

The Effectiveness of Blogs and E-mail Exchanges: A Project between Japan and Taiwan

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This study consisted of two parts. In the first part, 22 Japanese university freshmen and 16 Taiwanese sophomores constructed blogs (easy-to-make homepages), and the teachers encouraged the students to post comments not only at their classmates' blogs but also at the blogs of the students in the other country. Later, surveys were taken of all the students regarding their feelings about the blogs.

In the second part of the study, students were encouraged to exchange e-mails with the students in the other country. Copies of all the e-mails were later turned in for evaluation, and a questionnaire was given. Among the findings:

1) The Taiwanese students, who were striving to be military leaders, seemed to be more motivated to learn English than the Japanese students, even though the Japanese students were majoring in medicine at a major university.

2) The Japanese students stated that blogs and e-mail exchanges were very effective ways to learn during an English writing course, but in actual practice they did NOT make elaborate blogs or send many e-mails.

3) In both the blogs and the e-mails, grammar errors were relatively rare. The most common grammatical errors made by Japanese students in the e-mails involved the articles *the* and *a*. But even they were not so bad, being used correctly in 71% of article locations — hardly an impediment to communication.

One possible reason for relative lack of “quantity” in the blogs and e-mails is that nearly half of the Japanese students, surprisingly, said they did not feel comfortable writing in English while using communication tools such as Skype, MSN Messenger, e-mail, or blog. Indeed, the Japanese university students were relatively novice computer users; 68% of them said they had been using the Internet for five years or fewer.

Background to the Study

Blogs are a kind of homepage which can be used in language classes as a form of online diary writing, and/or as a way to post students' academic writings so that peers can make comments on them (Harashima, 2007). Online places where people can post profiles and blogs, leave messages for friends, and meet new people include MySpace, Facebook, Zanga, Sconex, Bebo, and Tagged. MySpace has more than 100 million profiles, accounting for about 80% of

all visits to leading social-networking sites (Andrews, 2006). Facebook is more popular with American college students.

In Japan, Blogger seems to be the leading site which is used in English writing courses. It has Japanese support, so is quite easy to set up. Pictures can be placed next to text.

Theoretically, constructing blogs in the foreign language writing classroom is thought to be an effective activity because blogs meet the six criteria proposed by Chappelle (2001) for sound CALL activities. First, they have *language learning potential*; by writing in blogs, writing skills will most likely improve. Second, they usually have *learner fit*, matching the students' interests. Third, blogs *focus on meaning*; they have nothing to do with grammar drills or the like. Fourth, blogs are good because they are *authentic*: they enable real-world communication. Fifth, blogs have positive *impact*, with students learning not only English skills but also computer skills. Finally, blogs are *practical*; for all intents and purposes, they do not cost the students or the university any money. Thus, the socio-cognitive interchange with peers or teachers—in other words, the incentive to make a product which will be seen by others—facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge about English grammatical structures.

On the applied linguistics side, a number of studies say that blogs are effective in foreign language classes. Studies which have found blogs to be successful in the second-language classroom include Cetera and Emigh (2005), Pinkman (2005), Ward (2004), and Campbell (2003). Cetera and Emigh, for example, found that students had a better understanding of texts studied in class when they wrote about those texts in their blogs. All the studies have found that some students like blogs, and some do not; there is great variety in the quantity and quality of blogs constructed in foreign language classes.

Kitao (2002), in a review of the literature, concluded that publishing student writings on homepages is effective. Miyao (2003), for instance, successfully had junior college students make their own Web pages. Shimoyama *et al.* (2002) found that CALL, in contrast to traditional classrooms, may be especially beneficial for shy students. Knutson (2000) states that teachers should encourage writing fluency and self-expression by NOT spending much time editing content or grammar mistakes; blogs provide such an environment.

In an important study, Fellner and Apple (2006), using blogs, showed that low-level, low-motivation Japanese university students can make significant progress even in a short period of time. On the first day of a seven-day intensive English course, over a 20-minute period, students typed an average of just 35 words, nearly all the words produced falling within the most frequent 1,000-word level. But on the final day of the writing course, in a 20-minute period, there was a 350% increase, with a substantial increase in the number of 2,000-level words.

