# A Unique Opportunity for Communication: An Intercultural Email Exchange Between Japanese and Thai Students

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## Introduction

For many students of English as a foreign language (EFL), exposure to English outside of the classroom rarely occurs. When students donft get the chance to use their English for meaningful communication due to cultural or geographical factors, they often experience negative motivational effects on their overall outlook towards learning English. Past research on EFL writing indicates that student motivation increases when an authentic audience, or someone other than the teacher, is reading the student material (Frank, 1992). In a homogeneous society like Japan, finding opportunities for language learners to improve their English through communication with other English speakers can be a daunting task. The modern union of computers and the language classroom has opened channels for virtually instantaneous written communication with people from other cultures.

The role of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is playing an increasingly important role in many EFL and English as a second language (ESL) classrooms around the world (e.g. Appel & Mullen, 2000; Fedderholdt, 2001; Liou, 1999; OfDowd, 2007; Son, 2005; Warschauer, 1997). Many EFL and ESL teachers are experiencing the benefits of meaningful international communication and are taking advantage of the expanding opportunities available for online intercultural exchange (e.g. Appel, 1999; Bauer, de Benedette, Furstenberg, Levet, & Waryn, 2005; Belz, 2005; Byram, 1997; Carney, 2006; Thorne, 2005). Son (2007:21) argues that the internet can be utilized by language instructors and learners as a global database of authentic materials that can enhance language learning and teaching.h Not only can the internet enhance the language learning experience, but the use of information and communication technologies has the bonus of preparing students for the ever-changing social and educational needs in modern society (Brown & Warschauer, 2006). Intercultural email exchanges (IEEs) are an increasingly popular tool for EFL and ESL teachers who want to expose their students to both language improving activities and computer skills training (Belz & Thorne, 2005; Gray & Stockwell, 1998; Hertel, 2003).

This study investigates an IEE between two groups of university EFL students in Japan and Thailand. Various aspects of the project will be covered: background information on the participants of the exchange project, an outline of the IEE between two groups of university students in Japan and Thailand, and an analysis of student responses to the exchanges. Student responses will be ethnographically analyzed, with a focus on the various successes the students felt they achieved in communicating with students from another culture by using English as an international language, as well as some of the difficulties they faced when confronted with an unfamiliar communicative situation.

## Method

### Participants

The subjects of this study were 70 Japanese EFL students in the Science and Technology Department at Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan. The students' majors were Biology, Physics, and Informatics. Both first and second-year students took part in the exchange, with the average student age being 19. All of the Japanese students spoke Japanese as their first language (L1). All of the students had studied English since their days in Junior High School, and had at least 2 years of experience with computers and the internet. These Japanese students were paired up with 80 Thai Economics and Science majors at Prince of Songlka University in Thailand. Because there were only 70 Japanese students for the 80 Thai students, some of the Japanese students corresponded with 2 different Thai students.

### The Course

The study was carried out in a high-tech EFL classroom at the university's Science and Technology Living Language Laboratory, with internet-connected laptop computers for every student. The IEE project was incorporated into both the freshmen and sophomore writing classes. The length of the semester-long course was 14 weeks, however, the IEE project only lasted for 6 weeks, due to the staggered semester schedules at the two universities in Japan and Thailand. Two years (four semesters) of English classes are required for all Science and Technology students at Kwansei Gakuin University, with English classroom time clocking in at 4.5 hours per week. Class sizes varied in numbers from 18-29 students per class. Below (Figure 1) is the time outline for the IEE that was the subject of this study.

### The Project

The student pairings were arbitrarily decided by the teachers, with Japanese male students being linked with Thai male students, and female students with other females whenever possible. This was done to avoid gender-related affective filters. There were more male students than female students, however, so not every student exchanged emails with a student of the same sex.

As detailed in Figure 1, this IEE included three mandatory email exchanges with the Thai students. The first email was a standard self-introduction, so the students could get acquainted with each other. To stimulate an increasingly engaging exchange between the two groups, the students were instructed to introduce a unique aspect of their culture to their partner in the second email. The third and final mandatory email was based on sharing news items of the students' respective countries. The news topic was chosen to further acquaint the IEE participants with each other's current events. Although the IEE was mandatory only up to the third email, many students chose to continue communicating with their exchange partners after the project was finished.

