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**Pen Pal Mysteries: Improving German Writing through Peer  
Communication**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated the observed behaviors and reported experiences of eighth grade German level I students when implementing peer pen pal communication in the target language on the students' writing fluency. First, a Student Information Survey was completed to gain insight into their experience and their overall confidence with the German language. Following the survey, students completed a Baseline Writing Prompt with a Reflection Slip and a 5-Minute Word Write to provide evidence of their beginning vocabulary and writing fluency in the target language. Once these assessments were completed, students began writing a series of three pen pal letters to another German language learner within their grade known only to them by use of a pseudonym. Throughout the pen pal writing, students also completed quizzes from the German curriculum, a Mid-Research Survey, and a Post-Research Interview. Once all of the data had been collected and analyzed, four main themes emerged. Research indicated that students improved in vocabulary usage and length-based fluency. Secondly, pen pal communication provided positive social interactions, which established and increased confidence. Additionally, authentic and student-centered strategies engaged students, which also increased writing fluency. Although pen pals did not improve subject verb agreement as errors showed little to no change during and after implementation, students enjoyed writing to their pen pal and found the overall experience helpful for their writing. Best practices and experience indicate using a student-centered, authentic approach for improved fluency.

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## **Research Stance**

My teaching journey began in fourth grade. Three of my classmates and I were assigned to teach our class about a topic we were studying in science. My group was required to work together to determine what information we were going to teach and how we were going to teach it. I remember standing in front of the class, being the leader of the group, and getting frustrated when the class wasn't listening. This was not my normal behavior. I was reserved and very self-conscious. I also didn't have very many friends and wasn't involved in activities outside of school because my family didn't have a lot of extra money. However, despite my normal behavior, when I was asked to teach something to others, I excelled. After my group had finished our lesson, my teacher pulled me aside and asked if I had ever thought about being a teacher. She told me I should be a teacher. I believe that ever since that day in the back of my mind I have known that teaching is my passion. However, what I should teach wasn't as clear until eighth grade.

The most exciting aspect of eighth grade was definitely, without a doubt, learning another language. It was easy to tell from the start that my enthusiasm for German far surpassed my enthusiasm for French or Spanish. I was biased and had already chosen which language I would enjoy based on my Pennsylvania German upbringing. I didn't need to be enticed to like German because German was already relevant to me. We did worksheets and I didn't mind, in fact, I enjoyed them! I had a love of German that only increased and was solidified as I left middle school and entered high school.

During high school, I studied all five levels of German, even though I had to skip lunch my senior year to complete them. In my last year of high school, I was encouraged by one of my German teachers to study German in college and become a German teacher. That summer, on a school trip to Germany, I decided to study German. I had uncovered what I was truly interested in studying and making a career.

My experiences abroad as a student did not end with a high school trip to Germany for a week, but instead, a full semester abroad studying at the University of Erfurt in Germany. During the six months in Germany, I experienced more culture and language than I could have ever experienced in a classroom. My personal language growth soared and I became much more confident with my language skills. It was then that I realized that time spent abroad immersed in culture and language is key for language-learning students to become proficient in the target language. Languages are best learned through doing.

This core belief was expanded upon during my student teaching experience, where I was able to participate in a GAPP (German American Partnership Program) exchange, in which the German students attended school in America with their exchange partner and then their American partner visited with them in Germany over the summer. The American students who participated in this exchange showed huge language growth by interacting with their partner in the German language. It was also here that I was introduced to an interactive form of language teaching called TPR (Total

Physical Response)/TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling). This is language learning by doing and speaking. The students in my student teaching classroom were far more advanced than other language classrooms that I had experienced of the same language level. These methods followed me to my first job at a middle school where my curriculum was TPR/TPRS based. After the first three years there, I knew that these two methods of teaching were what most of my students needed and thrived on. These methods make language accessible to a more diverse mix of students by focusing on listening and doing to start, then adding speaking, reading, and eventually writing.

Currently, I teach sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students exploratory and level I German. My teaching style is still TPR/TPRS based and requires a lot of hands-on learning activities. I very rarely use worksheets or a workbook and I almost never use a textbook. I prefer this method of teaching a world language because it is grounded in following the language acquisition process, in which I feel very strongly, is the best way to learn a new language. Some main ideas about language acquisition are that language is learned first through listening, and then speaking, followed by reading, and finally writing. Secondly, using kinesthetics enhances language learning and lastly that repetition in-context increases understanding and usability.

In addition to using language in context, I also incorporate learning games and activities, which encourage using the language within competitive and cooperative settings. I have found that this curriculum is fun and unique

for both the students and teacher. Also, I have experienced that my students learn more vocabulary and grammar concepts in both English and German using this curriculum than when I used a standard textbook/workbook curriculum due to learning these concepts within the context of spoken language.

Unfortunately, no matter how fun and unique the curriculum may be, I struggle with adding relevant, authentic, and student-centered writing assessments into my classroom. I want to incorporate new methods to increase vocabulary use and reinforce grammar structures to improve writing fluency in the target language. I considered asking students to write a letter to a native speaker, thereby having my students use the language for a real-world purpose. Pen pals have been an intriguing activity to me and I have wanted to incorporate them into my German class for quite some time, but I was also concerned about my students' language proficiency and, of course, the time difference between the German-speaking countries and the US. As I talked to my colleagues, I learned that the Spanish teacher at my school implements pen pal letters in her classes with success. Therefore, after much discussion, I decided I should try incorporating pen pal communication to meet my need for authentic, student-centered, relevant writing in the target language.

My motivation to share my love of German with my students and help them find value and relevance in communicating in German is leading me to study and report my experiences and my students' experiences using pen pals. I am interested in finding a successful best practice for improving writing

fluency using a student-centered strategy, as writing is one of the modes of language learning that is least practiced. As they interact in authentic situations with other German speakers their age, how will pen pals impact their writing fluency, in particular, their vocabulary and grammar skills in German? All of these aspects helped me to form my research question: **What are the observed behaviors and reported experiences of eighth grade German level I students when implementing peer pen pal communication in the target language on the students' writing fluency?**

## Literature Review

Throughout the day all over the world individuals write for a variety of purposes. Stephanie McAndrews (2008) states in her book *Diagnostic Literacy Assessments and Instructional Strategies* that “writing is essential to life” (p. 197). Even though writing has a strong presence in our lives and has a direct connection to the reading process, writing instruction is far behind reading instruction as the focus in schools and in national and state legislation. Additionally, Omaggio Hadly (2000) argues that writing instruction tasks should not be isolated from other language skills such as reading, but used in an integrative approach to encourage more natural communication and aid in enhancing other language skills.

Creating and incorporating integrative, authentic writing tasks in a world language classroom is important for keeping students motivated and providing opportunities for them to find relevance in using and studying the target language (Barkaoui, 2007; Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Omaggio Hadley, 2000). One way to encourage authentic writing and motivate students to communicate in the target language is through the use of pen pals. Writing letters is a communicative skill that requires not only the ability to comprehend what is being written, but requires critical thinking in order to respond appropriately. In addition to critical thinking skills, students who are writing letters in the target language will need to rely on new and prior knowledge to be able to effectively communicate with an authentic audience that is individually chosen for them

(Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy & Igo, 2011; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015).

Throughout the literature review, current theories of how language is learned or acquired will be examined. Additionally, this review will discuss the positive opportunities available through acquisition-based writing activities, in particular pen pal writing, and the ways in which this writing supports language acquisition and abilities of second language learners.

### **Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory**

**Acquisition –Learning Hypothesis.** Stephen Krashen's *Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory* developed in 1981 attempts to explain how second languages are learned and acquired. Krashen suggests that languages and language abilities can be both learned and acquired independently through the *Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis*. Learning a language is described as purposefully learning rules and grammar structures; whereas, acquiring a language occurs without conscious effort. It is important to note that both written and oral language can be acquired. Krashen acknowledges throughout his SLA Theory that acquired language is more accurate and better retained (Krashen, 2003).

**Input (Comprehension) Hypothesis.** The *Input Hypothesis*, also known as the *Comprehensible Input Hypothesis*, introduced in 1977, is the basis of Krashen's SLA Theory and explains how language acquisition occurs: language is acquired when the brain receives messages that are interesting and understandable. Therefore, the input or *i* must be easily

understood and also include something new or  $+ I$ , creating  $i + I$ , which leads to language acquisition. Furthermore, Krashen states that language and language ability can be acquired without any production or output. However, it can be argued that output or language production is necessary to obtain the goal of communication in the second language (Krashen, 2003).

**Affective Filter Hypothesis.** The *Affective Filter Hypothesis* within the SLA Theory explains the importance of motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety when learning a language. The hypothesis states that if the affective filter is in place, it is extremely difficult for the language learner to reach native fluency even though there has been comprehensible input. The language will not reach the part of the brain, which is in control of learning a second language because it cannot get through the affective filter. Language learners increase their language proficiencies by lowering their filter through tasks and situations that are low-anxiety, relevant, and motivating (Krashen, 2003).

**Monitor Hypothesis.** Another hypothesis within the SLA Theory, the *Monitor Hypothesis*, was developed to explain the uses of language learned or acquired. According to this hypothesis, fluent and accurate written or spoken language comes mainly from linguistic knowledge that has been acquired and does not rely on the monitor or editor. Learned language works solely to correct language, which enables only a small amount of accurate language production that is heavily reliant on the monitor. The “monitor” allows the language user to alter their language production consciously by applying

learned language rules immediately during use or after language use, such as while editing. Therefore, the monitor is best used during writing when there is ample time to edit the language produced (Krashen, 2003; Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

### **Merrill Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis**

Taking the lead from Krashen's *Comprehensible Input Hypothesis* (1977) and adding a language production component, Swain's *Comprehensible Output Hypothesis* (1985) requires not just listening and comprehending, but also speaking and writing in order to acquire a language. Lightbown and Spada (2006) note, "the production of language pushes learners to process language more deeply... in preparing to speak or write they must pay more attention to how meaning is expressed through language than they do for the comprehension of language" (p. 48). The *Comprehensible Output Hypothesis* requires the second language learner to pay attention to the form and meaning in order to speak and write. The use of language and learning the language would likely take place at the same time (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Krashen (2003) argues that there is not enough evidence to support Swain's hypothesis, as it is difficult to determine how much language acquisition is used in language production, due to the use of the monitor, which relies on learned grammatical structures. Also, the previous argument that language can be acquired without production can be used to weaken Swain's hypothesis (Krashen, 2003). However, despite Krashen's disagreement with Swain's theory, Omaggio Hadley (2000) mentions Swain's

*Comprehensible Output Hypothesis* to support her best practices for developing second language writing skills. In addition to just creating tasks that focus on comprehensible output to help students practice language, it is also necessary to note that these tasks should be at the students' level of language competence to be able to encourage accuracy at a proficient writer's level. This statement is important when considering how to effectively implement pen pal writing with students at a beginning level of proficiency.

Barkaoui (2007) is in agreement with Omaggio Hadley (2000) and supports in his review of theories of second language writing that language activities should encourage students to share their writing among authentic audiences, such as peers, because it can heighten awareness about how ideas are transferred and received from writer to reader. As students share their writing, the reader provides the writer an understanding of how different language learners can interpret what is written. Using peer audiences with similar proficiencies enables students to write to a reader at their language learning level and in return, be provided appropriate feedback which will help the writer improve their language skills on their personal level.

### **Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory**

Vygotsky (1978) argues in his work titled *Mind in Society*, "In the same way as children learn to speak, they should be able to learn to read and write" (p. 118). Vygotsky's *Social Development Theory* originally published in 1934 encourages learning through social interaction. Therefore, the meaning behind the statement above is conducive to language learning as it is

saying that language learners need social interaction. Even though Vygotsky's contributions were published in the late 1970's, his theory is still highly regarded and supported through modern theories and new information about language development. Freeman and Freeman (1998) conclude that learners are successful and "learn as they engage in authentic social interaction" (p. 174). Lightbown and Spada (2006) also encourage using social activities to learn a language stating that language acquired through external social interaction will become internalized. In particular, the ability for the learner to process the language internally allows for better control over language use (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

### **Importance of Written Language Development**

**Supporting language acquisition through writing.** Many linguists and language learners agree that in order to become proficient in another language, the use of all language modes: reading, writing, listening and speaking must be incorporated through interaction. However, what modes or skills best lead to more proficient language learners? According to the research on how working memory moves information from short to long-term memory, it could be reasoned that one of the best ways to become more proficient in a second language is through writing (Kormos, 2012). Writing is a task full of opportunities for second language learners to consolidate their current knowledge and acquire new knowledge about the language (Marchón, 2011). Krashen's *Monitor Hypothesis* reasons that the monitor helps language learners correctly use language, especially when editing during writing.

Williams (2012) argues that because writing helps language learners notice and internalize new knowledge about language, provides opportunities for output, and promotes automatization, it may be beneficial to second language development.

**Learning vs. acquiring views of writing: How should writing be taught or practiced?** According to Krashen (2003), specifically teaching grammar does not encourage fluency or the correct use of grammar better than acquisition-based teaching for language production. Additionally, acquisition-based teaching that includes a problem-solving aspect is a beneficial way to encourage new linguistic knowledge and encourage writing (Krashen, 2003). Freeman and Freeman (2014) agree and caution teachers about incorporating writing only for the purpose of form and not for content, by stating, “students who focus on form may not even try to use new words or sentence patterns for fear of making errors” (p. 77). Students who write in an acquisition-based classroom are motivated because they have written primarily for content, not form, and for the purpose of communication. Written language is developed naturally by focusing on both content and form (Freeman & Freeman, 2014). In order to encourage successful writing, the task needs to be one that is motivating, personal, authentic, and requires critical thinking (Barkaoui, 2007; Duke et al., 2006; Gambrell et al., 2011; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015; Omaggio Hadley, 2000). The best practices behind pen pal writing in a second language encompass all four of these areas.

## **What is authentic writing?**

Due to the nature of providing opportunities to interact authentically, the term *authenticity* must be defined from two aspects: the task and the product. Is the task authentic? Does it require the writer to communicate with a real audience? Is the product authentic? Is it used or created outside the classroom? Duke et al. (2006) argue that the meaning and use of authentic literacy activities is creating authentic tasks for the classroom that provide opportunities for students to use the target language in a way that they would if they were in that country, “not in abstract, decontextualized terms but in application, in a context that language is really for” (p. 345). In addition, “to be considered highly authentic, a literacy activity must include an authentic text read or written for an authentic purpose” (p. 346). For example, instead of memorizing lines from a dialogue and repeating them in front of the class to show progress in vocabulary, grammar development, and pronunciation, the students could use personal questions and answers to find out information about each other, much like a situation of meeting someone your age in another country for the first time.

Duke et al. (2006) suggest that writing tasks should be purposeful and develop language skills for real world use. The tasks should have a clear sense of real audience so students can develop audience awareness and competence in the target language (Barkaoui, 2007, Guariento & Morley, 2001). Guariento and Morley (2001) describe two aspects specifically that define authentic writing by determining whether real communication has occurred and if the

second language has been written for a genuine purpose (p. 349). Lastly, one of the results of Moore and Seeger's (2009) study convincingly determines that implementing authentic writing experiences naturally develops and supports children's writing (Moore & Seeger, 2009).

### **How is pen pal writing authentic?**

Pen pal writing is another term for letter writing. According to Moore and Seeger (2009), "letter writing represents a purposeful, authentic writing genre" (p. 186). Pen pal writing is a real-life task that occurs outside the classroom. It is an important life skill needed to communicate not just with loved-ones but also to apply for a job, or relay information from one company to another or from consumer to company. The students are reading and writing for a real purpose and to a real person (Alvis, 2007; Freeman & Freeman, 1998; Hook, 1995). It is important to note the definition of "real" purpose and "real" person because an assignment in a classroom is arguably written for a "real" person and purpose, but this is not considered an authentic purpose. Duke et al. (2006) define "real" person as a reader who reads what is written in the letter for the purpose of communication and not for the purpose of evaluation (p. 352). Furthermore, Guariento and Morley (2001) argue that it's not just whether or not the task is based on meaning and communication, but it is also important that the task provide opportunities to help the writer acquire real-world vocabulary in the target language (p. 347).

## **Personal Relevancy and Motivation in Writing**

Writing tasks in a second language should be authentic and meaningful. However, just because a task is authentic and meaningful to the teacher, does not make it meaningful for the students. In order to make writing relevant and motivating for students, Moore and Seeger (2009) note that, “children’s voices are most clear when they are engaged in writing about that which is important and meaningful in their lives” (p. 186). Therefore, writing tasks in a second language should include students’ interests, as they are meaningful to them. Kormos (2012) links interests to creating intrinsic motivation, which enhances feelings of enjoyment and also argues that the lack of student interest will affect the second language writing process and their ability to acquire the language. Additionally, writers who find no personal relevance or motivation will likely not engage in completing tasks or learning from them.

### **What makes pen pal writing personally relevant and motivating?**

Pen pal writing is considered to be a way of maintaining and increasing the writer’s motivation because it provides writers with the feeling that they are learning authentic language (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Freeman and Freeman (1998) offer a convincing example of how pen pal writing is personally relevant and therefore motivating by sharing results from classroom studies using pen pal writing between other second language learners. In one of the studies, the teacher noted the difference in time and effort her students put into writing letters that would be shared with other

classmates. The students put more time and effort into the letters than when they wrote compositions solely for the teacher's evaluation purposes (Freeman & Freeman, 1998). Gambrell et al. (2011) additionally noted that providing an authentic audience fosters ownership, personal relevance, and student control of learning, which can increase motivation and engagement.

Gambrell et al. (2011) conducted a study that implemented authentic literacy tasks using pen pal interventions for the purpose of observing how motivation affects literacy achievement and development. One of the main questions that guided their research focused on what the students thought about participating in the pen pal intervention and how it affected their motivation by asking "what do students report regarding their participation in a pen pal intervention that focuses on authentic reading, writing, and discussion tasks?" (p. 239). The participants consisted of 219 diverse students in grades three through five.

During the seven months the study was conducted, the students and adult pen pal volunteers read common books and exchanged letters about the books. Additionally, during class, the students participated in small-group discussions about the main ideas in the books. Throughout the study, the participants were reading both narrative and informational texts, writing about those texts and expressing their own opinions with their pen pal, and having small-group discussions about both their opinions and their pen pals opinions with their peers. The students were responsible for knowing the content of the texts and thinking critically about what they had read.

The Literacy Motivation Study used a Likert scale to inquire about how the students felt about authentic tasks at the start and end of the process. The informant interviews were conducted at the end of the process and inquired about student perceptions of the pen pal experiences and the reading and discussion tasks. The Literacy Motivation Study findings were positive and revealed increases in motivation. The informant interviews also provided positive results as 26 out of the 28 informant interviewees stated they would like to participate in the pen pal intervention again. The interviews also revealed that the students enjoyed having a pen pal and having a person outside of class with which to share their ideas. The researchers feel “that the authentic and purposeful nature of the pen pal exchange...carried sufficient social value for students to be more motivated to engage in reading, writing, and discussion tasks” (Gambrell et al., 2011, p. 250). The importance of this study lies in the understanding that providing opportunities for students to be motivated in literacy achievement and development from a young age is crucial due to the direct correlation between motivation and literacy achievement and development in later years.

### **What is critical thinking when writing?**

Paul and Elder (2002) define critical thinking as “the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, more defensible” (p. 316). Therefore, from the second language-learning point of view, critical thinking is not rewriting sentences in different tenses of language or using drills or pattern practice

assignments, but thinking about what was written and then responding appropriately with accurate grammatical structures and vocabulary (Mehta & Al-Mahrooqi, 2015). Aski (2005) points out that language learning and acquisition happen when learners are presented opportunities to process input (what is written) and comprehend the connections between grammatical forms and lexical meanings. Critical thinking in a second language is almost always used when students are required to read a text in the target language and then must respond to the text. The second language students cannot just write grammatically correct sentences in order to communicate well. The students need to know how language works so that they can effectively respond to a question or acquire new information (Moore & Seeger, 2009).

### **How does pen pal writing require students to think critically?**

Freeman and Freeman (1998) explain, “pen pal letters are one way that teachers can create situations in which their students can develop language in social interactions” (p. 148). In order to become proficient in a second language, the learners need to use their knowledge of the language in a social environment. Additionally, learners involved in social interactions cannot just write sentences using correct lexical and grammatical structures, but must also be aware of the reader and how the reader will process what is written (Barkaoui, 2007). Moore and Seeger (2009) further affirm “language learning is a reciprocal process supported by negotiating meaning through authentic question and response processes” (p. 200). Therefore, due to the nature of pen pal writing, the language learner must process the input received in the letter

by identifying the connections between the grammar forms and vocabulary in order to respond appropriately.

### **Pen pals: A Best Practice**

Pen pal activities could be thought of as real life situations that are purposefully designed to promote the development of writing skills through reviewing past and current vocabulary and using correct grammatical structures through the practicing of verb forms. The results of successful pen pal implementations show that writing to a pen pal is an effective way for students to acquire a second language (Chaffee-Sorace, 1999) and students show higher growth in comprehension and writing (Duke et al., 2006).

Research into the effectiveness of pen pal activities in a classroom setting has been conducted among multiple levels of language learners and even across a variety of content areas with publications of both practice-based and research-based articles and books. The research identified will focus on pen pals used in both early second language proficiency classrooms, which most directly relates to this study, and advanced second language proficiency classrooms. Furthermore, a research study using pen pals conducted in an elementary science classroom to promote literacy will also be examined. In all areas of use, both second language classrooms and a content-area classroom, pen pal activities provided a positive language learning experience.

In Chaffee-Sorace's (1999) and her colleague's experiences with college-level second language learners in Maryland, implementing pen pals has impacted and improved her student's writing skills and cultural

knowledge. The results show that their students are able to review vocabulary and practice using grammatical structures while writing, which effectively increases their second language acquisition due to the authentic nature of pen pal communication.

Additionally, Duke et al. (2006) argue through the use of authentic writing activities in elementary science classrooms, students develop higher comprehension and improved writing skills when learning the language in the context in which the language is used. Their study was conducted over two years in 26 second and third grade classrooms of districts with students from low and middle socioeconomic status. The students and teachers participated in a variety of both reading and writing activities in which students read informational texts and wrote information and procedural texts for the purpose of sharing with others what they had learned to help solve a problem or provide instructions for a task. These writing tasks became authentic because what was written would be read by someone outside of their classroom: not for the purpose of evaluating what was written, but for the purpose of communicating. The results of their study affirm that including authentic literacy tasks in the classroom allows for deeper comprehension and improved writing due to providing opportunities to use the language in real-life situations for the purpose of communicating.

