1-1-2010

E-mail and portfolio assessment as ways for language and culture learning - exchange between Australia and Taiwan

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IASK INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
TEACHING AND LEARNING 2010

Seville, SPAIN
November 29th – December 1st 2010

Organised by
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FORWARD

These proceedings contain the papers presented at the International Association for Scientific Knowledge (IASK) International Conference Teaching and Learning 2010, November 29 to December 1, 2010.

The initial call for papers occurred in January 2010. Papers were submitted from more than 30 different countries from all continents. To guarantee a high standard for the accepted submissions, each submission was anonymously reviewed by at least two scientific committee members. This book of proceedings contains the 98 accepted papers and posters presented at the conference. We thank all members of the Scientific Committee (65 leading researchers in their respective fields) for their hard work in reviewing and selecting the papers appearing in this Proceedings book.

The IASK International Conference Teaching and Learning 2010 addresses many of the technical, pedagogical, scientific and policy issues faced by educators, researchers and students. Subjects to be emphasized during the Conference include, amongst others, teaching and learning methodologies and the use of information and communication technologies. The Conference also includes plenary sessions. We are very grateful to our distinguished keynote speakers: Professor Jan Herrington, from Murdoch University, Australia; Professor Karen Huffman, from Palomar College, San Marcos, California, and Professor Maja Pivec, from FH JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences, Graz, Austria. It is a great honour to have them here with us.

We wish to express our sincere appreciation to all authors who have submitted papers to this conference and to all members of our organising committee. Last, but not least, we hope that delegates will enjoy the scientific program, the conference sites, the city of Seville and the social events scheduled during the Conference. We look forward to seeing you again at the next IASK Conference.

Welcome to Seville!

November 2010.

Guillermo Pérez-Bustamante, University of Oviedo, Spain
Kongkrit Phusavat, Kasetsart University, Thailand
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E-mail and Portfolio Assessment as ways for Language and Culture Learning – Exchange between Australia and Taiwan

Yu-Ju Chang, Su-Lien Chen

Abstract – The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of e-mail and portfolio assessment on language and culture learning for undergraduates. 42 students from Taiwan and 59 students from Australia served as the subjects of the study, with 27 students in the American cultural group and the other as the control group. The subjects were required to respond to "Language Learning Inventory", "Culture Learning Inventory" and "Portfolio Assessment Inventory". The method of this study adopted ANOVA to test the effects on language learning, culture learning, and portfolio assessment. Besides, on the qualitative research, the researcher collected students' responses as data analyses resources to analyze the learning process. According to the research results, this study offered some suggestions for related research.

Index Terms — culture learning, e-mail, language learning, portfolio assessment

1 INTRODUCTION

In Taiwan, elementary school students have started taking their formal English classes in the third grade, in particular Asian languages, while English learning has become a popular movement in Taiwan.

In Australia, the Rudd Government considers learning languages other than English, in particular Asian languages, very important to Australia’s future security and prosperity in an increasingly globalised world [1]. As a result, the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSPPP) aims to master Asian languages. The Minister, Kevin Rudd, speaks fluent Mandarin that sets a good example for language learning.

No matter learning English in Taiwan or learning Mandarin in Australia, there are two problems: First, students seldom have a chance to use target language to communicate with others in real life. Wang [2] pointed out that the most frustrating barrier to learning a foreign language is the fact that learners rarely have a chance to use the target language in a communicative, immediate situation. Second, regarding the relation between language and culture, many researchers have suggested that language and culture are inextricably linked, and language teaching should be directed toward enhancing learners' cultural awareness [3].

I teach in Taiwan at National Chi-Nan University, and have a chance to do Post Doc at University of Wollongong, Australia. I am Su-Lien who teaches mandarin there. I have a class called "Australian culture and education". We both have the same problems mentioned before. As a result, we decided to let our students to e-pals— to communicate with each other in English/Mandarin and introduce culture to e-pals. Besides e-pals, we used portfolio assessment which could support the process of improvement in language arts because it could provide comprehensive and continuous feedback that teachers could organize, plan, and evaluate their instructions for the individual needs of a student, and it can also engage students in the assessment process that will enhance their learning [4].

