

A Practice of Cross-Cultural Communication through E-mail Exchange in a Writing Class

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Introduction

Computer technology has been widely incorporated in language teaching in recent years. It certainly offers great potential in language classrooms, especially when the Internet is used to expand the boundaries of the classroom to the outer world. E-mail exchange is one way of using the Internet, and can be rationalized pedagogically mainly in two ways. First, as Wada indicated (2003), it can provide an optimal language learning environment as an evolved version of dialogue journals by which learners can experience cross-cultural communication and meaningful interactions with an authentic audience. Second, cross-cultural communication among various countries through e-mail gives a chance for learners to enhance their awareness that English is an international language.

Dialogue journals are written dialogues exchanged in many different educational settings between the students and the teacher, or the student and another student, in which they write to each other regularly over a period of time on any topic they choose (Peyton, 1987; Peyton, 2000; Peyton & Staton, 1993) and utilizing them is an effective application of the *process approach* of writing in that they reflect the idea of writing as a social activity (Kitao & Saeki, 1992).

The process approach, which was introduced in the 1980's, focuses on

the writing process including brainstorming, outlining, drafting, gathering feedback, and editing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Raimes, 1985) on the assumption that the act of writing is an evolving process through which the writer creates meaning (Zamel, 1982) — as opposed to the traditional product approach which emphasized the “correct” form of the produced writing — and it stresses the social aspects of writing, that is, interaction with an authentic audience (Berlin, 1988; Beach & Liebman-Kleine, 1986; Kitao & Saeki, 1992).

The stress on the importance of interaction for authentic social purposes, which is crucial to second language acquisition (Hatch, 1978; Pica, 1996), was originally directed for oral interactions, but eventually it has also been expanded to other areas such as writing (Peyton, 1999); and there has been increasing attention to the relationship between the concept of the audience and writing (Schaub, 1995; Porter, 1992; Roen & Willey, 1988). Dialogue journals have received attention as an effective pedagogical application of this theory.

As Wada discussed (2003), e-mail exchange is a faster and easier version of dialogue journals, but besides the mere convenience, it can provide a more effective learning situation. First of all, it has a strong advantage in that it can easily overcome geographical boundaries which can mediate cross-cultural communication. Further, e-mail exchanges can involve an authentic audience more easily. The teacher or the reader of dialogue journals can be an authentic audience only when they are purely interested in the meaning of what is written in the journals (Johnston, 1999). Within the scope of an activity in a writing class, it may not always be possible, as the number of people in the class is limited and it is agreed that it is done for the sake of language learning. On the other hand, with e-mail, students can find an abundant supply of audience because of the vast computer network from which they can select and an authentic audience will be more naturally chosen.

Now, cross-cultural communication with an authentic audience leads us to one problem to think about. Whose English and whose culture should students be exposed to? Sociolinguistic appropriateness, which is emphasized in communicative language teaching, is controlled by the culture of the speakers of the language, as each culture decides what is appropriate (Holliday, 1994). However, Smith (1984) pointed out that behind communicative language teaching, there seems to be an assumption that interaction through English is done between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English. It places an emphasis on training non-native speakers to acquire native speakers' English and cultural appropriateness and non-native speakers receive little help in handling other non-native speakers (Holliday, 1994; Kachru, 1994; Smith, 1984). In particular, English education in Japan has often been criticized in that it seems to have a supposition that only an idealized American or British English should be taught and English is bound to American or British culture; and that it has a focus only on interactions between American or British people and Japanese (Nakayama, 1982). "The ostensible goal of internationalization being trumpeted" (Duff and Uchida, 1997, p.456) simply makes Japan pursue internationalization only superficially which actually ends up meaning westernization (Brown, 1993; Edwards, 1989; Schoppa, 1991). As a result, there seems to be a myth in Japan that spoken English must sound American or British. One study suggests that the Japanese learners view English spoken by Japanese negatively (Wada, 1999).

Of course, English used by native speakers should be set in the center as the model when learning it; however, because of the rapid globalization of the world, English has been used more and more in international settings and this trend was accelerated by the spread of the Internet. According to Crystal (1997), while there are 320-380 million native speakers of English and 150-300 million second language speakers of English (as an official language);

there are 670 million people with a native-like command of English, and 1,800 million people are estimated to speak English with "reasonable competence" (p.61). He also points out that English is most often used in almost all international domains and that 80 percent of the world's electronically stored information is in English. Under these circumstances, the interactions between non-native speakers must be increasing more and more in number, and English is becoming dominant as an international language and English language education should incorporate this notion, too (Cummins, 1997; Holliday, 1994; Hino, 1988; Kachru, 1994; Nakayama, 1982; Norton, 1997; Smith, 1976, 1981, 1984; Smith & Kachru, 1985; Wada, 1999).

