In the Classroom/En classe

E-mail Exchanges: Teaching Language, Culture, and Technology for the 21st Century

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How can e-mail be integrated into a college preparatory ESL curriculum? Classroom e-mail exchanges between the University College of the Cariboo in Kamloops, BC and the University of Wisconsin, the University of Northeastern Illinois, and Carleton University demonstrate that e-mail can be effective in teaching intercultural awareness, creating a more positive affective climate by providing greater privacy and intimacy, and in making the EAP curriculum more relevant to the needs and aspirations of young people looking ahead to the 21st century.

How can computer technology reshape second language teaching and learning? Although some argue that print-based traditions are so deeply embedded in the culture of teaching and learning that computers will only be adopted to the extent that they leave these patterns intact (Cohen, 1987), others believe that electronic communication "extends the subject matter" (Myrdal, 1994, p. 50) and brings with it "several attributes which the traditional classroom can never provide" (p. 49).

Negroponte (1995) claims that "in the next millennium, e-mail will be the dominant interpersonal telecommunications medium, approaching, if not overshadowing, voice over the next fifteen years" (p. 191). Teaching e-mail skills in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom responds to the needs of foreign students to become familiar with information technology, which is already integral to their daily lives as college students and vital for their future as professionals (Bailey, 1996). In an attempt to meet these needs at University of Northeastern Illinois, for example, the teaching of computer literacy skills begins in the college preparatory ESL program and is part of the graduation requirements for all students. E-mail is generally believed to be more effective when used as an integral part of the curriculum instead of as a stand-alone, add-on exchange (Furstenberg & Morgenstern, 1992); moreover, what may begin as an add-on component of the traditional curriculum can develop into a central feature of a second language instructional syllabus and lead instructors to reevaluate their teaching practices.

The Students
Over 90% of ESL students at the University College of the Cariboo (UCC) in Kamloops, BC are on exchange programs from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea; most are between 18 and 23 years old. Students participating in the exchanges in the spring of 1996, who are the focus of this report, had intermediate to advanced levels of English proficiency and minimal or no prior experience with e-mail. For each exchange group a computer lab was booked for two or three 50-minute sessions per month. We were fortunate to have a technician and two adjacent overflow labs available.

To teach e-mail procedures, I designed flow charts, an approach recommended by Mohan (1986), and used a fluency squares technique (Knowles & Sasaki, 1981) for oral pattern practice. With the help of a tutor who was a graduate of our ESL program, my students mastered the basic commands during their first lab session. As they were typing, I led them through a series of questions to discover their language errors, a search-and-discover method of error correction (Yorio, 1994) intended to induce a state of noncomprehension followed by the *aha!* of comprehension (Auble, Franks, & Soraci, 1979).[1]

As we sat side by side at the computer, we somehow felt closer, less unequal, and more like partners with a shared goal rather than like a teacher and student in a traditional relationship.

Teaching Intercultural Awareness
The first exchange group consisted of 18 CESL 037 (Intermediate Reading) students paired with 23 American native speakers in an Intercultural Communication 312 course at the University of Wisconsin. Because our students' original goal was to inquire about cultural patterns and codes, they asked each other about such things as the meanings of their names and about food, body language, and holidays in their respective countries. One Wisconsin student sent a long letter about the rules of American football. One of the UCC students was delighted to give her classmates frequent updates on "her American boyfriend," who referred to her as "Beautiful Snow," the English translation of her name, Miyuki.

The Wisconsin students also sent us accounts of a classroom simulation of the *Albatrossian* culture (a fictional group reported in Baronoliar & Warner, 1990), in which they had participated. They described the anger of some of their women classmates when they were told that Albatrossian women always kneel down to hand things to men. Some of them flatly refused to participate in the activity. During the debriefing, however, the instructor explained that Albatrossian women and the earth are highly valued and that women kneel to emphasize their connection with the earth and their higher status. This simulation, which uses discomfort as a means of learning about our own prejudices (Johnson, 1995), was a valuable activity that I would not

have discovered except for my online collaboration with the instructor, Cheri Niedzwiki.

The Wisconsin exchange also led us to discover other untapped resources. One day one of my Japanese students expressed her concern that her Wisconsin penpal "was always talking about guns." My reading of his letter was that it was an expression of common American attitudes that, as a Canadian, I also had difficulty understanding. Because we felt uncomfortable asking her penpal, we composed a letter to Uncle Ezra, an online counselling service at the University of Cornell (ezra@cornell.edu). Two weeks later we were delighted to receive an eloquent reply about minutemen, the frontier, the American revolution, and the traditional right to bear arms. Uncle Ezra's letter became the focus of our next lesson contrasting Canadian and American attitudes toward guns. Although I had not originally intended it, the penpals' letters often provided the content and focus of our classroom lessons. Finally, at the end of the semester, our students exchanged videos that allowed them to see their partners' faces; this generated a tremendous amount of excitement.