E-mail exchange programs, meanwhile, have also been praised. Fedderholdt (2001), for example, had Japanese students exchange e-mails with Danish university students. Pattimore (1999) successfully had e-mail exchanges with lower-level Japanese junior high students. Nozawa (2002) says that with careful planning by teachers, e-mail exchange programs can provide valuable experiences. Teachers can find other teachers interested in doing class

e-mail exchanges by going to <http://www.iecc.org>

Yet, there are researchers who question the efficacy of both blogs and e-mail exchanges. In a review of the literature, Iwai (1999) concluded that computers *per se* do not significantly improve the quality of writing without the presence of appropriate writing instruction. Also, some research shows that traditional classrooms are as good as, if not superior to, computer-communication formats, because in traditional classrooms students can give better feedback on each other's work (Braine and Yorozu, 1998), and because of the simple fact that most students have poor English keyboarding skills. Ueno (2000) concluded that, without proper guidance, students in e-mails tend to write mainly about themselves, leading to superficial learning. Long and Robinson (1998) and Skehan (2003) say focus on accuracy may not be necessary to communicate, but is definitely beneficial.

Privacy protection and web etiquette remain important issues. Students need to be told not to make public any information which could be used for malicious purposes. This includes never publishing home addresses or phone numbers.

Method

Twenty-two freshmen at Hiroshima University (males = nine), majoring in medicine, and 16 Taiwanese sophomores (all males) at the Air Force Academy of Taiwan constructed blogs at Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com/start>) during the fall of 2005. Students in both countries were required to post writings they had completed during the writing courses, and "whatever else they wanted to post." Also, the teachers encouraged the students to post comments not only at their classmates' blogs but also at the blogs of the students in the other country. (For an example of part of a blog, see Appendix 1.)

Importantly, the Japanese blogs were evaluated by the teacher about one month after the students had begun to construct the blogs, while the Taiwanese blogs were not evaluated until the end of the three-month course. At the end of both courses, surveys were taken of all the students regarding their feelings about the blogs. (See Appendix 2 for the Japanese survey.) Grammar errors in the blogs were not evaluated, because the blogs often consisted of writings which had already been checked by the teacher, and then were simply posted onto the blogs. Not very much classroom time was taken up with the blogs — an estimated total of only 90 minutes in each country.

In the second part of the study, students were encouraged to exchange e-mails with the students in the other country. They were told they would be evaluated on "the quantity and quality of the e-mails." Students in each country had about six weeks to do this task. They were given a list of the students' names, e-mail addresses, and hobbies in the other country, and could choose to send to whomever they wanted. Students were told "the more, the better." Copies of all the e-mails sent and received were later turned in for evaluation.

The following phenomena were tabulated: Number of Taiwanese students corresponded with, number of e-mails which Japanese students sent and received, total number of words Japanese sent and received, topics discussed, and all grammatical errors. Linguistically,

grammatical article (*a* and *the*) usage errors were counted, but, importantly, the null case was not part of the tabulations; since the null case is the unmarked case in Japanese, students were overwhelmingly successful with this.

Results and Discussion

The Japanese students clearly were not as motivated to study English as the Taiwanese students were. Answering Question 1 (hereafter, Q1) on the questionnaire (see Appendix 2), only 11% of the Japanese students said that they liked using English (*i.e.*, chose B or D). On the other hand, 62% of the Taiwanese students expressed such an enjoyment for English. Also, with Q2, an amazing 86% of the Japanese students said they studied English only once or twice a week, while only 38% of Taiwanese fell into this category; another 38% of the Taiwanese said they studied “a little bit every day,” while only 14% of the Japanese said so. None of the 22 Japanese said they studied English a few hours every day, though two of the Taiwanese claimed to do so.

None of the Japanese students had ever made a blog before the course began (Q8), and even their experiences using the Internet were not very extensive (Q7). At the start of the course, about 60% of the students (13 of them) either did not know anything about blogs, or knew very little. The average Japanese student had been using the Internet only 3-5 years; surprisingly, 32% of those students (seven of them) said they had been using the Internet for fewer than three years, and only one student had been using it for more than eight years. One Japanese student, in an e-mail to a Taiwanese, even wrote: “I want to send a picture of mine and show, but ALL my friends don’t know how to do the way!!” In other words some students did not even know how to attach photos to e-mails sent abroad. The Taiwanese, similarly, had had almost no experience with blogs before the course, but had been using the Internet for slightly longer periods of time: 5-8 years, on average.

