

English-Japanese Email Exchange Project

Mark Shrosbree
Tokai University

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In this paper a bilingual email exchange project involving two universities, one in Japan and one in Canada, is described. Participants in this tandem learning project wrote emails in both English and Japanese on subjects of personal interest. The email exchanges involved a high level of learner autonomy, as well as peer support through a dual mentor-protégé, protégé-mentor relationship. The success of the project was evaluated through student questionnaires, the main results of which are presented here. Students reported high levels of satisfaction with the project and indicated preference for this type of bilingual interaction. Student feedback, together with the subjective experiences of the teachers, was used to develop the methodology for subsequent projects. To date, five successful projects have been completed. A description of the bilingual email exchange methodology is included, along with suggestions for teachers wishing to start a similar tandem learning project.

本研究は、日本とカナダの大学間で行われた、二言語使用Eメール交換プロジェクトの報告である。本プロジェクトで使用されるタンデム学習では、参加者は自分の興味のある話題について日英両言語でEメールを書いた。この学習形態には、高い学習オートノミー、互恵性による学習者間の相互作用が関係していると言われる。本研究の学生評価アンケートの結果から、このプロジェクトが肯定的評価を得ていることが示された。プロジェクトに対する高い満足度、二言語使用Eメールへの好感が報告されている。学生評価結果と教員の経験からプロジェクトの方法論がさらに開発され、これまでに5つのプロジェクトが行われている。本論は、二言語使用Eメール交換の方法、タンデム学習を始めたい教員へのアドバイスにも言及している。

In EFL settings, there are often few opportunities for learners of English to engage in genuine, meaningful communication in the target language. In Japan, these opportunities can be limited to classroom interactions with fellow learners or with an English teacher. One way to address this problem is to use the Internet to bring students in

contact with English users elsewhere in the world. Online applications, such as discussion forums and email, provide opportunities for learners to communicate irrespective of geographical location. The present study was on an email exchange between students studying English at a university in Japan and students studying Japanese at a university in Canada. Students wrote bilingual emails to a partner assigned to them at the start of the project. Through this process of tandem learning, students were able to practise communication in both their first and second languages. Following positive feedback from participants, the project was repeated in five successive semesters. The author reports on the lessons learnt in these five projects from the perspective of the English learners in Japan. A report on the lessons of the first two projects, from the perspective of the Japanese learners in Canada, is also available in Japanese (Ikeda, 2015). These lessons have led to the development of a bilingual email exchange methodology that is detailed in this paper. The aim is to help other teachers who are interested in introducing similar tandem learning projects in their own classrooms.

English Learning and Motivation in Japan

Although the Japanese government's aim for English education is to develop "practical communication abilities" (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008), there is a widely-held belief that although students have many years of English study, more needs to be done to raise fluency levels in Japan (e.g., Clavel, 2014). One approach is to increase the number of native English-speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs) employed under the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme from the current 4,786 to 6,000 by the time of the Olympic Games in 2020 (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, 2015). However, the problem of inadequate practical communication abilities might not be addressed by simply increasing the number of teachers. There often still remains an emphasis on the learning of English as an academic subject, rather than through communicative methodologies (Nagatomo, 2012). This continues from high school into university English classes, where students are often seen to be reluctant to actively participate

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in communication-based classes (Nagatomo, 2012). One way to address this problem is to offer students the opportunity for genuine communication in English with their peers in other countries. An international email exchange project offers such a genuine communication opportunity and the possibility of improving motivation to study English. As Yashima (2000) reported, both intercultural friendship motivation and instrumental motivation are important predictors of the effort to study and the proficiency of Japanese EFL learners. Yashima (2009) also suggested that international posture is an important construct related to the motivation of Japanese university students to learn English. International posture refers to how learners relate to the broad international community rather than to a particular English-speaking group. Thus, it was hoped that by exchanging emails with Japanese learners in Canada, students would feel they were relating to an international community of shared language users and as a consequence improve their motivation to study English.

