Integrating Electronic Mail in the Speech Classroom

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Teaching English as a Second Language to a large group of students in a short amount of time becomes easier with the help of email, on-line chat rooms, and message boards. These devices allow students to feel less self conscious while learning basic language concepts, opening a whole new world of tools for ESL teachers to enhance student learning.

Introduction

In this narrative, I will present the case study of a class in which I integrated ESL (English as a Second Language) theory and methods with "electronic exchange writing" to the benefit of my students' learning. With the help of e-mail, the participants of Kingsborough Community College exchanged ideas and opinions on a variety of topics that, at times, were selected by themselves and, at other times, were selected by me (the Speech professor). They produced an impressive range of written work based on their readings of stories about their own cultures as well as other cultures. The participants improved their command of English; they developed a sense of pride in their own work and enlarged their awareness of themselves as members of an international and global community.

One task cycle often spiraled into the next through content connections (Willis, 1996). Within the task cycle, students individualized topics and carried out the tasks to suit their own interests and learning styles, which gave them the freedom to build language proficiency at an appropriate level. All of these activities helped with oral presentations and face-to-face discussions. The purpose of using computers as part of the course was not to replace other learning methods but rather to provide additional means to accomplish the task, in this case, speaking skills.

In order to provide a framework for this study, I will review some of the literature related to English language skills via the use of e-mail. The Internet represents an abundant informational resource. For example, it has tremendous educational potential in being able to facilitate intercultural exchanges through which students may work collaboratively, first gathering and sharing information, and then discussing and analyzing issues. When used effectively, technology can help to encourage collaborative learning and the development of critical thinking skills, as well help students learn problem-solving techniques (Means et al., 1993).

Several philosophies guide us as we ESL professors make decisions about technology and English language learning. Two of the most important are the ideas of scaffolding and collaborative learning. A key feature of scaffolding is to select goals that build upon everyday experiences of students and provide them with social support. In collaborative learning environments, students learn from each other. Instructors are not expected to have the right answer but instead facilitate the knowledge construction process (Hsi, 1995).

The participants for this study were students who were taking intensive ESL classes at Kingsborough Community College. This means that they had a reading/writing professor and a listening/speaking (speech)

professor as well. The participants went to Kingsborough five days a week for a total of twelve weeks during the fall semester of 1999. Participants' ages averaged 25.3 and they represented a total of eight countries: China, Honduras, Russia, Taiwan, Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Ukraine. The participants met with the speech professor six hours a week; one hour a week was spent in the language laboratory where participants would perform drill exercises on audio tapes to practice the sounds of the English language.

Although in the initial stages participants were together physically because they were taking classes together (ESL and Speech), they took the opportunity to get to know each other and the professor better by engaging in electronic small talk. Students set up e-mail accounts on one of the free e-mail providers on the Internet, the one requirement being the ability to send and receive e-mail attachments. This was necessary because they would be sharing their writing with Internet partners as well as with their professor. Internet discussions were about everyday topics of interest to them; for example, movies, television, fashion, sports, hobbies, and religion. Soon, the focus moved to more demanding issues and assignments. They began to select their own topics based on their perception of issues (e.g., pollution, the ozone layer, comparing the study of the English language in their native countries to that of the United States) which were, in their view, significant, both locally and internationally.

Theoretical Rationale

Participants who are reluctant to speak or cannot respond spontaneously in class are able to improve their speaking after "practicing" in chat mode. While a chat does require a certain degree of spontaneity, the slight time lag means that the participant can plan and correct what is written on the screen, something more difficult to do in oral discussions. Also, chatting via computer has a certain facelessness to it. The screen and the keyboard seem less intimidating than humans do, and shy participants who hesitate to speak in class suddenly have fingers flying across the keyboard. Thoughts and arguments first composed in writing on e-mail give participants time to reflect before they engage in oral work. Whenever we have a class discussion based on e-mail entries, I find that the quality of the arguments is enhanced and thinking is more creative than without this kind of preparation. In addition, those who come to the class computer illiterate often become the most enthusiastic participants during the chat. The Internet can also be used effectively for interactive reading tasks, so students frequently located, read, and reported on articles, information, and resources they discovered on the Internet. I provided guidance in using Internet search engines and on occasion recommended specific web sites. Because students located a variety of materials in these searches, they could later discuss the topic from different perspectives and share a wealth of information.