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Advantages of Using E-mail as a Language and Culture Tool in the Classroom

Since the early 1980s, language teaching has changed the focus of instruction from teaching of discrete grammatical structures to the fostering of communication ability. In expression has valued over recitation of memorized dialogue and negotiation of meaning has been regarded as being more important thanstructural drill practice. Comprehension has been emphasized more, and "providing comprehensive input has become a common pedagogical imperative" [5].

"Foreign language educators have long accepted intellectually that language and culture are inseparable". Seelye [6] thought that without a cultural context a word has no meaning. Brooks [7] advises that linguistic characteristics should be viewed as cultural elements and that culture learning requires the vehicle of language. Besides, "language teachers have come to understand culture as a proper domain of instruction in language classes" [6], [7], [8].

"Culture is inseparable from language and therefore must be included in language study" [9]. Despite the agreement of the union of language and culture, teaching culture is still a challenge for teachers. First, "teachers feel inadequate in their knowledge of the foreign culture". They feel a "pressure to dispense culturally accurate information, but they have only limited experiences in the foreign culture. Second, teachers may not have been adequately trained in the teaching of culture. Cultural awareness in language learning (CALL) has come of age" and help people to learn language and culture [10]. Among all the CALL activities, e-mail communication has been gaining more and more favor among language teachers [11]. Warchauer [11] "provides three main reasons for using e-mail in the classroom: (a) it provides students an excellent opportunity for real and natural communication; (b) it empowers students to learn independently; and (c) it enriches the experiences of teachers". Also, e-mail can put language learners together with native speakers, or other language students, across a city or across the world. This is especially meaningful and beneficial for language learners, because the real power of learning through e-mail and computer networking lies not merely in more convenient distribution of information but in helping build socially cohesive communication in the classroom. In addition, paired with native-speaker e-pals, students can benefit from their partners' writing, which sets up a good scaffolding setting to promote language learning [12], [13]. Many researchers have discovered that through e-mail discussion activities, every student's opinion is heard, and this is something that does not always occur during oral discussions, especially when some students are timid or shy (Beliso, 1996; Chiu, 1998; Kroonenberg, 1994/1995; Liao, 1998).

2.2 Research on Using E-mail Exchanges in Improving Students' Cultural Awareness

Fritter [14] reported that most of his ESL students mentioned intercultural interaction as a major benefit of learning to write online during the interviews. Furthermore, his students revealed that intercultural interaction could educate themselves and others about people and cultures outside of their native surroundings, as a way of preventing the perpetuation of stereotypes. Feddorhof[15] conducted cross-cultural e-mail exchange projects for her ESL college students, and reported that having direct contact with overseas e-pals allowed her students to discover different cultural settings in a natural way, and that being confronted with aspects of another society enabled them to go beyond the basics of comparisons and differences. Furthermore, the e-mail exchange also created an opportunity for them to examine their own culture in the light of a broadened perspective. Liaw and Johnson [16] utilizing e-mail writing as a method to enrich their students' cross-cultural experience. The participants 'had noted that lacking linguistic proficiency is not the sole reason for miscommunication. Cultural acquisition and the awareness of cultural subtleties when communicating with native speakers of English are just as important as linguistic competence, if not more important. Some preexisting stereotypes of American people and culture were challenged and a more realistic image of the USA culture and people emerged. The students were surprised by the similarities between the two countries but also by the deviations from previously held beliefs. They pointed out, "Although there is no substitute for actual experience of immersing oneself in target culture, cross-cultural e-mail correspondence sensitizes the participants to cultural differences and served as a learning experience for better cross-cultural understanding" [16]. Wang [2] also conducted a computer-mediated cross-cultural exchange project to investigate Taiwan college participants' cultural awareness. She reported that the students held a positive attitude toward computer-mediated cultural exchanges, and that their cultural awareness was enhanced through communicating with Japanese and American students.

The related research has showed that e-mail is a good tool to improve language and understand culture. However, the studies are just one language and one culture exchange. In this study, we will try to use English/Mandarin to
exchange Australian and Chinese culture.