Students in both countries overwhelmingly said that communication tools such as Messenger, Skype, e-mail, and blogs have great potential for allowing communication with other people (Q6, Q12, and Q13). For example, the Japanese wrote statements in Japanese such as, “When we receive information, we are motivated to send information,” and “We can talk with people even though they’re very far away,” and “It’s fun to have friends around the world.”

An interesting finding is that nine of the Japanese students said that they generally did NOT like to use Skype, MSN, e-mail, or blogs when learning English (Q3). Another nine said they DID like to use them. Two students had mixed emotions about them. On the other hand, the Taiwanese students overwhelmingly said they liked using those tools while learning English.

The Blog Study

Most students in both countries generally thought it was easy to make blogs in English (Q9). But some students did say it was a fairly difficult task (14% in Japan, and 25% in

Taiwan). The Japanese students overwhelmingly thought that blogs were easier to maintain than individual websites (Q10), but the Taiwanese were divided equally on this question.

An important finding is that almost none of the Japanese students made extensive blogs (Q5). Almost all of their blog constructions occurred during the first month of the course, at the end of which the blogs were evaluated. During the following two months, the students were not required to do anything with their blogs. Consequently, during the three-month period, 32% of the students posted fewer than three articles on their blogs, 64% posted 3-5 articles, and only one student posted 5-8 articles (Q11). Meanwhile, one Taiwanese student posted fewer than three articles, 50% posted 3-5 articles, 31% (five students) posted 5-8 articles, and two amazing students posted more than 15 articles each.

Accordingly, only 36% of the Japanese students had friends and classmates comment on their blogs (Q14 and Q15). When asked why they did not invite friends to comment, four students wrote statements in Japanese such as "I don't think I did a great job" and three students wrote statements such as "I'm embarrassed about it." Of the students who did get comments from friends, the average blog received 2.12 comments from students either in Taiwan or in Japan. In contrast, 88% of the Taiwanese asked for and received comments on their blogs; but the number of comments was small, too.

A slight problem with the blogs was that a fairly large number of unwelcome "junk comments" came from outsiders and salespeople. But since the summer of 2006, Blogger has a "moderate comments" function which makes pages more private. All incoming comments go to a special page, which can be ignored or edited before actually appearing on the student's blog.

In summary, a large majority of the students in both countries thought it was a good idea to use blogs in English class (Q16 and Q17). About 85% of the Japanese students had positive comments such as "It's a relaxing way to study" and "It's fun" and "While making blogs, we think about English grammar." Only a few of the Japanese students had negative comments such as, "I'm afraid that private matters will leak out," and another said "Using Blogs in class seems more like a computer lesson than an English lesson."

The E-mail Study

Seventeen of the 22 Japanese students turned in e-mail reports. Thus, it is important to note that five of the students (four females, one male) did not think the e-mail exchanges were worth doing. Indeed, the e-mail exchanges were required, but they were just one part of the multi-project writing course.

Among the 17 Japanese (nine males, eight females) who handed in all their e-mails, there was a wide range of efforts made. Three students (two females, one male) sent e-mails totaling 700-900 words, while nine (five males, four females) sent e-mails totaling 154 words or less. The Japanese sent an average of 3.59 e-mails (SD= 2.50), totaling 268.47 words (SD = 257.18). This is an average of 74.78 words per e-mail.

All the Japanese made attempts to contact one or two Taiwanese, except for two

Japanese who sent e-mails to six Taiwanese, and one who sent e-mails to four. The average Japanese sent 3.59 e-mails (SD= 2.50) and received 2.47 e-mails (SD= 2.27). The two most popular topics in the e-mails were music and school life, while climate was the third most common topic. Other relatively common topics were movies, sports, travel, and pets.

As would be expected, initial e-mails were usually short, inquiring about the desire to correspond and basic hobbies, but follow-up letters were often longer. Also, as might be expected, the more words that were sent, the more words that were received. There were no statistically significant differences between the numbers of e-mails sent and received between the two countries, nor between the lengths of the e-mails sent from each country.