Interest in listening is augmented as well. The tactile action on the keyboard and the appearance of the entry on the screen make the work easier to read, help thoughts to flow, and enhance the overall thinking-composing-writing process. "Thinking and writing are interdependent processes" (Olson, 1991, p.147) that can be enhanced on a computer. Reading, speaking, and listening skills can also be strengthened because once participants input their entries, their classmates can read them and then respond both in writing and orally. Students reported in their course evaluations that they found the support in technology helpful because it gave them confidence to complete course tasks independently.

If, we, as professors, provide a sequence of topics and integrate them with other aspects of course content, we find that certain topics are more open ended than those that ask for

information only. The topics ask the participant to report on something learned, studied, or experienced, then invite the participant to contribute personal opinion or reflection as desired, and this may stimulate the writer to add questions about the information provided by the classmate.

During the twelve weeks of fall 1999, I used topics that would (a) foster cooperative writing and discussions in small groups; (b) introduce word stress rules; (c) reinforce textbook material and class objectives; and (d) reinforce aspects of usage that troubled participants (e.g., definite articles, word order, and adverbial clauses). The first prompt asked participants to introduce themselves to each other, going beyond details of everyday life to include a focus on their previous language study and how English might present difficulties to any learner. On another prompt, participants collected examples of English slang and idioms. Questions flew back and forth. Why did a character on a TV program say knife point and not knife edge? Another participant had heard the term "sleepy elevator music" and asked for clarification. The sources for their slang and idiomatic expressions were rich and varied: radio, movies, television, audio and video tapes, compact and video disks, newspapers, reference tools, magazines, billboards, posters, and mail flyers.

As participants send messages back and forth, they gradually construct an area of given or shared knowledge. The slang posting allowed participants to draw on their own interests in movies and music, to share these interests, and to identify specific cultural differences and similarities in language use. They had a range of models for emulation, they could work with information given previously or old information, and they could also offer new information to each other. One of my goals has always been to enhance cultural awareness, and I found that the computer culture facilitated this. Students would send me e-mails describing their cultures and countries. It was a delight to download images of Bangladesh or to read a poem they had written to a boyfriend or girlfriend. They shared feelings about the class. They would ask for clarification of ideas or suggest topics for debate. There was a feeling of comfort in knowing that they were not being "judged," Slowly but surely, they stopped introducing their passages with "Please forgive me, my English is so poor." Or "Excuse my English, next time I try to improve."

Using a combination of self-selected and instructor guided materials, the course capitalized on the rich language resources available on the Internet and used them in authentic tasks and texts. Students were encouraged to challenge their language skills by keeping track of new vocabulary and structures that they learned from the Internet. Some Internet tasks were simulations of real life activities, such as locating housing in another borough or comparing products through different e-businesses.

In the early stages, it became clear that participants were benefiting from a communication between themselves and a "real audience." Their willingness to make use of critical thinking skills and their ability to manage whole and meaningful texts began to increase. The following was observed: Participants (a) learned to look at and assess their work and the work of others from different perspectives; (b) learned to write clear, forceful, and effective prose to convey their intended ideas; (c) gained a rich insight into each others' lives and the culture of their respective countries; (d) gained a better understanding of the use of the computer as a communicative as well as a learning tool; and (e) discovered that written exercises helped with oral communication.

Conditions for an Ideal Learning Environment

In the SLA (second language acquisition) and English as a Second Language (ESL) literatures, research repeatedly points to four conditions that, when present in the language learning environment in one form or another, support optimal language learning. These conditions are summarized briefly below:

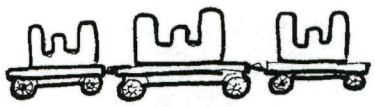
Condition Number One: Opportunities for learners to interact and negotiate meaning with an authentic audience.

