

A Case Study on the Use of the Internet and Electronic Mail for Exchange Purposes in the Foreign Language Classroom

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The recent surge in the use of computers and computer networks, especially at colleges and universities, has led to the availability in the foreign language classroom. It is now possible to use computers to send messages from any point on the globe to almost any other point. There are certain connections with the system of networks called the Internet that must first be made, but after that is accomplished, the steps that must be taken to communicate with any other Internet user are relatively simple. This opens availability of use opens up a whole range of possibilities for students and instructors alike to communicate across the barriers of physical space. A case study using students from Japan and the United States of America demonstrates how this system can be used for the purposes of language education and cultural exchange.

INTRODUCTION:

Since the inception of the first bulky computers that were a conglomeration of radio tubes and miles of wires and cables, educators have been utilizing them for a variety of purposes. The advent and proliferation of the personal computer have made it indeed rare to hear of any school in most of the world's industrialized societies that does not possess any number of these extraordinarily versatile implements. While the first computers were used primarily by scientists and mathematicians, their use has been diversified into every field of study that one can possibly imagine. Computer Aided Instruction (CAI), Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) and Management Information Systems (MIS) are three examples of terms that are now commonly used in educational institutions and are the direct product of the computer generation in our schools.

English education is no exception to the fields in which the usefulness of computers can be capitalized upon. There are particularly countless paths that may be pursued using computers in the language classroom. However, the feasibility of using computers as a

cross-cultural tool to communicate and practice language skills will be the focus of this paper. Through a case study in which Japanese college students were allowed the opportunity to communicate via computers and electronic mail with students at an American university, I will show that an efficient system can be established within a curriculum to allow interaction between students of varied academic disciplines.

Especially for the language teacher, social interaction is the of utmost importance. I will provide evidence that having students interact through the media of computers and electronic communication, educators can allow students with an ideal opportunity to acquire cultural information as well as to accumulate experience in real communication with native speakers of their target language.. Moreover, to provide confidence and a true sense of accomplishment using computers is an achievable goal.

A fundamental understanding of the Internet and electronic mail is necessary to fully comprehend the study that was conducted for this paper. However, I will not go into detail on the technical aspects pertaining to these systems any more than is necessary to comprehend the major points that I listed in the previous paragraph. Rather, I will focus on how the language instructor can manipulate these tools to accomplish the goals of communicating over the boundaries that politically and geographically separate the different countries of the world.

I will also discuss some of the advantages, disadvantages and problems with computer mediated communications that were manifested through this study.

THE INTERNET AND ELECTRONIC MAIL

What is the Internet? Simply stated, it is an interconnection of computer networks large and small from various locations all around the globe. What all of these individual networks share is the ability to communicate with each other through a common communications standard called a protocol. This system allows computers the ability to freely communicate with any other computer on the Internet, exchange files between one another and also have to ability to remotely log on to another computer network from anywhere in the system.

However, for the purpose of this paper, I am primarily concerned with the ability to communicate in the form of sending messages back and forth in the forum called electronic mail (commonly referred to as Email).

Each computer network on the Internet has a common address which is unique, and used to identify it among the other networks on the Internet. Each individual that subscribes to that network has a user name. Generally speaking, that user name would be the only identifier necessary to communicate with other users on the same network. However, when that user name is attached to the networks address, it becomes the person's Internet Address. This Internet Address is unique to that person. This makes it possible to identify that user from absolutely any other user anywhere on the entire Internet system.