2.3 Definition of Portfolio Assessment

Vavrus [17] defined portfolio as "a systematic and organized collection of evidence used by the teacher and student to monitor growth of the student's knowledge, skills and attitudes". On the other way, Yancey [16] stated seven defining features of a portfolio:

(1) It is a collection of work.
(2) It is a collection of work.
(3) It includes reflection.
(4) It presupposes development.
(5) It documents diversity.
(6) It is communicative.
(7) It is evaluative.

The seven features show a clearer picture of what portfolio assessment is. Portfolio assessment collects diversified works, documents show that the growth of students, invites the reflections from students, and fosters communication between teacher and students.

3 METHOD

3.1 Participants

Participants are 42 students in Taiwain and 39 students in Australia. The former students are from Comparative Education Department, Chi Nan University, and the latter are from Mandarin / Language Centre, University of Wollongong. We asked students to write e-mails at least twice in a semester. They could communicate more than that if they are interested in each other's culture and language. Therefore, we defined them or more than three times as experimental group and below that as control group.

3.2 Instruments

Language Learning Inventory. This is a self-report Likert scale (1=never to 4=often) questionnaire consists of 16 items. After the process of item analysis, internal consistency assessed by Cronbach's α was .86.

Culture Learning Inventory. This is a self-report Likert scale (1=never to 4=often) questionnaire consists of 14 items. After the process of item analysis, internal consistency assessed by Cronbach's α was .85.

Portfolio Assessment Inventory. This is a self-report Likert scale (1=never to 4=often) questionnaire consists of 16 items. After the process of item analysis, internal consistency assessed by Cronbach's α was .88.

3.3 Design

This study used experimental design by students selected for the experimental group and a control group, and before and after the experiment measured pretest and posttest. The experimental design presented in Table 1. It aimed at comparing the experimental treatment effect of experimental group with control group, in order to analyze the differences in culture.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A: Contact with e-pals over three times by e-mails  
B: No contact or below twice with e-pals  
Y1: Y2: Pretest, including "Culture Learning Inventory" and "Language Learning Inventory".  
Y3, Y4: Posttest, including "Culture Learning Inventory" and "Language Learning Inventory".

3.4 Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant difference between experimental group and control group on "Language Learning Inventory".

H2: There is a significant difference between experimental group and control group on "Culture Learning Inventory".

H3: There is a significant difference between experimental group and control group on "Portfolio Assessment Inventory".

### 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The influence of e-pals communication on language learning

On account of the differences of language learning between experimental group and control group in the beginning, we used ANCOVA to analyze posttest scores while their pretest scores as a covariance. Table 4 presented the means and standard deviations and adjusted means of the two groups.

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Scores in Culture Learning Inventory</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01

From Table 4, there was significant difference (F=4.73, p<.01) between experimental group and control group on Language Learning Inventory posttest. It meant after different times to communicate with e-pals, experimental group scored higher than control group.

4.2 The influence of e-pals communication on culture learning

On account of the differences of culture learning between experimental group and control group in the beginning, we used ANCOVA to analyze posttest scores while their pretest scores as a covariance. Table 4 presented the means and standard deviations and adjusted means of the two groups.

### Table 4

The Scores in Culture Learning Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-test M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01

From Table 5, there was significant difference between experimental group and control group on Culture Learning Inventory posttest. It meant after different times to communicate with e-pals, experimental group scored higher than control group.
We just have e-mails twice, included introducing self and some things happened at school. I want to share more with him. (Students H, June 30)

5 DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study resulted in three main findings that (a) the effect of language learning on experimental group is better than is better than control group; (b) the effect of culture learning on experimental group is better than is better than control group; (c) the effect of portfolio assessment on experimental group is better than is better than control group.

Being e-pals is a fresh learning way for students. However, some students don’t have much time to communicate with their e-pals because of lacking time or enthusiasm. Portfolio assessment helps students to reflect their learning which helps students to learn language and culture.

Because e-mail is an asynchronous way to communicate, some delay might happen. For further study, the researchers could use some synchronous way to let students strengthen their communicate ways.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by a grant from National Science Council, Taiwan.

REFERENCES