Tandem Learning

A key element of the email exchange project reported here is the use of both English and Japanese for communication. The use of two languages in this way is known as tandem learning. Little and Brammerts (1996) describe tandem learning as “a form of open learning in which two people (or groups) with different mother tongues work together in order to learn one another’s language” (p. 10). This form of learning was chosen for this project as it creates a dual mentor-protégé, protégé-mentor relationship between participants. The author had previously been involved in two monolingual English language exchanges: one, a letter exchange between Japanese and Chinese university students, and the other, an online discussion forum involving Japanese and Greek university students. These monolingual exchanges did not seem to suit the Japanese learners who appeared to lack motivation or confidence to participate fully. In contrast, in tandem learning learners are simultaneously an expert in one language (their L1) and a novice in another (their L2). This not only allows learners to use both languages equally, but also helps them to learn each other’s language and culture (see Wakisaka, 2012).

Another important decision was to have one-to-one email exchanges, rather than a group project. In one group discussion forum project, Edasawa and Kabata (2007) found unequal participation to be a problem. Similarly, Mori and Nonaka (2011) noted individual differences in group email exchanges leading to motivation problems. To address these potential problems, a one-to-one email exchange methodology was adopted. It was hoped that less active students would not be able to hide behind more active students as they can in group projects. They would also be motivated by the knowledge that a

partner was waiting for their personal reply to an email. Moreover, the teachers would be able to more closely monitor each student to ensure that everyone participated fully.

Tandem learning was also chosen in order to encourage autonomous learning, as “genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous” (Little, 1995, p. 175). Autonomous learning means that “the learner accepts responsibility for his or her learning” (Little, 1995, p. 175). With limited classroom time, it is clearly advantageous for students to continue their language study independently. It was hoped that by studying in tandem, students would be motivated to study outside the classroom.

Background to the Email Exchange Project

The Email Exchange Project (hereinafter *the project*) commenced in the autumn of 2013 and was conducted twice yearly thereafter. The project involved students studying English at a university in Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan, and students studying Japanese at a university in Montreal, Canada. The students in Japan were enrolled in various required English courses with English proficiency levels of between B1 and B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). In the first three projects, all participants were L1 Japanese speakers, but in the last two projects three international students were involved. However, as they studied their majors in Japanese, they all had high Japanese language proficiency. In the first two semesters, participation in the project was voluntary and did not form part of course assessment. The opinions of students who volunteered to participate in these first two projects were elicited by questionnaire, and following this the project was made a course requirement and conducted in three further semesters. In contrast, the students in Canada were enrolled in two Japanese writing elective courses and had Japanese proficiency levels of beginner and mid-level beginner. Participation in the project was a compulsory component of the courses and formed part of their assessment. The students were from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Not all of them were native speakers of English, but because they attended an English-medium university, all the students were highly proficient in English. In the first project, there was an equal number of participants in both universities, which facilitated pairing the students. In subsequent projects, there were fewer students enrolled in the courses at the Canadian university, which meant that some of these participants had two partners. As the project progressed, some former participants in Canada joined a subsequent project to make the numbers more equal.

The initial aim of the project was for students to send two emails with both a Japanese thread and an English thread. In the emails, students wrote a self-introduction and then asked personal and cultural questions to one another. Students were free to choose

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the content of the emails, so topics were very diverse, including hobbies, university life, travel, traditional culture, modern life, music, and dreams. Many students added photographs and Internet links to their emails. The first email was a monolingual Japanese email written by the students in Canada to their partner in Japan. The student in Japan replied in Japanese to the questions in this email, and then added an English message to the same email with some questions to their¹ partner in Canada. In this way, one email contained two streams, one in Japanese, and one in English. Next, the student in Canada responded to the Japanese stream in Japanese and the English stream in English. The student in Japan responded to this email in the same way. Thus, each student exchanged two emails with their partner. These emails were cc'd to both teachers to facilitate monitoring of the project. After the first two rounds of emailing, students were free to continue emailing one another without the need to cc the teachers.

Tandem Email Exchange Methodology

The experience and feedback from the first two email exchange projects led to an ongoing process of improvement and refinement of the methodology. By the fifth semester, the following methodology had been established.