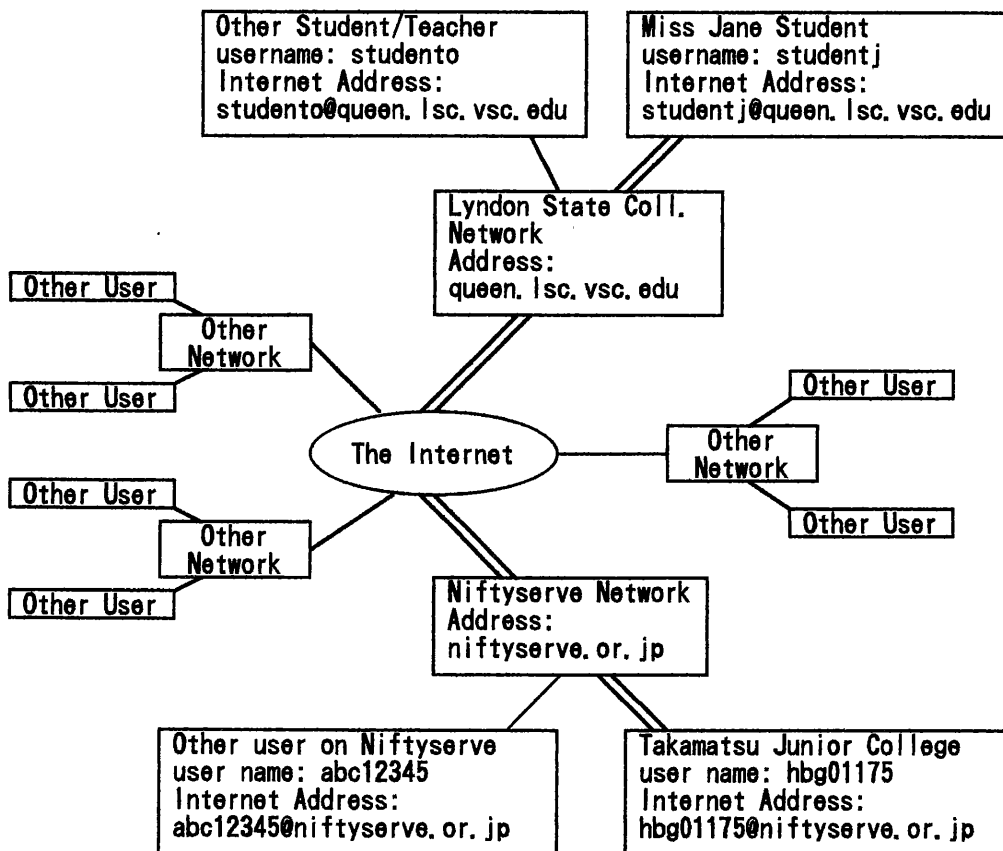


Diagram 1

Diagram 1 should clarify the way in which a representative at Takamatsu Junior College may correspond with another user on the Niftyserve Network or how the use of the Internet Address can facilitate communication with a student at Lyndon State College in the United States of America as well as any another user on any separate part of the Internet. However, Diagram 1 does not provide any clear concept as to the size or number of networks and users that exist on the Internet. According to Kirkpatrick et al. (1994), there are more than 100 countries that have at least some access to the Internet, over 39,000 networks and at least 5,000,000 users worldwide.

In order to send a message to someone else on the Internet system, you must have access to the Internet and a computer terminal to type a message. You must also know the Internet Address of the person to whom you wish to send a message.

Three of the most important factors that make Email such an attractive alternative to other forms of communication are:

1. Cost. Usually it will only cost the price of subscribing to an established network and possibly the price of a telephone call to that system . Since the number of educational institutions having their own computer networks connected to the Internet is increasing, this cost can be surprisingly very low for the individual user (and the institution as well).

2. Speed. The time for a message to travel from sender to receiver is generally quite rapid. While it can take much longer at times, it generally takes minutes or even seconds for a message to reach it's destination anywhere in the world . However, the message generally goes into an electronic mailbox somewhere on a disk within the network used by the individual user. It still requires that the receiver log on to the network and open the mailbox and read the message. Since there it is not necessary to stuff an envelope, add postage or travel from your office to any post office the entire process is much less time consuming than using more traditional methods of correspondence.