Willis (1996) agrees that interacting naturally to achieve a communicative goal is far more likely to increase fluency and acquisition of language. Freeman and Freeman (1998) agree and further argue that while the

primary function of students writing pen pal letters is to develop writing proficiency in the second language, chances to talk and read in the second language are also provided throughout the process.

### **Implementing pen pals for Novice Language Students**

Hook's (1995) introduction of "mystery" pen pals in her beginning level Spanish class is the model on which this study is based. Her idea stemmed from wanting to create an opportunity for her students to write in the target language in light of the fact that they have limited linguistic knowledge. The first attempt at this strategy was to have her students write to imaginary pen pals, but she quickly realized that the assignment wasn't very meaningful because it didn't have an authentic audience. Therefore, she assigned each student a Spanish first name and exchanged the names between two of her beginning level Spanish classes. This gave her students the opportunity to use beginning level lexical and grammatical structures, such as describing themselves, including hobbies and family members, and their ages to write to their pen pal in Spanish. The teacher's role throughout this strategy is to evaluate and distribute the letters between the classes. Hook (1995) confirms that "students are delighted to hear back from their mystery pen pal, and teenagers like the idea that the teacher has given them the freedom to write letters on their own in the new language" (p. 353). Her researched-based curriculum provides a model framework for pen pals. In order for the activity to be successful over the span of multiple letters, first, the students should only use their Spanish class names and last name initial or the teacher should

provide the students with numbers instead of names and second, the letters should be written during class time so that the teacher can ensure that all students receive a letter (p. 353-354).

Another example of “mystery” pen pals implemented into the language classroom comes from Alvis (2007), who activated prior knowledge of Spanish-language vocabulary using the “social nature of eleven and twelve year-olds” (p. 15). Alvis (2007) had students write and illustrate postcards that they signed as “your secret classmate” and were exchanged with other students in her other classes. The students writing the postcards needed to meet specific guidelines for writing, such as complete sentences, legibility, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The information written on the postcards provided clues for the reader to figure out their secret classmate. The clues included age, description, favorite class, after school activities, and where they lived. In addition to providing clues, the writers also included questions for their reader. According to Alvis (2007), “students were eager to read and write in Spanish to meet their own communication needs: determining their secret classmate’s identity and telling about themselves” (p. 15).

Hook (1995) and Alvis (2007) provide practice-based examples of successful implementation of pen pals into early language proficiency classrooms. Chafee-Sorace (1999), Willis (1996), Duke et al. (2006), and Freeman and Freeman (1998) describe a variety of ways to incorporate pen pal activities into not only second language classrooms, but also a core

content-area classroom. All of the above researchers exemplify positive examples of the use of pen pals in the classroom to enhance language learning.

### **Summary**

Well-respected language theorists Krashen and Vygotsky support the use of social interaction to improve proficiency in second language learners. Additionally, language theorist Merrill Swain (1985), as well as researchers, such as Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015), Aski (2005), Freeman and Freeman (1998), and Kormos (2012) all agree that social interaction through writing is a valuable and necessary mode of communication in a second language. Furthermore, Barkaoui (2007) and Moore and Seeger (2009) concur that writing requires critical thinking while using new and prior knowledge. This allows second-language learners to reinforce their vocabulary and grammar skills through acquisition using a real-world form of communication. Incorporating pen pals into a second-language classroom offers an authentic, motivating, and social task for students using both comprehensible input and comprehensible output to build writing fluency and increase language acquisition as seen through the research of Hook (1995) and Alvis (2007).

Therefore, what will be the observed and reported experiences of eighth grade German level I students when implementing peer pen pal communication in the target language on the students' writing fluency?

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Research Goals**

When I began to think about my level I German curriculum and the specific areas of need in my classroom, I knew immediately which language mode was the most difficult for my students. It was no surprise that writing would be my focus since not only is it a valuable skill, but also it is often neglected outside of the language classroom. A majority of the time, it is the last mode tested even though it is the mode of language we use to test. Unfortunately, I am also guilty of putting writing behind listening, speaking, and reading. It is the least developed skill, but the most requested of my students. Additionally, writing, when not developed early enough, becomes the most difficult mode of language, especially in the upper levels of language learning. Therefore, I knew I needed to focus on writing but not just have them write for writing's sake. For my students, anything that isn't relevant or enjoyable to them is not taken seriously and not completed using their best effort. Knowing this encouraged me to find a writing activity that was relevant, authentic, and interesting: a writing activity that means something to them and will improve their writing skills. Thus, my study focuses on the observed behaviors and reported experiences of eighth grade German level I students when implementing peer pen pal communication in the target language on the students' writing fluency.

## **Setting & Participants**

**Setting.** I am the German teacher in one of the four middle schools within my district located in the eastern part of Pennsylvania. Throughout the day, I teach three levels of German: Exploratory, Level I part 1, and Level I part 2, over three grade levels: sixth through eighth. Since my school district is a large district in Pennsylvania, our students come from a variety of backgrounds. My school has 764 students including 48.6 percent Hispanics, 36.6 percent White, 13.4 percent Black, and the remaining population comes from Asian and/or Native American decent. Due to the large percentage of the students in my school building who are eligible for free or reduced lunch, which is approximately 72.5 percent, it can be concluded that most of the students come from a low socioeconomic background.

**Participants.** The participants for my study include 35 eighth grade students in my German level I class for the 2016-2017 school year. Distributed among three class periods there are 16 females and 19 males with five students having Gifted Individualized Education Plans (GIEPs) and no students having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Additionally, the students meet for German class on either days 1, 2, and 3 or 4, 5, and 6 for about 50 minutes. All students placed in a world language class must have scored proficient or advanced in both math and reading on the state standardized test or PSSA.

## **Procedures**

Implementing pen pals into my classroom was not an easy intervention to design. There were many ways to go about providing each of my eighth grade students with someone to write to in the target language. At first, I decided that I would contact a class overseas and we could write to each other. However, there were many issues surrounding this idea such as time delay, reliability, and most importantly, language proficiency. Students in eighth grade in Germany and my level I German students do not have equal proficiencies in German which makes it very difficult for both my students and the German counterpart in the form of what to write and how to write it. The German students could quickly become bored with my students low proficiency and my students would be frustrated with the Germans students' advanced proficiency. Also, how quickly and reliably would we as a class be able to exchange letters? This led me to utilizing email and typing our letters. Unfortunately, a downfall to this idea was again proficiency and additionally, appropriateness. As the teacher I would have had to proofread every letter for every student both being sent and being received to make sure that what was written was school appropriate which would have meant having them all sent to me and then printed out. Therefore, I chose to use mystery pen pals within my classes so I could control reliability, time, and appropriateness and also incorporate getting to know someone new within our school by having a written conversation in German. My students chose German names and were then paired with another one of my students at random as long as they were not in the same class. Then based on both pre-assigned topics that matched the

current vocabulary section and basic getting to know you informational phrases, they wrote letters to their pen pals using their German pseudonym, edited them with a classmate or myself, and then I delivered them to their pen pal during class.

### **Data Collection**

In order to measure the participants' writing fluency, I administered surveys, interviews, and reflection slips in addition to collecting student work and writing researcher observations so that I could ensure the true findings of my study.

**Student Surveys, Reflections, & Interviews.** Even though most of my students were not new to me at the start of this school year since eighth grade takes part 2 of German level I with me, I realized before starting my survey that I was not aware of what they thought about the language or of most of their backgrounds. Therefore, the very first item I asked them to complete was a Student Information Survey (**Appendix D**) which asked them for information about their first language, culture, reasons for studying German, and their view of writing in German.

Then, halfway through the study, they completed a Mid-Research Survey (**Appendix E**), which asked 10 questions about their view of writing and how they feel the pen pal communication is impacting them. I created this survey to check-in with my students about their reactions to the pen pal letters and how they feel about writing since we have begun writing more in German.

Lastly, the End-of-Research Interview (**Appendix F**) was an eight question individual interview conducted by me about how the pen pal letters have impacted their writing and if they enjoyed writing to a pen pal. I decided upon an interview for the final discussion with my students so that I could ask the difficult questions and make sure that if there is anything they need to say that wasn't asked, they could have that opportunity. Also, this interview allowed my students to talk about their growth as a German student in grammar and vocabulary.

Another form of data collected was Writing Reflection Slips (**Appendix H**). After completing the baseline writing prompt at the beginning of my study, they completed a reflection slip that asked them to rate the level of difficulty of writing using a Likert scale 1-4 labeled Easy, Somewhat Easy, Somewhat Difficult, Difficult. Then, explain why. Additionally, after completing the final writing prompt, my students completed a second reflection slip so that I could note the change in their feelings toward writing.

**Student Work.** Assessments from the curriculum were given throughout the study and include the G-2-5 Test (Quiz) (**Appendix N**), G-2-6 Test (Quiz) (**Appendix O**), and G-2-7 Test (Quiz) (**Appendix P**). The G-2-5 Quiz required students to match the German word I said with the opposite meaning of a vocabulary word on their paper. Then students had to write four descriptive sentences about four different people and answer two personal questions about themselves and a family member using a word and phrase bank. The G-2-6 and G-2-7 quizzes required students to choose correct forms

of sentences and write sentences by answering personal questions. I am using these quizzes as student work for my study because they show student knowledge of vocabulary and writing skills.

The Baseline Writing Prompt: Ein Bild sagt 1000 Wörter (**Appendix K**) and the Final Writing Prompt: Was Sagen Sie? (**Appendix L**) were created so that I could see changes in my students writing from the start of the study to the end. My students were given a prompt with a photograph and were instructed to write at least 10 sentences in German in relation to the photograph. It could have been a conversation, dialogue, or just sentences about what they saw in the picture. Most students wrote a dialogue between the people in the picture. The baseline prompt was their first real test of writing in German and it was the first time for me to see their vocabulary and grammar knowledge put into writing. The baseline prompt was assessed using the original German Level I Writing Rubric (**Appendix I**) and the final prompt using modified German Level I Writing Rubric (**Appendix J**).

A 5-Minute Word Write Assessment (**Appendix M**) was given at both the start and the end of the study. This word list was a quick way to check vocabulary knowledge. My students were asked to write as many German words or phrases as they could with the English translation in five minutes.

Pen pal Letter 1: Rough draft and Final copy, Pen pal Letter 2: Rough Draft and Final Copy, and Pen pal Letter 3: Rough Draft and Final Copy, are the focus writing activities for my study. My students were provided with

letter topic papers (**Appendix G**), lined paper for rough drafts, and nice paper with a scroll print for final copies. They were given time to write to their pen pal, both individually and with a partner in order to peer edit each other's papers. Once they were peer edited, they wrote their letter on the final copy paper and turned it in so that it could be given to their pen pal. These letters were assessed using both the original writing rubric and the modified writing rubric.

**Researcher Observations.** The third type of data collected is participant observations. This is done through the use of a double-entry journal, where one side of the document has the direct observations of the participants and the other side has my understandings and reflections of these observations. The double-entry journal enables me to distinguish what actually occurred and why I believe it occurred which allows for better reflexivity of the data. The double-entry journal is also coded to identify common themes that emerge throughout the research. The participant observations were collected within the context of the classroom while the students were participating in the intervention. The observer understandings and reflections were noted after class or the school day when the students were not in the classroom.

### **Trustworthiness Statement**

As an action researcher, it is important to validate my research by using evidence to support my conclusions. There are many ways to show the honest connection between what I have experienced and any assumptions that

I make before, during, and at the end of my research. The ways in which my conclusions are validated is through participant feedback using low inference descriptors (direct participant quotes), member checks using conferencing and interviews, and reflexivity on the process and accurately collected data, including persistent observations and peer debriefing with colleagues and fellow teacher action researchers. Additionally, data triangulation used for thematic analysis, which occurs when at least three types of data are collected and analyzed in the search for common themes, detailed descriptions of the study strategies, setting, and participants, and lastly negative case analysis including researcher bias explanations are also outlined (Hendricks, 2013).

While measuring writing fluency in the target language, participant feedback using low inference descriptors is crucial because every participant experiences the writing process differently. Therefore, it is valuable for each participant to have a voice due to the variety of differences and preferences among each. Participant feedback in the form of quotes comes directly from the participants involved and is not altered so that their true experiences can be understood and portrayed. In addition to ensuring that the participants' comments are not misconstrued or used out of context, quoting participants directly removes the likelihood that the views of either the participants or me are only assumptions. Going further, utilizing member checks individually through conferences and interviews as well as group discussions provide opportunities for the participants to share their input on the accuracy of the research findings. Respondent validation helps form a bond of trust between

the participants and me and can decrease my bias, which creates a more stable and credible study (Hendricks, 2013, McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

In order to obtain low inference descriptors, I took accurate notes regarding observations and recorded them in a journal separating fact from opinion. A key importance to the validity of my study is ensuring that facts and opinions are kept separate. The strategy was also implemented over a longer period of time to allow the observed experiences to be a true representation of the impact of the intervention. These journal observations promote naturally occurring personal reflexivity, which also occurred as I presented my findings to my peers for discussion through peer debriefing. Their views and own action research studies offer a different point of view, wisdom, and critiques that I might not have originally seen or noted. Being able to reflect continuously on the success of the study while planning and implementing is important so that changes in ways of collecting data could be made or the needs of the participants could be met appropriately.

In addition to journal observations, other forms of inquiry data such as interviews, surveys, and student artifacts were collected and triangulated to ensure trustworthiness. Two surveys (**Appendices D & E**), one at the beginning and one at the middle of the study provided baseline and intermediate information about writing, while a post-interview (**Appendix F**) provided an overall perspective of the intervention. Student work in the form of pre and post intervention short prompts and pen pal letters written throughout the study provided writing skill progress. These types of data were

then viewed separately and coded to find common themes in a process called thematic analysis. In using data triangulation, I am able to have a higher confidence level when making statements regarding my research because the outcome can be identified in different areas of data (Hendricks, 2013).

However well the data is triangulated, it would be difficult to fully understand and trust the weight of the information offered, unless presented with a detailed description of the study with strategies and interventions, the setting including participant information, and the research methods. Moreover, sharing the steps to follow the ethical rules of research is equally important to maintaining my study's credibility. At the start of my study, I submitted a proposal to the Moravian College Human Subject Internal Review Board and have received written approval to conduct my research (**Appendix Q**). My principal and my students' guardians received informed consent forms (**Appendices A & B**) and my students received assent forms (**Appendix C**) outlining my study. The letters also provided voluntary participation information including that data of only those who had parental consent would be used, how to withdraw with a lack of penalty for withdrawing information, and contact information if questions or comments should arise. Lastly, providing safeguards to keep confidential information secure through using pseudonyms instead of student names, specifying a safe place to store all of the data collected, and when the study has been concluded, ensuring that the data is destroyed appropriately (McNiff, 2014).

The final aspect of ensuring trustworthiness is being honest about researcher biases and using negative case analysis when data collected from the study is not supported by other data sources. It is inevitable that researcher bias will occur due to the fact that action research requires personal investment in the study. My study began with a bias toward the success that occurred when other teachers implement pen pals. It is necessary to admit that I believed this intervention would be successful. However, aspects of my study that were not successful cannot be hidden or filtered by my bias and must be analyzed as to why they were not successful and how they could become successful (McNiff, 2014).

## **Our Mystery Writing Adventure**

### **And So The Adventure Begins...**

This school year began with the anxiousness of meeting new students and the excitement of returning students sharing stories of their summer adventures. Since my eighth graders in the second part of level I are already familiar with my classroom expectations, they come into the room and settle themselves in a seat that is comfortable for them. They are mostly worried about the other students that will be in the same class and whether or not their friends will have German class during the same period. I enjoy that I have the same group of students for two years in a row because we are comfortable with each other and I know my students well, which helps me plan lessons that are appropriate for them.

The first three weeks of school are review and organizational days. Due to the summer break, most of my students have lost their notebook materials and since they haven't used German during the summer, the majority have lost a lot of their vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, we complete vocabulary lists and play review games. I began teaching my curriculum from where I left off at the end of last year. After about two days of introducing new vocabulary and getting back into the routine of the curriculum, I introduced my study to my classes on September 16.

### **My First Teacher "light bulb" Moment**

**September 16.** I was nervous. I had never done anything like action research before and I had no clue how to talk to my students about my study.

During both classes on days 1, 2, and 3, I walked to the front of the room and decided right there in that moment I was just going to go for it! I sat on one of the front desks in my classroom to create a conversation-like atmosphere, looked at my students, and said “I’m going to introduce something new.” Looking back, these words were probably the worst choice for getting my students interested in my study. My students’ reactions were, as you can imagine, less than desirable and consisted of groans and moans of uncertainty. One of my stronger language students, Lukas (a pseudonym), asked “Is it good or bad?” I kept going in my introduction by explaining that a requirement for my graduation from college was to conduct a research study in my classroom and write about it. I told them that they were all going to get pen pals and that I was going to focus on how their grammar and vocabulary will be impacted as they write in German to their pen pal. After they heard they would be writing to pen pals, they became more interested and began asking questions about how this was going to work. Unfortunately when I explained that they wouldn’t be writing to Germans, but they would be writing to fellow German students in our school, they weren’t as excited anymore. I explained to them why the study was designed without native pen pals, but I could still sense the disappointment. One student, Simone, sarcastically remarked, “Great, I’m going to get Wolfgang!” Sensing their disappointment and that I was losing their focus, I handed them the assent and consent forms (**Appendices A & C**) to take home and have signed. It was at this point that I really knew what they thought of my study when Reinhard

asked, “So if I don’t get this paper signed, I don’t have to do this pen pal thing?” This was crushing. It was then that I decided I needed to change the way I introduced my study to my third and final class of eighth grade students on days 4, 5, and 6.

**Reflection and Take Two.** After much discussion with my fellow action researchers, I decided that I needed to go about introducing my study very differently for this last class. I concluded through these peer conversations that I focused too much on me. I introduced this study in a way that made it all about me. In reality, this study was not all about me and is almost entirely about my students. It was then that my light bulb went on and I finally realized the importance of relevance for my students. As I was researching pen pals for my literature review I began quoting researchers, such as Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, and Tower (2006) who said that one of the most important aspects of pen pals is that they are personally relevant for the writer and yet I didn’t apply this personal relevance to the introduction of my study. So I created a plan to begin my introduction with what we have already learned, what we still have to learn, and how we could learn the material so that my students could find the relevance for themselves.

**September 21.** Instead of introducing my study using the phrase “I’m going to introduce something new,” I began by asking my class some reflective questions. First, I asked them what we had already learned in German class and the strategies we used to learn language. Then we wrote all of the information they provided on the board. Next, I asked them what they

thought we were going to learn this year and what strategies they thought we were going to be able to use to learn them. The board was filled with answers of forming sentences, reading, speaking, and translating. Then I asked them if we could learn to do these things by solely playing games and identifying vocabulary like we did last year. Surprisingly, they said no, even though they were quick to mention that the games did help them learn the vocabulary and were fun. I agreed with them, but then revealed that I had been thinking about a fun and meaningful way we could practice what we already know of German and could also help us learn new German and explained that one way we could accomplish this was through writing. I continued by saying that we won't be writing just to write, but we will be writing to a pen pal in German so that we can practice our skills. This introduction came with the reaction I was hoping to hear: excitement! I explained that they would choose German names and their pen pal would be a mystery student from another German class. This time when I discussed the need for them to complete the consent and assent forms, I didn't have a single student ask if they could not participate because their parent didn't provide consent.

This first light bulb moment was a valuable, personal teaching moment that continues to remind me and encourage me to always strive to make learning experiences relevant to the learner. The next day for both days of classes consisted of completing a student information survey focusing on their background, view of the German language and culture, and their writing skills, which led to my second light bulb moment.

## **“Light bulb” Moment Two and Baseline Data Activities**

**Student Information Survey.** Before this action research project, I very rarely thought about the reasons behind my students’ choice to study German. However, as I learned at the beginning of my study, relevance is important for language learners and why they chose to learn German and how they feel about German now that they are halfway through level I is extremely important for their language learning. Due to the location of my school and the student population, I just assumed that the majority of my students were in German class because they were put there, not because they chose to study German. I believed this because most of the students in my building are Spanish speakers or are of Spanish-speaking decent. Additionally, I wanted to know what they thought about learning German, what they saw as future German use, such as career options and living abroad, and how they felt about writing in German. The results of the student information survey surprised me and led to my second light bulb moment: my students are actually interested in learning German and all along I thought they were in my class against their will!

**September 19 and 25.** As soon as my students settled into their seats, I began distributing the Student Information Survey (**Appendix D**). This survey was about three pages and had approximately fifteen questions. My students’ reactions to this survey were varied and consisted of interest and curiosity, but also disinterest. Some of my students, such as Simone and Lukas, expressed disinterest due to the length of the survey and getting the

answers correct, whereas Rolf and Christoph expressed their interests in German due to their German ancestry and family's ability to speak German at home. I was a little confused as students expressed a disinterest in completing the survey, as this task was completely relevant to them and was not a test. There were no correct or incorrect answers and this survey was completely in English. I wrote this disinterest off as laziness in my morning classes and showing off to seem cool in my afternoon classes. I was initially concerned about the results of this survey because I didn't want to learn that my students hated German class and I was nervous that they did. If the results said that my students hated German, this would ultimately have me blaming myself for their lack of interest. It's my job as the teacher to instill in them the love for German and it would mean that I was failing at my job. As my students completed the survey and turned it in to me to tally the results, there was only one real question from the survey that I needed to see their answers to immediately: do you want to continue to study German next year? What did I expect to see as the answer to this question? No! What were the results of this question? Much to my surprise, all but two students said Yes! It was at this moment that I realized that my classroom was not a prison. My students overwhelmingly wanted to learn German and I was shocked.

10. I want to continue studying German next year.

Yes

No

*Learning Another Language Questions*

11. How do you learn a language best?

review games and vocab sheets

12. Do you like to write in German?

Not at all

Very Much

1

2

3

13. On a scale of 1-3 how confident do you feel writing in German?

Not at all

Very confident

1

2

3

14. Would you like to improve your German writing?

Yes

No

15. Do you think being a confident writer in German will help you be a better German speaker?

Yes

No

How so?

Because its very easy to write and read a language if you know how to speak it.

**Figure 1: Sample Information Survey**

10. I want to continue studying German next year.  Yes  No

*Learning Another Language Questions*

11. How do you learn a language best?

I WRITE IT

12. Do you like to write in German?

Not at all

Very Much

1

2

3

13. On a scale of 1-3 how confident do you feel writing in German?

Not at all

Very confident

1

2

3

14. Would you like to improve your German writing?  Yes  No

15. Do you think being a confident writer in German will help you be a better German speaker?  Yes  No

Figure 2: Sample Information Survey

10. I want to continue studying German next year.

Yes

No

*Learning Another Language Questions*

11. How do you learn a language best?

By speaking it.