| Week | IEE-specific tasks |
|---|---|
| 1 | Students went through IEE project orientation, which included a basic outline of the project and some defined goals for the exchange. Students were taught the basic format for writing emails, and given the contact information of their Thai exchange partners. For homework, students were to write their rough drafts of their first emails to their exchange partners, which would be peer-reviewed in the second week. The first emails consisted of self-introductions so that the Thai students could get an idea of who they would be writing to. |
| 2 | Students exchanged emails with classmates and performed peer-reviews, checking for correct format and appropriate content. After completing the peer-review process, students sent their emails to their Thai exchange partners. |
| 3 | Thai students' emails arrived. These emails also consisted of self-introductions so that the Japanese students could become better acquainted with their exchange partners. For the second email, Japanese students wrote about some unique points of Japanese culture to introduce to the Thai students. |
| 4 | Thai students' cultural introduction emails were received. For the third email, the Japanese students answered any questions about the Japanese cultural points they received from the Thai students, and also sent some of their own questions about Thai culture. The main directive for the third email was to write about some Japanese local or national news items. |
| 5 | Thai students' news-themed emails arrived. This was the end of the mandatory exchange with the Thai students, although many of the students continued to make contact with their Thai exchange partners, writing about any topic that they wanted to. |
| 6 | The final week of the exchange project consisted of the students submitting to the teacher archived email exchanges via text documents, along with 2 paragraph reactions to the IEE. Students were instructed to talk about the positive and/or negative points to the project. |

Fig. 1: Intercultural email exchange project outline for the Japanese students

The Japanese students kicked off the exchange by writing the first emails to their Thai counterparts. The self-introductions included information like the age of the students, birthplace and current living situations, family information, hobbies, and other general personal information. The first stage of the exchange was completed when the Thai students wrote back within the next week, giving their self-introductions to the Japanese students.

The exchange moved into the second stage with the Japanese students writing about unique aspects of Japanese culture, and sending it on to the Thai students, @who in return offered their lessons on Thai cultural points. Any questions concerning the cultural information were included by the Thais in their second round of emails, which the Japanese students answered at the beginning of their third volley of the exchange. The

third and final mandatory part of the IEE involved the students sharing local or national news stories with the other group of students.

**Materials**

Learner profiles: At the very beginning of the semester, students were asked to fill out a pre-questionnaire/consent form. Students gave information about their age, gender, native language, parent native languages, and languages spoken at home. The students were also asked about their previous language training, ranging from primary and secondary schooling to any study abroad programs they participated in, extra-curricular language training, or extended stays in foreign countries.

IEE reflections: At the end of the IEE project, all students were required to submit their reactions to the project (a minimum of one paragraph), along with the transcripts of their mandatory email exchanges. All further transcripts of contact with the students' exchange partners were only given voluntarily. As part of the IEE reflections, students were instructed to think about the following questions:

- Was the IEE an enjoyable experience? Why or why not?
- Which email topic did you find the most interesting? Why?
- What other topics would you have liked to discuss? Why?
- Did this project help to improve your English?
- Did you continue to contact your exchange partner after the project was finished?

**Reactions**

There were a variety of positive and negative reactions from the students who participated in this study. The negative student reactions to the IEE were based almost exclusively on logistical failures, which included unreturned emails, invalid email addresses for exchange partners, or interference caused by spam filters. The positive reactions, on the other hand, covered a wide array of benefits, ranging from increased language learning motivation and improved English skills to a broadened sense of cultural awareness (see Figure 2 below).

| Positive student reactions | Negative student reactions |
|---|---|
| Improved language abilities | No return emails |
| Increased language learning motivation | Problems with spam filters |
| Broadened sense of foreign and domestic cultural awareness and improved international relations | IEE was too short |
| Learn to successfully communicate in unfamiliar situations | |
| New long-term channels for communicating in English | |

Fig. 2: Student reactions to the IEE

A strong indicator of the level of success of the project lies in one of the complaints with the project itself: that it was too short. Unfortunately for many students who wanted extended contact with their exchange partners, the different semester schedules at each of the two universities prevented a more extensive IEE. For many students, however, this weak point was averted when many of the Thai and Japanese students elected to continue their communications even after the project was over. This was one of the most satisfying positive points of the exchange.

**Improved language abilities**

Many students noted that their English reading and writing skills had improved because of their participation in the IEE. Continued exposure to English outside of class, recorded transcriptions that students can review even after the initial communication has ended, and ongoing chances for meaningful communication all contribute to the improvement of English language skills (Warschauer, 1995). McClanahan (2001:4) notes how students who wrote "for an authentic audience made them pay closer attention to things like grammar, punctuation, spelling, and clarity.h Other researchers hold the view that dialogic activities like IEEs present more meaningful opportunities for language use than normal EFL classroom activities (Furstenberg, Levet, English, & Maillet, 2001; Morgan & Cain, 2000; Okubo & Kumahata, 2001). Students A, B, C, and D elaborate on the noticeable improvement in their English after partaking in the IEE:

> "Email project with the Thai students is very difficult but very beneficial. Sending email to the Thai students makes my English writing skill better. Reading email from the Thai students is interesting and makes my English reading skill better. I'd like to continue this project with all my might."