Many researchers have noted that learning is essentially interaction between students and others (Ahmad, Corbett, Rogers, & Sussex, 1985; Kelman, 1990; Levin & Boruta, 1983). If learning is such a social process, then social interaction is necessary for learning (Vygotsky, 1978); this is especially true for second language learners striving for communicative competence. "Social interaction" implies the negotiation of meaning. Other researchers have found that language learners must be involved in purposeful interaction, which includes a real audience that is actively involved with the learners (Pica, 1987; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Webb, 1982, 1985). The implication, then, is that learner involvement in authentic social interaction in the target language (TL) with a knowledgeable source (e.g., the teacher, another learner, a technology, a family doctor, or other who can negotiate in the TL) facilitates language acquisition. Participants began to focus on sharing knowledge, being heard, and getting the message across and not so much on grammar or punctuation. They were writing not only for me (the professor) but for each other as well.

Condition Number Two: Learners are involved in authentic tasks, which promote exposure to and production of varied and creative language

Authentic, in this context, means something that students know something about and are interested in that has a real purpose behind it (Reid, 1989; Roen, 1989). Johnson (1991) explains that an authentic task must provide learners with a reason to share ideas and information, preferably within a system that allows problem solving, as studies have found that learners interact more when working on problem-solving tasks than on other activities. Grammar drills, tasks common to many ESL classrooms and software, are not authentic tasks in this sense.

Today, the significance of computer-mediated communication in society and in the classroom is even greater. Some 3.4 trillion e-mail messages were sent in the United States alone in 1998, or more than 10,000 for every man, woman, and child in the country ("eMarketer Tallies the Number of E-Mail Messages," 1999). E-mail is also becoming a major form of business communication. In fact, in one survey of U.S. business managers, e-mail actually ranked higher than telephone communication or even face-to-face communication as a frequent means of workplace interaction (E-Mail Tops Telephone, 1998). With e-mail becoming a principal form of communication for business, academic, and civic affairs, learning how to communicate and collaborate well in this medium must become a goal in its own right.



Spolsky (1989) claimed that "whatever the language learner brings to the task, whether innate ability, a language acquisition device, attitudes, previous knowledge, and experiences of languages and language learning, the outcome of language learning

depends in large measure on the amount and kind of exposure to the target language" (p.166). An authentic task alone, therefore, may not be sufficient; varied and creative language implies a diversity of tasks and sources and learner use of both receptive and productive language skills that take into account the multiple learning styles and preferences among learners (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). The computer allowed participants to become more active. They were not empty vessels waiting to be filled with English. They were curious about topics or expressions they had heard on TV or the radio. I learned about what sitcoms they watched, which ones they preferred, and how they reacted to new words or phrases. They watched *Seinfeld* and *Frazier* but felt connected somehow to *Third Rock from the Sun*. When I asked why, I was told that the aliens were immigrants to a new land so they could relate to the characters.

Condition Number Three: Learners have opportunities to formulate ideas and thoughts and intentional cognition is promoted.

Learners need adequate time and feedback, both of which facilitate the formulation of ideas. They must also be given the opportunity to reflect on and communicate their ideas; however, presenting learners with opportunities to formulate ideas and thoughts does not imply that they will take these opportunities or make the best of them. During the learning process, learners must be "mindful" (Zellermayer, Salomon, Globerson & Givon, 1991); that is, they must be motivated to take the opportunities presented to them and to be cognitively engaged. A certain degree of guidance, whether from peers or others, may facilitate learning and promote mindfulness (Zellermayer, Salomon, Globerson, & Givon, 1991). I learned that part of the problem stemmed from the fact that participants were not doing enough writing even when provided ample opportunities to do so in class and at home. These writers lacked extended experience with writing and needed a great deal of practice to achieve fluency and clarity.

Addressing the challenge to get participants to care about what they were writing was also crucial. Recycling key concepts and vocabulary allowed the participants to develop familiarity with the topic about which they wrote or spoke. I found that this type of context for language development supported learning over the course of a whole semester.

