

Developing Intercultural Awareness and Writing Skills Through Email Exchange

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This paper is based on an international information technology-based collaborative project, initiated by the British Council, between primary level pupils from two schools in Singapore and Birmingham (UK). Through the electronic exchange of information, the pupils explored different writing tasks for various purposes and types of audience. The pupils' confidence, awareness and understanding of their own and their correspondents' cultures were enhanced in this intercultural and cross-curricular project. The study offered insights into how information technology can be used as a tool not only to develop pupils' confidence, language skills and creativity, but also to develop their sense of awareness of intercultural concerns, and of their being part of a dynamic, international, global community. The project also yielded discernible shifts in teachers' traditional roles and responsibilities, and the part they played in their students' participation as the project developed. Notable differences were also observed in pupils' expectation of teachers in the two countries.

Introduction

Current advances in computer technology and the rapid pace of change in the communications revolution are affecting the way English Language (EL) teachers use information technology (IT) to develop pupils' language skills. There is now a wide range of opportunities open to classroom practitioners from creating online self-access quizzes to the use of authentic online materials as input for activities, and for promoting collaborative projects through computer-mediated communication (Hegelheimer, Mills, Salzmann and Shetzer, 1996).

This paper focuses on the last area, namely, exploring how teachers and pupils in two countries collaborate on an international IT-based collaborative project for a specific purpose. The study also examines the role and place of the EL teachers over a period of time as the project develops, and discusses the implications for both the EL teachers and learners.

Background

In 1997 the British Council invited schools in UK and Singapore to register to work on a collaborative project. This involved producing a web site with details of the voyage of a British warship, HMS Illustrious, on route from UK to Hong Kong via Singapore. Two primary schools and two secondary schools in Singapore were selected to participate in this project with two primary schools and two secondary schools in Birmingham.

This paper focuses only on the primary schools involved in the project, Robin Hood Primary School in Birmingham and Xinmin Primary School in Singapore. Each school researched various sources of information, including CD-ROMs, encyclopaedias and communicated with the crew on board the ship through electronic mail (email). The project stretched over two months of active correspondence, research and writing up of material. The project is seen as the beginning of a long-term relationship between the schools, which enable young pupils to gain a greater insight into the life and culture of differing peoples.

Planning Stage

Three members of staff from Birmingham first invited the staff of Xinmin Primary School in Singapore to participate in the project which was termed 'Operation Oceanwave' in early 1997. Both schools were excited over the challenge of having their pupils involved in what appeared to be an exciting Social Studies project where they would be communicating in a real-life context with a real audience- the officers on board the warship as well as their counterparts in the respective schools. During the first visit, the British

staff checked out the Singaporean Information Technology (IT) configurations, their infrastructure and educational strategies in the use of IT as a tool for learning. Valuable information was exchanged on IT implementation and the schools' websites were also explored.

Areas Researched

Each school decided on specific areas to research into and to present their findings. The following were the areas of specialisation by the two schools:

'Portsmouth port' and 'Lovely grub!' by Robin Hood Primary School, and 'Facts about the ship', 'Port of Singapore' and 'Route of the ship' by Xinmin Primary School. In addition, Xinmin Primary School also displayed their personal welcome and 'Singapore gallery' on the website.

Stages of Implementation

The project went through the following stages over a two-month period.

Stage 1:

The Deputy Head Teacher of Robin Hood School first emailed Xinmin Primary School with short notes and brief information on her school. Messages from some of the pupils in her school were also included. This was greeted with much enthusiasm by a teacher from Xinmin Primary School who in turn reciprocated with background information on her school:

'My name is Baljeet Sandhu and I am a member of the Xinmin Primary School staff. I received a cc of your letter together with the letters of the children in your school. They sound extremely delightful and eager as all children are, curious to find out and learn more about other parts of the world. I was about to have a HUP (Helping Under-Achievers Programme) lesson then and I thought it would be a wonderful idea to have my children talk about themselves and have email-pals over there...'