12. Do you like to write in German?

Not at all

1

2

Very Much

3

13. On a scale of 1-3 how confident do you feel writing in German?

Not at all

1

2

Very confident

3

14. Would you like to improve your German writing?

Yes

No

**Figure 3: Sample Information Survey**

This “light bulb” moment proved to be bitter sweet for me. All this time I thought I was the only one interested in learning German and I was wrong! This moment meant that my students weren’t complaining about learning German, they were complaining because they weren’t provided relevant and interesting tasks to both learn and use German. The results to this survey provided more justification for introducing pen pals into my classroom and revealed to me that this strategy was a good match for my students.

**Baseline Writing Prompt: September 28 and October 3.** Following the Student Information Survey, I had students complete baseline writing activities so that both my students and I could see their current writing skills. The first writing activity was the baseline writing prompt titled “Ein Bild sagt

1000 Wörter.” (**Appendix K**) The instructions required my students to write at least 10 sentences in German. As soon as my students received their prompt there were immediate questions of concern. They asked me, “is this graded,” “do I need to spell everything correctly,” “can we use our vocabulary sheets or the sentences from the short stories?” Therefore, in order to ease my students’ worries, I explained that we are going to write in German so that we can see how well you can write and that everyone should just try their best.

Throughout the baseline writing prompt, I viewed many emotional approaches to being asked to write in German. As my students begin their writing prompt, Udo, a student that spent a year in Germany as a young child, quickly begins writing while the others simply stare at their papers or the rubric (**Appendix I**), which I distributed with the prompt.

## Ein Bild sagt 1000 Wörter!

Create a conversation in German using the following picture. Write at least 10 sentences using only German. No English, please.



"Guten Tag Gerd!" sagt Sabine "Oh wie heißt du?" fragt Gerd "Ich heist Sabine!"  
"Was ist los Gerd?" sagt Waltraud  
"Sabine ist was ist los!" "Geht recht Mädchen," sagt Waltraud und ksst Gerd.  
Gerd erhorrecht um und springt neben Sabine "Ich hee dich Sabine!" und gibt die hand.

### Figure 4: Udo's Baseline Writing Prompt

Else boldly states, "I don't know any German," which is her cry for help. Else is a smart student that knows a lot of German, but has low confidence when a task requires her to be challenged, even a small challenge, and in her strive to

be well-liked and noticed, relies on others to help her. If I could write her a short letter I would say:

A Letter to Else: Else- Smart, confident young women are attractive and well-liked, too.

### Ein Bild sagt 1000 Wörter!

Create a conversation in German using the following picture. Write at least 10 sentences using only German. No English, please.



"Hallo" sagt Sabine. "Guten Abend"  
Sabine und Herr Schmidt," sagt  
Nicole. "Wie geht's es dir?" fragt  
Herr Schmidt. "Nicht so gut,"  
sagt Nicole. "Was ist los?" fragt  
Sabine.

Figure 5: Else's Baseline Writing Prompt

Lastly, Heidi, a new student to German class, sits and stares at the paper not writing anything. She has been in German class for about fifteen days and has done a remarkable job learning vocabulary, but does not yet have the experience to be able to form sentences in German. She is quiet and doesn't complain, but as I walked next to her desk, I sensed the frustration and I hoped that I haven't rushed too quickly into requiring German from her.

**Writing Reflection Slip.** Following the baseline writing prompt, my students completed a writing reflection slip that asked them to rate their writing experience using a Likert scale and then explain why they chose their rating. (**Appendix H**) The majority of my students answered truthfully and provided valuable insights in their struggles with writing. A couple students, Udo and Connie, rated their writing experience as somewhat easy, when most chose somewhat difficult, because they were able to remember conversational vocabulary.

**Reflection Slip**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Circle the level of difficulty you feel when writing in German

Easy	Somewhat Easy	Somewhat Difficult	Difficult
1	2	3	4

2. Explain why.

*I can write words, not sentences fluently*

---

---

---

**Figure 6: Connie's Baseline Reflection Slip**

**Reflection Slip**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Circle the level of difficulty you feel when writing in German.

Easy

Somewhat Easy

Somewhat Difficult

Difficult

1

2

3

4

2. Explain why.

I just used words that were taught  
and burned into my brain.

**Figure 7: Udo's Baseline Reflection Slip**

These two students are very confident and allowed me to see that confidence has a lot of bearing on my students' ability to write and write well in German. This helps support Krashen's *Affective Filter Hypothesis*, which states that when the affective filter is in place due to lack of self-esteem or comfortableness, students struggle to learn language, but when removed, students excel in language learning.

**Baseline Word Write: October 4 and 7.** Due to the nature of my study, I decided that I needed a way to get an accurate picture of my students' vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, after consulting with a colleague who suggested a 5-Minute Word Write (**Appendix M**), I distributed lined paper to my students and asked them to write as many German words they could think of with the English meaning within a short five minute window of time. Needless to say, they were all stressed, even the more confident students. My days 1, 2, and 3 students completed the task reluctantly. Else again expressed

that she doesn't know any German words and asked permission to copy words from around the room. Additionally, another student who lacks confidence in German and was the first to ask if he had to participate if his parents didn't give consent, Reinhard, asked to use the bathroom after two minutes and justified asking by saying "I already wrote all I know."

German	English
was	what
wes	who
wie	How
wann	when
wo	where
warum	why
welch	which
wie viel	How much
wie viele	How many
Ich	I
Entschuldigung	Excuse me
Er	He
sie	she
Du	you
das Knie	Knee
der Finger	Finger

**Figure 8: Reinhard's 5-Minute Word Write**

As he says these words and I give him permission to use the bathroom, I am again frustrated with myself. Did I not provide him with enough positive learning experiences to increase his confidence? Does he think putting in effort is uncool? If I could write a letter to Reinhard, I would say:

A Letter to Reinhard: Reinhard- Trying isn't uncool, never reaching your potential because you didn't try, is uncool.

However reluctant my students on days 1, 2, and 3 were, my days 4, 5, and 6 students created a different approach on their own and made this 5-minute word write task a class challenge. They competed against each other to have the most words. From these two days of word writes, my days 4, 5, and 6 students wrote more words than my days 1, 2, and 3 students and voiced no complaints, which again proves the importance of and connection between relevance and motivation.

### **Pen Pal Letter One**

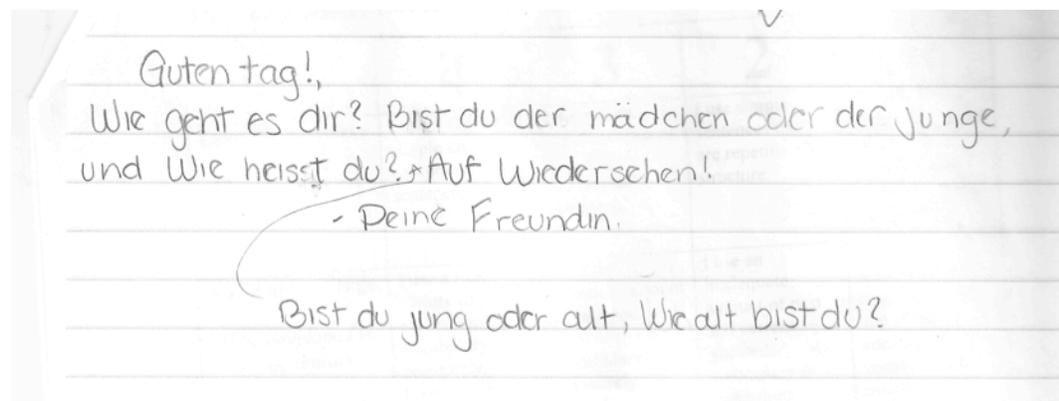
**Pen Pal Selection Process.** After all of the baseline data had been collected and the results were tallied, I moved forward with the pen pal selection. My students chose German names and wrote their German and English names with their class period and class days on slips of paper. I collected those slips of paper and placed them into one large container. As I was deciding how I was going to match my students with a pen pal, I was bombarded with the variety of ways I could organize this process. My first requirement was that students needed to have pen pals in different classes in order to keep the students guessing about the identify of their pen pals.

Additionally, I made the decision not to pair my students based on ability or effort so that I would not be assuming how they would react or contribute to this strategy. I wanted all of my students to have an equal start without being influenced by my prior assumptions. Therefore, to remove my bias from the selection, I asked my fiancé, now my husband, to pull names out of the container and as long as they weren't in the same class period, they were matched together. This process was mostly successful and I only had to reassign two students due to the uneven number of students. In the end, one student, Kirstin E., was paired with two students, which meant that she had to write two letters instead of one. I trusted her to do this and asked if she would be comfortable writing two letters and she agreed. I also told her if it was too much work, she could let me know and I would pair one of her pen pals with another student. When the pen pals were finalized I created a spreadsheet with their names and partners so that I would know the pairings and keep records of who finished their letters and who still needed to finish their letters.

**Writing Letter One: October 13 and October 18.** The mystery aspect of the pen pal communication made it motivating for my students and since creating a motivating strategy was important to my study, I had them choose German first names to identify themselves and use the initial of their real last name, for example Rolf C. Going further, so that they would be able to ask and answer the question “how are you called?” without giving away the answer in their first letter, they all signed the first letter as “your friend.” This also served another purpose because the vocabulary in this first section

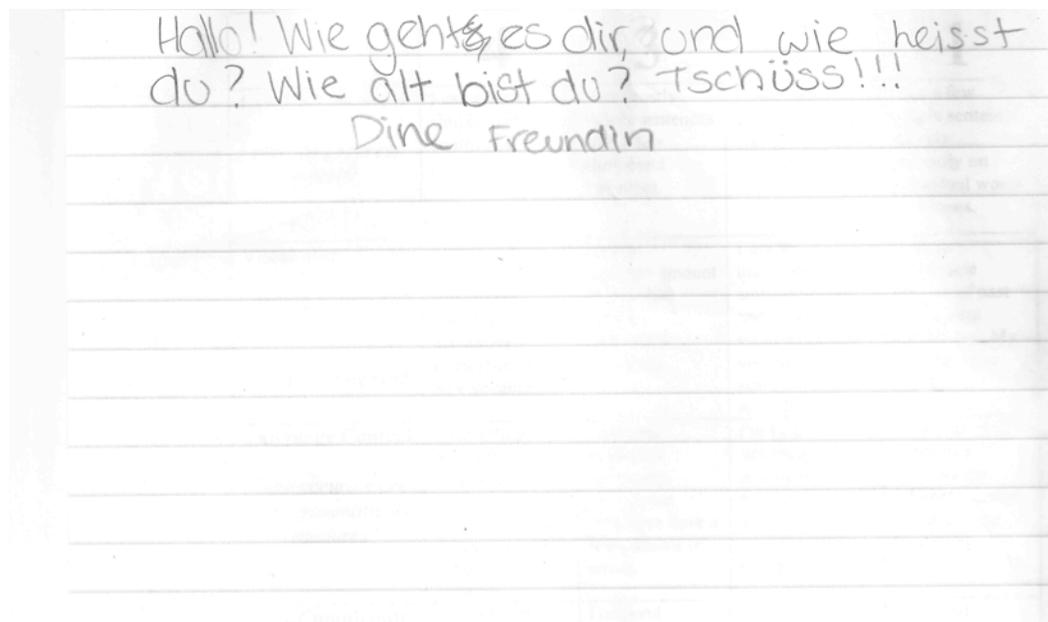
required my students to know the word for your friend in German and identify whether the friend was a girl or a boy. My students followed a topic list, which laid out questions they would be required to ask in each letter **(Appendix G)**.

As students wrote their first drafts of their very first letter, they asked questions and made comments that proved to me they were thinking critically about grammar concepts, such as how to form a sentence in German and how to manipulate language to say what they wanted to say using prior knowledge. Simone asked, “Can I write an extra sentence asking if they are a girl or a boy?”



**Figure 9: Simone's Rough Draft Pen Pal Letter 1**

Ute thought aloud saying, “I don’t have a *are you*, I have a *you are*, so should I just switch them?” Gottfried inquired to his friend saying, “Wait... are all nouns capitalized?” Else commented, “Frau, would it be *eine Mädchen* since it’s a girl or *ein Mädchen*?”

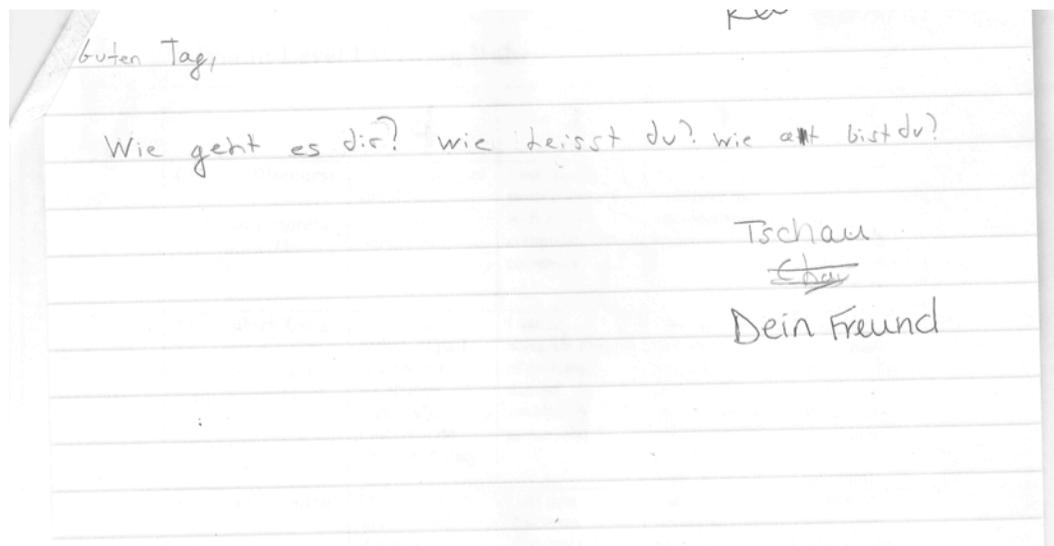


**Figure 10: Else's Rough Draft Pen Pal Letter 1**

Additionally, Udo noticed the endings on personal pronouns, such as *dein* and *deine* and when to use them stating, “I’ve been using these incorrectly when I speak.” As this was my first interaction with a real writing task and my students, I was amazed that my students were commenting and thinking about grammar concepts that I didn’t teach them and that they probably wouldn’t have even thought about while writing until German level II. My students were learning grammar concepts through the writing process.

Unfortunately, not every student was as enthusiastic about writing to a pen pal and many students were apprehensive about where to even start. Reinhard, for example, asked to use the restroom and when he returned, avoided writing his letter. When I approached him about needing to write his letter, he told me he doesn’t know what we are doing and that he isn’t good at German. For my students that lack confidence, like Reinhard, I gave a quick mini-lesson to my classes about what to say in the letter and how to use their

vocabulary lists to find the vocabulary they needed to meet the letter requirements. We also discussed as a class how letters are formatted and wrote an example letter on the board. Once this mini-lesson concluded, the hesitant students were more comfortable writing their letters and began the writing process. Reinhard wanted me to sit with him and go through the writing process one-on-one. He wrote his letter primarily by himself as I sat next to him, but I believe he needed me to give confirmation that he can be successful.



**Figure 11: Reinhard's Rough Draft Pen Pal Letter 1**

As I continue my personal letter to Reinhard, I would ask him to repeat and quote Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*.

A Letter to Reinhard, cont.: Reinhard- Trying isn't uncool, never reaching your potential because you didn't try, is uncool. To quote a famous verse sang by Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, "But I'll make them see I have confidence in me." I believe you can do it, why can't you?

As the letters were being finished, students asked me to edit their drafts so that they could start their final copy on the scroll paper. One downside to the mystery aspect of the first letter was the generic format of the first letter. Almost every student wrote the same first letter because of the required topics and the need to create an equal amount of surprise for each student. If a student would have written the first letter and signed their name, then the receiving student wouldn't have the surprise of asking for their name and getting an answer in their letter. Once they finished the final copy, they wrote their initials on the back corner of the paper so I knew who wrote the letter and then I folded the letters and wrote the recipient's name on each letter so I could distribute them to the correct pen pal the next class period.

**Testing Writing Skills: Quiz G-2-5.** Within the time spent waiting for all of my students to finish their final copy of their first pen pal letter, I introduced new vocabulary and prepared my students to complete the G-2-5 Quiz (**Appendix N**). This was the first quiz from the curriculum for this year. It was important because it was the first quiz of the curriculum to require my students to write sentences answering personal questions in German. My students were given a list of words to use in order to form sentences. As I surveyed the class and peered at my students' papers when they were working, I saw unease as they struggled to form sentences. I was not surprised but had hoped that writing their pen pal letters would be good practice for this quiz. There was one error in particular that many students made while writing their sentences: *Ich bin* vs *Ich ist* (I am vs. I is).

Describe the following people with a short sentence in German (example in English: Michael is young and ugly). You may want to use some of the following words: ist, jung, alt, schön, hässlich, # Jahre alt, ein Junge, ein Mädchen, ein Herr, eine Frau. You may use numerals if you mention a specific age.

- 1) Ich (yourself) ich bin jung und schön. -5
- 2) Der Professor der professor ist alt.
- 3) Sabine (from story) sabine ist jung und hässlich. -5
- 4) Herr Schmidt Herr Schmidt ist 46 Jahre alt.

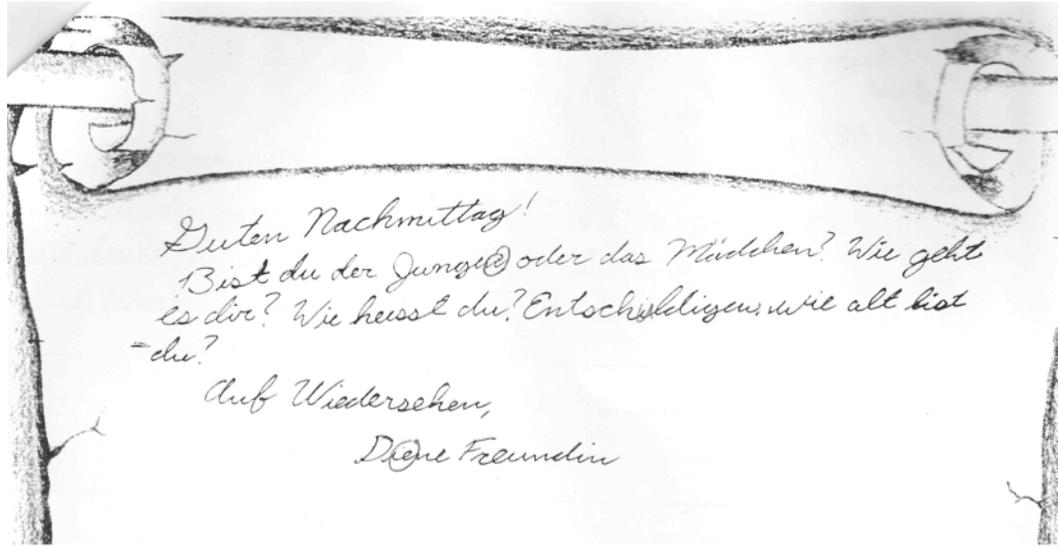
**Figure 12: Example of G-2-5 Quiz**

This grammar error is common among beginning German language learners, but has always confused me as a language teacher because while speaking, reading, or writing in class, it is always used correctly. Therefore, in order to meet the needs and clear up any confusion my students may have had, I gave a short mini-lesson about matching the correct pronoun with the correct verb and why *Ich ist* isn't grammatically correct. The results of this quiz were positive and the short mini-lesson provided my students with the help they needed to answer the personal questions on the quiz and use *Ich bin* correctly.

**Receiving Letter One: October 26 and November 1.** Due to the related arts rotation schedule and students missing classes for a variety of reasons, distributing my students' pen pal letters took a longer amount of time than was originally planned. However, the day had come for my first group of students on days 4, 5, and 6 to receive their letters and they were excited! As I called out their German names, my students rushed to pick up their letter and read what their pen pal had written. I don't think in my seven years of teaching that I have ever seen my students become so excited to read German! Gottfried opened his letter and immediately exclaimed, "I got a girl!!!!" as

everyone around him was discussing with their seat partner what their pen pal said to them and what information they wanted to know about their pen pal. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, my students would need to wait until next class to begin responding to their pen pal by writing letter two.

My second and third groups of students on days 1, 2, and 3 also reacted with enthusiasm when they learned that they were getting their first pen pal letter, which was such a wonderful feeling for me as a teacher. Implementing mystery pen pals in my classroom was having a positive effect on my students' engagement and I couldn't wait to hear their reactions to their letters. Erika H. was the first to comment on her letter by saying, "oh, this is easy to read." Erika's comment shows me that she thought reading the letter from her pen pal was going to be difficult and she wasn't confident that she was going to be able to understand her letter. Eva spoke next by saying "Frau, I can't read my letter because it's in cursive. Can you ask my pen pal to not write in cursive?" My first reaction was silence as I processed what Eva had said. I looked at the letter, which was written in lovely, clear cursive handwriting, and was stunned that she had never learned to read and probably never learned to write cursive handwriting. I assured her that I would ask her pen pal to print her next letter and I helped her by reading her letter aloud in German.



**Figure 13: Connie's Final Copy of Pen Pal Letter 1**

Unfortunately, not every student was as confident or excited as Erika when it came to understanding his or her pen pal letter. Kirsten sat at her desk and after five minutes proclaimed, "I don't know how to read this. I don't know what it's saying. I'm struggling to read this." I could hear the frustration in her voice, knew she wasn't having a positive experience, and helped her translate her letter using questioning to show her she did know what the letter was saying, she just needed to use her resources to help her.

A letter to Kirsten: Kirsten- You are smart and kind. You can learn anything you set your mind to! Give German a chance by putting in the effort and believing you can learn this language. Instead of saying I don't know, first say I'm going to figure this out! Give it the old college try!

After everyone had read their letter, they began their rough draft of their second pen pal letter.

### **Pen Pal Letter Two**

**Writing Letter Two: October 28 and November 2.** The topics of pen pal letter two followed the German curriculum by requiring my students to use phrases such as “nice to meet you” and “what do you/ does he or she look like?” These requirements were perfect for letter two because it made conversational sense to discuss appearances, especially since my students were trying to figure out who their mystery pen pal was and politely say that it is nice to meet someone while responding to their first letter.

