

Developing email exchange projects in the university classroom: Recommendations for successful implementation

Marlen Elliot Harrison
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

With university computer labs and self-access centers now a reality, using email for cultural and language exchange has become increasingly more practical. Though research illustrates the effectiveness of asynchronous communication via email as an excellent opportunity for developing reading, writing, and vocabulary skills, effective implementation of such activities can be a challenge. In this paper, I will review the development of email exchange activities at three universities in Western Japan and highlight the importance of instructor support and student feedback.

Introduction

Though students of foreign languages may feel that actual communication with 'native' speakers is an effective and often preferable method of self-study, the reality is that language anxiety and communication apprehension too often become roadblocks to success (Carroll, Douglas, Harrison & Tsurii, 2005; McCroskey, Gudykunst & Nishida, 1985; Takada, 2003). By implementing classroom activities that introduce students to international communication using email, instructors can assist students with taking the first steps to applying their language skills in a world outside the classroom, thereby providing opportunities for learning that may last a lifetime (Absalom & Pais Marden, 2004; Easton 2004; Greenfield 2003; Hopkins 1999; King & Orton 1999; Kitao, 1998; Mello 1998; Robb 1996; Stockwell & Levy, 2001; Warschauer & Healey 1998).

For the last three years, I have been researching the efficacy of email exchange projects with first and second year university students in Western Japan. The aim of these activities was to strengthen and develop language skills and awareness of foreign cultures, while offering students opportunities for autonomous learning. Projects were initially assigned as out-of-class homework, though more recently, were also incorporated into in-class assignments to review composition and e-mail writing, and to reinforce basic computer and internet use; students were routinely encouraged to use the emails as opportunities for independent application of skills practiced in class. For example, after a lesson on present-perfect tense, students were encouraged to use "Have you ever..." questions in their emails. To further explore international culture, students were asked to

discover how their email friends spent their winter holidays and then report back to their classmates during a subsequent class activity.

Harrison & Kitao's (2005) paper revealed largely positive student reactions to email exchange projects, with students citing improvements in reading, writing, and vocabulary skills, comfort levels regarding English-language communication with foreigners, and increased awareness about and interest in foreign cultures. However, such projects can also present many challenges to the instructor. While restrictions from the university, student anxiety, the necessity of computer use, and cultural norms can all conflict with an instructor's implementation of these kinds of projects, success is related to clear instructions and explanations of resources, consistent student support, and an understanding of the culture of the learning environment.

What follows then is a discussion of how I developed email exchange projects at three universities in Western Japan over a three-year period, and with corresponding recommendations for instructors wishing to explore the use of email exchange in their own classrooms.

Clear Instructions and Explanations of Resources

In 2003, I required both my first and second year university students in a variety of two-semester English language courses to identify a keypal (a term used to describe email/computer pen-pals) via the internet whom they could exchange emails with. During the first year that the projects had been introduced, instructions on how to complete them were both given to students as part of their course syllabus and verbally reviewed in class. Instructions were kept to a minimum: my students were asked to provide me with five emails that they had sent to and five emails received from their keypals. Students were also instructed to use an internet search engine to identify websites where they might initiate keypal friendships, with *yahoo.com*, *google.com* and *msn.com* cited as examples. No other instructions, such as how to write the emails, were provided.

These instructions, focusing merely on quantity and completion proved insufficient as evidenced by the following comments from students (listed on an end-of-term questionnaire examining the efficacy of these projects):

In the beginning, I was worried about this project because I didn't feel confident about my internet skills or my writing skills. (translated from Japanese)

I wasn't sure how to find my keypal or if I was doing the assignment correctly. This made me not like the project at first. (translated from Japanese)

In the second year, a brief internet article (written for ESL students) was introduced which offered advice on getting started. This article also listed four websites that students could visit to meet keypals.

During the third year of implementation, to further reduce the initial stress of identifying a keypal, a thorough list of links to useful internet sites (created from a list of sites recommended by the students themselves) was both distributed and posted to the instructor's language learning website. These sites were then

introduced under the guidance of the instructor during a class period spent in a computer lab. Additionally, examples of actual student emails from previous years (to serve as a model for content) and a lesson on composition (formatting, greetings and closings, etc.) were provided.

Though students chose to communicate with past instructors, international friends from religious, academic and social pursuits, pre-existing friendships and new friends found on the internet, many of them found it difficult to maintain relationships due to differences in schedules and keypal unresponsiveness. Due to these difficulties, students were encouraged to communicate with more than one keypal so as to ensure sufficient communication to complete the project.

Consistent Student Support

When the projects were initiated, students were asked to complete the activities completely on their own, with no in-class time provided. In the second year, brief lessons on how to write emails in English, along with samples were provided. As of the third year, this was supplemented by spending 20% of total class-time each semester in a computer lab completing CALL and related assignments. Students reported an increased understanding of how to use the computer and internet, with roughly half of each lesson made available to students so that they could work on their emails independently and receive assistance from the instructor:

Spending time in the computer room was not only fun, it helped me feel more confident that my teacher saw what I was doing and could answer questions for me. (translated from Japanese)

During the beginning stages of the project, students were asked to provide the instructor with copies of all of their emails at the end of the semester. In later stages, to help break the project into manageable activities, emails were due on a set schedule, with approximately one email due every 2-3 weeks:

I didn't like the due dates for the emails, but I think if I didn't have them, I may not have finished the assignment. (translated from Japanese)

Further support during year three included providing both keypal websites exclusively for women (to reduce anxiety about male-female keypal relationships for female students), and quotes from students who had completed the activity in previous years (to serve as words of encouragement).

