Intra-Program Email Exchanges

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Abstract

Email exchange projects have been shown to raise intercultural communicative competence and cultural awareness, increase motivation and improve writing and computer skills. However, the difficult process of organizing and implementing such an exchange can leave instructors wondering if these benefits are worth the effort. One way to mitigate the difficulties involved is to have a practice intra-program email exchange before attempting an exchange with another school. This paper describes how one such exchange was organized, implemented, and integrated into the established curriculum at a university in Japan. The results demonstrate that completing an intra-program exchange can help learners build self-confidence and email writing skills and can help educators clarify objectives and identify problem areas before beginning an exchange with another school. Equally valuable, completing an intra-program exchange can also help educators determine whether an inter-school exchange is necessary or even desirable for the particular program in question.

Keywords: Email, Writing, Telecollaboration, Curriculum development

Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, email exchange projects have become more and more popular in language classrooms. Japan, where the authors are based, has been home to several such projects (see Carney, 2006, pp. 151-152), with more appearing all the time. These exchanges, which can involve the exchange of emails between learners of the same language or different languages, have been shown to have various positive effects. These include improved intercultural communicative competence (O'Dowd, 2007), greater cultural awareness (Fedderholdt, 2001; Gray & Stockwell, 1998; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Stockwell & Stockwell, 2003), increased motivation (Fedderholdt, 2001; Rooks, 2008; Sakar, 2001), improved writing skills (Stockwell & Harrington, 2003; Van Handle & Corl, 1998), and improved computer skills (Fedderholdt, 2001).

However, the arduous process of organizing and implementing an email exchange can leave instructors wondering if the above benefits are worth the effort. The first problem is finding an appropriate partner school or program. "Appropriate" is the keyword here; while there are plenty of instructors and institutions interested in email projects, it can take "months" to find a partner program with similar goals and work out

agreements with the programfs educators on the finer points of the exchange (Johnson & Brine, 2000, p. 258). Belz and Muller-Hartmann (2003) discuss these points at length. Decisions, after all, have to be made on schedule, numbers of students, assessment, and numerous other details. Scheduling, in particular, can be a very difficult problem to overcome when academic calendars do not match (see also Johnson & Brine, 2000; Robb, 1996; Van Handle & Corl, 1998). Learners may send pragmatically or culturally inappropriate messages, resulting in miscommunication or hard feelings between partners (Liaw & Johnson, 2001; O'Dowd, 2003; Stockwell & Stockwell, 2003). Instructors and administrators may have similar problems (Belz & Muller-Hartmann, 2003). Partners may reply to emails late or not at all, leading to decreased motivation and incomplete projects (see Johnson & Brine, 2000; Robb, 1996; Rooks, 2008; Vilmi, 1996). Finally, the email format itself can be a problem. As Rooks (2008) mentions, incorrectly typed email addresses and spam filters can result in emails being returned or rejected, leading to the learner (and instructor!) confusion and frustration.

Due to the logistical and cultural issues involved, O'Dowd (2007) states that telecollaboration projects like email exchanges require "that both teachers and students are explicitly prepared for the activity" (151-152). One way to do this is by conducting a pilot project within one particular school or program. For example, before attempting an online forum exchange with another school, instructors at Mount Holyoke College in the United States had their students' post-class assignments to an internal discussion forum and required them to send messages to each other connected to these assignments (Van Handle & Corl, 1998). Unfortunately, it is difficult to find other examples of "intra-program" exchanges such as this one; the more common approach seems to be simply to "jump in" to an inter-school exchange and deal with problems as they arise, however serious (and preventable) they may be.

As the old saying goes, practice makes perfect. This paper describes how an intra-program email exchange project was organized, implemented, and integrated into the established curriculum at a university in Japan. The results make it clear that completing an intra-program exchange can help learners build self-confidence and email writing skills and can help educators clarify objectives and identify problem areas before beginning an exchange with another school. Equally valuable, completing an intra-program exchange can also help educators determine whether an inter-school exchange is necessary or even desirable for the particular program in question.

Method

The Project

This intra-program email exchange project was conducted over six weeks during the Fall 2007 academic semester at a private Japanese university. During this semester, freshmen writing students are taught how to write essays employing various rhetorical patterns, particularly comparison-contrast. The email-exchange project was designed to 1) complement regular classroom instruction by allowing learners to apply what they had learned about the comparison-contrast pattern in a practical, communicative way; 2) teach students how to write three of the most common types of emails: queries, replies, and

follow-up emails; and 3) give students additional practice writing essays using the comparison-contrast pattern.