Introduce the Project

Students received two bilingual guides to the project. The first gave a brief overview of the project and some broad instructions on the bilingual email exchanges (see Appendix A). The second guide instructed students to send an email to their teacher with the following information: name, university major, sex, three interests, and computer email address (see Appendix B). This information was used to match students who have similar interests, where possible. This was considered important for the success of the project, as students with similar interests might be expected to develop closer friendships and thus motivate one another to study. Another important consideration for the students in Japan was the use of computer email rather than smartphones. It had been found that many of the Japanese students used Line and other social media in their daily lives, rather than email. It was felt that writing emails on a smartphone might have a detrimental effect on their writing, so all students were asked to use a computer for all email exchanges. The second guide also gave students advice on how to participate fully in the project. Students were instructed to check their email account every day, use a spell checker when writing, and add small details to their emails. This latter point is important, as students may be unaware that their daily commute on a crowded train or their lunch of ramen noodles could be of great interest to someone studying Japanese in another country.

Teach Email Conventions

Before sending their first email, the students in Japan were given instruction in email writing. In the earlier projects, it was found that many of the emails lacked forms of address, greetings, introductory comments, or a clear structure to the body of the message. Three worksheets were prepared to address this problem. First, students received a model English email based on content from earlier projects. This model email was relatively formal as it represented the first contact between partners. The model was annotated with the following: addressing partner by name, opening comments and niceties, introducing the background and reason for each question before asking each question, final comments, signing off, and full name in Latin script (see Appendix C). Introducing the background to each question was of particular importance as it helped students to avoid simply sending a list of uncontextualised questions to their partner. The second worksheet was very similar to the first but it was in Japanese. Although all the Japanese university participants in the first two projects were native speakers of Japanese, many were uncertain about how to structure their emails. This worksheet was aimed at addressing this problem. Third, students received a handout with a template for their first email. Students wrote their first message in class on their handout, which allowed the teacher to move around the classroom and offer personal assistance.

Start and Monitor the Exchanges

The first email monolingual message was sent by the Canadian university students directly to their partner's email address and cc'd to both teachers. The main job of the teacher in Japan was to ensure that students responded promptly with a bilingual email. Both teachers had built a bank of email messages addressing anticipated problems. As soon as an issue was noticed, an email was sent to the student concerned. There were three problems in particular which sometimes needed to be addressed: misunderstanding the guidelines, lack of participation, and unequal effort.

The most common misunderstanding of guidelines concerned the instruction to write bilingual emails. This occurred more often with the students in Japan, perhaps due to their unfamiliarity with this way of learning. However, one advantage of tandem learning was that teachers could also work in tandem to help and advise students. Thus, for example, the teacher in Canada was able write emails in Japanese to guide the students in Japan.

In order for one-to-one email exchange projects to be successful, it is essential for all students to participate. Each semester, a small number of students, at both universities, were slow to respond to their partners. With so many emails arriving in the teachers'

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email accounts, it was hard to ensure that every student replied promptly to their partner. This problem was addressed in several ways. Firstly, when introducing the project, it was necessary to emphasise each student's responsibility to their partner. Secondly, if a student was slow to reply, the teacher talked to them personally and explained that their partner was eagerly awaiting a reply. Thirdly, students who promptly wrote their emails were praised, especially when they continued corresponding beyond the required two emails. It was hoped that this praise would motivate other students to participate fully. Fourthly, the first two projects were voluntary, so it was hard for the teacher to put pressure on participants to reply promptly to emails. Once the project was made a required part of the course, it was possible to more strongly emphasise the importance of prompt replies.

One potential problem with projects of this sort is unequal effort on the part of students. Edasawa and Kabata (2007) noted this problem in a bilingual discussion forum, in which some students contributed much less than others. By adopting a one-to-one email methodology, rather than group exchanges, it was hoped that this problem would be addressed. However, in some cases a long message from one student was responded to with a very short message from their partner. Once more, this issue was addressed generally in whole-class feedback, and when necessary, individual students were encouraged to write more.

Post Email Exchange Project Activities

Continued Email Correspondence

Although students were only required to write two emails each, they were encouraged to continue private email exchanges after the project finished. Results of post-project questionnaires showed that approximately one third of the students continued to exchange emails. Other students reported that they stayed in contact through social media. It is considered one of the successes of the project that so many students maintained long-term contact.