In addition, in relation to teaching English as an international language, not only "target culture materials" but also "international target culture materials that use a great variety of cultures in English-and non-English-speaking countries (Cortazzi & Jin, as cited in McKay, 2000, p.9) should be presented. Further, as McKay (2000) discusses, learners should reflect upon their own culture being exposed to various cultures; therefore "the teaching of culture should not involve a mere presentation of facts but, rather, a critical and social process of trying to understand other cultures in relation to one's own" (p.8). E-mail exchanges with people all over the world could create an optimal learning environment to meet these demands.

This paper will describe an experimental study using e-mail in a writing class in a Japanese university. The objective of the study was to have them experience cross-cultural interaction with an authentic audience in English in the hope that they would improve writing skills and raise awareness of the role of English as an international language. At the beginning and at the end of the school year, questions were asked to gauge how these projects worked.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 16 female students from a writing class in Ferris University (a Japanese female university). The class met once a week for two semesters; 12 classes in the spring semester and 13 classes in the fall semester, each lesson was 90 minutes in length. The class objective was to have the students learn how to write essays with coherent paragraph developments in various rhetorical modes. The level of the students was lower intermediate. (Their TOEFL scores ranged from 420 to 440.)

Procedure

The experiment was conducted using part of the whole class session and it was continuously done over a year. The students were assigned two projects. One was to find pen pals on the Internet from all over the world, to exchanged messages through e-mail, and to keep a journal called an e-mail log. The other was a group research project in which they did research on educational systems in various foreign countries in groups and at the end of the school year each student wrote a paper based on the results of their group research. The reason for assigning the two projects was that in the first project, students would have a chance to express themselves freely in English with real communicative purpose, the second one would give them an opportunity to integrate the e-mail communication into a tangible outcome as a research paper which would meet the goal of the writing class. Also, it would give them clearly focused objectives and chances to reflect upon their own education and culture in relation to the others'. The topic of "education" was chosen because a country's educational system reflects its values and culture, and it is something students can relatively easily relate themselves to and talk about. In order to assess how this experiment

influenced their writing, students were given Questionnaire A (see Appendix). For the purpose of measuring how their perception towards the role of English changed, Questionnaire B (see Appendix) was delivered at the beginning and at the end of the school year, and the answers were compared.

E-mail Log

To begin with, the students were given a lesson on basic computer skills, including how to use the e-mail facility and how to get on the Internet. Then for the sake of security, each student got a web mail address for the projects only. The students visited several websites that gave them chances to find pen pals (e.g., <http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion/>, <http://www.epals.com/>, <http://www.jaderoses.com/>, <http://www.penpalseek.com/>, <http://cgibbs.mmjp.or.jp/bbs/show/www.ajet-japan.com/bbs>). The safest and the most reliable one would be an electric discussion list, which was made to connect groups of people with similar interests under coordinators' supervision. The SL-Lists specialize in "cross-cultural discussion and writing practice for college, university and adult students in English language programs around the world" (Holliday & Robb, n.d., VI). There are ten kinds of discussion lists: for new members, for low-level students, for high-level students, on business and economics, on learning English, on current events, on the cinema, on music, on science, technology and computers, and on sports. First, the students were registered as members by the teacher, and they chose any lists they were interested in, and discussed the relevant topics on the Internet. The students were encouraged to find pen pals from as many countries as possible, not only from English speaking countries. Each student kept a record of with whom she wrote and short summaries of exchanged messages in the e-mail log and submitted it five times during the year; the teacher read it and gave it back

A Practice of Cross-Cultural Communication through E-mail Exchange in a Writing Class with some comments. She did not correct their writing nor give them grades on the journals. The students exchanged the journals with one another and read each other's journals when they were returned.

Group Research Project

The students were divided into four groups of four, and each group was required to research the educational system of a foreign country. When each group was trying to choose a country, they were encouraged to select one whose educational system was not well-known in Japan. In order to avoid the situation in which all four groups' choices concentrated on the same geographical area of the world, the teacher made a lottery: She prepared several pieces of paper, each on which a different region of the world was written, such as Asia, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and South America. In this way, each group was assigned a different region of the world. Next, each group selected a country from their assigned region based on research about the availability of pen pals. They chose Korea, Brazil, South Africa, and Italy. The members of each group tried to find pen pals from the country they chose, and asked them about its educational system. They referred to the textbook they were using, *Introduction to Academic Writing* (Ohshima & Hogue, 1997, pp.191-192), and the questions they asked were about four areas in education addressed in the textbook: time spent in school, curriculum, teachers and teaching styles, and miscellaneous things such as school uniforms, rules, extracurricular activities, etc. Each student from a group was responsible for one area.