Grammatically, the Japanese students wrote relatively well, averaging just one grammar error per 39.68 words sent.

Among the grammar errors, incorrect usages of the articles *the* and *a* were the most common, with 53 errors counted. But even they were not so bad, being used correctly in 71% of situations — hardly an impediment to communication.

The second most common type of grammatical error involved verbs. There were 19 such errors, an average of one per 240 words sent. Ten of the verb errors involved improper use of tense, especially using present tense instead of the correct past tense.

The next-most-common types of grammatical errors involved plurals (nine errors) and prepositions (eight errors). There was a smorgasbord of other types of errors, led by inappropriate vocabulary choice (10 errors); for example, “I have a schedule in a moment” and “You said about...”

It should be noted that the Japanese clearly used capitalization and punctuation in more formal and traditionally-correct ways than the Taiwanese students did. And spelling was almost never a problem in either country. The Taiwanese e-mails were not analyzed grammatically, but overall it can be said that they were relatively well written, with the numbers and types of grammatical errors approximately equaling those of the Japanese students.

Ten months after the course ended, all the Japanese students were asked by e-mail if they were still corresponding with Taiwanese students. Five students responded. One student said that he had corresponded with a Taiwanese student for one month after the course finished, but had not corresponded since. The other four students said they had not corresponded at all since the course finished. Thus, the probability of any long-term relationships having been established seems low.

A limit to the present study is that it mostly only measured the number of words written and the numbers and types of grammatical errors made. But the number-of-words parameter has been criticized because any increase in the number of words in CALL settings could possibly be due to an increase in typing speed rather than writing ability, or maybe students write the same simple sentence repeatedly (Laufer and Nation, 1995; Goodfellow *et. al.*, 2002). Thus, recent studies have also considered lexical frequency as part of the fluency component (Fellner and Apple, 2006); when students can use less-frequently-found words, they have better

fluency. Future studies on blogs and e-mails should consider word frequency.

Also it should be noted that all the Taiwanese students were males. If some Taiwanese females had been available, the dynamics might have been different.

Conclusions

Both the blogs and the e-mail exchanges were generally successful. Some Japanese students were excited about learning English using blogs, and some students clearly enjoyed the chance to communicate with students in Taiwan.

But, the learning experiences could have been made even better by the teachers. For example, after one month, almost all of the Japanese students had put fewer than five postings each onto their own blogs. Some Japanese students, as shown by the questionnaire, obviously were not excited about the idea of blogs.

To increase the quality and quantity of students' blogs in the future, the following recommendations can be made.

1) For lower-level students, or at the beginning of a course, assign the blogs only as "a kind of diary." In the current project, the students were encouraged to not only use the blogs as a kind of diary, but also to "post their finished writings from the course." These included short essays that had been written. This latter duty possibly made the blogs seem like homework, rather than an enjoyable activity.

2) After students become adept at personal journal writing, ask them to make entries on more complex topics. These include writing about items in the news, movies, and their academic classes. At higher levels and in specialized courses — medical writing, for example — more complex issues can be tackled in the blogs.

3) Spread the blog project out over a longer period of time, and give the students more direction and feedback. In this project, only about 90 minutes of class time were spent on the blogs, and very little feedback was given on particular blogs until the final evaluation, which was made a mere one month after blog construction began. Students need more time and advice from the teacher. Instruction should include advice on what topics to talk about in the e-mails. Set up a teacher's blog which will include clear suggestions on what to write about, and links to classmates' blogs.

4) Encourage students to post questions, which perhaps other students can answer! This was not done adequately during the project.

5) Repeatedly evaluate not only the blogs but also how frequently and conscientiously students make comments on other students' blogs. Repeated evaluations can avoid the last minute frantic flurry of activity and large amounts of unread material on line.