Emails From Teachers

At the end of each project, the teachers sent an email to the students in their partner university thanking them for participating in the email exchanges. Some of the students in Canada responded and asked for information about study and work in Japan. As they were studying Japanese as an elective subject, many had a strong interest in Japan and hoped to travel, study, or work there. Being able to help students in this way was one of the unforeseen benefits of the project.

Visits

Another unforeseen benefit was visits to the partner universities. This started with one student from Japan visiting Canada and meeting his partner and the teacher. The next year, a student from Canada visited the class in Japan, gave a lecture, and shared photographs from Canada. It is hard to exaggerate the positive impact this visit had on the class in Japan, especially on the student's partner. A third visit involved the teacher from Canada, a Japanese national, who came to Japan to address the class in English. This visit was very well received and led to a prolonged question and answer session in English.

Postcards

One more innovative idea introduced by the Canadian side was to send postcards at the end of the course. These postcards were handwritten in Japanese and seemed very well received by the students in Japan. Postcard writing was then added to the Japanese university side of the project. Students were taught how to write a basic greeting card in English (see Appendix D), and also added a message in Japanese written with calligraphy pens.

Evaluating the Success of the Project

Any language learning project requires some investment of time and energy by both the teachers and the students involved. It is thus important to evaluate the success of the project to decide whether to continue using this methodology in future courses and also how to improve it. The first two rounds of emails were cc'd to the teachers, who were able to subjectively evaluate the benefits of the bilingual email exchanges. However, in order to understand the students' viewpoint, a questionnaire was conducted with participants in the first two projects in autumn 2013 and spring 2014. The questionnaire was created on Google Forms in Japanese for the students in Japan and in English for the students in Canada. The full questionnaire and Japanese university students' responses are shown in Appendix E.

The questionnaire response rate by the students in Japan was 21 out of 34 participants (9 out of 15 in the first project and 12 out of 19 in the second) and by the students in Canada was 18 out of 24 (12 out of 15 in the first project and 6 out of 9 in the second). Questions to elicit students' feelings about the project were answered on a 4-point Likert scale (*strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree*); some further yes/no questions were also asked. Respondents were also given the opportunity to write their specific feelings concerning certain aspects of the project. The majority of respondents, both in Canada

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and Japan, responded favourably to the project, answering that they found it enjoyable, useful, and motivating. The following is a summary (translated from the Japanese) of the results of the questionnaires given to the students in Japan. (For a detailed report in Japanese of the responses in Canada, see Ikeda, 2015.)

The results of the questionnaire strongly suggest that students enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the email exchanges. In response to the statement, “Exchanging emails was fun,” 19 out of 21 respondents agreed (10 strongly agree, 9 agree). One student added, “I had a really good experience. It will become an important event in my life.” Similarly, most respondents agreed that the project was useful for their language study. 19 out of 21 respondents agreed (10 strongly agree, 9 agree) with the statement “Email exchange was useful for my language study.” One student wrote, “I could get more chances to use email. I could learn English from reading my partner’s emails.” The only negative comments concerned delays in receiving emails from their partner, for example, “My partner was slow to reply.”

When asked whether they preferred monolingual or bilingual email exchanges, there was unanimous support for bilingual emailing. A common reason for this position was that bilingual email exchanges allow students’ partners to help one another. This feeling was confirmed by the strong support for the statement “It was enjoyable helping my partner with his/her Japanese study” (9 strongly agree, 11 agree). On the question of motivation, 18 of the 21 respondents agreed with the statement, “This project raised my motivation for language study” (11 strongly agree, 7 agree). The fact that all respondents stated that they would like to participate in a future email exchange project would also suggest that students found the project a rewarding and motivating experience.

Conclusion

This has been a report about a successful bilingual email exchange project involving Japanese learners of L2 English at a Japanese university and Canadian learners of L2 Japanese at a Canadian university. The students exchanged personal emails in both English and Japanese with a student at the partner university. The results of questionnaires suggested that the students in Japan found bilingual tandem learning useful for their study, enjoyable, and motivating. Both teachers involved compared this form of project favourably with other more conventional monolingual projects and saw it as a way to offer valuable communication opportunities for EFL learners and to encourage autonomous learning.

