Nurturing Cultural Awareness via E-mail Exchanges in an English as a Second Language (ESL) Reading-Writing Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this era of globalisation, it is necessary for students to be sensitised of towards other cultures around the world, and this could be done in the ESL classroom. This paper shows how modern technology such as email, can become a powerful tool and could be used to bridge language learning and cultures. This project involves a group of Thai and Malaysian students who were instructed to email each other to gather information on various themes such as religion, places of interest, food and lifestyle. Throughout the project, they were encouraged to share their experiences in groups and in writing reports. At the end of the project, questionnaires with closed- and open-ended questions were distributed to Malaysian students to get their feedback on the email project as well as their language learning experience. Assessment was also done on their reports. It could be summed that they overcame their anxiety and discovered that learning English was more than just mastering grammar. More importantly, it fostered the perception that learning English was fun and meaningful, no matter what culture they belonged to.

Keywords: *cultural awareness, email exchanges, inter-cultural communication*

Introduction

It has been pointed out in the past that online language learning has shifted the focus from classroom learning to collaborative projects with

emphasis on intercultural competence, cultural learning and cultural literacy (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2000 in Liaw, 2006: 5). Language practitioners have been linking cultural awareness with language learning and they have highlighted the impossible task of teaching English without teaching culture (Kramsch, 1993). In addition, Baker (2003) also suggests that culture be treated as an overt component of EFL instruction in non-English speaking countries. With this in mind, the use of email as a communicative tool to incorporate the teaching of culture in an ESL reading-writing class was investigated. Though this has been popular as a pedagogic tool, its use in the local context especially cross-cultural experiences among students in a similar non-native context is rare. In this action research, the researchers attempted to create an authentic context for writing activities. It was found that, generally, students frowned to write numerous assignments and project papers, resulting in plagiarism and shoddy pieces. Thus, it was thought that using email exchanges could motivate students as pointed out in the literature. Furthermore, students had easy access to computers which made this feasible. Several objectives were identified: (1) to explore inter-cultural communication through email exchanges; (2) to nurture writing skills among non-native students and (3) to create awareness those non-native students from other cultures too may face similar challenges when communicating in English. It was hoped that the task would create platforms to exchange cultural experiences and open minds. It has been acknowledged in the literature that email is useful in writing classes and in promoting cultural awareness. By having direct contact with keypals from other countries, learners are able to discover different cultural aspects in a natural way. This is also a way to foster better understanding between youths of both countries.

Review of Related Literature

Literature shows that projects involving email are very popular among practitioners. Nutta and Cohen (2002) conducted an email exchange project involving American teacher trainees and Israeli college students. Email was used to link native English speaking teachers and teacher candidates from the University of South Florida, US with EFL students from the Tel Aviv University, Israel. Ten participants (five from each university) spent two months learning about each other's culture through email exchanges. The first step required the American teacher trainees

to read on culture and intercultural issues. The Israeli instructor then sent the names and a brief description of Israeli keypals to the Florida instructor who later passed them on to her trainees. The teacher trainees then emailed ten cultural questions (designed by their instructor) to their counterparts. Based on their keypals' responses, the teacher trainees wrote a final report comparing both cultures. The Israeli students, too, underwent a similar process.

Overall, the email exchange project was a success for both groups. Moreover, the Israeli students had the opportunity to communicate with native English speakers. Likewise, the American teacher trainees were exposed to non-native writing and this provided them with opportunities to negotiate meaning in written email exchanges.

In another email exchange project between Danish and Japanese students, Fedderholt (2001) reported that writing to a counterpart is seen as a good way to increase enthusiasm for writing and "ease the transition from sentence-oriented translation for grammar purposes to meaningful communication". Her experience with Japanese students' writing indicates that these students generally find it difficult to write long, coherent texts. They are also wary of whom they write to and are reluctant to communicate with foreigners as they are not confident of their English language proficiency. Therefore, writing to keypals provided a less "stressful" writing environment.

