especially when trying to explain our own traditional culture. At the same time, I also have gained a better understanding about our own culture. Most importantly, I have learnt that friendship can be established between different nations and across the oceans, no matter where we are and who we are.

Festivals in Their Eyes

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F and M were my first two foreign e-pals. F was a high school student from America, whereas M was an undergraduate majoring in mathematics from Britain. Honestly, I was more attracted to M who was a lovely young lady of my age. Of Nigerian origin, she was not only energetic but also sensitive. By contrast, F was about 15 years old so that I regarded him more like a younger brother.

I did learn a lot from both of them, including how to make good conversations with them and how the British and the Americans went on with their daily lives. Most importantly, they both provided me with a general concept of how Westerners celebrated their festivals, ranging from the most famous to the controversial ones: for instance, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and the Gay Pride Festival, etc.

Christmas and Thanksgiving were F’s favourite festivals. Families would usually gather together and have magnificent turkey dinners and share each other’s joys and sadness that gone through the bygone year. He also seemed to be extremely excited about Halloween. Thanks to his feeling of thrill, I have got an idea of why people get all dressed up and put ghost-faced pumpkins around the houses: to scare the evil spirits away. But he showed his disappointment later when he wrote, “Kids are wearing costumes just to get free candies nowadays.”

Sharing the similar festive culture with F, M felt the same way that things that one
on festivals changed simultaneously as one gets older. She also added that many traditional festivals are no longer popular. Instead, more recent festivals such as the Notting Hill Carnival in London and the Gay Pride Festival in Brighton, England have replaced the older festivals in popularity. I asked whether she would like to join in them. Her answer was that she was not in favor of these kinds of festivals, let alone taking part in them. She explained, "I have nothing against homosexuals though I would never want to be one or be the mother of one. Besides, such acts are frowned upon in my culture." What made me happy, nevertheless, was that, she was willing to discuss them with me. Therefore, I learned that both Notting Hill Carnival and Gay Pride Festival are observed annually. I also learned that people parade down the streets, go nuts and cry out loud in colourful costumes.

On the other hand, the impacts of the Chinese festivals on their societies have become more and more tremendous. Among these, the Spring Festival has been the most popular one. Both Miriam and Fitosum said that celebrating the Spring Festival has become one of their traditions in their countries.

Apart from learning about Western festivals, I have also learned something related to English writing.

First of all, I have made notable progress in my writing. There is a saying that the most efficient way of learning writing is writing more. In these 2 months, I wrote a lot. I have made improvements, at least, in speed and in length. Now I can compose a 300-word article in about half an hour, compared to 2 months ago when it used to take me one hour or even longer.

Secondly, I tried to make a two-way conversation. Why? Because all the emails I wrote and received were informal ones. In other words, it was as if I were chatting with them. In order to get all the information I wanted reasonably, I had to answer their questions first. For example, one-child policy, educational system in China, etc. A good communicator should have the power of drawing their partners' attentions to each other's topics. Otherwise, it would be just a one-way communication, in which you were just selling yourself and making your listeners bored and silent. Since I have done all of those, I found that I became a good communicator.

Thirdly, I learned how to use my Email-box in the right way and also realized the benefits of it. For instance, I began to send E-cards to my friends during holidays, which I had never done before.

Finally, I have learned varied ways of expressing things. Take "saying goodbye" for example. From Miriam, I’ve got “I’ll get back to you soon with some news on my life but till then stay cool”; “I’ve got to go now and I will get back to you very soon”, and “I have got to fly so take care!”. I have also got from her some phrases that are widely used in Britain like “sort out”.

This was one of the best writing experiences I have ever had. Rather than seeing it as a task, I consider this writing experience as a journey, in which one can write freely without any restrictions; no one was there to impose any titles onto your writings. The most amazing thing was that when you were taking this journey, you did not have to leave your seat at all. You could sit in front of your computer and type. Then your epals would draw you an exotic picture of what their lives are like. In a word, it was incredible!
Becki is Coloring My Learning of English

My pal, Becky, a lovely girl from San Diego, California, has put some colors into my English learning.

The first “color” is that I learned different styles of expression. Hers is more informal while mine the opposite.

When I said hello to her for the first time, I wrote, “I feel it’s a great pleasure to write to you and I hope that you can enjoy reading. I would like to first introduce myself...”, which was very formal. Several days later, I heard from her. Obviously, her response was more informal. She wrote, ‘Hi Shine! It was great to get your letter. I enjoyed reading it, and I am excited at the chance to be able to talk to you. I am RIIIIIIa. You can call me “B” or “R-II” as my friends do, it is up to you to choose...”

The second “color” is that she affected my attitudes towards writing email. I have now tended to be more relaxed. When I first wrote to her, I was very serious and I tried my best to make no mistakes in my grammar and spelling, as I was afraid of making any mistakes. As a result, my letter was not only formal but also stiff. She was more relaxed than I was. She did not pay much attention to either grammar or spelling. For example, she wrote, “It is my favorite Holiday”. I have learned the grammar and spelling, etc. are not as important when we actually communicate with each other.

The third “color” comes from some of her interesting words such as “My clothing style is very me”. To be honest, I have never thought that “me” could be used in this way.

Moreover, I cannot help thinking about where the differences come from. For one thing, we are from different cultures and obtain different educations in different cultural environments. According to the history of America, its culture is a mixture of the kinds of cultures that calls for more freedom and more tolerance, while ours is far more traditional and astringent. It then results in differences in our attitudes towards many aspects, for example, writing emails. For another thing, English is not my mother tongue; we learn it as a foreign language. When our English classes are over, we still talk with each other in Chinese. It is difficult for us to write in English as naturally as our pals.

I have been trying to put these colors into my English learning. First of all, I am trying to emulate writing English compositions that sound as natural as Becky’s. For example, when I was going to use an English idiom in my writing, I used to choose a Chinese idiom, and then translate it into English. I am now trying to use the original English idioms that have a similar meaning to the Chinese idioms instead.

What is more, when I am reading about festivals in my textbook, I have been trying my best to relate myself to the festivals, as I am facing them. Although we have learned much about American festivals in our listening, reading classes, etc., the texts are not directly related to us. But, through the vivid description of Becky’s writing, these festivals seem to become part of my daily life. The feeling is like that of a beautiful dress being put on a model, and then miraculously bringing the dress to life.
封面设计：董暖

写以促续
写以促记
写以促说
由长到短
由短到精
由惧到爱