The first set of messages from the Singaporean pupils in response to the pupils in Birmingham were also included.

This was the initial stage of socialisation and building up of rapport between staff and pupils of the two schools. It is noted that the teachers played a central role at this critical stage where it was they themselves who actively mediated, and did the actual sending and retrieving of messages for their respective students. The following message from the Birmingham staff reflects clearly the belief in the impact of the messages not merely on the students but on the teacher herself:

'Here are the email replies as promised and also some new letters. All the children are very enthusiastic and want to email your pupils but I can only manage a few at a time. They think I have nothing else to do! Anyway I hope you enjoy the e-mails. I know the children here at Robin Hood will look forward to the return mail.'

There is also the expectation from the Birmingham students that it is their teacher who would facilitate their exchange of messages as evident in 'They think I have nothing else to do!'

The focus of the pupils' subsequent messages at this stage remained very much on exchanging personal background information such as age, personal attributes, family members, hobbies and preferences in terms of subjects studied in school.

Stage 2

From the personal sphere of friends, family and school, the pupils began to move towards other areas of interest, extending beyond the world of personal relationships to that of other people and countries other than their own. It was noted that, even at this stage, teachers' influence was not responsible for the topics initiated for discussion. Queries were raised, for instance, with regard to food and cultural practices associated with their specific cultures:

From Emily Lim Sheue Chyn (Singapore) to Lucy Karim (Birmingham):

'I like potato chips but not toast. Could you please tell me about England?'

From Lin Yiling (Singapore) to Lauren Arnold (Birmingham):

'This year for Chinese New Year, I got a lot of hongbaos. I will tell you what it is. I get hongbaos (red packets) with money in it. It is good luck for the Chinese.'

From Peh Zonghui (Singapore) to Daniel Black (Birmingham):

'What is Easter?'

The following messages were in response to the questions posed on specific aspects of their countries:

From Lucy Karim (Birmingham) to Emily Lim Sheue Chyn (Singapore):

'In another part of your letter you wanted to know more about England so I will tell you a bit more about England. London is the capital of England. I have been to London once to watch Birmingham City football team play football. England is a big place. The Prime Minister is called John Major. The Queen's name is Elizabeth. If I write to you again I will tell you more about England.'

From Daniel Black (Birmingham) to Peh Zonghui (Singapore):

'Zhonghui you wanted to know about Easter. It is a Christian festival celebrating the rise of Jesus after he sacrificed himself to save the life of other people. As well as a holiday we have chocolate Easter eggs and other presents.'

Stage 3

Pupils went beyond communicating with their overseas counterparts to the crew on board the warship who were posed specific questions. For example, the Singaporean pupils selected the following categories:

- history of the ship: 'When was the battleship built?', 'How many battles has the battleship been engaged in so far?'
- physical structure: 'What is the dimension and the weight of the ship?', 'Why is the flight deck of HMS Illustrious curved upward and forward?'
- the crew: 'How many crew are there on the battleship?'
- functions and maintenance: 'What is the horsepower needed for the ship to move at the fastest speed?', 'How do you dispose waste from the ship?'
- voyage of the ship: 'How long does the ship take to sail from England to Hong Kong including all the stopovers?'
- main activities of the ship: 'What are the main activities on board the ship in a typical day?'
- weaponry carried by the ship: 'How many anti-aircraft missiles can the battleship carry?'

Stage 4

This final stage involved consolidating the information gathered and putting the data collated together in a coherent whole. The teachers became heavily involved at this stage with the revising, editing and proof-reading of the write-up of the texts generated, and in designing the website for presentation of the material researched.

