

Developing Cultural Awareness through Email

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Reference Data:

Chartrand, R. (2005).
Developing Cultural
Awareness through Email.
In K. Bradford-Watts, C.
Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson
(Eds.) *JALT2004 Conference
Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

A study was undertaken over a four-month period to assess the level of cultural awareness of third year junior high school students in Japan. Contact was initiated with two high schools in the United States of America with the assistance of the ePals website. Qualitative and quantitative assessments were performed before and after the email exchanges. In this report I will demonstrate that the students' responses to the qualitative segment of the assessment showed a positive attitude towards the email exchange and a majority of the students replied that they had learned something about American culture. However, it was difficult to assess the students' cultural awareness quantitatively, which lead to inconclusive results. I will present the data that was collected and discuss the results from the viewpoint of cultural awareness.

日本の中学三年生の文化認識度がアメリカの学生とのEメール交換によって、どのように変わるか4ヶ月間調査しました。ePalsウェブサイトで、アメリカの2つの高校と連絡をとり、Eメール交換の前後に定性、定量査定を行いました。定性査定では生徒の反応はよく、Eメール交換に積極的な態度を示し、多数の生徒がアメリカ文化について何かを学んだと回答しています。しかしながら、生徒の文化認識度を定量査定するのは難しく、結論に至りませんでした。この論文では、集計したデータを紹介し、文化認識の観点からその結果について論じます。

This study was undertaken as part of a course to fulfill the requirements for a Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. I completed this program on-site in the United States over two summers and by on-going instruction via the Internet during the interim year teaching practicum. The course, "Intercultural Communication for Language Teachers," is made up of three components: a classroom component in the first summer, a contextualized teaching project to be completed in the interim year and additional coursework in the second summer. The study mentioned here was completed in the interim year.

The Students

Twenty male students of fourteen or fifteen years old were selected for this study from Nakamura Gakuen Sanyo Junior High School in Fukuoka, Japan. This boys' school has an intensive English curriculum. It includes ten class hours (fifty minutes) a week of English lessons in the first year and eight class hours a week in the second and third years. I had been their primary English teacher for those three years; therefore I was very familiar with the students. Moreover, at the end of their first year, all of the students went on a three-week English study homestay program in

Auckland, New Zealand. Therefore, by the time they began their email exchange program, they had already had an intercultural experience in an English speaking country and were somewhat familiar with American culture due to their exposure to movies, sports, TV, books, music, food, and educational experiences.

Twenty students from St. Augustine Catholic School in Belleville, Illinois and twenty students from Liverpool High School in Liverpool, New York participated in this email exchange. The correspondence was initiated in February, 2003 and the last email was exchanged in May, 2003. One of the consequences of this timeline, however, is that it coincided with the war in Iraq, which began in March, 2003. Thus, several of the Japanese students' comments in their writing reflect this particular event and their impressions were noted in the qualitative assessments. Originally I had planned to continue the exchange with St. Augustine School for three months, but it became known to us that soon after the war started, a large number of the parents of those children had gone to Iraq to fight in the war. The school was near a military base and some of the children began writing that their father or mother had left home to fight in the war. Due to the emotional and moral issues that those students faced, it became apparent that they were having difficulties in keeping the email exchange going and, therefore, the teacher in charge of the group suspended the program after one month. I then quickly began the search for another school on the ePals website and was fortunate to find a willing colleague at Liverpool High School, so the email exchange was resumed and lasted approximately two months.

The students from Liverpool High School were fifteen or sixteen years old, half were male and half were female. They were part of a social studies class. The teacher in charge of the class was teaching about Japan and she wanted the students to communicate directly with Japanese students to enhance their learning experience. This particular matching worked relatively well because there was a strong commitment on the part of the teacher to encourage the students to write and the results led to the present study.

Background

According to Kramsch (1998), culture can be defined as “membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing and acting” (p.127). Moreover, a discourse community can be defined as “a social group that has a broadly agreed set of common public goals and purposes in its use of spoken and written language” (p.127).

