

Collaborative Email Exchange: A Case Study

協同的なEメール交換 事例研究

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As an asynchronous computer-mediated form of communication, the use of email in a target language has been shown to be highly motivating and useful. Email is viewed as an informal and interactive medium that provides a genuine context for student interaction in a way that is student centred. This use of information technology and its applications have been increasing in classroom use as an effective way of enhancing learning, especially email which facilitates a shared environment for discussing and collaborative learning (Choi, 2008). Others (Lee & Chen, 2000) concur, stating that pedagogically, online collaboration has the potential to promote learner autonomy and improve writing skills. As Oxford (1990) explains, computers can provide a “medium of real communication in the target language, including composing and exchanging messages with other students in the classroom or around the world” (p. 79). Other benefits of online collaboration for the purpose of L2 writing are numerous and well documented. The promotion of active (Ewing & Miller, 2002) and autonomous learning (Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996), an improvement in writing skills including syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy (Cantrell, 2003; Flórez-Estrada, 1995; Stockwell & Harrington, 2003), reducing stress and promoting mutual help (Morris, 2001) and developing higher order thinking skills (Valdez, 2005) are all salient examples.

Regarding the case study in question, this paper surveys a number of noted

benefits native Japanese second year university students (n=12) majoring in English as a foreign language (EFL) experienced in communicating via email with native English speakers (n=17) based in Australia, of a similar age and who study Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) at high school. Specifically, the study was designed to address the following two guiding questions: (1) What are EFL students' (English majors) perceptions of using email exchange with JFL students for improving writing competency, and (2) Are there differences between the EFL students' perceptions of using email exchanges with JFL students?

Logistically, this structured collaborative email exchange, undertaken over the duration of a month, was initially set up through an interested party known to the author. The author's counterpart, as head of the Japanese Department at a private high school based in Brisbane, Australia, helped facilitate a similar number of senior high school students studying Japanese. Both cohorts' length of study of the respective target language was approximately the same, though slightly longer at seven years for the Japanese students as opposed to six years for the Australian students. Rather than have students communicate with other EFL learners, communicating directly with native speakers was believed to be pedagogically ideal, as was the notion that the exchange be based on the principle of mutual benefit. In this way, the communicative interaction in the target language was far greater than was possible in the confines of a traditional classroom setting, especially for both groups of students where there is little or no chance to communicate regularly in the target language in daily life.

Relevant topics were selected by the teachers in order to build upon cultural knowledge whereby the students responded, forwarded on by the teacher to their counterpart in their respective foreign language. Following self-introductions, examples of such topics included culturally specific themes deemed straightforward to write about, namely the coming of age ceremony in Japan and the formal dance (also known as a prom) in Australia. Students were encouraged to ask questions about their respective countries, which also helped to reinforce and extend material covered in class. The participants were additionally asked to provide brief encouraging comments

on their counterparts' language use. More detailed comments and corrections were provided by the teachers, an initiative which students welcomed. Furthermore, although as a rule both groups of students composed in the target language, on one occasion, the students were asked to write in their native language for the purpose of authentic reading input of the target language and subsequent comprehension. Students verbally commented on the enjoyment involved in this reading exercise brought about by the authenticity of their counterparts' prose.

Regarding data collection, in order to gauge the students' impressions of the exchange, an anonymous online survey was completed at the end of the project by both cohorts, providing valuable qualitative data (Appendix). The same survey was completed separately by both groups for comparison purposes. The main findings of the Japanese participants were as follows: The overall impression was overwhelmingly positive, with 75% stating it was useful / encouraging and 83% finding it fun and enjoyable, comparable with the Australian students' responses at 62% and 50% respectively while 50% also described the experience as fresh. The main language benefits were cited as 91% who felt the task led to improved writing ability, 41% reporting improved vocabulary and 16% stating improved reading ability. Again, these statistics were similar with the Australian participants but conversely with higher percentages for all macro skills, namely 46% improved writing, 40% improved reading, 40% improved vocabulary and 20% stating an improvement felt in grammar.

Specific comments worth mentioning from the Australian students included increased motivation and knowledge stemming from the chance to authentically communicate with slightly older students at university as well as the opportunity to write directly with someone on the other side of the world. For English as a foreign language (EFL), such opportunities are especially valuable, in light of the few chances to communicate in one's L2 outside the confines of the classroom. Additionally, a noteworthy observation made was students who are normally rather shy commenting on the ease of communication via the medium of email as a safe writing environment, seconded in research conducted by González-Bueno (1998).