My timing, however, for writing letter two proved difficult for my class on days 4, 5, and 6 because it was the day of Trick-or-Treat and all of my students’ teams were having a special party day. Therefore, upon entering my classroom, my students were under the impression that we wouldn’t be working in class today and that they wouldn’t need to put in the effort. Eberhard confirmed my assumption by saying, “But Frau, its Trick-or-Treat night and in my other classes we aren’t doing any work so we shouldn’t be doing work today.” My reaction was, as you might imagine, shocked! and I struggled to muster up the patience to say to him, “This is German class and did you know in Germany, they don’t celebrate Trick-or Treat like we do in America. Therefore, we are going to work on writing our letter to our pen pal.” Needless to say, I didn’t get very much work out of Eberhard this class period. However, the majority of my students were excited to write back to

their pen pal and began working together to figure out how to say new vocabulary. It was also during this class period that something beautiful happened between two friends: Erika R. and Anna. Erika R. has always been a timid and shy student. She is very quiet. Anna is the opposite. She is strong-willed and opinionated. Anna and Erika R. struggle with German and also with self-confidence so it was a surprise to me when, instead of avoiding work to gossip, they began working on their letters. Erika R. became frustrated with writing her letter, turned to Anna and said, "I'm not good at German." Anna, instead of stating the same as Erika R., as she usually does, began helping Erika R. write her letter. This was totally unexpected. Anna had enough confidence to help Erika R. with her letter even though she is usually the first one to state she is not good at German. Even though this is only the second letter, I have noticed a trend in building and establishing confidence in both my days 1, 2, and 3 and 4, 5, and 6 classes.

A letter to Anna: Anna- Thank you for being such a good friend to Erika R. It was thoughtful of you to help her when she needed it and encourage her to persevere instead of giving up! I hope that you can remember this moment whenever you feel like giving up, too!

**November 4.** By the next class, Anna was building and showing more confidence than I have ever noticed before in German class. She asked me a question, "How do you say 'and about you'?" I prompted her with a question instead of just providing the answer, "Well, remember how we said my name is and yours?" Anna thought for a little and then smiled, "und du?" I looked at

her and confirmed that she had the correct answer. Anna had come up with the correct response using previous knowledge and in turn had built her confidence a little more. It would have been easy for me to just provide the answer, but by encouraging and guiding her with questioning, she was able to answer her own question. Immediately after figuring out the answer she returned to her seat, finished her sentence, and began helping Erika R. with her letter.

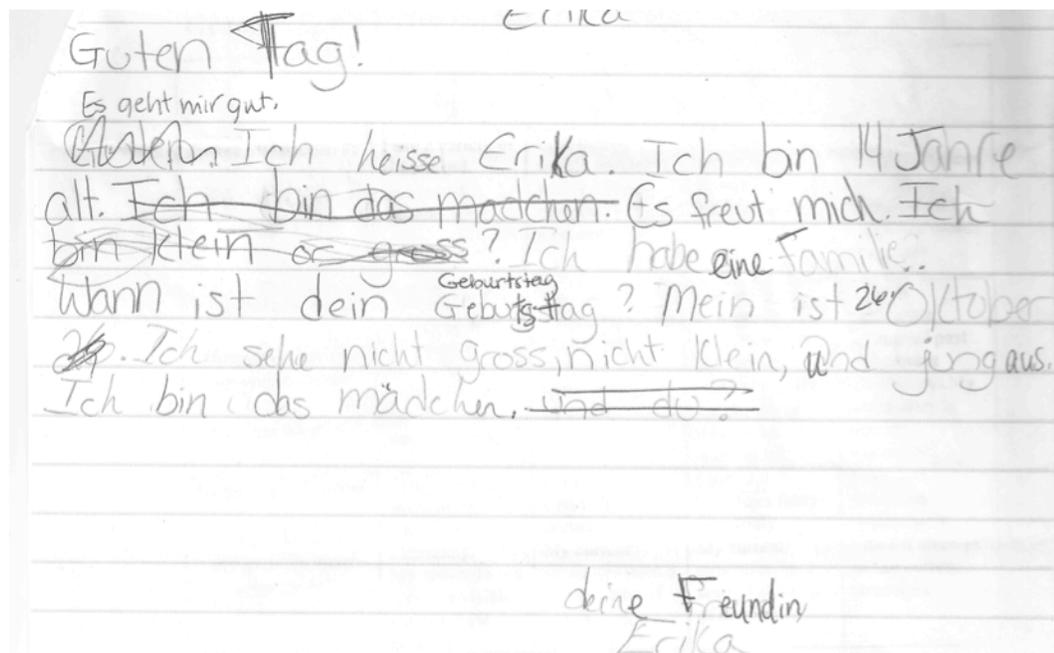
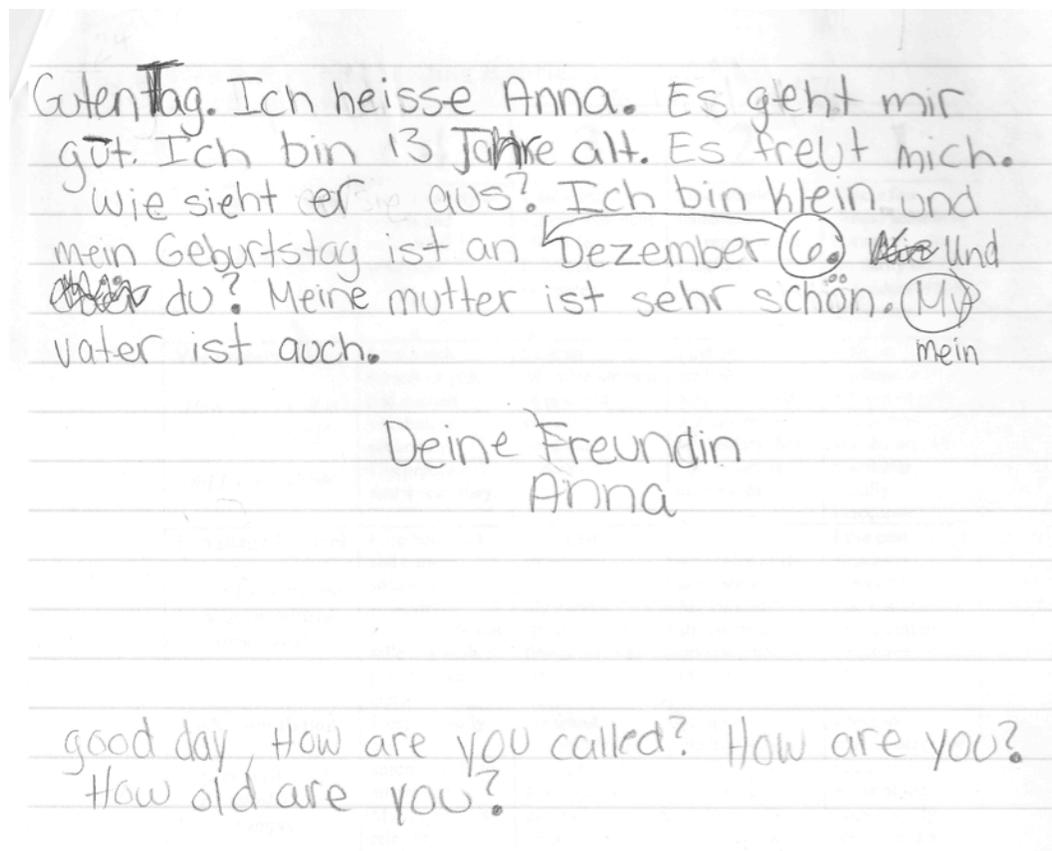


Figure 14: Erika R.'s Rough Draft Pen Pal Letter 2



**Figure 15: Anna's Rough Draft Pen Pal Letter 2**

**November 7.** As my days 4, 5, and 6 finished writing their rough drafts and their final copies of pen pal letter two, many students were working together to edit their peers' letters. Mathias, struggling to stay on task, chose to work with Ute because she is patient and usually offers to help him with his work. Mathias turned to Ute while she was helping him write his letter and asked using a tone of disbelief, "You really like writing to pen pals?" As a teacher who is trying something new and relevant in the classroom, these are the very last words I wanted to hear. Unfortunately, I'm familiar with students that don't want to put in any effort during class therefore I'm not phased by his tone or question and try not to take it personally. Fortunately, what came

out of Ute's mouth was probably the most heart-warming comment since the beginning of my study. Ute looked at Mathias and said in a loud voice, "Yes! Yes I do!" All I could think in this unbelievable moment was "you tell him, Ute!"

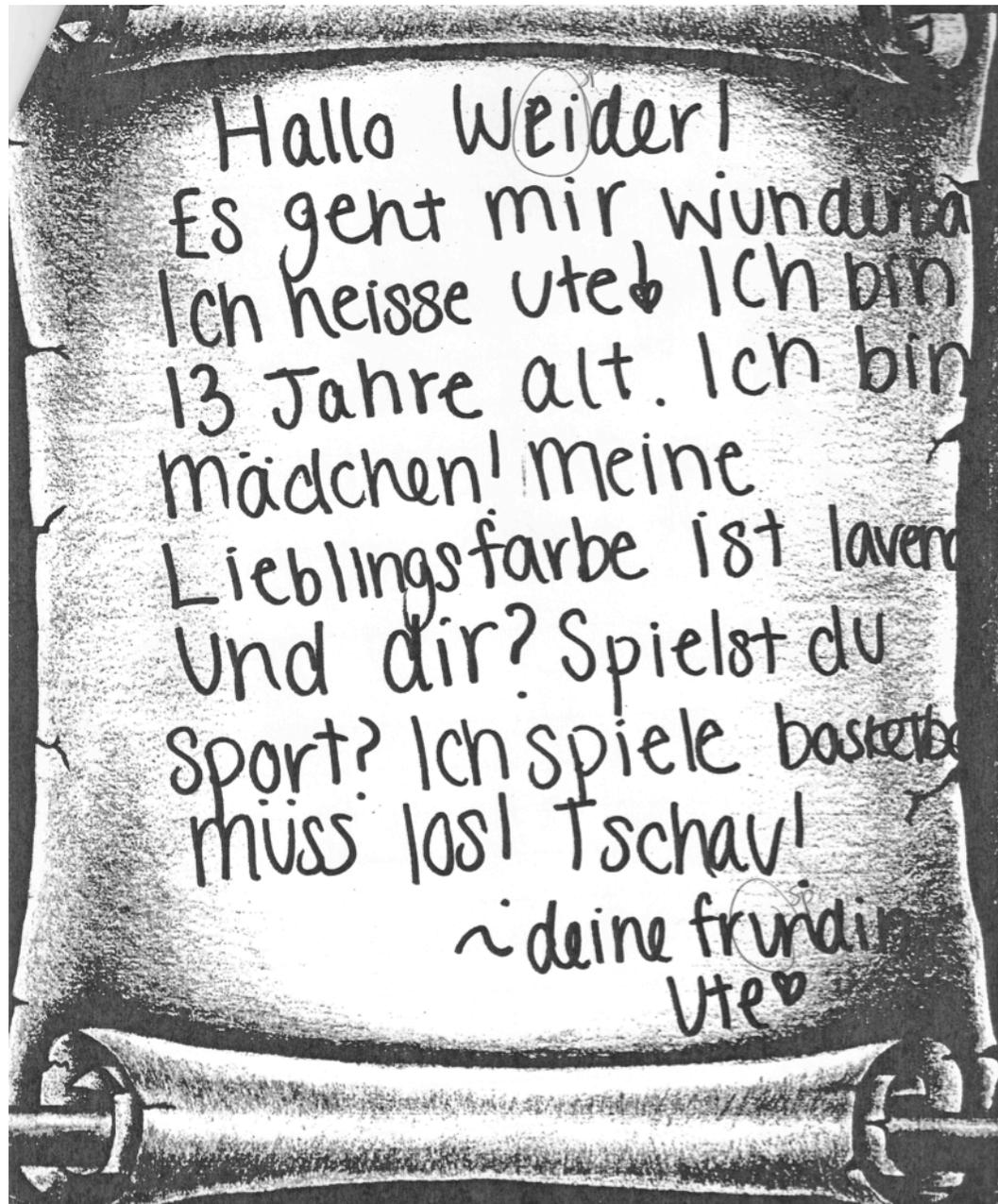


Figure 16: Ute's Final Copy of Pen Pal Letter 2

A letter to Ute: Ute- It makes me proud to be your teacher because you aren't afraid to be who you are even when your opinion isn't popular.

Right on, girl!

Following days 4, 5, and 6, days 1, 2, and 3 students experienced multiple moments of critical thinking while writing pen pal letter two. Simone rushed up to me at the front of the class and said "Frau, I wanted to write hello friend because I thought I didn't know if they were a boy or a girl, but then I looked at what they signed and I know I have a girl pen pal because it's signed *freundin*." Simone's comment proved to me that she understood the concept of making words feminine and that she was able to use her knowledge of the German language in context to figure out information she wanted to know. Later that same day another student, Else, had a similar positive experience when she figured out how to say it's not nice to meet you by using the phrase it's nice to meet you and adding the new vocabulary word "not" to the end of the phrase.

Dear <sup>m</sup>hässlich,  
Guten <sup>son</sup>Aben. Es freut  
mich nicht. Ich bin  
Mädchen und meine <sup>g</sup>  
Namae <sup>son</sup>ist Else. Ich  
bin Frauig. Meine  
Mutter und <sup>son</sup>Vater <sup>g</sup>bind  
Deutsch  
Tschau,  
deine Freundin <sup>g</sup>

Figure 17: Else's Final Copy of Pen Pal Letter 2

Throughout my career as a language teacher, I have always wanted to have students learn the language through personal experiences that require them to

think critically and purposefully, which is why I am in awe of moments such as these.

**Receiving Letter Two: November 10 and 15.** Simone walks into my classroom and in an excited voice asked, “Frau!!! Are we getting our letters today?” Before I can even answer her, another student, Eva, who had just entered the room asked, “Are we going to write to our pen pals all year or are we stopping after three letters?” The look on Eva’s face screamed “I hope she says yes!” My answer to these questions was a calm “yes” however on the inside I was bursting with joy! Success!! As soon as everyone was settled, I distributed their letters from their pen pals and they quickly opened them to reveal what their pen pal had written.

A letter to Simone: Simone- Your positive attitude and effort in German class is allowing you to grow as a language student. I enjoy listening to you figure out new vocabulary and grammar concepts as you write in German. Keep Calm and Write On!

### **“Light bulb” Moment Three and a Mid-Research Survey**

**Another “light bulb” moment.** As a class, after reading letter two, we wrote words on the board from the letters that we didn’t understand and then went over them so that every student could interact with new vocabulary and grammar concepts. After translating the letters, I introduced new vocabulary for the next section in the curriculum, which also happened to be the next topic for the letters. It was here that I realized that writing pen pal letters was truly reinforcing curriculum vocabulary by using the vocabulary for an

authentic purpose and was not taking time away from the curriculum, but adding value to the curriculum. At the start of study, I was worried that adding pen pal letters to my curriculum would take up too much time and my students wouldn't gain much from the experience and there would be too much time gone in vain. Thankfully, I couldn't have been more wrong. My students had many positive experiences and did not just learn the vocabulary and move on, but then, right away, were able to use the new vocabulary they had just learned in a letter to their pen pal. Not only was I realizing the power of writing to a pen pal on their vocabulary usage, but my student, Erika H. also noted this when she stated, "Frau, I can use the new vocabulary question in my next pen pal letter."

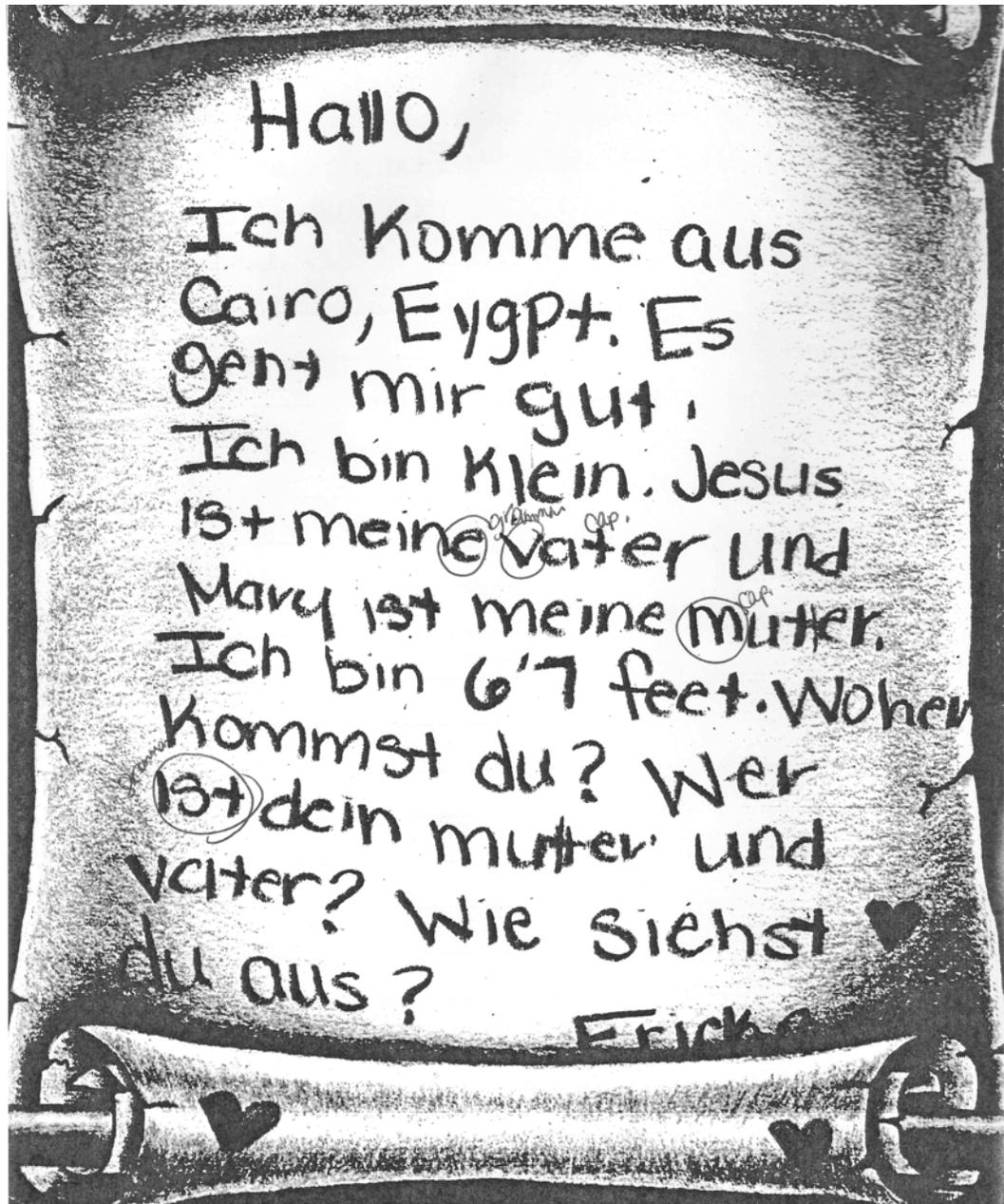


Figure 18: Erika H.'s Final Copy of Pen Pal Letter 3

**Mid-Research Survey: November 10 and 16.** I distributed a short 12-question survey (**Appendix E**) and reminded my students to answer these questions honestly using the Likert scale at the top of the page. The questions asked students to reveal what they thought about writing to a pen pal and

writing in German. Bruno finished his survey and returned it to the pile on the front desk, but didn't leave until after he said, "this is the truth and how I feel." Not sure exactly what this meant, I nodded and said, "that's exactly how I wanted you to answer them." Here is Bruno's survey.

### Mid-Research Survey

Answer with a number score.