Cultural awareness can thus be defined as having knowledge about a particular discourse community. More specifically, in this study I have further attempted to define cultural awareness as having some knowledge in three areas of understanding:

1. Geography and Society
2. Language
3. Social Behavior

Thus, when trying to quantify cultural awareness, I wanted to ask specific questions that had precise answers

(see Appendix 1). The risk in doing this was clear, however. The students may not know the answers to the multiple-choice questions and there is a certain amount of guessing and luck involved in choosing the right answer. Also, was I really assessing the students' cultural awareness if I asked questions about the capital city of a country, the name of a mountain or if people kiss each other on the cheek? I had some difficulty in phrasing the quantitative questions and was not confident of the results that would be revealed. Therefore, I also handed out a qualitative assessment with open-ended questions that would allow more personalized responses to the information I was seeking (see Appendix 2). Both forms of assessment were handed out to the Japanese and American students, before and after the email exchange. The results of the Japanese students are discussed here. The results of the American students will be discussed in a later paper.

The Japanese students had access to email twice a week in a computer classroom that was connected to the Internet. At the beginning of the program, the students were given time during the class to compose their letters, but gradually this task was assigned as homework. Some of the students continued their correspondence from home while others used the computer facilities after school. In each case the letters were monitored by the teachers for appropriate content and use. This was a critical decision due to the age of the students and the gender of some of the American students. I was especially worried about suitable content from the Japanese boys. One of the key features of the ePals website is that it allows the teachers to maintain control over the students' email accounts and to view the email before it is

allowed to be sent. Incoming mail was also monitored before the Japanese students could read their emails. The process was simple and did not require too much time to manage. It also enabled the teachers to maintain a database of all the emails, which was useful for teaching purposes and for promoting discussion in the class. All of the students were made aware that their emails would be monitored, and so there were only a few minor infractions.

At the beginning of the program, I taught the Japanese students some basic letter writing skills and we tried writing some sample letters with pencil and paper. One of the more difficult tasks was to get the students to write something, in some cases, anything. Therefore, some guided writing was necessary. Parts of letters were written out and the students could fill in the blanks with their own information. This was especially useful in the early stages of writing. Later, towards the end of the correspondence, this was not so important, but I did assign some specific themes after the students told me that they did not know what they should write about.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative assessment had three parts. The first part asked the names of places and the name of the President of the USA. The second part asked some questions about the usage of American English. The third part asked about what American people do at certain times. There are fifteen questions and all answers are multiple choice. The assessment questions can be seen in Table 1 and the multiple choice answers have been included in Appendix 1. The results were as follows:

Table 1. Quantitative questions.

What is the capital city of the USA?
Name one state on the east coast of the USA.
Name one state on the west coast of the USA.
Which of these is a famous river in the USA?
Who is the President of the USA?
What do Americans say instead of “How do you do?”
What do you say after someone says “Thank you.”
What is the greeting that people say at Christmas time in America?
The expression, “How’s it going?” means:
The expression “Freeze!” means;
How do most people greet each other at the office?
What do many people do at Thanksgiving?
Which of the following is true of most Americans?
What do most people like to do in their free time?
What is the most popular sport in the United States?

Table 2. Geography and Society (Results %) n=20

Before Email Japanese Students	62%
After Email Japanese Students	58%

Table 3. Language (Results %) n=20

Before Email Japanese Students	54%
After Email Japanese Students	48%

Table 4. Social Behavior (Results %) n=20

Before Email Japanese Students	54%
After Email Japanese Students	52%

As can be seen from Tables 2, 3 and 4, the results after the email are slightly lower than before the email correspondence. The data shows an actual numerical decrease in the students’ awareness in the three sections of geography, language, and social behavior. This was a surprising fact since I could not imagine that this exchange actually decreased their learning. Instead, I will provide a possible reason for these results.

The quantitative questions were multiple-choice questions with five possible answers. The students were assessed first in February and then in May. This did not give enough time for the students to actually learn about the questions that were asked on the assessment. Perhaps the questions were not pertinent to the email they were doing and so there is no increase in learning in that narrow definition. So, why were the scores lower the second time? The students were given the second assessment after they had had a relatively busy week. Also, they said that they had written this assessment earlier and were not interested in doing it again. It is possible that a lack of a positive attitude in answering the questions contributed to a lower assessment. In fact, I looked at some of the answers and it appeared to me that some of the students had answered the questions without much effort. However, these results are inconclusive.

Qualitative Results

The qualitative analysis, however, shows different results as can be seen in Tables 5 and 6. When asked if they had learned anything, an overwhelming majority of the students (17 out of 18) replied they had learned something about a particular aspect of American culture (See Table 6 – Question 3 “What did you learn?”). Also, 13 out of 18 students thought that the email exchange was a good experience for them. Moreover, after talking with the students, they said that they had wanted to have more time to write to their keypals and would have liked to continue for about one year.