The research was conducted over the course of a year by the four groups and the members of each group shared their research results, compared them with the Japanese educational system, and organized the information into similarities and differences. Then each group wrote an outline together, and each individual student expanded it into a three-to-five

page research paper. In order to get peer feedback, they gave several presentations as they progressed.

Description of Project Development

Below is a detailed description of how the two projects were developed. Each class session in the year was numbered from 1st to 25th although the sessions were held during two consecutive semesters.

Class Description

- 1st Orientation
Questionnaire B was delivered.
- 2nd The students learned basic computer literacy.
- 3rd Each student got a web mail address for the purpose of these projects only.
They got on web sites looking for pen pals and posting messages calling for them.
They were divided into four groups and each group selected the region from which they were to choose a country.
- 4th The student visited various sites to find pen pals and replied to e-mail messages they had received.
- 5th The same as the previous week
- 6th The same as the previous week
- 7th The e-mail logs were submitted.
Each group presented the country whose educational system they had selected to research.
- 8th The e-mail logs were returned with the teacher's comments.
The students exchanged their e-mail logs and gave each other feedback.
- 9th

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10th Group presentations on the research project: Each group gave a short presentation to report what they had been done what they were going to do in the future. The other groups asked questions and gave feedback.

11th The e-mail logs were submitted.

12th The e-mail logs were returned.

The end of the spring semester

The students were required to maintain their log during the vacation. They continued research on each country.

13th Group discussion: The students shared the results of their research during the summer vacation in groups.

The e-mail logs were submitted.

14th The e-mail logs were returned.

The students exchanged their e-mail logs and gave each other feedback.

15th Group presentations on the research project:

Each group gave a short report on what they had learned during the summer vacation.

The other groups asked questions and gave feedback.

16th Group discussion: Each group discussed how they would organize the information they had found.

17th The e-mail logs were submitted.

The outline of the research paper was presented by each group.

Counseling with each group was done between classes: The teacher gave each group advice and feedback on their outline. They revised their outlines where necessary.

18th The e-mail logs were returned.

Group presentations on the research project: Each group gave a short report on their outlining of the paper. The other groups asked

them questions and gave them feedback.

19th The introduction of the research paper was submitted by each student.

Counseling with each student was done between classes: The teacher gave students advice and feedback on their introduction. They revised their introductions where necessary.

20th

21st The first drafts were submitted.

22nd The first drafts were returned.

Counseling with individual students was done between classes: The teacher gave each student advice and feedback, and pointed out grammatical errors.

New Years' holidays

23rd Group discussion: The members of each group exchanged their second drafts and gave them peer reviews.

The second drafts were submitted.

24th The second drafts were returned.

Class sharing: First, the members of each group read each other's papers. Then the four groups were shuffled and formed new groups in a way that each group had four members from four different groups. They read each other's papers. The students gave feedback to each other.

Counseling was done for the students between classes as needed.

25th The e-mail logs were submitted.

The finals drafts were submitted.

Questionnaire A and B were delivered.

Students' Feedback

Results of Questionnaire A

The mean and the standard deviation of each question of section 1 was as follows:

Question	Mean	SD
No. 1	4.8	0.39
No. 2	4.6	0.66
No. 3	4.6	0.50
No. 4	4.5	0.85

The following statements were taken from the students' comments written in section 2.

- I thought some foreign people ask very personal questions and I wondered why.
- At first I felt very offended but gradually I learned a technique to avoid answering those questions, or stopped writing to that person.
- I truly realized that English is being used all over the world.
- These projects really made me feel that if I can master English, I would be able to communicate with people all over the world.
- Before these projects, international communication always meant communication with Americans or British people to me, but the prejudice has disappeared. It was because I communicated with a lot of Asians.
- It was interesting to find a lot of ways of life in the world.
- It was fun because there was a specific area I was writing about.
- I am glad that I could learn about various cultures and expand my horizons.
- It was joyful to be able to talk about movies and music with people from various countries.

- I realized so many people from various countries, especially Asians, want to communicate with people abroad using English.
- Taiwanese college students' English is much better than ours, so I felt I had to catch up.
- I thought Japanese students are not studying enough. I communicated with Koreans, the Turkish, Indonesians, Singaporeans, etc., and they really study hard.
- I felt the strong need to study English more.
- It was good as I could learn how to learn English from people in other countries.
- I came to read more about international issues.