Students were introduced to the project in the following manner:

> Students, professors, and company workers in Japan often have to contact people over the Internet in English. Therefore, being able to write emails that are well-organized and professional is an important writing skill to master. To help you learn how to do this, you will contact another student at this university by email. This student will have a different major from you. **Your job: Find the similarities and differences between this student's life and yours and write an essay about them.**

The project was included in the course syllabus and was a required component.

Participants

The participants were 136 freshmen (N = 136) in five writing classes. At this university, classes are grouped by academic major; the breakdown for these five classes can be seen in Table 1. There were two instructors involved in the project. Instructor A was responsible for the first three classes; the Instructor B was responsible for the latter two.

Table 1.
Participants

Class	Instructor	Academic Major	Participants (N = 136)
1	A	Physics	33
2	A	Physics	27
3	A	Biology	27
4	B	Chemistry	21
5	B	Informatics	28

The first issue to be considered was how to pair up the students. Due to several factors, including the odd number of classes, the unequal number of students in each class, the preponderance of Physics students, the differing levels of English ability between majors, and the desire on the part of the instructors to keep logistical concerns to a minimum, it was decided to match each Biology student with two or three Physics students and each Chemistry student with one or two Informatics students. Doing things in this way allowed the two instructors the maximum amount of control over their own classes and put the burden of an additional correspondent on the students better able to handle the work.

Procedures

Week 1

After a general introduction to the email exchange project, students formed groups and brainstormed possible questions to ask their partners (who were as yet unknown to them). To assist them in this process, the instructors provided a pre-writing worksheet containing general areas for discussion. These were:

1. Classes and Homework
2. Professors
3. Friends and Classmates
4. Daily Schedule
5. Lifestyle
6. Other

Students were encouraged to think of as many questions within these six areas as they could. They were reminded that the answers to these questions would become the basis of their essay; good questions, therefore, were needed to elicit good, helpful answers.

At the end of the brainstorming session, the students were given a choice. They could choose the best 3-4 questions from three different areas (9-12 questions total) or 9-12 questions from the one area which interested them the most. Weaker students were strongly encouraged to choose the first option, as these students had difficulty thinking of more than three questions in any of the six areas.

The students were next introduced to the basics of email writing. While all of the students had written emails in Japanese, few of them had any experience writing emails in English. Specific points taught included:

1. Using the "CC" function
2. How to write a brief, effective subject
3. Appropriate greetings
4. Email writing format
5. Introducing yourself and clearly stating your purpose
6. Making polite requests
7. Ending an email

For homework, students were assigned to write a draft of their initial email.

Week 2

With the first drafts of their emails completed, students formed pairs for peer review. A checklist and a model email written by the instructors were given to each student to assist them in this process. After all the emails had been reviewed and checked, the students edited their work.

At this point, the instructors passed out partner names and email addresses to individual students, who then completed and sent their emails. Instructors were CC'd for each email, both for assessment purposes and as a backup if anything went wrong (see Findings). Due to privacy concerns, only university email addresses assigned to each student were used for this project.

For homework, students were assigned to read the emails from their partners and consider how to answer the questions posed.

Week 3

In the third class, the students were taught how to reply to query emails. Specific points taught or reviewed included:

1. Replying to sender versus replying to all
2. Greetings
3. Beginning a reply
4. Answering in detail
5. Ending a reply

Students then spent time in class to compose and send their replies.

Week 4

After a brief review, students were given a test on email writing and replying. This involved writing both a query and a reply without access to models or notes. Students in classes 1-3 wrote a query email to Instructor A and replied to an email from Instructor B. Students in classes 4-5 did the reverse, writing a query email to Instructor B and replying to an email from Instructor A.

As all students had now received replies to their initial emails, the final part of the exchange involved sending and answering follow-up emails. Points taught included:

1. Greetings
2. Expressing thanks
3. Clarification questions (or answers)

At this point, the students were ready to begin organizing their material and start the essay writing process.

Week 5

Essay first drafts due. Students did peer reviews and revised their writing.

Week 6

Final drafts are due. Students completed questionnaires regarding the exchange project.