In order to use this kind of methodology in Japan, it is necessary to find partner schools where students are proficient in English and are learning Japanese. For teachers who do not know of such schools, there are websites that put schools in touch with

one another. One such website is LinguaeLive (www.linguaealive.ca), which is based in Canada. The site lists many schools where students are learning Japanese and looking for partners for exchanges.

Bilingual email exchanges might be particularly suitable for Japanese learners, who often lack the confidence to communicate only in English. The students in Canada were taking elective classes in Japanese, so they had a strong interest in Japanese culture. The students in Japan were able to answer many questions about history, traditions, and popular culture. To the teachers monitoring the content of these exchanges, it became clear that students took pride in explaining their culture to Japanese learners in Canada. It is hoped that this positive communication will stay with the students and motivate them to continue their language study.

Note

1. In this paper, *they*, *them*, and *their* are used as singular, sex-neutral pronouns.

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Bio Data

Mark Shrosbree teaches at Tokai University in Kanagawa, Japan. His interests include course design, methodology, and materials development for both general EFL courses and English for specific purposes. He maintains his university’s online materials banks and conducts regular professional development workshops.

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Appendix A

Email Exchange Project Introductory Guidelines

こんにちは。私たちは、カナダのX大学で日本語を勉強している学生です。私たちの質問に、日本語で答えてもらえるとうれしいです。よろしくお願ひします。

Hi! We are first students studying at Y University in Japan. We are taking an English Reading & Writing course. We will be very grateful if you can answer our questions in English. We will be happy to answer your questions in Japanese. Thank you!

(Instructions 方法)

- ① まず、Xの学生が、Y大学の学生にメールを送ります。X大学の学生は、日本語でメッセージを書きます。
- ② Y大学の学生は、①の返事を日本語で書いてください。それから、英語でメッセージを書いてください。
- ③ X大学の学生は、②の返事を日本語と英語で書いてください。日本語のメッセージには日本語で、英語のメッセージには英語で答えてください。
- ④ Y大学の学生は③の返事を英語と日本語で書いてください。日本語のメッセージには日本語で、英語のメッセージには英語で答えてください。
- ⑤ これ以降のメール交換は自由です。

Instructions

- ① First, X University students will send emails to Y University students. X students will write a message in Japanese.
- ② Y students, please reply to email ① in Japanese. Then, please write a message to X students in English.
- ③ X students, please reply to email ② in both Japanese and English. Reply to the Japanese message in Japanese, and reply to the English message in English.
- ④ Y students, please reply to email ③ in both English and Japanese. Reply to the English message in English, and reply to the Japanese message in Japanese.
- ⑤ After this, you can exchange emails as you like.

* ①~④のメールには、必ず下の2人の先生のアドレスをCCに入れてください。
* Please be sure to CC emails ①-④ to the two teachers' email addresses below.

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Appendix B
First Email Guidelines

Guidelines

- Send me an email with three hobbies or topics you are interested in. A-sensei in X University and I will try to match you with someone who shares the same hobbies as you. You will write your emails on a computer – not on a smartphone – so you must give a computer email address.
興味のあること (Eメールで読みたいこと) を3つ、メールで (Eメール.com まで) 送ってください。X大学の先生と協力して、できるだけ同じ興味を持っているパートナーを探します。パソコンで見られるメールアドレス (gmail, yahoo など) から送ってください。携帯のメールアドレス (docomo, softbank など) は避けてください。

Example email:

Dear Professor B,
I am writing about the Email Exchange Project. Here is my computer email address: eijmiyake3@gmail.com
Here are my three interests:
1) Food (cooking and eating!)
2) Soccer (playing and watching – I support Yokohama F Marinos)
3) Making music (I play guitar and sing)
Regards,
Eiji Miyake