3. Simplicity. The whole process is relatively easy to figure out how to use. With modern computers and user-friendly programs there is no complex learning of computer languages or systems. With few exceptions, the process of sending and receiving Email

can be learned by most adults in only a few minutes. Also, messages sent and received can conveniently be stored on a computer's disk space.

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL INTERACTION

Foreign language educators must consider the truism that there is a real relationship between the target language they are attempting to teach and the culture of those people who use the target language as their means of communicating in daily life. As an instructor of a foreign language outside of the environment of the target language, a challenging task can be to find some means of tying the students to native speakers of that language, thereby giving students not only the opportunity of using the target language in a valid and natural environment, but also the experience of negotiating on the cultural terms of native speakers of the target language.

The reality of being situated outside of an area where the target language is spoken means that there can be little or no opportunity to give the students any substantial practice with the native speakers of the language. Of course, the use of well-written textbooks and other teaching materials can help to a certain extent. However, they cannot replace the interactive exchange of cultural information that can go on between participants in a dialogue.

THE STUDY

Over the period of 2 months, students from Takamatsu Junior College in Kagawa Prefecture in Japan and Lyndon State College in the State of Vermont in the United States of America(US), participated in a project where individuals and groups were matched to study the feasibility of using Internet Email to exchange information on language and culture.

The factors being studied included the following:

1. The process of seeking out and finding an appropriate school to communicate with.
2. Grouping the students.
3. Educating the students in the skills necessary to communicate with the computer.
4. Sending and receiving messages.

5. Reading and writing messages.
6. Evaluating the students' work.

The process of finding a school to communicate can often be challenging. Sometimes it is a very simple process. One might simply know an instructor at another institution that they can communicate with. Another method might be to simply write to schools directly.

If possible an attempt can be made to find a school that has one or more similarities with your own. There are various books that are published giving the details of colleges and universities. Several of these guides to colleges, including the famed series published by Peterson's, can be studied and the details of what a school's courses of instruction, size and buildup are can be ascertained. The problem with these guides is that they are usually only designed for high school seniors trying to decide where to go to college, no instructors attempting to build an Email project. In other words, information that you may wish you had, may not be there. For example, the only contact that college guides usually provide is the name of an admissions counselor (if that). Also, the process of going through these guides can be excessively lengthy. It is also important to note that such guides are often only available for colleges and universities in North America and more specifically the US.

In my search for a college, I took an approach that seemed appropriate to the project. I subscribed to an electronic mailing list that is run by St. Olaf University in Minnesota State in the US. Like other mailing lists that utilize Internet Email, I simply had to send my name, Email address and the word "subscribe" to the St. Olaf University list in the form of an Email message. As other parties send messages to St. Olaf stating their intention to establish relations in some form with other schools, the St. Olaf's computer is geared to automatically resend the same message to all of the other Email addresses of individuals or organizations subscribed to the list (including the Email address for Takamatsu Junior College).

After a few weeks of receiving anywhere from 10-20 message every day, I finally found a message from a school in Vermont State in the US. The only similarity between our college and Lyndon State College was the fact that we were located in a rural environment. At first, it was a concern that the difference in the academic majors (ours being Secretarial Studies and theirs being Psychology) would make the project less workable. But, overall, I feel that it had no bearing on the project whatsoever.

After reading the message from an instructor at Lyndon State College who had posted the message on St. Olaf's mailing list, I sent a personal Email message to her stating that I was interested in what it might take to set up an exchange between our two classes. I explained exactly what my students needs were and I soon received a message back from her stating the same about her students.

1. Takamatsu Junior College (TJC):

- A. Class of 40 Japanese Students studying English Conversation.
- B. Intermediate ability in English.
- C. Students are very eager to learn about American Culture

2. Lyndon State College (LSC):

- A. Seminar of 11 American students studying cross-cultural Psychology
- B. Eager to learn about psychological phenomena in cultures other than other than their own.