Because of large classes and curricular activities, teachers and individual students often have insufficient opportunities to communicate in the classroom. Likewise, students and teachers may not communicate outside class because of a lack of suitable office hours, busy schedules, or simply shyness on the part of the students. E-mail can open up an extra channel for teacher-student communication. Teachers who use e-mail with students need to be aware, however, of the time commitment it may involve. Many students who might hesitate to ask questions in person are much more forthright via e-mail. Over time, teachers gain experience in deciding when to give a full reply over e-mail and when to simply acknowledge the concern and save it to discuss at the next class meeting.

E-mail is useful for informal consultation. If students know that teachers are willing to communicate with them via e-mail, they will have excellent opportunities for *authentic* communication. Students may have minor questions that they would hesitate to mention in person, but for which an e-mail message seems to be an appropriate way to obtain the answer. My students also e-mail me to set up appointments, let me know why they have been absent, inquire about assignments, or submit their homework.

Condition Number Four: An atmosphere with ideal stress/anxiety level in a learner-centered classroom.

Before learners can be mindfully engaged and willing to communicate and share their ideas, they must experience an optimal level of anxiety in the language learning environment. This means that feelings of worry or apprehension must be facilitative, rather than debilitative (Brown, 1987; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Lozanov, 1978). Technology use can assist in the creation of an optimal stress environment by creating a learner-centered classroom, which implies that learners have some control over their learning (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Kremers, 1990; Robinson, 1991). Kreeft-Peyton (1990) suggests that giving more control to the learner removes the confounds of teacher; learner; and school personalities, styles, and goals.

Due to the familiarity with the content and their sense of expertise about it, most participants wrote with newfound confidence. As a result, they moved from stitching together bits and phrases to writing with fuller expression, going beyond the plain listing of facts to a more richly synthesized presentation. Because of their confidence, they were able to take risks that resulted in a more creative and effective presentation. Ultimately, their speech improved as they used language for purposes that both interested and made sense to them.

I have found that electronic dialogue journals achieve the same benefits as or greater benefits than paper journals do, with more convenience and spontaneity. Students can easily send their journals at any time of day or night, and I can respond at my convenience as well. A good electronic management system on both ends allows me and my students to keep excellent, searchable records of the correspondence. Wang (1993), in fact, in research on the differences between the discourse in the dialogue journals written on paper and those sent via e-mail, found that students wrote more text, asked more questions and used language functions more frequently than did students writing on paper.

Briefly, there are many strategies by which the four conditions presented above can be operationalized in the second language classroom, including using group-work techniques, providing concrete opportunities to interact in English, focusing on survival skills and functions, using problem solving, providing a multitude of media, recycling content in various ways, and providing open-ended opportunities for meaningful language use. In addition, providing adequate time on tasks, adequate feedback, prompting, and other assistance; and adequate information and learner opportunities to choose and participate support the conditions.

It is very important to think carefully about integrating electronic discussion with other classroom activities. Electronic discussion can be an excellent follow-up to or a preparation for an oral discussion with the teacher planted firmly at the center of the room.

It is also important to avoid correction of students' errors in electronic discussion. Rather, I model correct language for them in all my responses. Also, I analyze the transcripts to gain information about the students' language level and needs. I prepare lessons based on some of the linguistic features noted in the students' written communication or even have the students work in groups to analyze linguistic features of their writing (Kelm, 1995).

I would recommend that participants write as they would in a dialogue, letting their ideas flow. As one participant put it, "It's like a public journal." Since everyone is part of the audience, participants do take more care in their writing than in a traditional journal. One participant said, "I'm conscious of who I'm writing to and because of the amount of

people who have access to the computer, I think of how what I'm saying will be reacted to." Another participant said, "I tend to proofread more when my writing is on the screen." A fourth participant said, "You can see the grammatical errors more easily on the computer. It reminds me textbook of verbs, tenses. I am very visual." I try to give participants topics of high interest so they will write about them.

For some assignments, I am the main audience. When I respond to entries, I focus on content, looking at logic and thinking and prodding participants to probe further. I always ask questions or express opinions for participants to respond to during the next session. In my responses, I model grammatical structures with which participants have trouble or on which we have just begun working. I also use new terminology to help enlarge vocabulary range. Participants are required to complete all e-mail works, which are corrected, and the grade is given in class when they give five-to ten minute speeches.