The second exchange group consisted of a CESL 058 (Advanced Academic Writing) class paired with an Advanced Composition class at the University of Northeastern Illinois in Chicago. The instructor, Don Sorsa, used a content-centered approach based on the African novel *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1953). The novel recounts the personal tragedy of the main character, Okonkwo, and the transformation of traditional Ibo (Nigerian) culture after the arrival of the British in the mid-1800s. The novel is short, easy to read, and renowned for its compact use of language and its remarkable ability to elicit empathy for a preindustrial people likely to be different from the cultures represented in the exchange groups. Achebe's work is extraordinarily accessible to people of various cultural backgrounds and also, according to critics, qualifies as one of the world's great works of literature (Bloom, 1994).

Our students got into a routine of writing short paragraphs about key topics and sending their work to their e-mail partners for feedback every other week. Their papers described Ibo religion, economy, and kinship, analyzed the dynamics of cultural change, and made comparisons with their own cultures. Again, Mohan's (1986) key visual approach was used to help the students comprehend and organize the complex ideas in the novel.

Reading Achebe's (1953) novel appeared to have a genuine impact on my students' thinking about Africa. Once they asked me why Ibo village women sat under a particular tree in the afternoon. They were surprised when I told them that they were waiting for the spirits of the unborn children who resided in that tree to come down into their bodies to be born. Although my students were disturbed by Okonkwo's abuse of his wives and the traditional Ibo practice of putting twins to death, they were not unfamiliar with

patriarchal traditions—several of them said Okonkwo reminded them of their own fathers. Okonkwo's solitary and difficult struggle to succeed in life only to suffer humiliation and defeat at the hands of British officials was perceived by my students as tragic, as was the accompanying disintegration of traditional Ibo culture. Some students drew parallels between the history of imperialism in Africa and in Asia. Achebe's novel made us experience a sense of loss that traditional cultures in all parts of the world are vanishing. As we made an inventory of traditional cultural artifacts and practices that have now all but disappeared or been robbed of their original meaning, we realized that this loss is something we all share as members of the global community regardless of our countries of origin.

Toward the end of term, Bernard Igwe, a UCC English professor originally from Iboland in Nigeria, came to give my students a guest lecture. They were quite surprised when Bernard told them that his father had four wives and that he himself had 23 brothers and sisters. He told them that other traditional Ibo beliefs and practices still remain; for example, foreign condominium developers have a hard time selling units that have been built in or near the Evil Forest, the traditional burial ground for those who die violent deaths. My students, most of whom had never met anyone from Africa before, appeared to be deeply moved by Bernard's words. Later several of them told me that they had spent more time on their ESL writing course than on any of their university transfer courses.

The third exchange group consisted of 16 students in CESL 037 (Intermediate Reading) paired with 25 (mostly male) pre-science and engineering students from African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian backgrounds in a similar reading course at Carleton University. Our students exchanged letters about their lives and their class readings, some of which dealt with the social impact of computer technology.

Once again this technology-mediated experience challenged my students' thinking about people from Africa, India, and the Middle East. The fact that the Carleton students were preparing for science and engineering programs gave them an elevated status in the eyes of my students, who often commented on their partners' ambition and perseverance and their success in overcoming many hardships in their native countries. They were also impressed by their elaborate electronic signatures, with salutations such as "God is great." When their video arrived at the end of term, my students expressed much appreciation for its polished format, especially for the letters that appeared on the screen as they were being typed on the computer. My students were distressed because they felt that their own video had not been as good.

The most striking moment, however, came when they saw their partners' faces. One of the Carleton students was wearing a traditional Muslim scarf and another was wearing a sari, but what really stunned them was that some

of their partners were *women*. Apparently, they had believed—all semester—that their partners were *men* because they were in science and engineering. My students were so dazed by the effect of the assumptions they had made about their partners that one almost fell off his chair! This experience was especially memorable because it effectively drove home the point of how distorted stereotypes really are. Given the demographics of Kamloops, it is hard to imagine how they would have acquired this new awareness without e-mail. As one student said, "E-mail has opened my eyes to the world!"

E-mail and the Affective Climate
In all three exchanges the medium of e-mail seemed to foster a communication style that was more intimate than face-to-face conversation. The exchange with Carleton demonstrates the remarkable ability of the technology to strip away visible signs of gender and ethnic differences and to create a climate that enabled our students to communicate as souls. Some said they really liked the mysterious quality of communicating with someone they could not see. Here are some of their comments.

I have a chance to make a friend in America.

We can make friends in different country. It's interesting and fun.

He told me about his work and school life. I think that helped me to understand him and improved our relationship.

My partner is from Ethiopia. I never had a chance to meet someone from Ethiopia before. I envy her!

I learned about different culture from him or her. I can never learn about foreign countries in Kamloops.

I've never felt it's boring.

Perhaps because e-mail is a very private medium, there seemed to be less of the anxiety that typically accompanies communication in a second language. One shy student said she felt very comfortable with e-mail. Another said that he could write more freely because he did not have to "worry about what the person might say about him." Anxiety-reduction is generally believed to be beneficial for language learning, and with e-mail students can negotiate the meaning of language *in use* in an authentic context without seeing their language errors put on public display. As some students said,

[My partner] is like a teacher because he finds my mistakes in my letters and corrects them. He is a very polite person.