Analysis

The initial messages exchanged display a need for pupils and their teachers to begin by constructing a mental representations of each other through the sharing of basic information such as who they are and where they come from. These 'identification indicators' include name, age, school, where they live, grade level, looks or physical attributes characteristics, favourite hobbies or friends etc. The names of students is the most frequent indicator in messages. This is followed by age, school, area in which they live, physical attributes, family, and other interests. The messages also clearly indicate a signature, signalling the identity of the sender of the message. This shows the sender's assuming responsibility for the messages without anonymity. The analysis showed that full signature (name and surname) occurred in a number of the messages with the rest carrying partial signatures or first names only. The teachers, at this stage, acted more as technical facilitators, enabling the smooth transmission and retrieval of messages exchanged among the

pupils.

The nature of content of the messages ranges from phatic to specific or topical, depending on whether the message tends towards merely establishing contact and building rapport such as 'What is your favourite sport?', 'What sort of food do you like?', 'What pop groups do you like?' , 'What do you do in your spare time after school?' or specifically focussing on a topic or issue for discussion such as 'Could you please tell me about England?', 'What is Easter?', 'What are your schools like in Singapore?' and 'How many computers do you have in your school?'. Again, at this level, the topics for discussion were decided upon by the pupils themselves as they responded to each other's interests.

As the project developed in the later stages, communication extended beyond the pupils themselves to including the staff or crew on board the carrier. More specific questions eliciting detailed information on the technicalities involved in the journey such as 'Is the water of the Straits of Malacca deep enough for the battleship to pass through?', and 'What do you do if the ship runs out of fuel when it is at sea?' were still generated by the students themselves, guided by their personal areas of interest without any strong influence from their teachers.

The progression from a purely phatic-social level of communication into one seeking out specific, detailed and precise information in the electronic interaction clearly benefits the pupils not only in terms of their general knowledge but also their cognitive development. What is more significant is that the learning is self-directed by the pupils themselves rather than set by the teachers in charge within the confines of a fixed schema of topics.

The Singaporean pupils have been identified as 'under-achievers' who are involved in a special programme, the Helping Under-Achievers Programme (HUP), aimed at helping them attain their inherent potential. It is noted that the Singaporean pupils preferred to correspond with their British counterparts on a one-to-one basis. They felt more comfortable knowing that they were communicating with a person on an individual basis rather than talking about themselves in general as a class. Dependence on their teachers' guidance was not evident in selecting what they chose to share in their messages. This preference for communication of their personal interests on an individual basis was also shared by the British pupils.

However, the Singaporean pupils showed a preoccupation with form, being meticulous and concerned with the spelling, grammar and syntax of their messages. This was where they relied on their teachers to check their messages first for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors before messages were sent out. The teachers were, for them, a support for the technicality of their writing rather than in the generation of content for their messages and in directing their queries.

Pupil Impact

The study showed that an international IT-based collaborative project between students from different countries yielded a number of positive results. Students proved to be more motivated and displayed a positive attitude towards writing. Analysis of the electronic messages also showed a maturity in pupils' cognitive development over time in the type of questions posed. The project also enhanced pupils' thinking skills as they responded to specific messages directed to them and as they made decisions with regard to the project. They learnt to work collaboratively and, in so doing, improved their communication skills.

They were also given the opportunities to transfer what they learnt from one environment (the information from email messages with the crew) to new settings (presenting the information on the website). As a result, pupils were actively engaged in a project through the dynamic and interactive mode of communication. The project further allowed them to actively participate in an experiential or 'living' curriculum which extends beyond their textbooks, and involved them in authentic tasks and situations with real-life audiences as global citizens.

Teacher Impact

Clearly, the success of a project of this nature rests on the attitude and motivation of the teachers involved. It is noted that the school in Birmingham actually had its own Deputy Head Teacher involved in the initial stages of the project. The teacher from Singapore had a personal interest in the nature of the work. The teachers' management of collaborative learning and the monitoring of the learning process is also acknowledged to be critical factors for the effectiveness of any IT-based project (Ho, 1997).