Results of Questionnaire B

When the students were asked the question at the beginning of the school year, the results were: the United States (16), Britain (14), Canada (12), Australia (10), New Zealand (8), China (2), Singapore (2), India (1), Spain (1), France (1), and Turkey (1) (The numbers in the parentheses indicate the number of students who wrote the country). As expected, English-speaking countries, especially the United States, Britain and Canada were most often mentioned. As for countries whose official languages are English, such as India or Singapore, a personal interview was done with the student who had listed them. They didn't think of these countries as "native English-speaking countries," so they were not included in the category. This brought the total number of non-native English-speaking countries listed to eight.

The same question was asked at the end of the year. The results were: the United States (14), Britain (12), Canada (9), New Zealand (8), Australia (7), China (7), Taiwan (6), Korea (6), Brazil (5), Italy (4), Indonesia (4), Uganda (3), Israel (2), Venezuela (2), Nepal (1), Spain (1), France (1), Argentina (1), Mexico (1), and Turkey (1). This time more non-English-speaking countries were

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added and the number counted was 44.

Discussion

The results of Questionnaire A seem to indicate that the students evaluated the projects highly with all the means being over 4.5. The comments also showed that they enjoyed writing with a real-purpose with genuine audiences around the world and these projects through e-mail were effective for improving their writing skills and expanding their horizons in terms of cross-cultural communication. The projects served as an eye-opener for the students and let them know that English was being used as a communication tool between non-native speakers. The projects motivated the students to learn English. Moreover, the emphasis shifted from form to content, and the discovered different learning strategies of English from non-native speakers.

Their writing skills were not measured objectively but through the researcher's own assessment, the quality of their writing seemed to get better and the students' motivation for writing was enhanced as they had the hands-on experience of communication with an authentic audience. The projects brought about other benefits than had been anticipated. As Tella pointed out, (1992a, 1992b) through cross-cultural e-mail exchange projects, the students got to use more peer tutoring and helped each other not only on technical problems but also in the process of writing itself. The project influenced their writing process in that they became more open for peer editing and did more revision according to each other's advice, and revised their drafts more willingly.

The change in answers to Questionnaire B before and after the projects shows that the students widened their views and more often thought about non-native English-speaking countries when contemplating cross-cultural

communication. The results of the questionnaire done at the end of the year included many non-native English-speaking countries, especially the ones they conducted research on. It should be mentioned, however, that the top five countries they chose were almost the same and still dominant. It suggests that they may not conceive that native English speakers and non-native speakers are equal as interlocutors of communication through English, which means still in their value order native English-speaking countries, in particular the United States and Britain, are priorities, but the projects made the students more tolerant and accepting of wider varieties of English and culture.

One difficulty of this experiment was that since it was part of a writing curriculum and the students were learning other things, too; therefore almost always two or three assignments were proceeding at the same time. It could be fairly confusing for both the teacher and the students. In particular, the projects needed a lot of individual attention and care, the teacher had to keep a good record of what each of them was doing, how far she was going, and what the problems she was facing were. These things were manageable as the class size was small, but in a larger class, there might be a need to modify the procedure.

Conclusion

New technology gets more and more advanced and continues to give language teachers opportunities to think about new teaching ideas. The potential of the computer to expand communication networking all over the world is phenomenal. While it offers the opportunity of global communication, however, both the teacher and the learner need to raise a wider view of who uses English in this world. This experimental study suggests that the projects using e-mail were successful in this regard, as

A Practice of Cross-Cultural Communication through E-mail Exchange in a Writing Class well as improving the students' writing skills. For future research, more objective and accurate measurement and statistical analyses in these areas will be needed. A study on a larger sample size or an in-depth case study might help as a follow-up. For another possibility of more dynamic e-mail use in a classroom, a project collaborating with another set of students abroad using computer net-working might be very beneficial for learning. There is limitless potential in the use of e-mail cross-cultural projects.

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Appendix

Questionnaire A

Section 1

Please evaluate the two projects using e-mail exchanges. Rate how much you agree with each statement on the scale from 1 (not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree).

No. 1 I enjoyed the e-mail exchanges.

No. 2 I enjoyed the group research project.

No. 3 Writing to pen pals through e-mail helped me improve my writing skills in English.

No. 4 The group research project helped me improve my writing skills in English

Section 2

Is there anything you learned or became aware of that you were not before through the projects? Please write anything freely below.

Questionnaire B

When you think of communicating in English with people from other countries, which country or countries would you have in mind? Please specify the names as many countries as you wish.