As soon as I discovered the goals of LSC, I first thought it may be appropriate to contact a professor who was doing research in a field that was related to psychology so that the students could have some common basis of understanding in communicating. However, upon further consideration of the matter, I thought it more appropriate for me to go on with my initial plan and have my students of English communicate with LSC's psychology students. My reasoning behind this: If the students have no previous knowledge of the their counterparts, they will have to use their communication skills to learn what they do not know. And, this was, in fact, the entire essence of the project.

The next step in the process would be to develop groups that would communicate together. The LSC group of students consisted of 11 people, while TJC students numbered 40. This first seemed like too big of a contrast in number. However, considering that the level of the TJC students were from upper-beginning to intermediate, I felt that if I placed the students in groups of three or four, not only would they better be able to work together and to solve the problems that they would have with the English, but since the group consciousness and cooperative activities are the norm in Japanese Education (Anderson, 104) the students could find security in the fact that they were not alone in completing this project. Beyond that, as a group activity, the students would have the collective responsibility of making certain that their tasks were completed.

Thus, each individual student at LSC was assigned a group of students from TJC. 7 of TJC's groups consisted of 4 students each with the remaining 4 groups being composed of 3 students. This makes a total of 11 groups that were matched equally with the 11 students at LSC.

If you look back at diagram 1, you will notice that Mr. John Student at LSC has his own individual Internet Email account. This means that he would only have to access his own personal mail box within LSC's computer network from any computer terminal that would be able to interface with it.

TJC, as stated before, has a different system. The school merely has one account that is shared by all of the faculty and staff and is part of a commercial Japanese network called Niftyserve. The students do not have direct access to the system. This means that all work related to the actual sending and receiving of messages had to be handled through myself as their instructor.

In order to facilitate communication between students at TJC and the students at LSC, I decided that the best way to handle the operation of sending messages would be by having the students use a word-processing program on any computer terminal on the TJC campus to write their messages. They would then copy the message onto a disk and give it to me. I would put the disk into my computer and copy the students' messages onto Niftyserve to be sent to LSC.

The first practical step that had to be taken after assigning the students to groups was to instruct them in the use of the computers. The best way to go about carrying a task of this nature, is to let the students have hands-on capabilities with the computers. For this reason, I decided to spend one full class period in the computer room. During this time, I had each individual sit with the other members of their group, all in front of one computer. I walked them through step-by-step from turning on the computer, to starting the word-processing program, to saving their work on a disk, to turning off the computers again. I had them format one disk for each group that would be used throughout the project.

Almost any word-processing program can be used in order to copy the text and send it in message form over the Internet. With this in mind, my considerations were to find a program that is not only easy to use, but is also accessible on most of the computers that are situated in various locations throughout the campus. The program that I chose to use is called RED.

In our first meeting in the computer room, I had the students write their first message. I had it consist of a self-introduction of each of their members as well as a questionnaire for the student who they would be communicating with. Since it was decided between myself and my counterpart instructor at LSC, Dr. Lori Werdenberg, that TJC students would initiate the exchange of messages, I decided to simply ask the students to spontaneously develop a minimal number of questions during that first meeting.

I was able to collect the disks from each group after that first class. I returned to my own computer terminal and took approximately 1 hour to check the students messages for clarity and send them all on their way. Within 24 hours I began to receive the first responses from students at LSC. Within 72 hours, all but 2 groups had received replies to their original messages. Since the students at LSC were sending the messages on their own and not going through their instructor, most of them sent them as soon as they had time to read them and compose a reply.

Because the students at TJC do not have direct access in their seminar rooms to read the messages if I simply transferred the received messages to disc, I gave the students a

printed copy of the correspondence from their individual LSC counterparts. Also, I set a deadline

of the next week for the second round of messages from them back to the LSC students. This time, they had their own questions to answer and I had them make up a new set of questions to ask. They all received at least one more message from their counterparts and some had received 2-3 more.