For other assignments, participants are the principal audience. They type in their entries, read a specific number of other entries, and express their opinions about them via e-mail. I often use this type of assignment to let the class decide on oral discussion topics.

I usually ask participants to make an entry during their free time within so many days. Then, either I have the participants read all the entries on the computer screen or I make printouts of all entries, passing them out. Participants silently gather the opinions of all the classmates and have time to reflect on them. Participants who are usually timid about participating in class became more active participants. They had had a chance to first get their thoughts on paper and to think through their own and others' opinions. Such a process, while time consuming, ensured that everyone was engaged in writing about the topic and in participating in the class discussion.

The rewards are great, in that participants learn from realistic and stimulating examples, which provide a focus for discussions. I was removed from the responsibility of being the sole supplier, interpreter, and/or judge of language use.

Computers and communication are closely interrelated, and a marriage of the two can allow participants to organize and process their knowledge at the touch of a keyboard button. We have found that computer technology presents both participants and professors/teachers with exciting and rewarding challenges.

W. B. Yeats said that "education is not the filling of the pail, but the lighting of a fire." In my experience, there is no better means to light students' fire than to involve them in authentic and challenging communication, inquiry, and problem solving using computers and the Internet. To accomplish this, I had to rethink traditional ways of teaching. I had to engage in acts of creative imagination and ask my students to do the same. The positive results achieved are sometimes matched by the frustrations of technical problems or the difficulty of trying open-ended tasks in narrowly defined academic time periods. But I believe the process is worthwhile, and necessary, if I am to help students achieve their full potential in the age of communication technology.

For the participants, there were benefits to their knowledge of technology, English as a second language, and the world. They were able to compare and contrast their experiences as immigrants to those of Liu Zongren. Also, since they were exposed to other participants who came from different nations, they shifted from being ethnocentric to more cultural relativists. This means that they became less judgmental of others in the class who did things a little differently and expressed their opinions according to what they were experiencing. Hence, they learned

that there are no right or wrong answers; people are just different.

It was rewarding for me to confirm the hope that, through the use of literature, participants could gain an understanding of the world far removed from their own reality. For both participants and professors/teachers, this approach to learning and literature differed from conventional classroom-based instruction, in that the work evolved from the participant's own experiences and reactions and took them beyond the confines of Kingsborough Community College and their cultural boundaries.

E-mail encourages participants to use computers in realistic situations so that they can develop communicative and thinking skills. Even if we are technologically phobic language professors/teachers, we can become adept at engaging participants to use e-mail in skill development and the most timid language participants can come alive while creating meaningful communications via the keyboard and screen.

Most of the participants in my class are computer literate in word processing. However, because word processing alone has certain limitations, using e-mail can be more effective. As one participant put it, "It is a very realistic form of communication because it is real conversation about real, relevant topic with real people." In addition to developing writing skills, e-mail activities further develop participants' reading comprehension and thinking skills. With follow-up classroom activities, speaking and listening skills are also enhanced. Although most of the participants studied English in their own countries, they were not used to conversing and thinking in English. What made the project a success was the fact that the Speech professor could be contacted at school, via phone at home, and via e-mail. With the America On Line system, participants and professors/teachers send private messages and make public entries.

An additional feature of e-mail is chat mode, in which two or more participants use the computer simultaneously to "talk back and forth." Participants give opposing sides to argue and defend. Reactions to having such a discussion debate in chat mode have been surprisingly positive. Students have to type in information to support their idea and persuade the other participant. This lets them think more about their environment and improves their skill of debate. I thought that debate, composing, and thinking skills would be enhanced, but I was unsure if chat mode would have any effect on speech/debate skills.