By giving students the freedom to choose their own keypals, and by allowing students to be completely responsible for the content of their emails, autonomy was emphasized. On several occasions, students brought their emails to class and asked their teacher to assist with a reply or translation. More often, however, students reported working with other students (this increased when class-time was dedicated to emailing), using their own resources (dictionaries, texts, etc.) or asking the keypals themselves for guidance. Additionally, in years two and three, students were offered extra credit for their final grades for the completion of additional emails. Nearly 20% of all students who completed the projects

were able to exchange between one and 20 extra emails with their keypals, with the average being four:

I had thought that I would only do what my teacher had asked, 5 emails, but by the end of the semester, I decided to keep going...I found that the more often I emailed my friend, the easier the assignment was...It didn't feel like homework anymore. (translated from Japanese)

It is unclear if the motivation to complete additional emails was related to the grade for the class or for the enjoyment of communicating with the keypals, but at least 10% of students from year three (N=187) reported that though the incentive to raise their class grade served as encouragement, the connection with their friends was actually a greater reward.

Understanding Culture

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000) defines culture as "The predominating attitudes and behavior that characterize the functioning of a group or organization." With each group of students that I teach, challenges unique to individual students arise, though more commonly, and as regards to difficulties with the keypal projects, many of these challenges have been cited by colleagues (university administration and instructors) and students themselves to be specific to the Japanese culture. An understanding of how a curriculum fits into a specific learning culture and how appropriate adjustments to the curriculum can positively enhance the learning experience has proven to be one of the key components to the successful development of keypal projects.

Recently, I interviewed two small groups (N=8) of university students from year two. These students collectively had either strongly positive or negative views regarding the projects at the time of completion at the end of the schoolyear. They were asked to reflect on the following actual comments from university students and administrators on why they believe the project is difficult specifically for Japanese university students.

Comment: "It is difficult for Japanese students because they are shy and lack confidence."

Response: Students agreed that they felt this characterization was true, but more strongly stated that they recognized the importance of this project as regards to practicing and applying their language skills. One student stated that the most important thing she had learned from this project was to take the risk to communicate with foreigners because she had learned that the reward was greater than the risk. Students also responded that this statement was perhaps an excuse used by classmates who did not want to attempt the project.

Comment: "It is difficult for Japanese students because they don't know how to use computers or have never used a computer."

Response: Students responded that the use of computers was a reality in the employment world and that getting acquainted with email would

benefit their job skills. Students also added that a stronger orientation to composition and letter-writing would be beneficial, a recommendation put into action with students in year three.

Comment: "It is difficult because Japanese people consider it rude to contact a foreigner for the sole purpose of practicing language."

Response: Students in the interview unanimously agreed that this statement was erroneous because quickly after initiating contact with keypals, learning about the individual and his/her foreign culture superceded the idea of completing the project merely as language practice. In year three, students were encouraged to find keypals at websites that were theme-oriented, to better find individuals that might share their interests thereby lessening the impression of communication solely for practice and creating the potential for better-matched email partners.

Comment: "It is difficult because styles of communication are different between Japanese and foreigners."

Response: Wondering how they were perceived by their keypals was by far the greatest cause of anxiety for students. As one student offered, "*The American style of communication is very straightforward, but we Japanese are different, and this style is strange to us, so I wondered how I should be*" (translated from Japanese). In response, year three students were provided with sample emails that they could copy and use for initial communication and were also given class-time to discuss their subsequent emails with their classmates and instructor to serve as guidance.

Additional comments included:

It is unreasonable and a breach of confidentiality to ask students to hand in their personal emails to their instructor.

It is dangerous because of the problems inherent with communication with strangers—sharing personal information such as address, phone number, etc.—considering the minimal or complete lack of experience Japanese students have had interacting with foreigners.

It is dangerous because the university cannot take responsibility for negative outcomes of a class project and therefore, to minimize risk or controversy, such projects should not be required but rather offered as a choice of study.

To address concerns of confidentiality, students were asked not to hand-in, but only to show their teachers their completed emails; students were also instructed to use a black marker or white correction tape to omit any information that they felt uncomfortable about possibly being viewed. Moreover, students were specifically informed by their teacher, both verbally and in writing, that any issues regarding the sharing of personal information (e.g. giving the keypal an actual mailing address) should be carefully discussed with the family or school advisor, but that it was best not to do so. In year three, though 41% of students

(N=187) agreed to some extent that the project should not actually be a required activity, none of the students chose the option of completing an alternate writing activity.

Regarding developing students' own concepts of foreign culture, the following comment, written in the student's own words, best summarizes potential benefits to the learner:

I think sometimes about my [email] friend and his life and think that we are very like people. I didn't think we're family and life are so close but now we see it. We are fun together and the world is smaller because we have a lot of chance to learn. Every student needs this type chance, to use learned English and have friendship because English is learned. I didn't think about English importance before this class, but now I know it is cool to learn and cool to meet and other countries peoples not so different from Japan.

Conclusion

Bainbridge (2002) suggests that one of the key skills for current language learners is the ability to use email and internet, skills which despite developments in technology still require English. In countries like Japan, where opportunities for English-language internet and email use are uncommon, and interaction with speakers of other languages is limited, email exchange activities may be ideal for both introducing and sensitizing students to international communication and foreign cultures.

When implementing these types of activities, it is important for the instructor to elicit feedback from students regarding their specific needs. Acting on student feedback by creating clearer and more thorough instructions (with links to web resources and composition practice), stronger and more consistent support (such as in-class time to work on the assignment), and a consideration of how the culture of the students affects participation, have enriched not only the students' experience, but mine as well. For the instructor, this deeper understanding of student needs has resulted in a richer picture of the realities and benefits of this activity and what is necessary for successful project completion.

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