A summary of the schedule and procedures for this project can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2.
Schedule and Procedures

Week	Procedures
1	• General introduction to the email exchange project • Groupwork: Brainstorming of questions to ask partners • Basics of email writing
2	• Email drafts due • Pairwork: Peer review • Initial emails sent
3	• Replying to emails • Replies sent
4	• Email writing test • Writing follow-up emails • Follow-up emails sent
5	• Essay first drafts due • Pairwork: Peer review
6	• Essay final drafts due • Exchange project questionnaires completed

Findings

One purpose of this pilot study was to give students the training and confidence necessary to undertake a 'real' email exchange with foreign students in the future. As far as the students were concerned, this goal was accomplished. The results of a questionnaire administered to the students at the end of this project can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3.
Questionnaire Results

Questions	Responses
1. Before beginning this email project, had you ever sent an email in English to someone other than your KGU teacher?	Yes 29.0% No 71.0%
2. Did you know how to send a professional email before starting this project?	Yes 22.6% No 77.4%

3. Do you feel you know how to send a professional e-mail in English now?	Yes 87.1% No 12.9%
4. Do you think that this email project is good preparation for exchanging emails with native speakers?	Yes 85.5% No 14.5%
5. Would you like to do an email project with a native speaker?	Yes 78.2% No 21.8%

The second purpose of this intra-program study was to help the instructors identify weaknesses/problem areas before attempting an inter-program exchange. Based on reports from previous projects (see particularly Stockwell & Stockwell, 2003), the instructors were expecting students to write pragmatically inappropriate messages or requests and devoted class time to deal with this issue. Overall, the results were positive, with most students framing their requests, particularly, in an appropriate manner, using forms like the following:

"Do you mind helping me by answering a few questions?"
"I know you are very busy, but I would be interested to learn about your major and lifestyle. I hope that you will answer my questions."
There were exceptions, such as:
"I want you to question!"

While this manages to be rude and incomprehensible at the same time, more common were requests which were polite but difficult to understand:

"Would you like please answer some question?"
"I would be happy to answer my questions."
"Could you mind helping me?"

Students needed more practice with the various forms of polite requests.
Another area in which students needed more practice/instruction was answering in detail. To a question like gWhat is your favorite class?h many students would give one-word answers ("English," "Chemistry") with no additional information. This made it difficult for their partners to complete their essays. Many students recognized this problem and stated so on the questionnaire. Examples of these comments included:

"Some students write only a little answer."
"If partner send poor answer, I can't write Assignment3."

Interestingly, a solution to this problem proffered by a number of students was to increase the number of partners.

"In my opinion, we should send e-mail for 2 or 3 people and less questions."
"I think that we should send e-mail to all major at (the university). If we do it, we can write more interesting essay."
"We should send e-mail about three students."
"We should send e-mail to more other major students."

Comments such as these led the instructors to wonder if multiple partners in an inter-program exchange would solve, or at least mitigate, some of the problems mentioned by Robb (1996) and others regarding partner non-response in email exchanges.

A third problem area was a lack of attention to detail exhibited by a significant percentage of learners. Students mistyped email addresses, leading to undeliverable messages. They forgot to write subjects. Despite instruction to the contrary, they wrote subjects like "Hello" or "Help me," which almost certainly would have been rejected by another program's spam filter. They misspelled the names of their partners or forgot to write the names at all. They forgot to write their names. They misspelled their names! Some of these mistakes were minor; others meant their emails could not be sent. All of them made for a certain amount of confusion in the classroom. Had the instructors not had control of all classes in the exchange, and thus not been able to immediately check and respond to problems, this confusion would most certainly have been much greater.

The fourth problem area was absences and non-participation. For every student who did not send an initial email or reply, at least two students were affected: the non-participating student and his or her partner. Again, as the instructors had control over the classes in the exchange, it was relatively easy (if time-consuming) to track down non-participating students and mollify their frustrated partners. However, the thought of trying to do the same in an inter-school exchange gave both instructors pause.

A final purpose of any pilot study is to determine whether further projects are warranted. At the end of this intra-program exchange, both instructors concluded that an inter-school exchange was not appropriate for this university and these students then, at least not as a required component of the course. As detailed above, many of the students did not seem ready, language-wise, to participate effectively in an intercultural exchange. Furthermore, the logistical problems seemed too difficult to overcome without a high degree of control over the exchange process. Ten students doing an exchange as part of an open-ended extracurricular program seemed doable; one hundred thirty-six students participating in an exchange for credit did not. Despite students of notable progress and demonstrated interest, this experiment would stop here.

Conclusion

Email exchange projects are often lauded in the literature for their benefits to second language instruction, but it should not be forgotten that they are also difficult and time-consuming to organize and administer. Hopefully, this paper has shown that doing a practice intra-program exchange before attempting an exchange with another program or school can be of practical value to both learners and instructors. Although the instructors involved in the intra-program exchange described here decided in the end not to take the next step and hold an inter-school exchange, this should not be seen as a negative result.

Indeed, the intra-program exchange worked exactly as the instructors hoped it would, giving the students practice writing various types of emails and helping the instructors identify key problem areas. Had an inter-school exchange been attempted at the start instead, the results might well have been unsatisfactory for all concerned. As it was, the skills the students learned and the confidence they gained can only serve them well in the future.

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