> "It was first time that I exchanged with foreigner. I talked about music. I could speak with the same sense talk to Japanese friends. And we can get various information, and, of course, we can do an English training. This is very good. And it is easy to focus on the contents of sentence, and improve some reading and writing skills. I felt it again that if we can speak English, we can exchange to with various countries."

> "This email project with Thai student is very fun!! And thanks to it, I can improve my English skills. Communicating with another country people is little difficult for me, but my English skills grew up. It pleased me."

> "I could study English communication in email. I have never sent email to a foreigner, so I didnft know how to write. In this project I could enjoy communicating with Thai friend and studying English. It was good project and meaningful for me."

**Increased motivation**

In their reactions, many students indicated that the IEE gave them increased motivation to better their English, which would make communication with their exchange partners and any other English speakers they meet in the future easier. Students E and F reflect on their rejuvenated motivation:

> "This project is very interesting for me. Because I always don't use English, so through this project I could use English a lot. I don't like English, especially grammar. But using English to contact friend is very interesting. When I write to my friend to Thailand, I felt my English levels up. So I want to study English more!"

Student B echoes the same sentiments:

> "I think that it is very interesting to mail to Thai students because I don't have foreign friends!! But it takes much time for me. I have to brush up my English writing skill!"

Giving Japanese students a rare chance to use their English to communicate with foreign students of the same group allows them to see first-hand how exciting and rewarding learning a foreign language can be. By making new acquaintances through their email exchanges, the students were able to see how their English skills can be put to use outside of the EFL classroom.

**Broadened sense of cultural awareness and improved international relations**

IEEs also have the added benefit of broadening the participants' cultural horizons. In their research, Bachner and Zeutschel (1994:44) show how students who took part in an IEE "increased their capacity for empathy because they have to think about why others think or behave differently." Students G and H share their thoughts:

> "The mail project is very interesting. At first I was nervous to mail a foreign person that I do not know. The international exchange was the first experience to me. But it was fun. I can know other country culture. I do not know Thai culture before this project. However I knew the culture a little for this project. And on the other hand I can teach Japanese culture. So I think it is good."

> "I was glad to exchange email with a student in Thailand. At first, as I sent email to foreigner for the first time, I was tensed. But I enjoyed email as she was very friendly. I could know Thai culture and food. Pictures that she sent me were very beautiful. It was good opportunity to know about Thailand. I think I want to know Thai culture and tell Japanese culture more."

In her research, Shibata (1998:275) explains the acute need for Japanese students to have contact with other cultures: ""Japanese in general are at a disadvantage globally due to a lack of experience in dealing with different races and communication patterns. This makes intercultural training especially desirable and appropriate in Japan." The individual-based nature of the project is also ideal for typical English classes in Japan, which have large numbers of students, and a few class hours per week (Takanashi, 2004). Students who normally do not have large amounts of individual attention from language teachers benefit greatly from the constant contact they have with their exchange partners.

Some students also gain a greater sense of appreciation for their own cultures when they realize how little they know when asked to talk about their own culture to other foreigners. Students, I and J share their thoughts:

> "We exchanged information of country and culture each other. Thus I can know a little bit about Thailand. However, at the time, I saw that I have not known about my country and other countries. Therefore, not only communicate with him but also seeing small my knowledge are so good experience."

> "It is wonderful for me to communicate with my new Thai friend because I have never experience like this. My new friend is my first foreign friend. I am thankful for this encounter."

**Successfully coping with unfamiliar language situations**

Students also showed much less hesitation to communicate as the IEE proceeded, which shows how IEEs can contribute to students' ability to successfully cope with unfamiliar situations (Bachner and Zeutschel, 1994). Here are students K and L's thoughts on the matter:

> "It was very interesting for me. But it was difficult because I didn't know what I might write. In addition, I have never done that email with foreigner. So, I was worry. However, it was a mistake. I could do it in English. She sent a photograph to me. It was a photograph of the sea and it was very beautiful. I sent a photograph of a Japanese castle in return."

> "First I heard this project I thought this is very difficult for me and I cannot do this well. I hadnft sent emails others so I was very nervous at the beginning. However I got used to sending the mails little by little and I felt pleasure. This project is good for me."