	No, Never 1	Somewhat 2	Yes, definitely 3
1. I enjoy writing in German		1	
2. I like writing to my pen pal.		1	
3. I look forward to reading what my pen pal wrote.		1	
4. I can understand what my pen pal wrote.		2	
5. I would be interested in writing to a native German pen pal.			1
6. My pen pal and I get along.		1	
7. I feel confident using German.			3
8. I find German useful.		2	
9. Having a pen pal helped me learn more German vocabulary.			1
10. Having a pen pal helped me learn more German grammar.			1
11. Having a pen pal helped me better understand written German.			3
12. I think writing in German is easy.		2	

Figure 19: Bruno's Mid-Research Survey

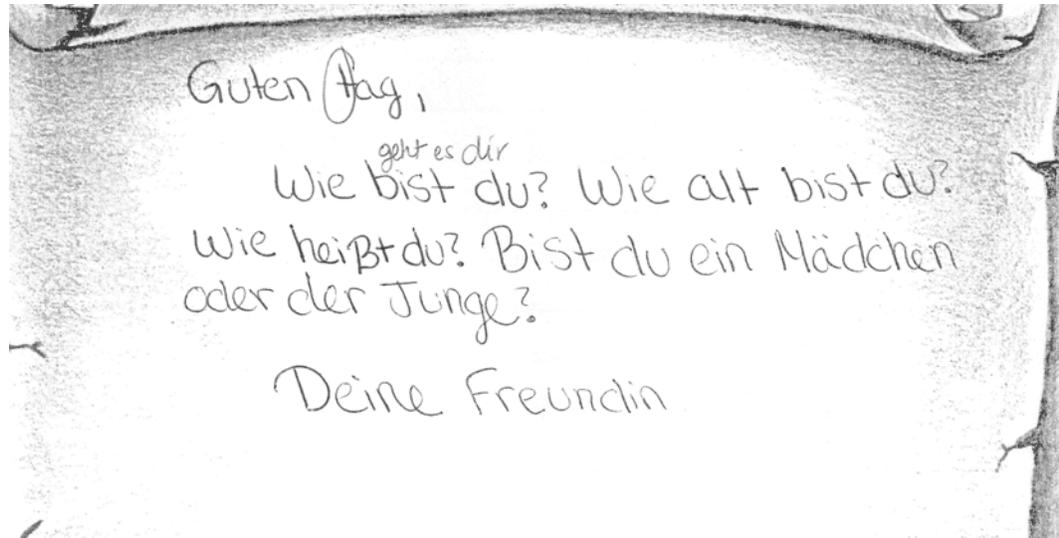
## **Pen Pal Letter Three**

### **Writing and Receiving Letter Three: November 17 through**

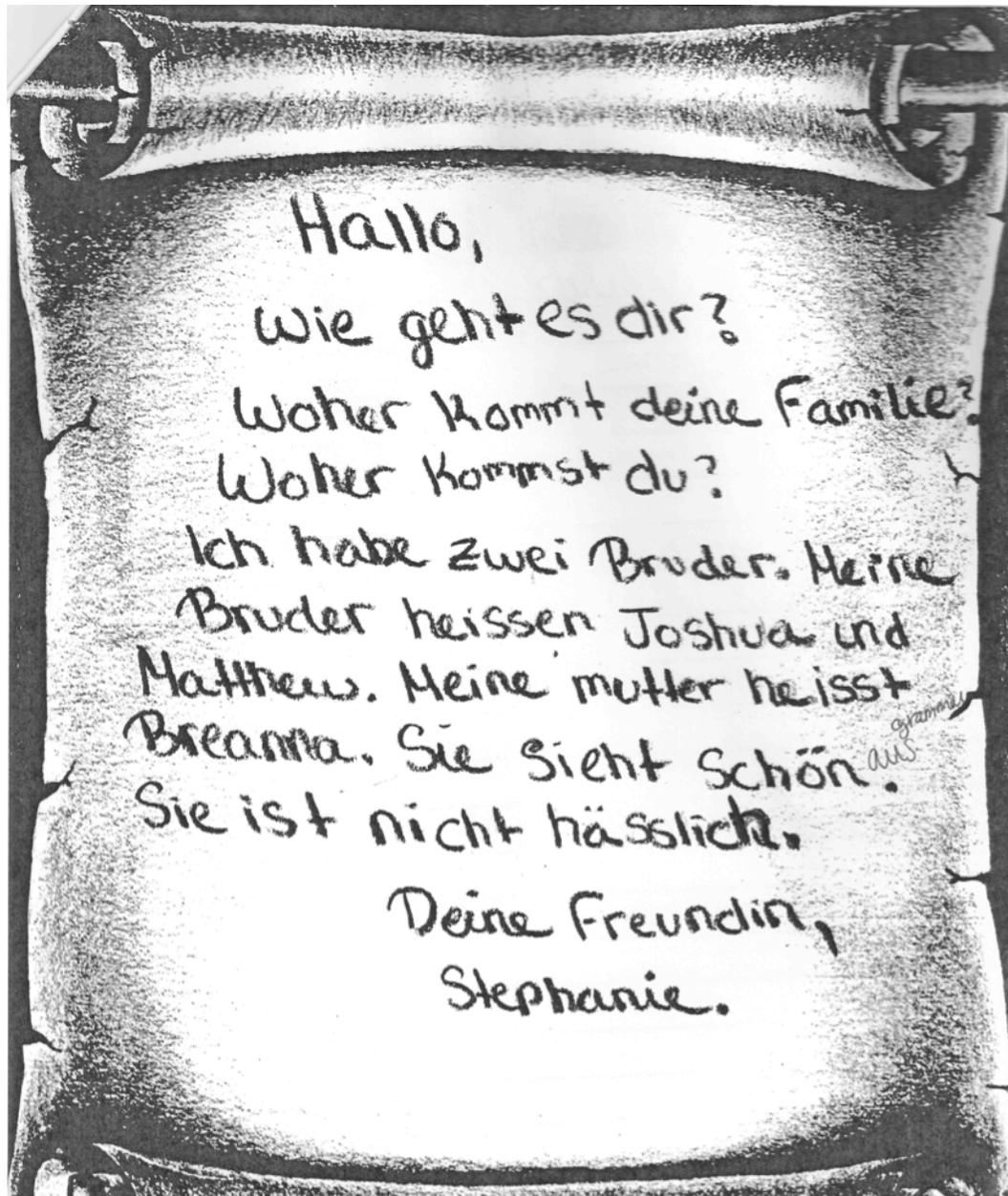
**December 13.** Before class began on days 1, 2, and 3 I met with Kirsten E. because she was falling behind on writing her pen pal letters. Kirsten E. was the student I chose to write to two pen pals because of the odd number of students. Unfortunately, this was proving to be difficult for Kirsten and when I asked if it was too much work and if she felt overwhelmed having to write to both, she confessed that it was difficult. I asked her to which pen pal she would like to continue to write her letters and she answered Lukas. Therefore, I decided that I would be the one to write to her other pen pal, Udo, using the German name, Britta. Kirsten E. left my room much happier than she entered it and I felt much better removing the burden from her.

As my students began writing letter three, I noticed that they needed more of my help due to the desire to use new vocabulary and new phrases in German and that there was very little complaining about completing this assignment. Therefore, I began holding mini-editing conferences with each student. This was both stressful, but productive due to trying to focus on one student, but having to monitor a class of students at the same time. As I was conferencing, I was pleased to see the progress my students had made in writing both in grammar and vocabulary usage. Additionally, students that were struggling could also ask me questions and get clarification during the conference. In particular, one student, Stephanie, improved dramatically from

the first letter to the third letter in creativity. Below are her first and third letters.



**Figure 20: Stephanie's Final Copy of Pen Pal Letter 1**



**Figure 21: Stephanie's Final Copy of Pen Pal Letter 3**

My students on days 4, 5, and 6 were much more peer-editing focused with the exception of a few students with specific questions about grammar and vocabulary when writing letter three and didn't require mini-conferences with me. Anna, at first off-task and not focusing on writing her letter, became interested in writing her letter after being prompted to think about something

she would like to know about her pen pal. She decided to ask them if they had any pets. After she returned to her desk to write, I confronted her about why she was now interested in writing her letter when she wasn't at the start of class by asking, "Do you think it's more interesting now that you are writing something new, like *haustier* (German word for pet)?" Anna's reply, "yes, now I'm interested because I'm asking my pen pal about their pets" was perfect evidence for implementing strategies that are personally relevant. A similar interaction due to the same behavior occurred between Rüdiger and I. As I confronted him asking, "Do you like doing this (referring to writing to a pen pal)?" He answered honestly, "No, it gets boring after a while and sometimes I don't understand his handwriting or I don't remember what was in the last letter." Then I asked him, "Do you think you are a better writer? You are writing really well." Rüdiger replied, "In German? Yes." My final and most important question for Rüdiger, "Do you think it would be more interesting if your pen pal wrote something more interesting to read?" got down to the root of his behavior and lack of interest in writing when he answered, "Yes." Another student, Gottfried, expressed the same sentiment while writing his third letter saying, "Your (pen pal) letter is entertaining, my letter (from my pen pal) is low key and boring. She doesn't give me anything to work with!"

A letter to Gottfried: Gottfried- I hear you! I wish your pen pal would write something creative and interesting so that you can be just as creative and interesting in return! Maybe then, the both of you will

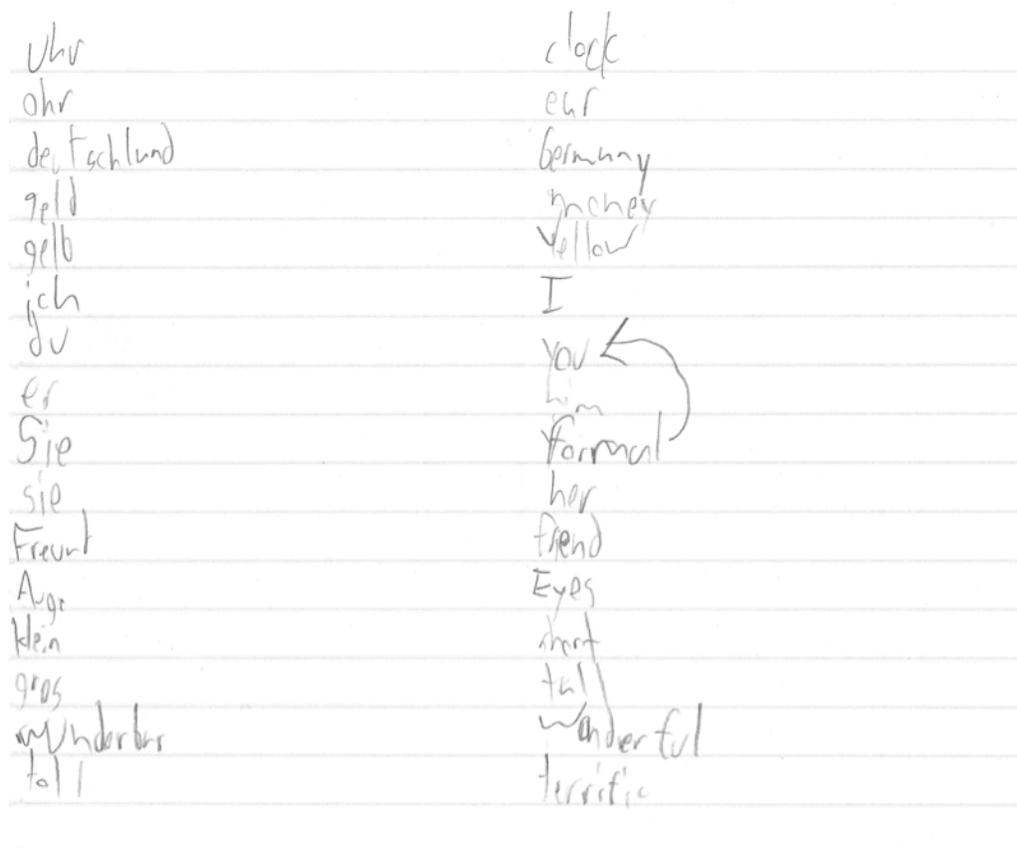
learn and better your language skills even more than you already have!

Keep your head up!

**Modifying the Writing Rubric.** After the experiences of some of my students and as I read through the final copies of letter three, I started to realize that my students who were taking risks and being creative by writing difficult phrases and using new vocabulary were scoring lower than my students that were doing the bare minimum required for the letter. Therefore, after much discussion with my fellow action researchers during class, I decided to modify my rubric to include creativity (**Appendix J**). I was hopeful this would enable my creative students to earn a higher score on their letters and encourage the students doing the bare minimum to take risks with the language and keep their pen pals interested in what they were writing.

### **End of Research Activities**

**5-Minute Word Write: December 14 and 19.** As this was the second time my students needed to complete the 5-minute word write activity, they were less than thrilled. All of my students groaned about completing this activity. Christian moaned, “It’s too stressful.” Other students, such as Otto exclaimed, “I can’t think of anything!” When asked why they thought it was more difficult the second time around, which is the opposite of what I thought, my students mentioned they needed to remember more vocabulary because they had learned more vocabulary than at the start of the year. Below is Otto’s second 5-minute word write, which has less vocabulary words than his original 5-minute word write.



**Figure 22: Otto's Final 5-Minute Word Write**

**Final Writing Prompt and Reflection Slip: December 15 and 20.**

Before requiring my students to begin writing the final writing prompt (**Appendix L**), I encouraged them to look at the picture and remember phrases and vocabulary they learned while writing their letters. I told them they will be able to write much more than they did at the start of the year because they have more experience with writing. Christian immediately began stressing about writing ten sentences and Eva began worrying about spelling words correctly. Once my students started writing, Anna threw her hands in the air and cried in frustration, “I don’t know what to do. I give up!” Reinhold, after

being encouraged by me to focus on writing, states, “it’s boring though.” I was not surprised by his response and knew that this activity was not the most interesting activity I could have given them, but after I thought about what he said I noticed that not once during the pen pal writing sessions did he say it was boring. This was progress for Reinhold and meant that he didn’t mind writing as long as it was relevant and interesting to him. Bruno had a similar reaction to the writing prompt as he tried to turn it in without completing the prompt before he realized it was going to be graded. He declared, “I don’t know what to write. I don’t got nothing.” The third student to avoid writing the prompt, Monika, sat for ten minutes without writing a single word. When I approached her about not working on the prompt, she looked at me and in an exasperated voice said, “I can’t write anything anymore today. I have nothing to write.” Monika completed a reflection slip about the writing prompt that she did not complete.

1. Circle the level of difficulty you feel when \_\_\_\_\_

Easy	Somewhat Easy	Somewhat Difficult	Difficult
1	2	3	4

2. Explain why.

I Don't know what to write

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**Figure 23: Monika's Final Writing Prompt Reflection Slip**

Following the prompt and the reflection slip, I asked my classes a question to find the real reason behind their lack of effort. When asked why they were not interested in writing, my students replied that they didn't know enough vocabulary or sentence formation grammar rules to write well or make their writing interesting. Additionally, some stated that they just don't like writing or didn't feel like writing today.

**Individual Student Interviews.** The very last pieces of data I collected were individual student interviews (**Appendix F**). These interviews consisted of eight questions and were one-on-one with me. Each student had the opportunity to answer the questions honestly and at the end, add any comment they felt they wanted me to know about their experience writing to a pen pal in German. Overall, I was surprised to find that my students had many positive comments about writing to their pen pal and also constructive comments including ways to make it more interesting. There were very few negative comments, which mostly pertained to too much time between letters and not being compatible with their pen pal. My students were surprisingly open with me and felt comfortable answering the questions I had for them. Even Reinhard, who avoided writing and struggled throughout the entire process, enjoyed writing and learned German by writing to his pen pal.

Post-Research Interview Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How do you feel writing to your pen pal improved your German language skills?

greetings + goodbyes - little conversation

2. What do you feel were the benefits of completing this assignment?

fun activity - conversation in another language

3. What do you feel are some disadvantages of doing this assignment?

no disadvantages

4. Do you feel that you can write more in German and were less anxious about writing while working on the assignments?

yes - not totally confident, but its better than at the start

5. Do you feel you are better at writing German now compared to the start of the school year?

yes

6. Do you feel you are better at reading and translating German now compared to the start of the school year?

of course ↓ most improved

7. Do you think you learned more vocabulary due to having a pen pal?

reinforced vocabulary - learned more + better learned

8. Would you like to continue writing to your pen pal in German class?

yes - liked not knowing

\*right at perfect level

9. Do you think you are better with German grammar due to having a pen pal?

didn't learn grammar by writing

Figure 24: Reinhard's Post-Research Interview

### The End of the Beginning...

I concluded my study with individual student interviews; however, writing to their pen pal has not ceased. After the interviews were completed, I announced to each class that due to the overwhelming popularity of pen pal writing, that we will continue writing at least two more letters to our pen pals

before the end of the school year, to which my students reacted with smiles and excitement.

## **Data Analysis**

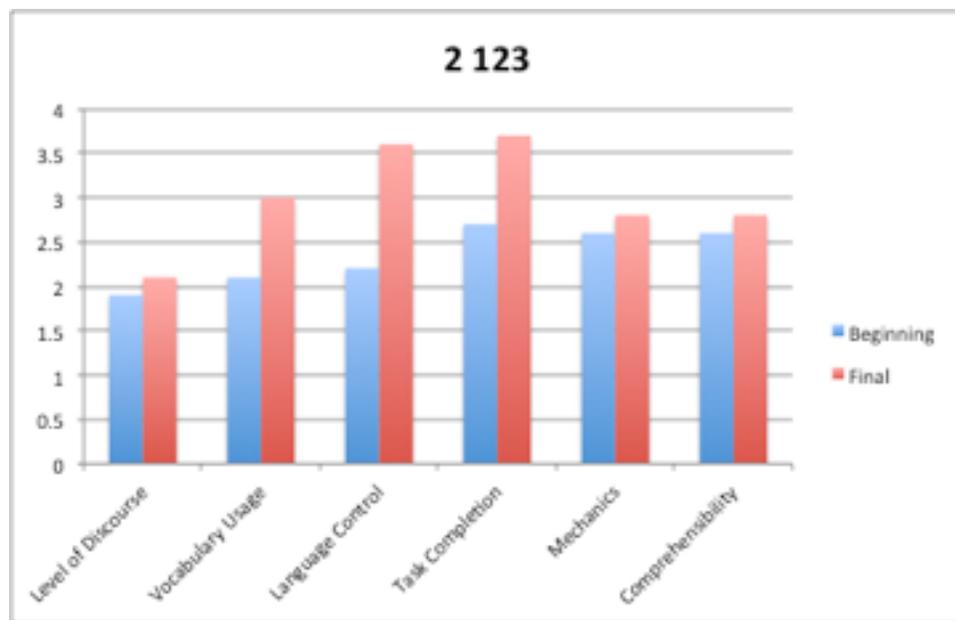
Throughout my study, I collected various forms of data so that I could effectively monitor my students' progress and my pen pal strategy focusing on writing fluency, including grammar, previous, current, and new vocabulary, and number of sentences written. In order to accurately show writing progress and fluency gains, my students completed a Baseline Writing Prompt with a Reflection Slip as well as a Final Writing Prompt with a Reflection Slip. Additionally, they completed a baseline and final 5-Minute Word Write, three curriculum quizzes: G-2-5, G-2-6, and G-2-7, wrote three pen pal letters with varying topics, and answered a variety of questions on a Student Information Survey, Mid-Research Survey, and a Post-Research Interview. Lastly, two prominent thematic codes from my personal observation log are explored to show student experiences related to grammar and vocabulary and the engagement levels of my students during various assessments and assignments.

### **Fluency Assessed Using Writing Rubric**

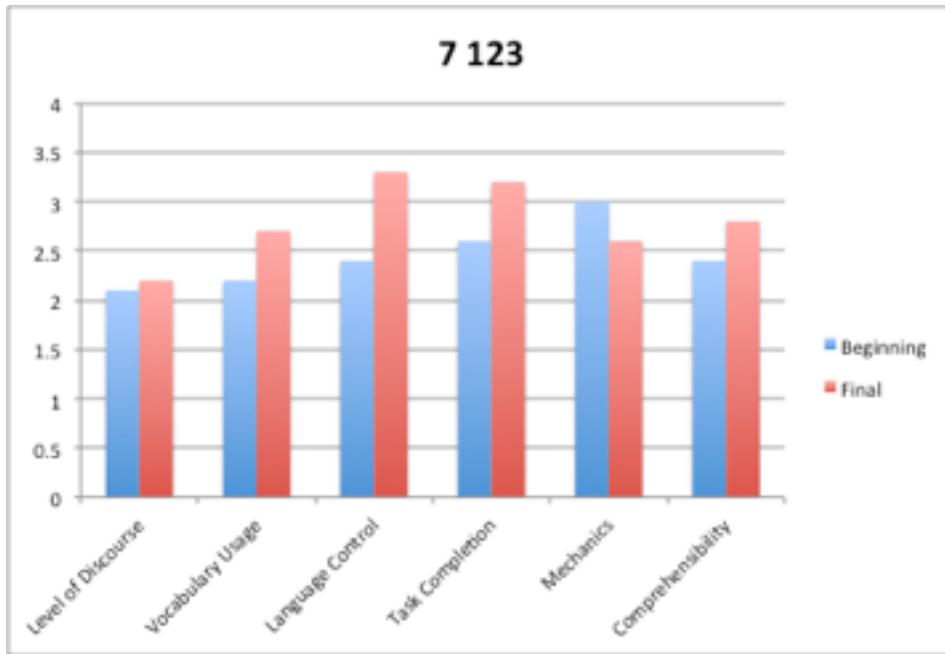
**Baseline Writing Prompt.** The Baseline Writing Prompt (**Appendix K**) provided students with a picture and then encouraged them to create a dialogue using 10 sentences in German. The purpose of this prompt was to provide students the opportunity to write in German as well as provide baseline data for their writing skills at the start of the intervention. The Baseline Writing Prompt was assessed using the original German Level I Writing Rubric (**Appendix I**). The results of the writing prompt provided

common errors among all three classes, such as spelling and subject/verb agreement errors, the use of English, repetitive phrases, and writing five sentences or less. The scores on the Baseline Writing Prompt ranged from 0-3.6 out of 4.

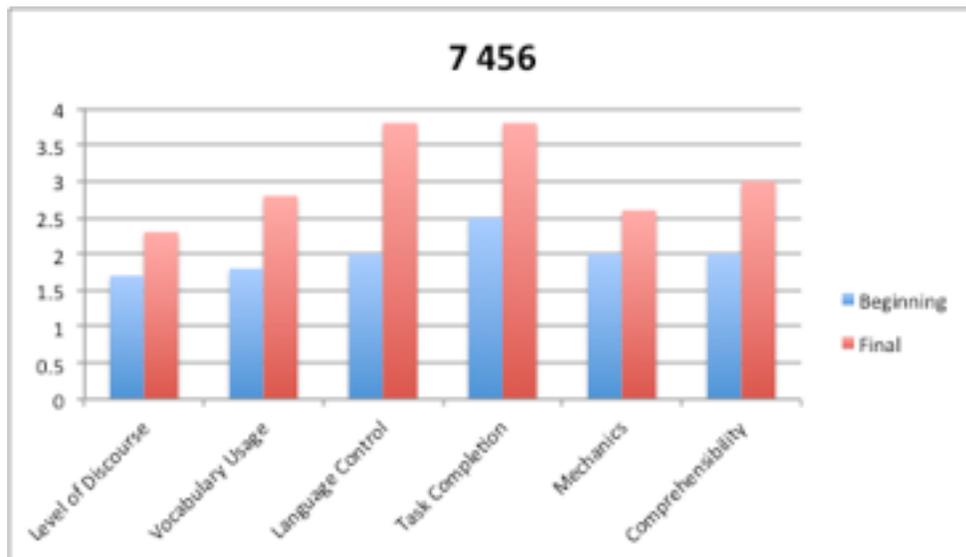
**Final Writing Prompt.** The Final Writing Prompt (**Appendix L**) was assessed using the modified German Level I Writing Rubric (**Appendix J**), which required more creativity. The results of the writing prompt provided common errors among all three classes, such as spelling and subject/verb agreement errors. However, the use of English, repetitive phrases, and writing five sentences or less were not common errors on the Final Writing Prompt, as the majority of students stayed in German and wrote at least eight sentences. The scores on the Final Writing Prompt ranged from 0-3.8 out of 4.



**Figure 25: Average rubric scores from each category from the Baseline and Final Prompt for Period 2 on Days 1,2,3**



**Figure 26: Average rubric scores from each category from the Baseline and Final Prompt for Period 7 on Days 1,2,3**



**Figure 27: Average rubric scores from each category from the Baseline and Final Prompt for Period 7 on Days 4,5,6**

The above three figures show the fluency progress from the Baseline Writing Prompt to the Final Writing Prompt of each class. To accurately assess fluency, I used a writing rubric that contained six writing fluency

categories: Level of Discourse, Vocabulary Usage, Language Control, Task Completion, Mechanics, and Comprehensibility.

The first category's average for Level of Discourse increased in each class. This category looked for creativity, repetition, and sentence structure, including simple and compound sentences. Overall, each class' letters became less repetitious with more students using a mix of compound and simple sentences while writing.

The second category's average for Vocabulary Usage also increased from the baseline to the final prompt. This category looked for students to accurately use past, current, and new vocabulary. Overall, each class' vocabulary use while writing increased drastically from the first prompt to the second.