On my computer, I made a file for each group. The file consisted primarily of the same information that was on the disk that I would trade back and forth with the students after each mailing. I kept the messages sent by the groups from TJC as well as the messages sent to each respective group from the students at LSC in this file. I would check to make sure that the students understood the messages they received from LSC students by how they worded their replies to those messages. For example: If they answered the questions from the student they were corresponding with (or attempted to or otherwise commented on them) it was natural to assume that they understood. If I felt that they did not understand or left something unanswered, I confronted them either face-to-face or I left a message on the disk that I would hand back to them, on the matter. In the event that I noticed a group's neglect to answer a question or respond to a statement from an LSC student, I would send the message along and inform the students to reply in their next message. This was simply an effort to make sure that all messages were sent in a timely manner. On the final message, if there were any problems, I called students in to make corrections before I sent their correspondence out. In the case of mistakes in their English, I would fix it only if it was a minor mistake such as spelling. Otherwise, again I would confront the students with the problem.

I had several opportunities to observe the students techniques in writing. I gave them part of the class time to do this. I let the students decide how they wanted to format their messages. On the third and final formal message, I gave the students no special instructions on the contents. After the first message 9 out of 11 groups wrote messages in parts. This means that their group message consisted of each member writing an individual message. Of the other two groups, in one I suspected that only one member of

their group was writing the message. I quizzed them to find that this was indeed the case. I also suspected the other group of the same. But, I learned that they were in fact writing a group message but all of the member were helping in providing the details of its content I found this acceptable to the project and its outcome.

Evaluating the groups was on ongoing process. I was in the position not only to read the messages of the students from TJC, but I also read the messages from all of the individual students at LSC. As I stated earlier, I was careful to make necessary comments to my students as I saw fit. From the LSC side, I noticed no remarkable evidence to prove that the English used by students from TJC was not understood. For TJC students, there were a minimal number of circumstances where slang or difficult grammar structure was used and the students had problems deriving any meaning from it. 37 of the students responded that

they understood at least 75% of the content of the messages they received from LSC and 50% said the they understood are or almost all of the total contents from all of the messages they received and read.

DISCUSSION

I will discuss my findings as they relater to the points I presented in my list of factors being studied. In the process, I will provide the results of a survey that I conducted of the 40 students from TJC who participated in the project with LSC.

To begin with, Overall I feel that the project was a great success. Not only was an appropriate school found to communicate with, but our major goal of providing genuine communication between students of English at TJC and a college in an English-speaking country was attained. When I asked the students about their overall impression of the project, their answers were:

22	13	5	0	0	---Number of Students
Great	X	Average	X	I hated it	---Ranking

One of the problems that we had, and the reason that some of the students seemed to think the project was less successful than others was the fact that not every group received

letters from LSC. Two of the groups, during the time period of the project received no letters and one group never did receive any correspondence.

This is one of the realities that is going to happen with a project like this. However, this is the reason that at TJC we 1) had the students participate in groups and 2) made it a requirement for all the students to participate and send messages. Another factor was that students were required to hand their disks directly to me as the instructor. This being the case, all of the students turned in their disks without a single group ever being late and missing a deadline.

Of this list of reasons, it is obvious that assigning the students in groups of three or four was an important factor. The student felt so too when asked if they felt it was better to do this kind of a project as a group:

14	20	5	1	1	---Number of Students
Definitely	X	It doesn't	X	Alone is	---Ranking
YES		matter		better	

This reflects the fact that students worked together to make the project a success. When combined with observations that showed all the members from 9 out of 11 groups writing individual letters anyway. It is easy to ascertain that students receive support from the group environment in other ways that make them comfortable enough to cooperate but still work at a personal level to accomplish this communicative task.

When it comes to sending messages, that process was handled entirely by myself as the instructor. I found that as long as the classroom of 40 students was divided into 11 messages being sent, it was not as difficult as it might have been. However, I did have some difficulty with finding time to send all the messages at one sitting after replies from the first round of messages came back. Because of other factors such as my busy schedule as an instructor, I could not successfully transmit all of the messages in one sitting. I found myself on every occasion sending messages over the course of 2 days after the first round.