Sometimes he explains what the difficult sentences mean because he knows I'm not a native speaker.

He has corrected my grammatical mistakes and has taught me many idiomatic expressions.

Finally, e-mail appeared to relieve some of the isolation our students must have felt as newcomers to a small town. The emotional bonds formed via the medium may have been experienced more intensely by young people who lacked other sources of emotional support. Nonresponse made them "feel bad"; one of my students received a very emotional "flame" for not responding.[2] Many students sent more than the minimum required number of letters or wrote letters in their free time; several asked me if they would be continuing with their e-mail lessons next semester. As for myself, I was in such frequent contact with their instructors that I had offices set up for them in our virtual university, the MAUD (Multiple Academic User Domain).

The EAP Curriculum and Technology

In addition to enhancing our appreciation of people who are culturally different, these e-mail exchanges made us aware of just how much culture we share with them as members of the global community and as users of technology. Moreover, as my students worked through their discomfort that their own video was not as good, they came to realize that the acquisition of technological competence would enhance their status and employability and that the new technology was somehow putting them in competition with people from around the globe. To prepare our students for the new global economy, ESL instructors need to devise strategies for teaching the language, concepts, and skills required to perform a range of computer-related activities.

If we are able to resolve the issue of whether we should be teaching the evolving "digital dictions" (Hale, 1996), the next challenge, of course, is how we should be teaching. The register of e-mail communication "lies somewhere between the formality of traditional writing and the spontaneity of speech" (Warschauer, 1995, p. 2). With its "celebration of subjectivity and personal insight" (Hale, 1996, p. 7), the medium fosters a writing style that is short, informal, and very personal. As instructors, we can teach the elements of "wired style" (Hale, 1996, 1997), that is, *emoticons* or domain-specific acronyms such as IMO (in my opinion) and BTW (by the way), the basics of *netiquette*, and the conventions for electronic citations of academic.

Finally, I believe that the traditional ESL instructional focus on mainstream Canadian culture or immigrant Canadian cultures needs to be placed in the broader context of the new global culture, which is in effect the culture of technology. Teaching vocabulary such as "hive mind" (a metaphor to describe the Net), "snail mail," "digital" or "analog," and "cyberspace" or "meatspace" (where you are now) will not only make our students' language more nativelike, but can also provide them with many contemporary cultural insights.

I believe we should also encourage reflection on the sociocultural impact of technology. We can lead discussions about our virtual identities, the second Guttenburg revolution (electronic typesetting), and about what might happen to books and libraries in the future. These kinds of topics, which encourage "reflection on the 'deep structure' of contemporary global culture" (Nobles, 1985), can be used as springboards for content-based language lessons that are contemporary, engaging, intriguing, full of "interestingness" (McKeown & Beck, 1994). Such lessons may provide a better fit between the EAP curriculum and the current and future uses that second language college students make of the target language (Bailey, 1996). As one of my students said, "I was lucky because if I hadn't chose this class, I wouldn't get opportunity to use computer. This was fun. It's very useful in the future. That's why I'm going to take a computer course next term."

Conclusion

Tucker (1994) predicts that language learning for the 21st century will be more technologically mediated than it is today. As instructors, we need to be aware that the energy and power of computer technology can be so captivating that it can deflect student attention from the language objectives (Winograd & Flores, 1986). At the same time, however, we have a great deal of sway in exploiting its many promising features. These three e-mail partnerships, which were originally set up to exchange cultural information, unexpectedly extended the subject matter (Myrdal, 1994) of the traditional EAP curriculum. By virtue of its intimacy and privacy, the medium can lead to greater intercultural awareness in the context of anxiety-reduced practice situations. Last, I believe that integrating a range of computer-related activities, concepts, language, and skills into the EAP curriculum will make our instruction more relevant to the needs of young people planning for professions in the 21st century.

Notes

[1] As for technical problems, the most common was making a mistake in their partners' e-mail addresses. Students were told that because of software and platform incompatibilities, formatting might not be preserved. One student spent hours typing only to find out later that, for some reason, her letter had been delivered in machine language. (She had not made a copy for herself.) Because a small percentage of e-mail letters never reach their destinations, students should copy all letters to themselves.

[2] My sense is that these nonresponse patterns had more to do with the individual students than with the technology. One of my own students collapsed in laughter when, after laboring over his own paper, he received in return a mere six words—"Okonkwo, yeah, I think he's COOL." One approach to the problem of nonresponse is pairing partners of similar ages, genders, and interests. Other strategies include careful recordkeeping and follow-up at both ends, assigning e-mail assignments as class instead of as homework activities, making e-mail worth 20% of the course grade, committing students to a "contract," and designating "foster" penpals to write in place of students who are absent. Warschauer (1995) has additional suggestions for dealing with nonresponse.

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Acknowledgments

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