The third category's average for Language Control, like Vocabulary Usage, had gains from the beginning to the end of the study. Language control focused on accurately using past and current grammar structures, such as subject/ verb agreement errors. The majority of students scored a 2 on the baseline prompt and the majority of students scored a 3.5 on the final prompt, which indicates that my students are more capable of writing simple and compound sentences using correct subject/ verb agreement by the end of the study; however, they are still making patterns of subject/ verb agreement errors.

The fourth category's average for Task Completion also increased by the end of the study. Task Completion assessed whether or not the students

could write 10 sentences in German, which was the prompt requirement.

Overall, more students were able to write 10 sentences or more by the end of the study, with only one student writing five sentences or less.

The fifth category was for Mechanics, which focused on assessing spelling, capitalization, English usage, and errors in punctuation. The averages increased in every class except period 7 days 1, 2, and 3. I believe this occurred in this particular class because students made more spelling and capitalization errors due to using new vocabulary and creative sentence structures. Overall, the amount of mechanical errors decreased resulting in a higher average in the category of Mechanics.

In the sixth and last category, Comprehensibility, averages increased in each class. This category focused on assessing whether or not the writing was understandable or required interpretation. By the end of the study, more students wrote messages that only required minimal interpretation and messages that were easy to understand.

Overall, from the start of my research which was marked by a baseline prompt to the end of my research marked by a final prompt, the evidence illustrates increases within the six categories on the writing rubric and indicates that implementing pen pals into my curriculum has improved my students' writing fluency within those aspects of fluency.

### **Length-Based Writing Fluency**

**Baseline and Final Prompt.** Another important aspect of fluency, which was not included on the writing rubric, was the amount of German

written. It is important to note the progression of the length of each piece of writing, not just the grammar or vocabulary usage when measuring fluency because a student could get an almost perfect score on the rubric, however, they might have only written four sentences. Therefore, Figure 28 illustrates that the number of sentences written for both prompts increased from the baseline prompt to the final prompt. These prompts were completed before and after the three pen pal letters were written so that I could assess how writing to their pen pal improved their writing fluency. Overall, with the exception of two different students writing nothing on either prompts, the majority of students' length of writing increased. The baseline prompt had many students writing six sentences or less and the final prompt had many students writing eight or more sentences. This increase in length is also seen over the progression of the three pen pal letters.

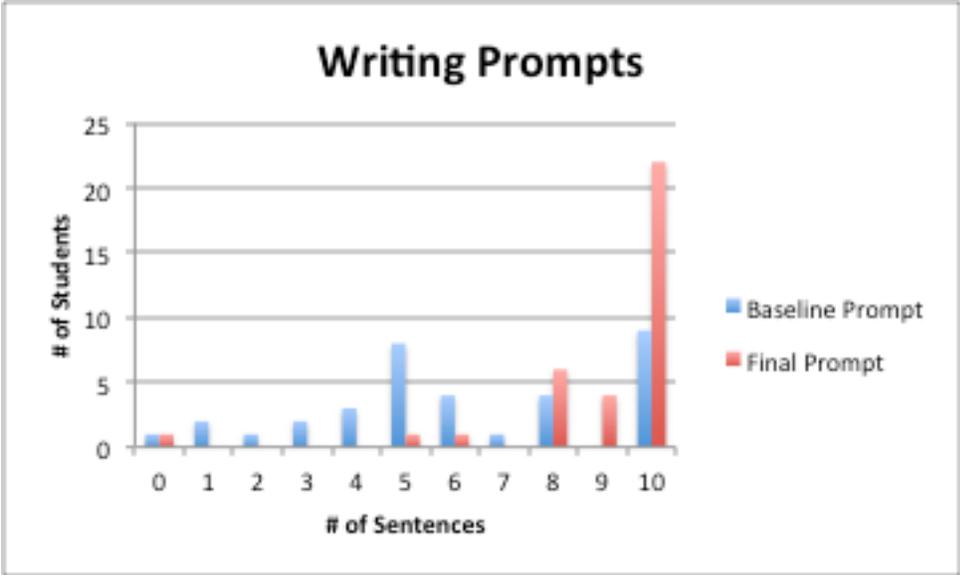


Figure 28: Writing Prompts sentence count

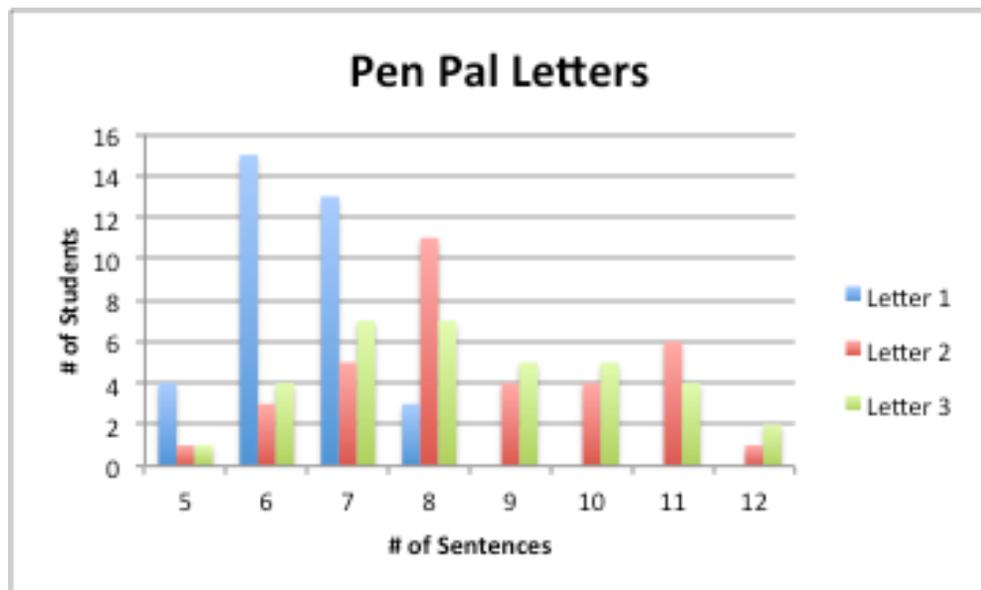
**Pen Pal Letters.** By the end of September, my students began writing their pen pal letters. Each pen pal letter had to follow the topic assigned to the letter (**Appendix G**). Additionally, the first and second letters were assessed using the original rubric and the third letter was assessed using the modified German Level I Writing Rubric (**Appendices I & J**), which was modified to include creativity. When assessing their pen pal writing using the rubric, the same areas of focus used to assess the baseline and final prompt were used, which included Level of Discourse, Vocabulary Usage, Language Control, Task Completion, Mechanics, and Comprehensibility.

However, as I assessed my students' pen pal letters, I noticed that students who wrote short, simple, uncreative letters were receiving better scores than those that produced longer, more complex and creative letters. In light of this information, I modified the writing rubric and added a creativity component. Even though I had modified the rubric, my creative writers, due to the number of errors that were made by using new vocabulary, were still scoring below my uncreative writers. Table 1 shows the scores of the pen pal letters assessed with the writing rubric. The students highlighted are examples of writers that were creative in using a variety of vocabulary, but due to spelling or grammar errors when using new vocabulary, their scores decreased instead of increased.

**Table 1: Pen Pal Letter Rubric Scores**

<b>Pd 2 123</b>	<b>Letter 1</b>	<b>Letter 2</b>	<b>Letter 3</b>
Eva	4	3.6	3.6
Alexander	3.6	3.5	3.5
Lukas	4	3.5	3.5
Patrick	3.5	3.8	3.75
Simone	3.6	3.5	3.5
Angela	3.6	4	3.5
Reinhard	4	3.8	3.5
Reinhold	3.6	4	3.5
Erika H.	3.8	3.6	3.6
Stephanie	3.6	3.6	3.7
<b>Pd 7 123</b>			
Kirsten R.	3.8	4	3.5
Otto	3.6	4	3.7
Monika	4	3.6	3.4
Rudi	4	3.8	3.5
Norbert	3.8	4	3.6
Bruno	4	3.8	3.6
Else	3.8	3.5	3.7
Connie	3.8	3.6	3.6
Ingrid	3.6	4	3.7
Christoph	3.6	4	3.7
Klaus	3.8	3.8	3.4
Rolf	4	3.7	3.6
Wolfgang	4	3.8	3.6
Udo	4	3.6	3.9
<b>Pd 7 456</b>			
Anna	4	4	3.5
Erika R.	3.6	4	3.6
Ute	3.6	3.8	3.5
Liselotte	4	3.6	3.6
Rüdiger	3.3	4	3.3
Kirstin E	3.8	3.6	3.5
Heidi	4	3.8	3.5
Christian	4	4	3.5
Gottfried	3.8	3.8	3.7
Eberhard	3.6	4	3.8
Mathias	3.6	3.8	3.5

Therefore, instead of focusing on the six aspects from the rubric to assess the three pen pal letters and in order to give credit to those risk-takers, I focused instead on the number of sentences written or length-based fluency for each letter. Figure 29 shows the number of sentences written by letter. The majority of students wrote between five and eight sentences on Letter 1 and five and 12 sentences on Letters 2 and 3. As the students progressed through each letter, more began to increase the number of written sentences and by the last letter, the majority of students wrote seven or more sentences for Letter 3.

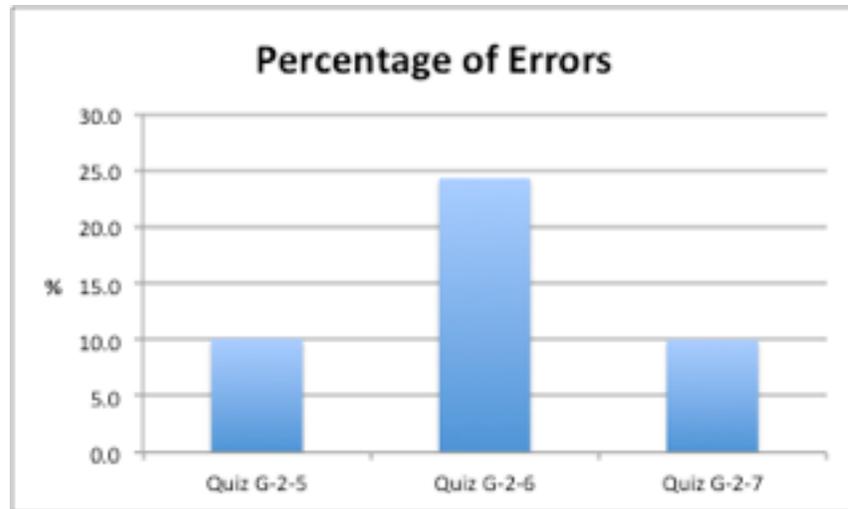


**Figure 29: Pen Pal Letters sentence count**

Both Figure 28 and Figure 29 provide evidence that implementing pen pal letters into my classroom increased my students length- based fluency.

## **Grammar**

**Curriculum Quizzes G-2-5, G-2-6, and G-2-7.** Throughout the study my students learned new vocabulary and grammar rules and were then given a quiz from each section. All three quizzes from the German Level I curriculum included a section in which students were required to write personal answers to questions in full sentences in German. The aspect of grammar that is focused on for the three quizzes was subject/ verb agreement. Figure 30 indicates that there was no change in the percentage of subject/ verb agreement errors made and students continued to make subject/ verb agreement errors, even toward the end of the study. On Quiz G-2-5 (**Appendix N**), 10 percent, which corresponds to 20 out of a possible 198 subject/ verb agreement errors, were made and on Quiz G-2-7 (**Appendix P**), 10 percent or 21 out of a possible 210 subject/ verb agreement errors were made. Quiz G-2-6 (**Appendix O**) had the most subject/ verb agreement errors with 24 percent or 51 out of 210 possible errors. The three curriculum quizzes indicate that even though my students were provided more opportunities through the pen pal letters to write in German, there was no improvement as the percentage of subject/ verb agreement errors stayed the same on quizzes G-2-5 and G-2-7 and the percentage increased on quiz G-2-6.



**Figure 30: Percentage of Subject/Verb Agreement Writing Errors**

Unlike the quizzes, quantitative results from the baseline and final writing prompts, as well as results from the pen pal letters would not be accurate representations of the percentage of errors made because the number of subject/ verb agreement errors depends on the number of sentences written. In both the prompts and the pen pal letters, there was a wide range in the number of sentences written (see Figures 28 & 29), including students who wrote nothing for the baseline and final prompts. Writing nothing would correspond to making zero subject/ verb agreement errors and would provide false interpretations, much like what occurred with the creative and uncreative writers' pen pal letters scores discussed previously.

### **Vocabulary**

Additionally, their vocabulary usage progressed from letter one through letter three, just as their vocabulary usage from their baseline prompt to their final prompt. Figure 31 displays that the percentage of students using

new vocabulary increased with each letter until almost all students were using new vocabulary in their pen pal letters.

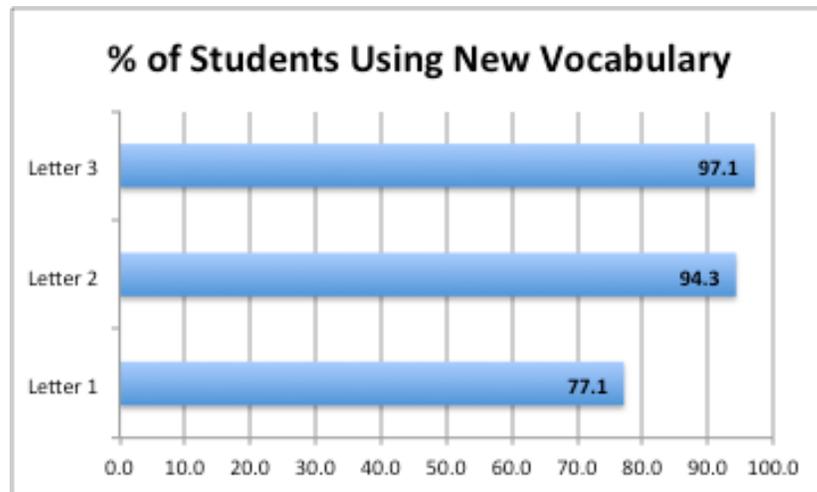


Figure 31: The percentage of students that used new vocabulary

**Baseline and Final 5-Minute Word Write.** The 5-Minute Word Write (**Appendix M**) assessment required my students to write as many words as they could remember in German with their English translation in five minutes. Table 2 displays that this was a struggle for many of my students as the most words written in five minutes was 37, in which most of those words were available on posters around the room, and the average for all of the classes was 22 words in five minutes. Table 3 indicates small increases in word recall in two of the three classes by end of the study with the average number of words for all of the classes being 23 words in five minutes.

**Table 2: Baseline 5-Minute Word Write Averages and Ranges by Class**

	5-Minute Word Write Ranges	5-Minute Word Write Average
Period 2 Days 123	9-26 words	17.5
Period 7 Days 123	6-37 words	21.5
Period 7 Days 456	19-37 words	28
Average		22.3

**Table 3: Final 5-Minute Word Write Averages and Ranges by Class**

	5-Minute Word Write Ranges	5-Minute Word Write Average
Period 2 Days 123	8-23 words	15.5
Period 7 Days 123	14-35 words	24.5
Period 7 Days 456	18-45 words	31.5
Average		23.8

However, even though my students' vocabulary recall only increased slightly, the amount of new vocabulary used in the pen pal letters increased drastically from the first letter to the third letter.

### **Confidence**

**Baseline Reflection Slip and Final Reflection Slip.** The Reflection Slip (**Appendix H**) required my students to use a four-point Likert scale in which they chose the difficulty they felt when writing and gave a short description in English justifying their choice. The overall average for all three classes was a 2.94 out of 4, in which 1 meant Easy, 2 Somewhat Easy, 3

Somewhat Difficult, and 4 Difficult. Table 4 results indicate that after completing the baseline prompt, my students felt that writing in German was Somewhat Difficult. Furthermore, Table 4 illustrates the difficulty they felt when writing slightly decreased from their baseline reflection slip following their baseline writing prompt to their final reflection slip following their final writing prompt. Overall, the average decreased from 2.94 to 2.62 out of 4 showing that students felt a shift in the difficulty of writing from Somewhat Difficult to Somewhat Easy.

**Table 4: Baseline and Final Reflection Slip Difficulty of Writing Results**

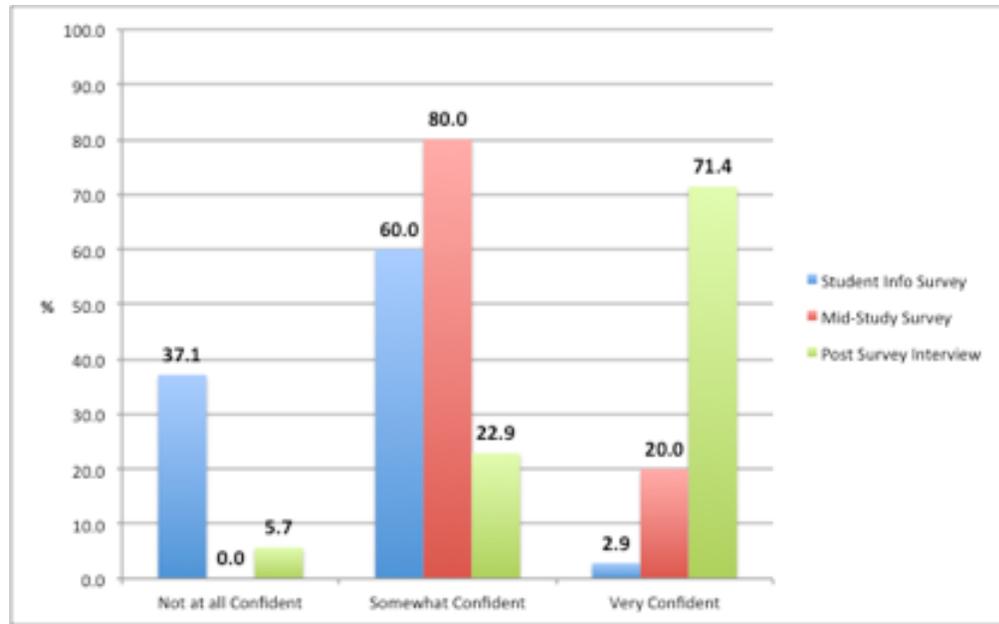
	Baseline Reflection Slip	Final Reflection Slip
Period 2 Days 123	3.10 Somewhat Difficult	2.60 Somewhat Easy
Period 7 Days 123	2.64 Somewhat Easy	2.71 Somewhat Easy
Period 7 Days 456	3.09 Somewhat Difficult	2.55 Somewhat Easy
Average	2.94 Somewhat Difficult	2.62 Somewhat Easy

**Student Information Survey.** Before my students began writing to their pen pals, I distributed a Student Information Survey (**Appendix D**) so that I could get to know my students and their relationship with the German language. The survey asked them questions about their home language use, thoughts about the German language and writing, whether or not they enjoyed learning German, and if they thought they could become better at using the German language. The information survey provided important data focusing on my students' confidence when writing in German. Out of 35 students using a three point Likert scale, 13 students claimed they were Not at All Confident, 21 chose Somewhat Confident, and only one student said Very Confident.

Figure 32 shows that the majority of students felt they were not confident when writing in German.

**Mid-Research Survey.** At the beginning of November, my students completed a Mid-Research Survey (**Appendix E**). This survey, based on a three-point Likert scale, asked them questions about their experiences with writing to their pen pal. It was important to monitor my students' experiences as they progress through each letter and compare them to their baseline information. In particular, the data from the survey presented in Figure 32 revealed a large increase in confidence from the baseline reflection slip. Out of 35 students, none of my students chose lower than a two out of three on question seven: I feel confident using German.

**Post-Research Interview.** Due to the major shift in confidence among my students from the baseline to mid-research surveys, I interviewed each student at the end of the study using the Post-Research Interview (**Appendix F**) and focused in particular on question four: Do you feel you can write more in German and were less anxious about writing while working on the assignments? This question revealed their confidence level while writing in German. Figure 32 indicates that by the end of my study and after writing three pen pal letters and two writing prompts, my students felt more confident. Overall, their confidence grew as 2.9 percent originally chose Very Confident to 71.4 percent choosing Very Confident with less students choosing Not at all confident, decreasing the percentage from 37.1 percent to 5.7 percent.



**Figure 32: Confidence levels from Student Info Survey, Mid-Research Survey, and Post-Research Interview**

### Observation Log

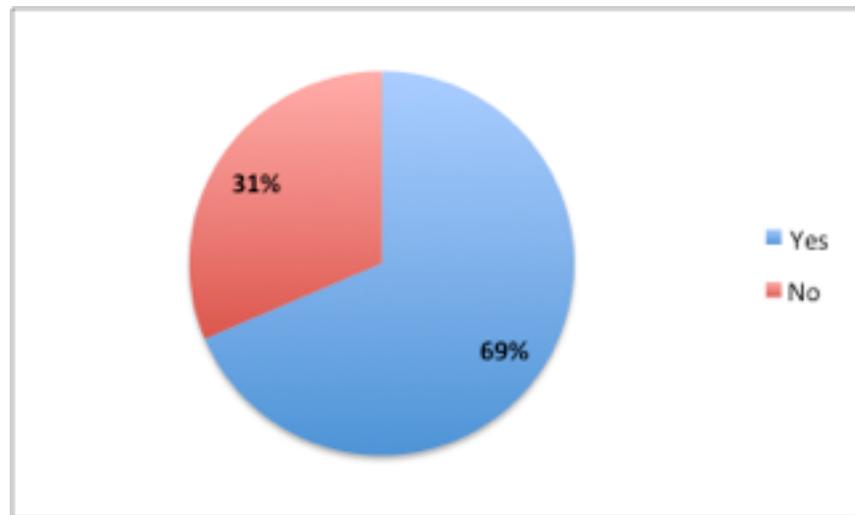
Throughout the entire study, I documented interactions between the students as well as interactions between the students and myself (the teacher). These observation logs have provided me with direct quotes from students to ensure that I am portraying the events and experiences of my students accurately and provided the ability to create common themes to see trends throughout the research.

As I reread through my observation logs, which I had coded to identify themes, I noticed two very common codes: Uninterested, which usually was coded when I noted groaning and moaning about an assignment, and Constructivist Learning. The first common code, Uninterested, occurred most during the baseline and final writing prompts and baseline and final 5-minute word write. Even though this code was rarely seen coinciding with times

students were writing to their pen pal, it did only appear twice while writing the pen pal letters due to the timing of the assignment, both occurring around holiday festivities. As I assessed why my students were uninterested in completing the baseline and final prompts and 5-minute word write, but for the most part were interested in writing the letters, I took note as to the type of assessments they were completing at the time. Both prompts and the word write were recall assessments that were given for the purpose of assessing. They were not authentic by any means and were not immediately useful or student-centered, as they were teacher-centered. On the other hand, the pen pal letters were very student-centered, relevant, and authentic because the purpose was communication and socialization with another German speaker, which is important to them, and they were not purely for assessment.