The following email project involved nineteen Japanese and Danish students for a duration of ten weeks. These nineteen-year-olds have been studying English for about seven years. The project started with both groups sending emails related to topics like the royal families of both countries, racism, smoking, youth, winter food, bathing habits as well as differences in celebrating Christmas and New Year. At the end of the project, the students were given a questionnaire asking them to comment on the project. The researchers reported that the email project was successful. The dropout rate from the project was low as the majority of the students were happy writing to their keypals. The Japanese students who were initially worried about writing long texts found that using email for writing was satisfying and less stressful. Despite language difficulties and limitations, they were more adventurous in writing grammatically challenging structures, in contrast to the Danish students who wrote good but short simple sentences.

The students' stereotyped thinking and perception of each other's culture also improved. Prior to this, the Danish students associated Japanese culture with karate, big cities like Tokyo and sushi. These

students also commented that the Japanese people observed traditions and that in Japan, families and schools are important. On the other hand, the Japanese students learnt that Danish students speak German instead of Danish! In short, the email exchange project seemed to have opened their eyes to different aspects of culture which may not be obtained through text book learning. Overall, the students were keen to write to their keypals and happy with the responses received. A large number of students also chose to continue writing to their keypals even after the project was over. The teachers also had the satisfaction of nurturing self-confidence and creativity in their students.

Email exchange programmes can also develop intercultural awareness among students. Another email exchange project involved Xinmin Primary School in Singapore and Robin Hood Primary School in Birmingham. Ho (2000) reported that the collaborative project helped students to "bridge ties and cross national boundaries". The pupils' personal understanding of the world had extended beyond the traditional confines of the classroom. For two months, pupils from both schools constructed a web site with details of the British warship, HMS Illustrious, en route from UK to Hong Kong via Singapore. Hence, pupils from both schools were able to gain insights into the life and culture of different people.

Basically, the project was divided into four stages. The first stage involved establishing rapport between the staff and students from both schools. The messages comprised personal information such as age, family, hobbies as well as preferences. The teachers also helped to correct serious grammatical errors. In the second stage, questions were raised about food and cultural practices, for example, one Singaporean student asked "What is Easter?" to his peer in Birmingham. A point to note was that teachers did not initiate topics for the discussion. The third stage involved students communicating with the crew on board the warship to elicit information. The type of questioning was more specific and related to their assignment. In the final stage, students compiled all the information and submitted a report. It is interesting to note that their teachers played an important role in this stage as they helped to revise, edit and proofread their students' text before it was posted onto the website. This intervention may be necessary as the project involved young learners, as compared to the earlier-mentioned project where teacher intervention was limited as older students were involved.

Ho's (2001) study showed that the collaborative IT-based project yielded positive results. Firstly, students were motivated and displayed a positive attitude towards writing. Analysis of their messages displayed

maturity of thought in the type of questions they posted to their keypals. In addition, they learnt to work collaboratively on the project. Besides that, they experienced a "living curriculum" as they were involved in authentic tasks with global citizens as the real life audiences. They had to transfer what they had learnt from one environment (the email messages with the ship crew) to a new setting (presenting the information on the website). The Singaporean students were more conscious of their spelling, grammar and syntax of their messages. They relied on their teachers to check their messages before sending them out as they wanted to appear "grammatically correct and polished". On the other hand, the Birmingham students were more interested to send their messages as soon as possible as they were more eager to receive their Singaporean keypals' replies. This difference in behaviour could also be construed as cultural influences though this remains to be unproven.

The project did not just end there. Both schools agreed to continue with other IT-based projects. One such project was termed "Festivals" where pupils from both schools exchanged information on the various festivals celebrated in both countries. In short, these projects extended beyond the traditional confines of the classroom and helped students cross "national boundaries".

Methodology

This paper reports the Malaysian experience in nurturing cultural awareness via email exchanges in an ESL class. In this email project, thirty-one students of Diploma in Communication and Media Studies were assigned to exchange email with their peers from the Chulalongkorn University. The main theme was culture. A brief description of the stages involved in the project is described below. At the end of the project, questionnaires were distributed to gather the Malaysian students' responses to the project.

Step 1: Initiating the project

Initially, students were encouraged to learn something about Thailand and her people. In subsequent classes, students presented their findings in their groups. This was followed by a reading comprehension practice related to Thailand. At this stage, the students also brainstormed on the various topics that they could discuss with their Thai keypals. At the end

of the project, they were told to submit a written report based on their experience.