Although this was a short project, the students had to change keypals after one month, so they corresponded with two separate students. They would have preferred writing to one student for several months. This positive feedback allows me to believe that most students improved in terms of their cultural awareness and were motivated to continue this type of activity.

Table 5. Results of Qualitative Assessment. (Answers are in order of frequency.)

1. What do you think of American people?	They are big.
	They are cheerful.
	They are aggressive.
2. Would you like to have an American friend?	Yes (to learn English)
	No (I can't communicate in English.)

3. Would you like to go to the USA?	Yes (Seattle, New York, LA)
	No (Too dangerous)
4. What do you think of the USA?	Arrogant (Because of the war with Iraq)
	Big and strong (geographical size and military power)
	Nice (fun)

Table 6. Results of Feedback. (Answers are in order of frequency.)

What did you think of the email exchange?	It was a good experience.	72%
	It was not fun because English is difficult.	28%
Would you like to do it again?	Yes. (To make new friends, to improve English.)	44%
	No. (English is too difficult, not enough time.)	56%
What did you learn?	I learned about American lifestyles and hobbies	44%
	I learned a little English.	22%
	I learned that I can't communicate in English.	11%
	I learned about American culture	11%
	I learned about sports	1%
	I did not learn anything	1%

Other comments...	I would like to send an email to other countries	*
	I wanted to have more free time to write	*
	I wanted to write to someone with similar interests	*
	I want to exchange email with girls	*
	It was more fun than I thought	
	I got to know about school life in the USA	
	It was not fun	

Note: * Denotes multiple answers.

Conclusion

The Japanese students learned about the culture of American students. They learned about TV, movies, food, school life, family life, sports, and hobbies. There was an honest exchange of information and students had a positive attitude about learning from their counterparts.

As a direct result of the email project, I have taken a greater interest in what my students are interested in. I am paying more attention to the kind of music or movies my students are experiencing, and we are sharing more cultural information than before the email exchange started.

Email correspondence requires the active participation of the instructor as well as the students. All the participants need to know a specific timeframe that should be adhered

to in order for the project to go smoothly. In the initial stages of the email project, the students felt a little *isolated* because they did not know who the American students were. The participants in the email exchange need to know that their lack of response can cause a lot of anxiety to the other members of the group. Therefore, a minimum amount of time between each correspondence should be discussed before embarking on a project like this one.

The Japanese students learned that their culture is not really different from that of their counterparts in the US. More than a few students have told me that students in America and Japan have very similar cultures. One of the recurring subjects was food. Many Japanese students are familiar with and enjoy American food, such as hamburgers and pizza. American students, however, did not seem interested in trying Japanese food like sushi and sashimi.

The students seem to have developed their cultural awareness by taking an interest in other students of a similar age in a different country. The Japanese students wrote email to students in the United States of America and developed a bond with their counterparts. By having a personal and direct contact with other people their own age in another country, the learning became very real for them and grew into a positive experience.

The quantitative analysis was inconclusive and it remains unclear if the students increased their level of cultural awareness. Further research is necessary to understand how students gain cultural awareness and what facilitates this understanding by use of email exchanges. How is cultural awareness defined? Do the students increase their awareness simply by learning cultural facts? It could be

argued that some cultural awareness is gained by acquiring particular knowledge of another culture. Do the students need a more intensive experience, such as a homestay visit, to increase their cultural awareness? There is no doubt that the experience of visiting a foreign country would be more encompassing than an email exchange.

It is possible that a better understanding of *cultural awareness* could be achieved through defining a wider range of parameters and asking more thorough questions. Nonetheless, this study has reinforced my belief that an email exchange among students of different countries contributes positively to their education and provides a cultural context to their language learning.

References

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Appendix 1

Quantitative Assessment

Part 1: Geography and Society

What is the capital city of the USA?

- a. New York
- b. Seattle
- c. Washington, D.C.
- d. Chicago
- e. Los Angeles

Name one state on the east coast of the USA.

- a. Arizona
- b. Montana
- c. Washington
- d. California
- e. Florida

Name one state on the west coast of the USA.

- a. Oregon
- b. Illinois
- c. Colorado
- d. Massachusetts
- e. Maine

Which of these is a famous river in the USA?

- a. Amazon
- b. Mississippi
- c. Nile
- d. Seine
- e. Rio Grande

Who is the President of the USA?