Additionally, throughout my observation log, my students made remarks about what they were learning and their own light bulb moments, which I coded as Constructivist Learning. Overall, my observation log strongly indicated that my students enjoyed writing to their pen pal and while writing to their pen pal made vocabulary and grammar connections on their own by activating prior knowledge. My students would excitedly inquire about when the class was going to write to their pen pal and would be disappointed if class time was not spent writing. Furthermore, when asked in the Post-Research Interview, would you like to continue writing to your pen pal in German class, the majority of the students answered positively. Figure 33 shows that 69 percent of students, which is 24 out of 35, enjoyed writing to

their pen pal while 31 percent, or 11 out of 35, would not want to continue writing to their pen pal.



**Figure 33: Interview Question 8: Percentage of students from all classes**

## Coding Graphic Organizer

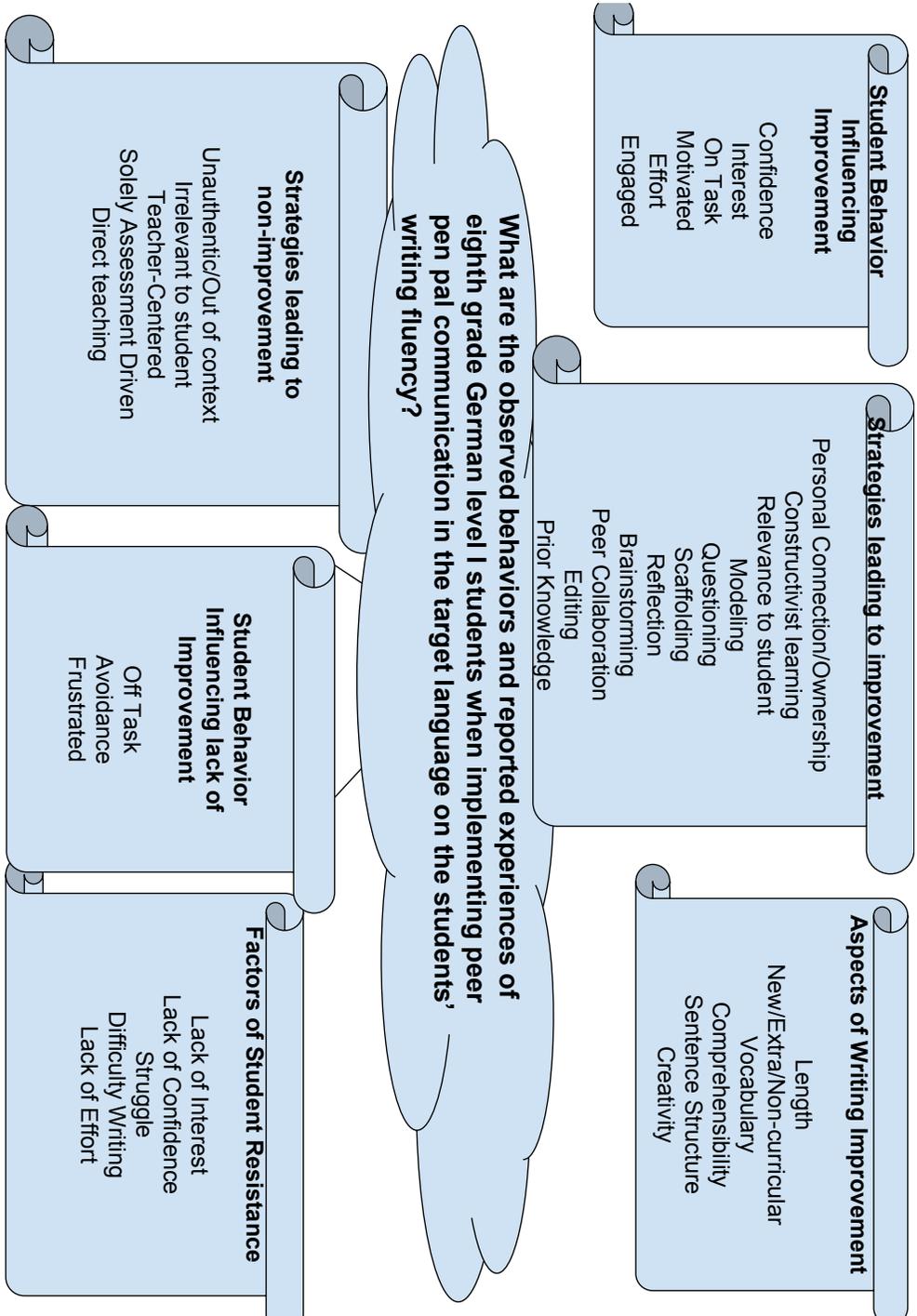


Figure 34: Coding Themes Graphic Organizer

## **Findings**

Throughout this pen pal implementation journey, I have found many themes that vary from teacher learning to student learning. My study has been to implement pen pals among my eighth grade classes and gather evidence to show progress in their writing fluency in German. Writing fluency has many aspects and progress can be shown through its many aspects individually or combined. For this study, the areas of writing fluency that I felt were most valuable were vocabulary usage, grammar in the form of subject/ verb agreements, and length of writing. Each of these three areas was affected throughout my study. Additionally, there were two aspects, confidence and authenticity, that impacted fluency during the study. Below are the four themes that have emerged from implementing pen pal communication in my eighth grade German level I classroom.

**Pen Pal communication aids and improves writing fluency in the areas of vocabulary usage and length-based writing.** Marchón (2011) claims that writing in a second language helps strengthen current vocabulary and acquire new vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, Williams (2012) agrees stating that the writer is able to notice and internalize new knowledge more efficiently while writing. Both of these researchers believe that writing is key to increasing vocabulary knowledge. As I reflect upon my research, I have found a variety of evidence to support the statements made by Marchón and Williams.

Throughout my adventure story, I relate multiple instances of students activating prior knowledge and uncovering new vocabulary because it occurred so frequently while writing. The best examples come from two separate student experiences: Ute and Anna. Ute used her knowledge of prior vocabulary, “are you,” to find the correct way to say, “you are” in order to write a sentence for her final draft of Pen Pal Letter 2 (Figure 16, p. 63). Anna had a similar positive experience while writing her rough draft of Pen Pal Letter 2 with a new phrase, “and you?,” as she used prior vocabulary “you” and uncovered new vocabulary “and,” which can be seen in Figure 15, p. 62.

Furthermore, as students activated prior vocabulary and identified current and new vocabulary, they began to write more sentences in German. These changes in writing length can be seen in both their pen pal letters and their baseline and final writing prompts. Figures 20 and 21 (p. 71-72) show just one example of a student, Stephanie, whose writing length progressed significantly from letter 1 to letter 3. Her progress is even more meaningful given the knowledge that she entered German class just this year, whereas almost all of my eighth grade students are in their second year of level I.

All of these experiences from my classroom can then be supported by the data I collected and discussed within my Data Analysis and in my Observation Log. Figures 25, 26, and 27 (p. 81-82) portray increases in vocabulary usage from the baseline to the final writing prompt and Figure 28 (p. 85) shows an increase in sentences written on both prompts. Figure 29 (p. 88) illustrates an increase from five- eight to five- 12 sentences written from

the first to the third pen pal letter. Additionally, Figure 31 (p. 91) shows an increase from 77 percent to 97 percent in new vocabulary usage from pen pal letter 1 to letter 3. Furthermore, there were also slight increases in vocabulary recall, particularly in Ute and Anna's class, from the Baseline 5-Minute Word Write to the Final 5-Minute Word Write as seen in Tables 2 and 3 (p. 92).

Lastly, qualitative evidence from my observation log and post-research interview also indicate an increase in vocabulary usage. During each pen pal letter writing session, I would note in my observation log which prior and new vocabulary words were discussed amongst students. For example, on October 28<sup>th</sup>, students inquired and used new and prior vocabulary to be able to write phrases, such as "I have" and "Do you have," as well as words like *die Familie*. The Post-Research Interview, particularly question 7, also provided solid evidence to support increased vocabulary as 35 out of 35 students answered positively saying that they learned new vocabulary during pen pal writing.

**Pen Pal communication provides the opportunity for positive social interaction through writing, which establishes and increases confidence amongst beginning language-learners.** Vygotsky (1978), famous for his social interaction theories, Krashen (1981) renowned for his Second Language Acquisition Theories, and published author Omaggio Hadley (2000) all contribute important ideas in support of this theme.

Vygotsky argues that language learning must be social in order for students to truly know a language. Krashen believes learning best occurs when students'

affective filters are low due to a comfortable environment and when they receive input that is at their appropriate language level. Omaggio Hadley agrees with Krashen and Vygotsky saying that working at their comfortable language level in a social environment encourages fluency amongst second language learners. As a new action researcher, I too have found their claims to be valid as I have found within my data a triangulation of evidence to support them.

While implementing pen pals into my German level I classroom, there were many days I observed students' first glimpses of establishing confidence and from then on, growing confidence as they wrote in German. As my students received their very first pen pal letter, one of my students, Erika H. exclaimed, "Oh this is easy to read," which shows increased confidence from her as a language learner. Additionally, three other students demonstrated strong glimpses of confidence: Anna, Erika R., and Rüdiger. The first two students, Anna and Erika R., always talk during class, but it's rarely about German. However, on November 4<sup>th</sup> I witnessed Anna, a usually low self-esteem and low effort student, gain confidence through helping Erika R. write her rough draft by discussing possible new and prior vocabulary with her. Anna's confidence continued the next day as well as she continued to help Erika R. write her pen pal letter and even moved to other students to help them. The third student, Rüdiger, when asked while writing his third pen pal letter in December, whether he thought he was a better writer after completing all three letters, without hesitation answered, "Yes!" These are just a couple of

examples of positive social interactions that have established and built confidence.

Moreover, the qualitative and quantitative evidence to support gains in confidence is exceptionally strong. Results from the Baseline and Final Reflection Slips in Table 4 (p. 93) show the average number of students rated the difficulty of writing on the Baseline Writing Prompt as Somewhat Difficult, but when asked to rate the level of difficulty after the Final Writing Prompt, the average number of students chose Somewhat Easy. Additionally, Figure 32 (p. 95) indicates an increase in confidence from the Student Information Survey given at the beginning of the study to the Post-Research Interview given at the end of the study. On the Student Information Survey, 37 percent of students answered Not Confident in writing in German and only 2.9 percent answered Very Confident. By the end of the study, only 5 percent answered Not Confident and overwhelmingly 71.4 percent of the students answered Very Confident. Finally, after asking each student during the Post-Research Interview Question 5: do you feel you are better at writing in German, the results show 34 out of 35 students answered that they feel they are better at writing.

**Authentic and student-centered strategies engage students and increase writing fluency.** An authentic strategy can be described as a strategy that imitates how language is used in everyday life and is for the purpose of communication, not assessment. Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, and Igo (2011) claim that authentic audiences create student ownership, relevance, and

control over learning which often leads to increased engagement and motivation. In agreement, Kormos (2012) argues that writers finding no personal relevance or personal motivation in a particular task will most likely not learn from the task or even engage in completing the task. Supporting these claims, Moore and Seeger (2009) believe implementing purely authentic writing experiences into the classroom allows language learners to naturally develop and helps support their writing skills. Pursuing and implementing pen pal letter writing in my classroom for the purpose of providing my students with an authentic task to practice writing in German has provided evidence supporting that students become better engaged and more fluent in writing.

The first sign of the importance of student relevance occurred when I introduced my study to my first two classes. My introduction was not as well received as I had hoped it would be and it was due to the lack of student relevance I gave to my study. I introduced my study from the teacher-centered point of view and why this was relevant to me instead of the student-centered point of view and why it will help them. Needless to say, as I introduced it from the student-centered side of my study, I received the reaction of excitement and interest that I was hoping for at the start. Additionally, each task I had my students complete that was solely for assessment was met with groans and moans. On the other hand, while writing to their pen pals, there were very few moans and groans and students even expressed comments of interest. Two students, Simone and Ute, would ask at the start of every class period about writing or receiving a pen pal letter. Ute even defended her

interest saying, “Yes, yes I do” when a student commented, “You like writing to your pen pal, don’t you?”

In addition to student enthusiasm for this authentic task, my collected data shows quantitative and qualitative evidence of increased fluency. Table 2 and 3 (p. 92) illustrate the results of the Baseline and Final 5-Minute Word Write assessment. This assessment for classes on days 1, 2, and 3 was met with a lack of enthusiasm from my students, as it was teacher-centered and purely for assessment. However, when introduced to my students on days 4, 5, and 6 as a competition, my students excitingly completed the task. The baseline and final scores for my students on days 4, 5, and 6 were higher than the scores for days 1, 2, and 3, thus supporting that student-centered tasks encourage improved fluency. The same evidence is seen between the baseline and final writing prompts and the pen pal letter scores. There were more sentences written overall on the pen pal letters than on the writing prompts. Table 1 (p. 87) illustrates that the majority of students scored in the 3 and 4 range on the writing rubric when writing their pen pal letters; however, when compared to Figures 25, 26, and 27 (p. 81-82) displaying the results from the writing rubric which assessed the baseline and final prompt data, the scores were in the 2 and 3 range out of 4. Finally, when asked during the Post-Research Interview if they would like to continue to write to their pen pal, 69 percent stated they wanted to continue writing to their pen pal (Figure 33, p. 97).

**Pen pals do not improve subject/ verb agreement fluency of beginner level students as errors showed little to no change during and after implementation.** The majority of research conducted on pen pals occurs in higher proficiency classrooms. For example, Chafee-Sorace (1999) saw improvements in grammar structures while her college-level students were engaging in pen pal writing. However, the research on pen pal letter implementation in a beginning level language classroom is limited and the focus is simplistic in nature as the researcher is interested in establishing students' abilities to write. Therefore, as I reviewed my data and reflected upon my experiences through the study, I found that I too focused on solely forming sentences and just writing, while introducing grammar structures slowly and without a strong emphasis. Due to the nature of their proficiency level and the importance placed on comprehensibility instead of grammar, I found that my evidence indicates little change in their grammar fluency.

Throughout my study, there were experiences of students understanding new grammar topics on their own, but the qualitative and quantitative evidence does not support increases in grammar fluency in the particular area of subject/ verb agreement due to writing to a pen pal. Figure 30 (p. 90) shows the percentage of errors as the same or even increased from assessment to assessment. Figures 25, 26, and 27 (p. 81-82) indicate an increase in grammar control as assessed using the writing rubric, however, students continued to make patterns of errors while writing. An example from the Mid-Research Survey as seen in Figure 19 (p. 69) shows that a particular

student said “No, Never” to learning more grammar. Additionally, the Post-Research Interview completed by Reinhard, Figure 24 (p. 78), states that he didn’t improve his grammar through pen pal writing. In relation to the rest of my data collected from question nine, eight out of 35 or 23 percent of students said that they didn’t improve their grammar.

Overall, even though my students made little to no fluency gains in grammar, there was improvement in confidence, vocabulary and length-based fluency, and they were more engaged when writing throughout the study.

## Next Steps

### **The Adventure Continues...**

After I administered my Post-Research Interview, I asked my classes if they were interested in still writing to their pen pals. The response was almost a unanimous agreement that we would continue until the end of the school year. In light of all of the struggles that occurred as I implemented pen pals into my classroom for the very first time, I have a few changes I would make in order to improve this experience, which include time, pen pal choice, and topics and rubric usage.

**Time, Time, Time!** The very first complaint most of my students had about writing to their pen pals was the time it took to get their letters returned to them with responses because they had already forgotten what they had written in the letter they sent to their pen pal. Unfortunately, due to the school schedule, absences, and wanting to keep their pen pals a secret, I struggled with getting their letters back to them in a short amount of time. Originally, this aspect of time was the main reason I chose to keep the pen pals within one school and not have my students writing to another class in another building. When I implement this again next year, I will try to return the letters as soon as I get them and if students are absent, their pen pal will need to wait until they have completed writing. I want to make it as short of a time as possible between letters because I want my students to stay engaged and motivated.

**Outsourcing.** As I discussed previously, my students wrote to other students within my classes in our school building. This decision was made

because of the short length of my study and the uncertainties of relying on another colleague to be prompt with receiving and writing their pen pal letters. I would love to try to have my students write to the German Level I students at the high school or even at another one of our sister middle schools since now there are no pressures of needing to complete the letters in a condensed amount of time or having the pressures of collecting all of the data to write a thesis. In the future, I would love to find a sister school in a German-speaking country to share letters or even emails.

**Letter Topics and Writing Rubrics.** The final aspect that I would modify for next year was the letter topics and writing rubric usage. My students gave valuable advice when asked what aspects of the strategy they would change that focused on the topics for the letters. I matched these based on the topics we were learning in the curriculum so that it would reinforce the vocabulary. This actually worked very well and my students did notice an increase in confidence and recalling of the newly learned vocabulary. However, they stated that they would have liked the topics to be guidelines instead of requirements. Upon reflection, I think this is a really good change for next year because my students that are not confident or creative will need suggestions for topics, but my students that are creative and confident in their language skills will want to branch out and explore different phrases and vocabulary. This would create more options and differentiation for all of my students.

Additionally, as I mentioned in the Findings section, my main focus while writing the pen pal letters was purely writing. I wanted my students to just be able to write and become more comfortable writing German. Due to the study and collecting data, I used a writing rubric to assess their letters for grading purposes and to be able to show results. My change for next year would be to allow students to write freely and use anchor papers with the writing rubric instead of systematically grading each one based upon each category. I want my students to write what they know and write at their own comfortable proficiency without worrying about meeting the demands of a rubric.

### **Sharing with Colleagues**

**Within my district.** I work in a school as the only German teacher and my language colleagues consist of a Spanish and a French teacher. As a tight knit group we share a lot of strategies and methods that we use or are interested in using. The Spanish teacher is already using pen pals in her classes and has provided me with advice and many different methods in which to implement pen pals. In moving beyond my building, I would be interested in pursuing discussions about sharing pen pal letters with students from the other German classes in our sister middle schools or even our high schools. In sharing my positive results, I could encourage more language teachers to implement pen pal writing into their classrooms.

**Within my teaching community.** While my thesis will be posted on the Moravian College website, I hope that it would be encouraging and

beneficial to other language teachers interested in implementing pen pals into their classrooms. Furthermore, I would also enjoy developing a mentorship program with a local college or university's language department in which my students could write to their students, in the target language or even in English, to discuss the possibilities available to language learners and experiences they could share about attending high school and pursuing higher education.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A: Parental Informed Consent Form

September 2016

#### Informed Consent Form

Dear Parents,

In addition to teaching German, I am also a graduate student at Moravian College. As part of my coursework, I will be studying my own teaching methods through a systematic research study to improve your child's writing fluency in German. My focus will be on grammar and vocabulary skills in writing using pen pal communication. Your child will be assigned a pen pal partner and will send and receive 5 letters in German over the course of the study. In doing so, I hope to refine your child's writing skills in German in a manner valuable for them. Mr.xxxx, our principal, sees value and has approved this study.

I will be gathering data using researched best practices. Your child will complete 2 surveys about their language background and how they feel about learning and writing in another language. I will also collect samples of your child's work in the form of short essays, before and after the study, to note changes in their writing, quizzes, their pen pal letters, and writing reflection slips. Additionally, I will be conducting student-teacher conferencing during class and an interview with your child focusing on the pen pal writing process at the end of the study. Throughout the class periods, I will be keeping an observational log and journal of interactions and experiences. My research will be completed during the current Fall Term, which ends December 9, 2016. Throughout the study, all data will be kept confidential and in a secure location. In addition, your child will be given a pseudonym identity. Within a year of the completion of my research study, all data will be destroyed. The results of my research will be shared with other teachers.

All lessons and assignments involved in this study will be part of the regular German level I instruction for all students. However, participation and collection of data is voluntary and your child has the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. If your child withdraws or your family opts not to participate, no information pertaining to your child will be used in this study. Your child will receive an assent form to sign that explains my research and gives their permission. A copy of this signed consent form and your child's assent form will be given to you for your records.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding my research or decide to withdraw from the study at any time, please feel free to contact me at [sathomas@basdschools.org](mailto:sathomas@basdschools.org) or call 610-868-8581 ext. 42122. You may also contact my Moravian College advisor Dr. Joseph Shosh at 610-861-1482 or email at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu). **Please sign and return this letter upon your earliest convenience.**

Thank you for your support,  
Ms. Sarah Thomas

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Please check, print your child's name, and sign this portion of the form.

I allow my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate.

I will not allow my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Sign

## **Appendix B: Principal Informed Consent Form**

### **Permission to Conduct Action Research**

September 8, 2016

Dear Mr.xxxxx,

In addition to teaching German, I am also a graduate student at Moravian College. I am currently working on my Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a Reading Specialist Certification. As part of my coursework, I will be studying my own teaching methods and student behavior through a systematic research study to improve student writing fluency in the target language. My focus will be on refining students' grammar and vocabulary skills in writing using pen pal communication. They will be assigned a pen pal partner and will send and receive 5 letters in German over the course of the study. In doing so, I hope to refine my 8<sup>th</sup> grade German level I students' writing skills in the target language in a manner valuable for them.

I will be gathering data using researched best practices, including 2 student surveys, samples of student work, such as short essays, quizzes, and the pen pal letters, observational logs and journals, student-teacher conferencing, and a post-study student interview. My research will be completed during the current Fall Term, which ends December 9, 2016. Throughout the study, all data will be kept confidential and in a secure location. In addition, all participants will be given a pseudonym identity. Within a year of the completion of my research study, all data will be destroyed. The results of my research will be shared with other teachers.

All lessons and assignments involved in this study will be part of the regular German level I instruction for all students. However, participation and collection of data is voluntary and any participant has the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. If the participant withdraws or the family opts not to participate, no information pertaining to that participant will be used in this study. All students' families will receive a consent form to sign explaining my research and all students will receive an assent form to sign. A copy of both signed forms will be given to the students' families for their records.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding my research, please feel free to contact me at 610 390 4043 or email [sathomas@basdschools.org](mailto:sathomas@basdschools.org). You may also contact my Moravian College advisor Dr. Joseph Shosh at 610-861-1482 or email at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu). Please sign and date this letter upon your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your consideration and support of my professional development,  
Sarah A. Thomas

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I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this research study, that I have read and understand this consent form, and that I have received a copy. Sarah A. Thomas has my permission to conduct this study in her German Level I classroom.