While the teachers played a critical role in laying the foundation and in establishing contact first with each other, and then later with

their respective pupils, it is observed that the extent and degree of influence of the teachers remained on the level of technical facilitator and general 'watch-dog' over the technicalities of writing, and did not extend itself forcibly in the area of content generation or in shaping the specific direction the project would take. The pupils' autonomy and control over their own learning became even more significant in such a project which is largely self-directed and guided by their personal learning process of discovery. It is at the final stage of the project where the teachers' input is visibly seen in helping the pupils to present the information collated in the most attractive and appropriate manner in the design of the respective websites.

It is interesting to note, moreover, a significant difference between the two countries involved, arising perhaps from the educational system with its own areas of emphasis and expectations in each country. The Singaporean teacher was expected to attend to the technicalities of writing, namely, refining grammar, spelling, punctuation concerns, and general proof-reading of her students' messages before sending out the messages. There was a strong need from the Singaporean students to want to appear 'grammatically correct' and polished when interacting with their British counterparts. The Birmingham pupils were more intent on having their messages sent out as quickly as possible with the anticipation of responses from their Singaporean peers.

Other Projects

The two schools in Birmingham and Singapore have agreed to continue with further IT-based projects in the future. The first of these, implemented in January 1998, is on 'Festivals' where pupils in both schools will be exchanging information on their different cultural festivals celebrated in their respective countries. These include the various festivals observed by the different ethnic groups in Singapore such as Chinese (or Lunar) New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali, and Christmas in UK. This project, it is hoped, will lead to a project on a larger scale that involves studying both the similarities and differences between Singapore and Birmingham, and possible solutions to overcome any problems identified. The third project involves both schools displaying their pupils' artistic efforts in an electronic art gallery.

The 'Operation Oceanwave' Project itself has developed to a second phase, 'Project OceanWave II' (Ong, online), again initiated by the British Council, involving another two schools in Singapore collaborating with their UK counterparts. This involves the HMS Grafton on its visit to Singapore in 1998. More information is available on the Internet website of the British Council (The British Council, online).

Pedagogical Implications

1. Know the Who:

Teachers themselves first need to know well the people involved in the project, namely their fellow colleagues as collaborators in the project and the differing backgrounds of their schools and pupil profiles. This initial stage of getting to know each other through personal sharing of their individual selves and their work lays the foundation necessary for the building up of ties for their respective students in the two schools.

2. Know the What:

The subject matter involved and the specific areas for research and follow-up by each school will have to be worked out clearly with specific objectives delineated right from the start. This will prevent any overlap of study in the research to be carried out and also clarify how the final outcome(s) will benefit the pupils in both schools.

3. Know the Why:

Both teachers and pupils need to understand the underlying overall purpose of the project and also how it will help both teachers and pupils in specific areas. This will lead to a fuller appreciation and motivation on the part of individual schools to work towards meeting their specific targets set.

4. Know the How:

A clear step-by-step process of implementation as outlined in the specific stages discussed will determine clearly the procedure involved and what is required at each stage. This framework is a useful guide as to how much time and effort are required at each

stage as the extent of involvement of teachers and the technical support staff will differ at each stage of the project.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the challenge provided by the availability of modern information technology provides not only students but also teachers exciting possibilities for innovative classroom challenges in the teaching and learning of EL. In this study, for the teachers, it was experiencing a progression from an initial sharing among themselves of their personal selves and school culture, to one where their students appeared to take over the project in a direction of their own. The pupils' personal understanding of the world then extended to beyond the traditional confines of the classroom. The move away from set tasks associated with conventional classroom-based instruction encouraged a natural move towards and support of work which evolved directly from students' own interests, experiences and responses. This autonomy and self-directed management of their own learning process helped them bridge ties and cross national boundaries. The role and responsibility of the EL classroom practitioners is observed to shift from being the traditional 'sage on the stage' to what is now more of a 'guide by the side'. The direct influence and control of the teacher in specific areas also differed in the two countries according to pupils' expectations and how they perceive their teachers could help them.

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