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# Letters from the Past; Letters to the Future

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Keene, New Hampshire is a small town with a relatively homogeneous population. When international students come to the high school, it is easy for them to feel lonely, isolated and lost. Often, because of the job situation or the exchange programs they belong to, they are only here for one year. In such a short time it is hard for them to feel that they have made a difference or contributed to society. I began the letters project because I wanted to address this double problem. I wanted the arriving students to be welcomed by people from their countries who could answer their particular concerns and smooth the way for them, and, I wanted the students who had been here and learned the culture to have the opportunity to share their expertise. What made this difficult, of course, was that the experts and the newcomers might be separated by several years.

In May, just before the end of the school year, I ask the students who have been in Keene for all or most of the year to write letters in their own languages to any student who may come here from their country in the future. I tell them that this is their chance to pass on everything they've learned while they were here to someone who will be vitally interested. I promise them that only another student from their country will read the letter; I won't, and I won't show the letter to other teachers, host families, or American students, though I warn that after some unspecified length of time I'm going to open the letters, translate them, delete anything personal or embarrassing, and publish them.

Beyond the requirement that the letters be in the native language there are no rules. I want the letters in the native language for two reasons: first, because I want the students to feel completely free to write whatever they think is important, and second, because we have no idea of the English ability of those who will read them. Because I want the letters to reflect the confusions and adjustments of the first year, students who have been here longer do not have to write new letters, though some choose to do so. In these cases, the students number the letters in sequence, and the recipient has more to read!

The students take these letters seriously. I have overheard discussions ("I'm telling him don't spend all your money the first month." "I want to say that Keene looks boring at first, then you get used to it." "You mean you get used to Keene being boring?"). Some students include their home addresses.

When they hand in the letters we ceremoniously seal them and mark them with the nationality (not the language—a letter from a Spaniard to a Colombian isn't necessarily going to be useful just because it's in a familiar language). A couple of the girls have also wanted to send the letter specifically to another girl, so this is marked on the envelope as well. I put the letters away, and wait to see who I'll have for students the next year.

At the beginning of the year, I hand out the letters to the new students. A student who is here for the second year doesn't get one, nor, of course does the first student in Keene from any country. Some students get more than one. I have a stockpile of several Spanish letters now, so a student from Spain next year will have a lot to read—and, from what I know of those past students, a wide variety of points of view. (If the ESL program were larger, I might give each new student only one letter.) Everyone has plenty of time to read and think about the letters, and I encourage them to share the contents with each other, though I don't join in the discussions myself or in any way try to break the confidentiality I promised the writers. Depending on the class dynamics, I either sit at my desk looking busy or leave the room for a few minutes after designating a moderator for the discussion so that the class doesn't feel inhibited. As the students discuss the advice, they begin to open up with each other and admit their confusion and nervousness about being here. This gives students who have been here longer the chance to share what they know about Keene, the school, and Americans. Without my having to set up artificial "getting to know you" activities, the old and new students begin to interact.

The students agree with me that while it's worth while getting the letters, the real value of the exercise is in writing them. One girl told me as she handed hers in, "I didn't realize until I started writing how much I've changed this year." Another told me, "I know when I go back, everyone will be interested in my life here, but it will just be casual. If someone ever comes to Keene High School from my country, though, what I wrote will really make a difference to them."

As for me, I can't wait till that "unspecified time in the future" to read them.

### **About the Author**

*Lucie Germer is the ESL Specialist for the Keene (NH) school district, teaching K-12. She has taught ESL/EFL extensively in the US, the Middle East, and Africa. Her PhD is in Anthropology with a specialization in cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation.*