Principal's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Student Informed Assent Form

September 2016

### Informed Assent Form

Dear Eighth Grade German Student,

I am currently a student at Moravian College. This fall I will be conducting an action research study in which I will investigate how writing to a pen pal in German affects your vocabulary and grammar.

For this study, you will be paired with another eighth grade German student and will write and receive 5 letters from your pen pal on a variety of topics. You will also be completing 2 surveys about foreign language and writing in German, answering questions about the study during an interview at the end of the study, filling in short reflection slips, and writing short essays in German.

During the study I will collect lots of data (student surveys, notes on student engagement and motivation, interviews and samples of student work) to determine whether this study was a success. When I share the results with others, I will not use your real name and all information will be kept confidential and in a secure location.

I am writing to ask permission to use the data I collect from you during this process. This study will help me to become a better teacher and will take place from September 2016 through November 2016. Participation in this project is voluntary, and you may withdraw yourself from this study at any time without penalty simply by notifying me. Participation in this study will not affect your grade. If you have any questions you may talk with me or Mr. RaHS, who has approved this study.

Thank You!  
Ms. Thomas

#### **Please check the appropriate box below and sign the form**

I give permission for my teacher, Ms. Thomas, to use my data in her study. I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this form. I have read this form and understand it.

I **do not** give permission for my teacher, Ms. Thomas, to use my data in her study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Sign

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**7. List ways in which knowing German would be useful to you.**

**8. What got you interested in German before you actually started learning the language?**

*Circle all that apply*

- German cognates
  - German Relatives
  - History
  - German friend
  - German culture
  - I am interested in languages in general.
  - I want to travel in Germany.
  - It provides better job opportunities.
  - I am interested in European countries.
  - Other (Please explain below) \_
- 

**9. What are some reasons that make you want to continue studying German right now?**

*Circle all that apply*

- I enjoy learning German.
- I want to become more proficient in German.
- I am interested in German or languages in general.
- I want to understand German culture more.
- I want to travel to Germany.
- I want to work or study in Germany.
- It provides better job opportunities.
- Other (Please explain below)



## Appendix E: Mid-Research Survey

### Mid-Research Survey

Answer with a number score.

No, Never

Somewhat

Yes, definitely

1

2

3

1. I enjoy writing in German
2. I like writing to my pen pal.
3. I look forward to reading what my pen pal wrote.
4. I can understand what my pen pal wrote.
5. I would be interested in writing to a native German pen pal.
6. My pen pal and I get along.
7. I feel confident using German.
8. I find German useful.
9. Having a pen pal helped me learn more German vocabulary.
10. Having a pen pal helped me learn more German grammar.
11. Having a pen pal helped me better understand written German.
12. I think writing in German is easy.

## Appendix F: Post-Research Interview

### Post-Research Interview Questions

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How do you feel writing to your pen pal improved your German language skills?
2. What do you feel were the benefits of completing this assignment?
3. What do you feel are some disadvantages of doing this assignment?
4. Do you feel that you can write more in German and were less anxious about writing while working on the assignments?
5. Do you feel you are better at writing German now compared to the start of the school year?
6. Do you feel you are better at reading and translating German now compared to the start of the school year?
7. Do you think you learned more vocabulary due to having a pen pal?
8. Would you like to continue writing to your pen pal in German class?
9. Do you think you are better with German grammar due to having a pen pal?

## **Appendix G: Letter Topics**

### **Letter Topics**

**Letter 1:** Who are you? Include greeting, name, and how you are.

**Letter 2:** Age/Description: Include nice to meet you, how old you are, what you look like, and your favorite teacher

**Letter 3:** Location/Heritage: Include where you came from, where your mother, father, and family came from, name of mother, father, siblings, pets.

## Appendix H: Reflection Slip

### Reflection Slip

1. Rate the level of difficulty of writing in German

Easy	Somewhat Easy	Somewhat Difficult	Difficult
1	2	3	4

2. Explain why.

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## Appendix I: Writing Rubric

### German Level I Writing Rubric

	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Level of Discourse</b> <i>How do I express myself?</i>	I use a variety of simple and compound sentences.	I use mostly simple sentences with a few compound sentences.	I use simple sentences that are repetitive in structure.	I use a few simple sentences but rely primarily on individual words or phrases.
<b>Vocabulary Usage</b> <i>How developed is my vocabulary?</i> <i>Did I use English?</i>	I use a rich variety of past and current vocabulary accurately. I incorporate new vocabulary.	I use an adequate amount of past and current vocabulary accurately.	I use an inadequate amount of past and current vocabulary. My vocabulary is sometimes inaccurate.	I use an inadequate amount of past and current vocabulary. My vocabulary is usually inaccurate.
<b>Language Control</b> <i>How accurate are my grammatical structures?</i>	I use both past and current structures. My errors do not follow a visible pattern.	I use past structures. My current structures have a few patterns of errors.	I use past structures fairly accurately. My current structures have several patterns of errors.	I use past structures inaccurately. I do not attempt to use current structures.
<b>Task Completion</b> <i>How well did I respond to the prompts?</i>	I respond fully and appropriately to all prompts. My response is relevant.	I respond adequately to most prompts. My response is generally relevant.	I respond inadequately (or not at all) to a few of the prompts. My response is a little irrelevant.	I respond inadequately (or not at all) to some of the prompts. My response is a very irrelevant.
<b>Mechanics</b> <i>Spelling, capitalization, English usage</i>	I make no errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. No English.	I make a few errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. No English.	I make some errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. A little English.	I make a lot of errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. Some English.
<b>Comprehensibility</b> <i>How well does the audience understand me?</i>	My message is fully understandable. No interpretation required	My message is mostly understandable. Minimal interpretation is required.	My message is somewhat understandable. Some interpretation is required.	My message is barely understandable. Significant interpretation is required.

Rubric template adapted from *Sara Adams: Spanish Class Rubric Samples*

## Appendix J: Writing Rubric Modified to include creativity

### German Level I Writing Rubric

	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Level of Discourse</b> <i>How do I express myself?</i>	I use a variety of simple and compound sentences. I am often creative.	I use mostly simple sentences with a few compound sentences. I am sometimes creative.	I use simple sentences that are repetitive in structure. I am rarely creative.	I use a few simple sentences but rely primarily on individual words or phrases. I am never creative.
<b>Vocabulary Usage</b> <i>How developed is my vocabulary?</i> <i>Did I use English?</i>	I use a rich variety of past and current vocabulary accurately. I incorporate new vocabulary.	I use an adequate amount of past and current vocabulary accurately.	I use an inadequate amount of past and current vocabulary. My vocabulary is sometimes inaccurate.	I use an inadequate amount of past and current vocabulary. My vocabulary is usually inaccurate.
<b>Language Control</b> <i>How accurate are my grammatical structures?</i>	I use both past and current structures. My errors do not follow a visible pattern.	I use past structures. My current structures have a few patterns of errors.	I use past structures fairly accurately. My current structures have several patterns of errors.	I use past structures inaccurately. I do not attempt to use current structures.
<b>Task Completion</b> <i>How well did I respond to the prompts?</i>	I respond fully and appropriately to all prompts. My response is relevant.	I respond adequately to most prompts. My response is generally relevant.	I respond inadequately (or not at all) to a few of the prompts. My response is a little irrelevant.	I respond inadequately (or not at all) to some of the prompts. My response is a very irrelevant.
<b>Mechanics</b> <i>Spelling, capitalization, English usage</i>	I make no errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. No English.	I make a few errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. No English.	I make some errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. A little English.	I make a lot of errors in spelling, punctuation, and/or capitalization. Some English.
<b>Comprehensibility</b> <i>How well does the audience understand me?</i>	My message is fully understandable. No interpretation required	My message is mostly understandable. Minimal interpretation is required.	My message is somewhat understandable. Some interpretation is required.	My message is barely understandable. Significant interpretation is required.

Rubric template adapted from *Sara Adams: Spanish Class Rubric Samples*

**Appendix K: Baseline Writing Prompt**

**Ein Bild sagt 1000 Wörter!**

Create a conversation in German using the following picture. Write at least **10 sentences** using only **German**. No English, please.



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**Appendix L: Final Writing Prompt**

**Was sagen sie?**

Create a conversation in German using the following picture. Write at least **10 sentences** using only **German**. No English, please.



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**Appendix M: 5-Minute Word Write**

I would  
count as  
help

German

Write as many words as you know

Frank

Englisch

## Appendix N: G-2-5 Quiz

\* students can write form sentences with a picture help  
\* focus on spelling

### G-2-5 Test

Write in the number of the German word you hear next to the German word you see that has the opposite meaning.

alt \_\_\_\_\_ schön \_\_\_\_\_ er \_\_\_\_\_ der Junge \_\_\_\_\_

Describe the following people with a short sentence in German (example in English: Michael is young and ugly). You may want to use some of the following words: ist, jung, alt, schön, hässlich, # Jahre alt, ein Junge, ein Mädchen, ein Herr, eine Frau. You may use numerals if you mention a specific age.

1) Ich (yourself) \_\_\_\_\_

2) Der Professor \_\_\_\_\_

3) Sabine (from story) \_\_\_\_\_

4) Herr Schmidt \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following personal questions with full sentence answers in German. The following words may help: ich, er, sie, bin, ist, Jahre, alt, jung. You may use numerals in your answers.

Wie alt bist du? \_\_\_\_\_

Wie alt ist deine Mutter? \_\_\_\_\_

Zum Spaß: What does this mean? Man ist nur einmal jung.

G-2-5 Test reprinted from *Sabine und Michael* by Michael Miller

## Appendix O: G-2-6 Quiz

### G-2-6 Test

• spelling + grammar = errors

Datum \_\_\_\_\_

Stunde \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the most appropriate answer to the questions you hear:

- 1) Er ist hässlich                      Er ist Schüler
- 2) Er ist groß                              Er ist Lehrer
- 3) Er ist ein Junge                      Er ist Hans
- 4) Er ist alt                                Er ist 12

Translate the following sentences into German. Some, but not all, of the following words may help: wie, sieht, aus, wer, bin, ist, ich, sie, er, das, groß, klein, Sie, Frau, Lehrerin, sind, ja, nein

- 1) Who is that? vacabo das question word vacabo \_\_\_\_\_  
Lehrerin sp. ist sp.
- 2) She is Mrs. Bauer, the teacher. \_\_\_\_\_  
sieht sp. Frau
- 3) What does she look like? || || \_\_\_\_\_  
ist sp.
- 4) She is tall. \_\_\_\_\_  
bist du (not formal) wrong pronoun wrong verb word order
- 5) Mrs. Bauer, are you tall? || || \_\_\_\_\_  
ist nein sp. no verb
- 6) No, I'm short. \_\_\_\_\_  
|| ||

G-2-6 Test reprinted from *Sabine und Michael* by Michael Miller

## Appendix P: G-2-7 Quiz

Stunde \_\_\_\_\_

G-2-7 Test *\* Writing is improving!*

Who comes from Berlin? Write the number of the German phrase you hear that matches the English pronoun you see:

I \_\_\_\_\_ he \_\_\_\_\_ you \_\_\_\_\_ she \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the word in parenthesis that best matches the subject of the sentence.

1) Ich (komme / kommt) aus München.      3) Woher (komme / kommen) Sie?  
2) Er (kommen / kommt) aus Hamburg.      4) Woher (kommst / komme) du?

List any two other German words that have the same meaning as **wunderbar**.

1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following personal questions with full-sentence answers in German:

1) Woher kommst du? \_\_\_\_\_  
2) Woher kommt dein Vater? \_\_\_\_\_

---

G-2-7 Test reprinted from *Sabine und Michael* by Michael Miller

## Appendix Q: HSIRB Approval Email and Proposal

Dear Ms. Sarah Thomas,

Thank you for submitting your revisions. You have addressed all of the concerns listed in your conditional approval. The HSIRB has completed its final review of your proposal, "Using asynchronous computer-mediated written communication to improve students' German writing fluency in the target language," and is granting approval of this proposal.

### Part I: RESEARCHER

1. <b>Proposer:</b> Sarah A Thomas	2. <b>Department:</b> Education
3. <b>Mailing address:</b>	4. <b>Phone:</b>
5. <b>E-mail address:</b>	
6. <b>This is a (please check):</b>  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> New Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> Resubmission of a rejected Proposal <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal <input type="checkbox"/> Request for modification	7. <b>Research Start/End Dates:</b> Make sure you clearly define the start and end dates. Format as month, day, year.  <b>Start: August 30, 2016</b>  <b>End: December 23, 2016</b>
7. <b>Title of Proposal:</b> Using asynchronous computer-mediated written communication to improve students' German writing fluency in the target language	
8. <b>Faculty Advisor:</b> Dr. Richard Grove, Dr. Joseph Shosh	

### Part II: PROPOSAL TYPE

1. This research involves **ONLY** the use of **educational tests** (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude or achievement).

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

2. This research collects interviews or surveys **ONLY** of **elected or appointed public officials** or candidates for such.

Yes  
 No

3. This research involves **ONLY** observations of **public behavior**.

Yes  
 No

4. This research involves **ONLY** existing data, documents, records or specimens.

Yes  
 No

5. List the **research funding sources**, if any.

None

6. The results of this research will be published.

Yes  
 No  
 Uncertain

If you marked “yes” or “uncertain”, please provide a brief description of the possible forum of publication (for example, peer-reviewed journal, conference presentation, etc.)

Description of publication forum:

Moravian Educational Action Research Website

*In this next section, you will provide extensive details about the research project. Please make sure that your explanations/descriptions are clearly written and grammatically correct so that the committee can accurately follow and assess your proposal.*

### Part III. DETAILS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

1. In this section, you have the option of either addressing each of the following subheadings individually or together (since there may be some overlap) in your proposal narrative. If providing a narrative, please make sure that each of the following topics is clearly identified in the narrative.

- a) **Objectives:** The researcher investigates the observed behaviors and reported experiences of 8<sup>th</sup> grade German level I students when implementing asynchronous computer-mediated written communication in the target language on the students' writing fluency.
  - Students write short descriptive and conversational sentences in German.
  - Students translate written letters from German to English.
  - Students reflect on and discuss their writing with the teacher and peers.
  - Students read silently and aloud in German.
  
- b) **Design:** For approximately 10 weeks, the researcher implements pen pals between two 8<sup>th</sup> grade German level I classes into the regular German level I classroom.
  - **A.** The researcher collects 3 forms of data and reflects upon the data throughout the 10 weeks.
    - 1. Observations of classroom activities and conversations, written using a double entry journal field log and a time-on-task frequency counter.
    - 2. Open-ended and Likert-scale surveys, interviews, and reflection slips before, during, and at the conclusion of the study.
    - 3. Student artifacts in the form of timed writing assessments and pen pal letters, including a rubric.
  - **B.** The researcher analyzes data using a coding process and creates theme statements.
  
- c) **Procedures (make sure you clearly describe what is required of subjects):**

#### **Week 1**

- **Teacher administers the pre-study survey on student background information.**
- **Teacher administers the benchmark timed writing *Ein Bild sagt 1000 Wörter***
- **Students complete a reflection slip about the timed writing**
- **Teacher assigns Pen Pals and discusses rubric and topics for writing.**
- **Teacher discusses Internet protocol and email safety**

#### **Week 2**

- **Teacher discusses German letter-writing notes**
- **Students write their rough drafts for email 1 in an email**
- **Students peer edit their rough drafts and conference with teacher**
- **Students revise final draft of email 1 and send it to their pen pal**

#### **Week 3**

- **Students receive email 1, read aloud and translate with a peer**
- **Students write their rough drafts for email 2 in an email**

- Students peer edit their rough drafts and conference with teacher
- Students revise final draft of email 2 and send it to their pen pal

#### Week 4

- Students receive email 2, read aloud and translate with a peer
- Students write their rough drafts for email 3 in an email
- Students peer edit their rough drafts and conference with teacher
- Students revise final draft of email 3 and send it to their pen pal

#### Week 5

- Teacher administers mid-study survey on student perception of writing and pen pals
- Teacher administers mid-study timed writing *Was sagen sie?*
- Students complete a reflection slip about the timed writing

#### Week 6

- Students receive email 3, read aloud and translate with a peer
- Students write their rough drafts for email 4 in an email
- Students peer edit their rough drafts and conference with teacher
- Students revise final draft of email 4 and send it to their pen pal

#### Week 7

- Students receive email 4, read aloud and translate with a peer
- Students write their rough drafts for email 5 in an email
- Students peer edit their rough drafts and conference with teacher
- Students revise final draft of email 5 and send it to their pen pal

#### Week 8

- Students receive email 5, read aloud and translate with a peer

#### Week 9

- Teacher administers post-study timed writing *Wie sehen sie aus?*
- Students complete a reflection slip about the timed writing

#### Week 10

- Teacher administers post-study interview on student attitude and perception

- a. Outline procedures/steps to reduce risks to subjects:

The procedures that will be put in place to reduce the risks and protect my students' identities will be the use of pseudonyms and specific numbers attached to all student work and all data I will be using throughout the entire study. When the study is complete, all student work and all records I've been collecting will be shredded and destroyed. Whether or not they

participate in the study will not be reflected in the students' grades. They may also choose to not participate in the study at any time and not be penalized.

1. This research involves the following GROUP(S) vulnerable to risk. Check all that apply.

Subjects under the age of 18  
 Prisoners  
 Pregnant women  
 People with mental, cognitive, intellectual, or physical disabilities  
 Volunteer sample so vulnerable group membership may be unknown

**Research Design Note:** *If you are asking for volunteer participants, you will not necessarily know whether or not your participants are under 18, pregnant and/or disabled. In fact, your volunteers may themselves not know whether they fall into one of these categories. Therefore, if you are asking for volunteer participants, you need to think carefully about whether or not your research project could adversely affect someone in any of these categories, and if so, how you might try to either screen out these individuals and/or design the project so that the risk to these individuals is minimized.*

- 2a. If you checked any or all of the groups identified above, explain why you need to use the group and the methods you will use to minimize risk. If your research design proposes no special risks to these vulnerable individuals even if they happen to be included in your sample, please state why:

All of my students will be under the age of 18, since they are eighth grade students. Since the setting of my study is in a general education classroom (a least restrictive environment), there may be student participants who have some level of mental, cognitive, intellectual or physical disability.

All participants, and their parents will be given a consent form. My administrator will also give his consent. To minimize risk, I will use pseudonyms instead of student names. All of my field notes will be stored in a password-protected computer, and locked into a secure location in my classroom and home office. I will destroy research materials once my study is concluded. Student participants can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All students and their parents will be informed of their right to withdraw through the aforementioned consent letter.

2. This research might affect people with special vulnerabilities (for example, pregnant women, people with allergies, people taking some medications, people with cognitive impairments such as ADHD, etc.)

**Research Design Note:** Think carefully here again about whether or not your research design could negatively affect people with special vulnerabilities. For example, does your research design require so much concentration and/or computation that it might result in considerable stress for someone with a cognitive impairment? Are people completing your instrument in solitude or in a group setting? Might comparative performance result in excessive stress?

Yes  
 No

If you checked “Yes”, explain the methods you will use to minimize risk to these people.

As an eighth grade teacher of a general education classroom (a least restrictive environment), I may have students who have allergies, who take medication, and/or have cognitive impairments. All IEP and Section 504 Plans will be implemented accurately, and I will follow all accommodations specified in these documents.

All participants, and their parents will be given a consent form. My administrator will also give his consent. To minimize risk, I will use pseudonyms instead of student names. All of my field notes will be stored in a password-protected computer, and locked into a secure location in my classroom and home office. I will destroy research materials once my study is concluded. Student participants can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. All students and their parents will be informed of their right to withdraw through the aforementioned consent letter.

4. Describe your subject pool including:
  - a. the intended number of subjects
  - b. subject characteristics/demographics

Subjects consist of students assigned to me, for the 2016-2017 school year, by my building principal.

- a) The number of subjects will fall between 10 and 30. This is the range of class sizes in my building.
- b) Characteristics of the subjects include
  - 8<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in a general education class
  - Ages from 12 to 13
  - Mix of males and females
  - Racially, ethnically, and/or socioeconomically diverse

5. Describe in detail the methods you will use to recruit your subjects.

I will not recruit my subjects. They will be members of my 2016-2017 8<sup>th</sup> grade class.

6. This research involves **deception** of subjects.

Yes  
 No

If you checked “Yes”, describe the nature of the deception and your debriefing procedure. You will need to provide the debriefing statement with the full proposal submission. Even if the debriefing will be done orally, you need to submit the text of the verbal statement that will be read to participants.

7. Explain by whom and how the subjects will be informed of the purposes of this research project. *(Remember to provide a copy of the informed consent form with this proposal form.)*

As their classroom teacher, I will explain to all subjects the purpose of this research project.

I will give subjects the consent form outlining the purposes of the project as well as the procedures I will use to minimize risk to participants throughout the study. Subjects and their parents/guardians will each receive their own letter of consent, and will have the option to participate (or not participate) without penalty.

My building principal will also receive a consent letter explaining the plan for the project and its purpose. I will secure his permission before beginning my research.

8. This research collects information, which (check all that apply)

deals with **sensitive aspects** from the participant's point of view.  
 identifies the subject by **name** or **number codes**.  
 might place the subject at **risk of liability** if made public.  
 might place the subject's **financial standing or employability** at risk if made public.

**Research Design Note:** *Think carefully about whether or not your research deals with topics that may be sensitive from the participant's point of view. Sometimes it is not obvious to the researcher that the subject of their research may be a sensitive topic for others.*

If you checked any or all of the categories above, explain the methods you will use to

- a. safeguard the data you collect (you need to describe this safeguarding procedure in detail, including but not limited to a description of how the data will be protected (for example, in a locked cabinet), whom will have access to the data, and how and when the data will be destroyed)
- b. inform subjects of available support services (If your participants are drawn from the Moravian College community, please provide contact information for the Counseling Center, Campus Safety and the Health Center—contact information available on the HSIRB website. For participants drawn from other communities, please provide the comparable support service information.)
- c. minimize the risk of identification of subjects.

Data will be safeguarded because it will be stored only on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked filing cabinet in my private home. Data will be considered confidential and, with the exception of my Moravian faculty advisor, will not be shared with anyone.

Subjects will be provided all contact persons information for questions and concerns as well as how to withdraw from the study in the informed consent form. Additionally, what the subjects will be doing during the study and how data will be collected and stored will be outlined and provided by means of the informed consent letter. They will be made aware of my availability as well as the availability of my faculty advisor at Moravian should they have questions or concerns about the study at any time.

Risk will be minimized to subjects by the researcher referring to subjects through pseudonyms, written reports of the research, storing research materials in secure locations, and destroying written materials/field reports notes upon entering the conclusion of the study.