Moreover, all participants felt the task allowed them to benefit from improved cultural knowledge while 75% and 81% from the Japanese and Australian participants respectively stated the task created a more positive impression of their counterparts' country. The only notable negative aspects students reported included insufficient grammar practice and the overall exchange being too short, as expressed by both cohorts.

Reassuringly, all twenty-nine participants expressed a desire to partake in a similar project in the future as well as 100% response of feeling more or at least a little more motivated to write in a foreign language as a result of the program. These findings corresponded with what other scholars have also found, such as Mahfouz (2010, p. 393), who states that “English foreign language learners generally tend to consider email exchanges with native speakers (NSs) as an effective tool for improving their foreign language proficiency.” Lastly, 75% felt their overall language ability had improved, while only 16% felt it had improved a little as a positive result of the project. The sole main discrepancy was the response of 90% of the Australian students who felt their language ability improved a little, possibly because of the task length being inadequate or because of their own unrealistic expectations.

Especially encouraging was the following comment from an Australian participant: “I think that any experience, whether that be through email, cultural immersion or videos, anything which involves foreign language learners to have more contact with the language we are learning has to improve the learners' understanding of the language, especially if it is with highly educated university students who are willing to support the learning experience from our perspective and theirs.”

One additional point worth mentioning is that despite email exchange being a medium which provides high levels of motivation, there is still a need for a strong presence by the learning facilitator (Nagel, 1999). A majority of participants in the assigned project indicated their desire for teacher feedback. For reference, EFL student feedback was provided on all emails by the teacher for the Japanese participants in the form of grammatical and lexical corrections and suggestions, as students provided the author with copies of their emails. Clarifying goals and ensuring that students remain on

task are important roles of the learning facilitator.

Admittedly, a number of limitations with this case study must be acknowledged, namely the fact that (1) student information was self-reported, (2) the duration of the project was relatively short, and (3) the number of participants was small. In addition, while subsequent analysis allowed for valuable insights, it did not always present a consistent or unequivocal picture of improvement across the whole range of attitudes surveyed in the questionnaires. Furthermore, the perceptions of students from other institutions were not surveyed. Therefore, although the findings are encouraging and overwhelmingly positive, the data cannot be generalised for use in other institutions or classrooms where contrasting findings could be yielded. That notwithstanding, this case study is a positive indication of a number of benefits which collaborative email exchange may facilitate.

In conclusion, the structured collaborative email exchange with Japanese EFL and Australian JFL students both highlighted and confirmed a constructive and enjoyable way of how computers can be utilised in foreign writing classes to encourage and motivate students in an authentically communicative manner. Analysis revealed that this form of language activity can promote active learning, bring about an improvement in writing and other receptive skills as well as stimulate learners' autonomy and desire to actively communicate in their L2. As a pedagogically rewarding experience for L2 learners, this type of project could be easily and successfully integrated into future foreign language syllabi. When properly harnessed, email has the potential to help scaffold other lessons, instil a degree of autonomy in learners, add to their cultural understanding and provide an authentic and practical platform for foreign language use.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

- 1) Overall, what was your impression of the collaborative email project?
 - a) useful / encouraging / meaningful
 - b) fun
 - c) fresh / new
 - d) boring
 - e) unhelpful
 - f) other
- 2) What were the main language benefits to you?
 - a) improved writing ability
 - b) improved reading ability
 - c) improved vocabulary ability
 - e) improved grammar ability
- 3) What other benefits did you experience?
 - a) improved cultural knowledge
 - b) other
- 4) Did you experience any of the following negative aspects?
 - a) not long enough
 - b) not enough grammar practice
 - c) not enough responses
 - d) not enough language feedback
 - e) other
- 5) Would you like to participate in a similar project in the future?
 - a) yes
 - b) maybe
 - c) no
- 6) Would you have preferred feedback from the teacher or no feedback from the teacher?
 - a) I prefer feedback (comments and corrections) from the teacher
 - b) I would prefer no feedback (comments and corrections) from the teacher
- 7) Do you have a more positive impression of your partner's country?
 - a) More positive
 - b) More negative
 - c) No change
- 8) Did you feel more or less motivated to write in your foreign language as a result of this project?
 - a) Yes, I felt more motivated.
 - b) A little
 - c) No, not really
- 9) Do you feel your language ability has improved because of this project?
 - a) Yes, a lot
 - b) Yes, some
 - c) Yes, a little
 - d) No, not really
 - e) No, not at all
- 10) Thank you for your participation. Do you have any other comments you wish to add?