Step 2

The course instructor gave the keypal's email addresses to each student and asked them to introduce themselves and begin their exchanges. The email addresses were obtained from the instructor's counterpart and were distributed with permission.

Step 3

In class, time was allocated to discuss the project. Students shared their experiences in groups and even printed out their exchanges. At this stage, the course instructor helped construct and correct drafts for low-proficiency students. The main themes discussed were culture, food, education and religion. As the main intention was to encourage students to use the English language in a natural setting, there were no formal assessments.

Step 4

In this final stage, students shared their experiences in groups. At the end of the discussion, they submitted their reports (a compilation of the materials gathered during their research, an essay and sample email). They also answered the questionnaires.

Findings and Discussions

In this section, findings from the questionnaires distributed to the Malaysian students would be discussed. Excerpts from the email exchanges also provide interesting insights into ESL students from two cultures learning from one another.

The first part of the questionnaire queried on how much the students agreed or disagreed (using a four-point scale) with the email project as a learning tool whereas the second part consisted of open-ended questions where students could express themselves freely.

Analysis revealed that the majority of the students are familiar with email communication and find it interesting to communicate with their keypals. Majority of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed

with the project. This indicates that the students have already been exposed to email communication as today's generation is indeed computer savvy. Some students also agreed that it was a new experience for them emailing to foreign keypals. Although they frequently used email for social networking, it was their first experience using it as part of formal lesson, especially in learning English. A majority (90.2%) agreed that it was rather exciting writing to real audience. One student commented: "By doing this project, I've learnt a lot of new things like the food, culture and interesting places in Thailand". She added, "I have also seen the beautiful scenery in Thailand even though I have not been there". Overall, the project encouraged them to express themselves and improve their reading-writing skills. Another student summed the general view as thus: "I've learned their culture and improved my reading-writing skills". Their views concur with Nutta and Cohen (2001) who suggest that email is a good writing tool especially for students to get information.

The students also agreed (99.9%) that the writing project on the Thai culture is interesting and provides a breakaway from their usual routine of learning grammar rules in class. One student said, "From this project, I've learned a lot about other countries. I've learnt about their culture and the best is I've learnt how they lived their life". Almost all of them (99.9%) agreed that the email writing project has enriched their knowledge beyond text-books. They also strongly agreed (83.8%) that email is a good tool to incorporate intercultural communication and that they were "relaxed" when writing to their keypals.

To a question whether the students were conscious of their language when writing to their keypals, 35.4% agreed that they were a little conscious of their language as their keypals were strangers. On the other hand, 64.5% said that they were more careful when writing their reports than when emailing with their keypals. They also did not face much language difficulties. In short, the Malaysian students did not try to "impress" their keypals with their language proficiency but used the opportunity to establish relationship and gather information (See Appendix 1).

The students' perception towards Thai culture improved during the project. Both groups explored different aspects of Malaysian-Thai culture. One student admitted that "Thai culture is amazing" and went on to point out that their Thai keypals revered their King and Queen and that many Thais chose their King's birthday as their favourite national holiday. They also learnt about Songkran Festival – the Thai New Year – which is celebrated on April 13 every year. Prior to the project, a few Malaysian

students were not aware of the Songkran festival. They also informed that they had found out that most of their Thai keypals were Buddhists who prayed at "wats" (temples) daily. Both groups also exchanged information on each others' leisure activities, for instance, the Malaysian students learnt about Thai kickboxing or "Muay Thai" which is also popular in the northern regions of Malaysia.

Conclusion

In short, the project was an eye-opener to the students in understanding a different culture apart from their own. Learning was self-directed as students obtained information on their own with minimal teacher intervention. Overall, the students found the whole experience fun. One claimed the project "a great way of learning the English language". Another responded "I think the (email) reading-writing project is good because my knowledge about other cultures has expanded through this project and it also makes me sensitive about other cultures". Besides learning about culture, they said that their relationship with their course instructors had improved and they had been more open to ask questions. It is well established in literature that ESL students generally experience high anxiety and are shy to converse in the target language but this was overcome in this class. Moreover, they realised that learning a language means more than just learning the rules. One student aptly pointed out: "I've learnt that there is much more to the language other than grammar. I've also had loads of fun experimenting in class with the language". It is this element of experimentation that each and every language learner needs to be thrust into doing in the ESL class!

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