One participant said:

> *"I feel very free when communicating in chat mode. And lots of things which are difficult to say can be expressed by chat mode. Actually, my partner and I just like arguing and we say lots of things to make the other angry. It's quite funny I think. And I don't know why, I can think a lot of things when using computer talk. I find it easier to think on chat mode than in an actual conversation. Also, chat mode helps my writing and thinking because it cultivates the ability to think and compose spontaneously."*

Assessing Assignments

The e-mail assignments become part of the participants' portfolios and self-assessment process. All participants have portfolios containing all e-mail entries. Based on their portfolios and oral/aural work, they write a self-assessment in which they comment on their language skills and suggest strategies for improving these skills for the next assignments. Afterwards, each participant and I have a conference in which we discuss his or her perceptions as well as my own. In terms of e-mail entries, we look at how the

participant's thinking and debate skills have developed during the semester. I keep a separate printout of participants' entries arranged chronologically. By reading through these during the course of the year, I can track class progress as a whole and see where I need to reinforce grammatical structures and vocabulary. Participants are eager to communicate their thoughts in comprehensible language, knowing that what they write will be read by their classmates and me. They are also clearly interested in reading, understanding, and responding to what their classmates have to say. All students who participated in this project benefited from enhanced performance, increased motivation, and greater confidence in their ability to handle academic tasks. The students marveled at the resources available to them via the Internet, and, as they gradually became more comfortable and competent with the technology, they also benefited from sharing information and opinions with peers and learning from not only their professor but also each other. If we are in a chat mode, all eyes are glued to the screen during the composing and receiving stages.

Conclusion

The highlight of the course was an exchange with a key-pal (a pen pal with whom one corresponds electronically by e-mail). The key-pal correspondence provided students with real opportunities for authentic and meaningful communication and it also presented opportunities for cultural exchange (Lafford & Lafford, 1997; Ma, 1996; & Meaher & Castanos, 1996). The key-pal correspondence offered a useful way for students to increase their pragmatic competence, such as using appropriate polite forms, engaging in small talk, and experiencing various levels of formality.

Students often completed reflective tasks by writing in an e-journal, an interactive communication via e-mail with the instructor. The instructor could respond quickly and efficiently to each individual, asking for further information and reflection by integrating comments into the students' own electronic entries.

The chat rooms gave students opportunities to communicate informally with classmates. In addition, the chat rooms enabled students to participate in simultaneous discussion (with only short delays) rather than experience the delays of letter correspondence. Students responded to task prompts posted by the instructor and also replied to their classmates' commentaries.

Students' responses throughout the course reflected keen awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in the English language and their interest in making suggestions for improving course content and procedures. They commented that they learned new vocabulary and language structures from a variety of tasks and new idioms from their key-pals. Since many of the tasks were open ended in nature, students felt that they could work at their own pace and level of proficiency, but for many, the tasks took longer than the recommended time.

The tasks using technology were perceived as useful, interesting, and challenging. Most commented that the use of computers was a modern and effective way of performing tasks, and they enjoyed communicating with the instructor via e-mail because they could receive timely feedback. Students enjoyed key-pals as well because these provided them opportunities for meaningful communication, insights into a foreign culture (in this case, an American one), and opportunities to reflect on their own cultures. Combining face-to-face discussions with reflective writing or oral production activities gave them the courage to embrace fluency in the English language.

As discussed throughout this article, the Internet is dramatically altering how people read, write, and communicate. The Internet

is so vast and complex that learning how to incorporate it effectively into the language classroom can be quite challenging. The challenge seems even more daunting because of how quickly the Internet continues to change. For all these reasons, learning how to use the Internet for teaching has been compared to trying to get a drink of water from a gushing fire hydrant! Nevertheless, I believe that keeping some basic principles in mind makes the process simpler and clearer. These principles relate to androgogy rather than to methodology, and in that sense they should remain useful guides even as particular tools change.

Success in today's Internet-connected global society—whether in the business world, academia, or civic affairs—depends in large measure on the ability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures and to interpret information from varied cultural contexts. This goal, too, should be consciously integrated into the Internet-enhanced classroom.

Finally, the vast amount of information available on the Internet means that critical learning and literacy skills are more important than ever before. More than ever, reading now means reading between the lines. We, as educators, should help learners think critically at the micro-level, for example, by analyzing the perspectives and biases of individual World Wide Web sites. We should also help learners think critically at the macro-level by considering how new information technologies are helping reshape social, political, and economic contexts in a broader sense.

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