- a. Tony Blair
- b. George W. Bush
- c. Jean Chretien
- d. Jacques Chirac
- e. Michael Douglas

Part 2: Language

What do Americans say instead of “How do you do?”

- a. Who are you?
- b. How are you?
- c. What are you?
- d. Where are you?
- e. Why are you?

What do you say after someone says “Thank you.”

- a. Nothing.
- b. I am happy.
- c. Never mind,
- d. You’re welcome.
- e. Don’t mind.

What is the greeting that people say at Christmas time in America?

- a. Happy Christmas
- b. Joyful Christmas
- c. Merry Christmas
- d. Content Christmas
- e. Fantastic Christmas

The expression, “How’s it going?” means:

- a. Where are you going?
- b. How are you going there?
- c. When are you going?
- d. How are you?
- e. Where are you?

The expression “Freeze!” means;

- a. It is cold.
- b. Would you like some ice cream?
- c. Let’s play a game.
- d. My computer is broken.
- e. Put your hands up and don’t move.

Part 3: Social behavior

How do most people greet each other at the office?

- a. The bow.
- b. They kiss each other on the mouth.
- c. They pat each other on the back.
- d. They shake hands.
- e. They applaud.

What do many people do at Thanksgiving?

- a. They go to a club and party all night.
- b. They visit their relatives and eat turkey.
- c. They exchange presents.
- d. They sing songs.
- e. They go shopping.

Which of the following is true of most Americans?

- a. They take off their shoes when they go into their homes.
- b. They are vegetarians.
- c. They are competitive.
- d. Each American can speak several languages.
- e. They are wealthy.

What do most people like to do in their free time?

- a. They like to watch TV.
- b. They like to work.
- c. They like to study.
- d. They like to clean the house.
- e. They like to cook.

What is the most popular sport in the United States?

- a. Soccer
- b. Cricket
- c. Rugby
- d. Ice Hockey
- e. Baseball

Appendix 2

Qualitative Assessment

- 1. What do you think of American people?
- 2. Would you like to have an American friend? Why or why not?
- 3. Would you like to go to the USA one day? If yes, where? If no, why not?
- 4. What do you think of the United States as a country?
- 5. Where does your knowledge of the United States come from?

Feedback

- 2. What did you think of the email exchange?
- 3. Would you like to do it again?
- 4. What did you learn?
- 5. Other comments?

Appendix 3. Sample Email Letters

Email exchange 1

Date: Thu, 06 Mar 2003

From: Masahiro

To: John M

Subject: Hello

I'm fine. My name is Masahiro. Masa - calling - my favorite sport likes baseball, soccer, and a basketball. Do you play very well? Japan is a very good place. Is the United States promising? I am not keeping the pet. How old are you? Now, although war is likely to break out, do your best.

From: John M

To: Masahiro

Date: 2003-Mar-08

Subject: Re: Hello

Hello, Thank you for mail. The United States is very promising. It is a very wonderful place. I have a lot of friends and I play a lot of sports. I play the same sports you do and even more. I am going to turn 13 soon.

Email exchange 2

Date: Thu, 06 Mar 2003

From: Kazumichi

To: alisonca2

Subject: hello!!

Hello! My name is a Rock'n star a Kazumichi. I'm in the eighth grade. I live in Fukuoka city. I love soccer, music and my sister. Her name is Fumina. It is China where a couple is allowed to have only one child. Japan is great. What do you think of this problem? I don't like dogs because they smell bad. I have NO pets. Do you like Limp Bizkit and Eminem ?

Good bye (=SAYONARA)

Kazumichi

Date: Thu, 08 Mar 2003

From: alisonca2

To: Kazumichi

Subject: Re: hello!!

Hello what do you mean your name is a Rock n' Star? I also have a sister and two brothers. I love soccer, basketball, volleyball, and horseback riding. I also like to read and go to school. How old are you? I have two cats and a dog. My dog doesnt smell very bad, but she is kind of smelly. My cats don't smell at all though. Is Fukuoka City a very big city or is it small? I don't really like Limp Bizkit or Eminem, I kind of like Eminem's song "Cleaning Out My Closet" but other than that i dont really like his music. I do like country music. Have you ever heard of Shania Twain or the Dixie Chicks, what about Toby Keith? They are some of my favorite singers.

How many days a week do you go to school? When does your school year start? When does it end? Do you like school? Well now that I've talked your ear off I really have to go. Please write back to me if you have any questions just ask.

Sayonara, your pal, Alison