Receiving messages was an even more arduous task. Since I received messages very sporadically and my schedule found me not always in the position to deliver those

messages in a timely manner. Also, on one occasion I misplaced a message and had to have it resent from LSC.

An obvious way to avoid problems with sending and receiving messages is to allow the students to have direct access to computers with connections to the Internet. This would also work to speed up the process. The disadvantage of having the students send and receive their own messages might be that the instructor would not have the ability to check the students' work. However, this too could be remedied by requiring students simply provide the instructor with copies of all correspondence. Apparently, this is the method that was used by Dr. Werdenberg for her evaluations.

Evaluating the students' work was not as difficult a process as I initially imagined that it would be. Since all of the information for one group was stored within one file on my computer, it was relatively easy to look through students' messages sent and the previous message received to find out if there was actual communication going on. An example would be noticing the following connection between messages:

TJC student group question:

What do you Americans think of Japanese Students?

LSC student response

I think that Japanese students are very smart. I also believe that Japanese are very hard workers and they take their work very seriously.

I am interested in what your opinion of American students is also.

TJC student response.

Americans are very free to decide what to do. . . .

This kind of an analysis between three different messages was easy to make when there was a direct answer to questions. However, this process of checking has the potential to be a very cumbersome responsibility. Again, that was a direct advantage of placing 40 students into 11 separate groups.

33 of the 40 students wrote mostly positively in the additional comments section on the survey to attest to the fact that by finding answers to their questions and experiencing communication they felt was a very valuable experience for them. It is obvious also from their comments that their confidence levels increased and they were overjoyed at the fact that they were actually able to communicate in English, the foreign language they have been studying for at least 8 years and many of them longer than that.

The following are random examples of students' comments:

"This was a very special experience, the chance to learn about American customs and culture. It's also great to feel that I actually made friends with an American.

"It was the first time for me to use the computer and to communicate with foreigners. When the response came to my letter, I was overjoyed. I would like to continue such a project."

". . . it was also a good experience for us Japanese to explain Japanese thing to foreigners. For example, I had to explain what Ozoni was to a foreigner. I think I learned a lot from that."

Of the 7 students that had mostly negative comments:

"It was difficult for us to find time as a group to work. . . It was difficult to understand all of the English in the messages, but it was good that I could at least communicate and learn a little bit about another culture."

"It was really too bad that I our group did not receive any message from our partner. But, we were still able to share some of the letters to our friends in the other groups."

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to look at the practicability of using computers and specifically the Internet and electronic mail to provide students of a foreign language with the opportunity to communicate with native speakers of the target language. In doing so, I outlined a project where students from Takamatsu Junior College in Japan were linked together with students at a Lyndon State College in the United States of America for a relatively short period of time.

I detailed the Internet electronic mail system and I denoted how that system can be exploited to the extent that users who can access it from any point on the globe can communicate in a speedy, simple and economical way.

Particularly since educators of foreign languages are constantly looking for ways to provide real communication with native speakers of their target language, I assert that using the computer as a tool, this goal can be accomplished.

Through detailing the specifics of the entire process of starting an exchange using the Internet Email system, and within the constructs of a course in English Conversation, I proved that not only can we provide a chance at real communication, but maybe most importantly, we can give the students a sense of accomplishment. Seeing the boost in self-esteem of the students can also be noted as the most rewarding aspect for me as their instructor. I found that not only did they learn something about English and American Culture through the project, but they also immensely enjoyed themselves doing it. One student said it best in her comments about the project, "I couldn't believe it when our group received a message from America. Also, our partner in America could actually understand our questions and gave us vivid answers. It was a great feeling to be able to read a real message to me that I could actually understand. Not only that, but we were able to make friends and explain about things Japanese to our partner in America. We finished only wishing that we could continue our English correspondence with our new American friend."

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