**New long-term channels for authentic English communication**

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the IEE was seeing some students willingly continue with their communications even after the project was completed. Seeing students make new friends, and genuinely taking interest and enjoyment out of communicating with them in English is one of the greatest rewards for learning a foreign language. Student M shares his reasons for wanting to continue his contact with his exchange partner:

"I was happy to hear that she know baseball because, in Thailand, baseball is a minor sport. In addition, I am proud of Japanese comic books. I knew people in the world read Japanese comic books, but I didn't know Japanese comic books are sold in Thailand. She taught me about the Songkla festival in Thailand. It seems that the festival is very interesting. Because I want to know more things about Thailand, I will continue to send my new friend emails."

In spite of facing some difficulties with his language ability, student N offers a similar experience:

"This project is difficult for me, because I hadn't ever sent email to foreigners, so I made some mistakes in email. But I will keep communicating by email with him. And I wish to be able to use English freely."

Student O talks of even going to visit her new friend in Thailand:

"I think email project with the Thai students is interesting and learning. My new friend of Thai sent me email about culture and event. I can know event of Thailand, Songkran and Loy Krathong. I am interested this event. I want to go to Thailand. I will continue sending email to her."

## Difficulties with IEE

This was the first time that both teachers had coordinated an IEE with their English classes, and as could be expected, there were several snags with the project. The most noticeable problems were failures in logistics planning. Some of the students' email addresses that were written on the roster from Thailand contained typos, thus preventing any emails that the Japanese students sent from reaching their intended destinations. Other students used email providers with heavy spam protection, which promptly sent some of the Japanese students' emails into junk or spam folders. Most of these problems were rectified, but it took about a week to identify and fix the problems, which left some of the Japanese students feeling frustrated or nervous that their emails weren't received well. Student P sums up his experience:

"This is first time for me to send email to a foreigner. I was very uneasy. At first, my pen friend did not write me email. I was sad a little. Soon, however, he sent email to me. I was very glad!"

Some Thai students also chose not to participate in the project, which left their Japanese partners somewhat hurt and confused. Although there was a slight delay for these students, they were soon paired up with other participants. Students Q and R reflect on their experiences:

"My partner did not readily return an email. So, I was irritated every day. I looked forward to this plan very much, but I got no response. I am sorry that the exchanges of an email were not good. I want to try to do it with another partner once again."

"I felt too bad about my email project with the Thai students, because I didnft get first email from Thai friend. However, I am getting email from different one now. When I get email from her, I am happy. I want to know about Thailand. All my classmates got email and exchanged email with the Thai students some times. So I was envious of them. They seem to be happy and be fun. I think that self- introduction email I sent for her is not good. Therefore, I displeased her and thought I made her angry."

Another student complain with the IEE was that the email topics were too heavily restricted, thus preventing the students from writing about other topics. Here, student S explains:

"Email project was interesting, but difficult. My friend sent me the address of internet space where he writes many things about him. There are many pictures and some music which he interested in. That was fun very much. But there is one difficult point to send email. I wanted free topic of mail. We had to send fixed topic mail. I confused to make fixed topic, like eabout news in Japan.f That was difficult. But totally this project is good for me."

In the future, this type of complaint could be avoided by simply extending the project to include more topics, and possibly free topics as well. It would be negligent, however, to forego some sort of facilitation by the teacher in the process, as research indicates that students themselves see the teacher's involved role in the activities as an important part of the level of success of the project (Stepp-Greany, 2002). The short length of the IEE was a common complaint from the Japanese students. Student T offers her opinion:

> "We enjoy sending email. I want more time to make sentences. It is too short for me to finish email in this class. And I want to send email many times and answer my partner's question."

Logistical and participation problems will always be a problem with IEEs, especially with those involving large numbers of students. These can almost always be sorted out, however, and are worth the hassle.

## Results

A majority of the students who participated in the IEE suggested in their reflections that they had enjoyed the exchange, and had learned new information about cultural and/or language. Out of the 70 Japanese students who were involved in the study, 61 of them (87%) indicated that the exchange was a positive experience. Out of those 61 students, 19 of them (31%) planned to continue communication with their exchange partners. These are relatively pleasing numbers, considering that almost all of these students had never previously had contact (much less continued contact) with foreigners before the IEE project began.

## Conclusions

To ensure that the full potential of intercultural exchanges in a language-learning context is realized, EFL and ESL researchers and instructors need to continue to develop effective ways of using technological resources as a means of communicatively connecting English language learners throughout the world, and analyze the reactions, successes, and problems with facilitating such endeavors. Although the potential groups of students who can participate in IEEs like the one outlined in this paper are limited to non-beginner English learners with some form of internet access, each year more and more EFL and ESL learners are falling into these categories. The expansion of cheap and readily-available internet access to EFL and ESL students means more new pathways for types of meaningful communication that, until recently, had never been available before.

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