- Check your email EVERY DAY. You will soon get an email from a X University student. Please reply to the email within 3 days. Do not wait...reply quickly!
メールチェックは毎日してください! X大学の学生はすぐに返事をくれます。みなさんもメールをもらったら、3日以内に返事を出してください。
- Check your email for spelling and simple grammar mistakes. However, do not worry about perfect English; this is not a test – it is international communication!
メールを送る前に、スペルチェックと簡単な文法のチェックはしてください。ただし、これはコミュニケーションの練習です。テストではありませんから、完璧な英語を書く必要はありません。
- Try to add lots of details. Normal things for you, such as taking the Odakyu Line, may be really interesting for someone in Canada. Details are always interesting!
身近なことを詳しく説明してみてください。みなさんにとって普通のこと、例えば小田急線を通り抜けることなども、カナダの学生にとってはとても興味深いことです。
- Your Japanese emails should be simple, direct Japanese. Remember, the X student is learning Japanese. Also, your Japanese email must NOT be a translation of your English email. Write different emails!
X大学の学生は、日本語の練習者です。シンプルな日本語を書くように心がけてください。日本語のメールは英語のメールの翻訳ではありません。
- Make some effort with your emails. The more you put in, the more you will get out of this Email Exchange Project.
メールを書くことに努力をしてください。努力すればするほど、成果も獲れます。

Appendix C
Model English Email

Dear Susan,

Thank you for your Email. I have some questions for you. I'd appreciate it if you could tell me about you and the country where you live in.

I have been to Montreal, Canada. I want to travel to Canada. What kind of place is Montreal? Please tell me about the tourist spots in Montreal.

I am very glad to know that you are learning a foreign language. So, I study not only English but also Chinese. What language do you like other than Japanese?

I was interested to hear that you were in the orchestra when I was a junior high school student. I played the violin. I'm too busy now, but I want to play in the future. I can also play piano.

I'm looking forward to your reply. Thank you.

Regards,
Miki Suzuki

Annotations:

- Address partner by name.
- Opening comments (nice email, etc.)
- Introduce question 1
- Ask question 1
- Introduce question 1
- Ask question 1
- Introduce question 1
- Ask question 1
- Final comments
- Sign off
- Name in romaji

Appendix D Writing a New Year's Card

New Year's Cards

Here are some typical greetings:

Dear David,
Wishing you a healthy and prosperous New Year.
Best wishes,
Eiji Miyake

Dear David,
I hope you have a wonderful 2016.
Happy New Year!
Eiji

Dear David,
I have really enjoyed exchanging emails with you. I wish you all the best in 2016.
Happy New Year!
All the best,
Eiji Miyake

Words for Greetings Cards

Wishing you I wish you I hope you have Best wishes for	a/an	prosperous healthy happy successful enjoyable	New Year. 2016. year in 2016.
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Practise writing your New Year's card here:

Appendix E Results of Japanese Student Questionnaire (Translated from Japanese)

a	Exchanging emails with was fun.*	3.4
b	Email exchange was useful for my language study.*	3.3
c	Which of the following did you enjoy? (multiple answers allowed) (1) Writing email messages in English; (2) Receiving email replies in English; (3) Writing email replies in Japanese; (4) Receiving email messages in Japanese	(1) = 20 (2) = 15 (3) = 8 (4) = 10
d	What do you think about using both English and Japanese languages? (1) Using both English and Japanese is better (2) Using only English is better (3) Using only Japanese is better	(1) = 21 (2) = 0 (3) = 0
e	Writing an email in Japanese gave me confidence to write in English.*	2.7
f	I enjoyed helping Canadian students with their Japanese.*	3.2
g	Writing in Japanese to a nonnative speaker of Japanese is a useful communication skill.*	3.0
h	This project motivated me to (1) study English language; (2) learn about my partner's culture.*	(1) = 3.4 (2) = 3.6
i	Did you learn anything new from the Email Exchange Project? Y/N	Y = 15 N = 6
j	Did the two email exchanges go well? Y/N	Y = 18 N = 3
k	Have you continued to exchange emails after the 2 exchanges finished? 1 = Yes; 2 = Yes, but have finished now; 3 = No	(1) = 4 (2) = 3 (3) = 14
l	If you have the chance, would you like to participate in this project again? Y/N	Y = 21 N = 0
m	Please write any comments and/or suggestions about this email project.	

*4 = strongly agree; 3 = agree; 2 = disagree; 1 = strongly disagree.