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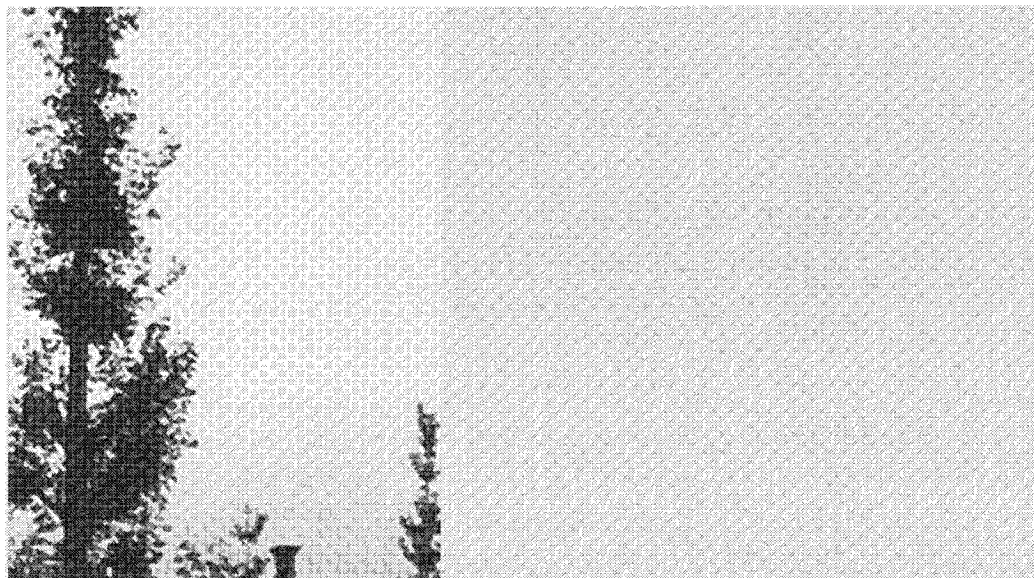
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Appendix 1: Part of a student's blog



UFO!?



I found the mysterious light in the sky on November 4. It was five o'clock.

It walked toward the bus stop, and I looked up into the sky by chance. Then, I discovered an orange light in the sky. It doesn't move easily though is like a comet.

I saw it in the sky for about five minutes. Therefore I could take a

picture of it. (Please look the photo!) I had to cross at the crosswalk, so I removed my glance.

When seeing next, it was gone .

When I told this story to my friends, they said, "It was UFO".

I don't understand whether it was really UFO, but I am glad to have a very interesting experience.

posted by yu_ka at [12:04 AM](#) | [2 comments](#)

Wednesday, November 02, 2010

The Brog of the student in Taiwan



I read the article "Shaolin soccer" in the blog "虚無中の空間~~幻想天堂" by Scorpion (<http://shal3213.blogspot.com/>).

I had seen the movie "Shaolin Soccer" before. I think that the attempt of making traditional arts applied to a modern life as Scorpion says is wonderful. Scorpion says "the movie

Appendix 2: The survey

Note: To save space here, the items have been compressed together. The actual survey was more spread out.

英語学習に関するアンケート

このアンケートは、英語学習に関する考え方や Blog を使った英語学習の方法を尋ねるものです。指導計画を立てるなど、教育のための研究にのみ使いますので、成績などには一切関係ありませんし、個人情報漏れることもありません。したがって、自分が思うままに回答して下さい。

... ..

自分に最も当てはまる選択肢を 1 つ選んでください。

1. インタネットで英語をどのように使っていますか。
 - A. 英語を学習するためだけ。その以外には、日本語で書かれたサイトを観る。
 - B. 世界中の英語で書かれたサイトを観る。
 - C. 専門分野の宿題をする時、英語で書かれたサイトを観る。

D. 英米の日常生活や俗語を学ぶために、英語で書かれたサイトを観る。

2. 授業以外で、どのぐらい英語の勉強をしていますか。

A. 毎日数時間

B. 週に1・2回

C. ほとんど毎日少しの時間

... ..

自由記述

3. MSN, SKYPE, e-mail, Blog などのコンピュータ・コミュニケーション・ツールは、どのように役にたつと思いますか。

4. 上記のコンピュータ・コミュニケーション・ツールをスピーキング, リスニング, ライティングとリーディングなどの英語学習でどのように使っていますか。

5. 授業以外での英語学習で、どのような問題に直面したことがありますか。

6. MSN, SKYPE, e-mail, Blog を使って、海外に住んでいる人たちと交信することは好きですか。そして、それはなぜですか。

自分に最も当てはまる選択肢を1つ選んでください。

7. インタネットを何年間使っていますか。

A. 8年以上

B. 5～8年間

C. 3～5年間

D. 3年以下

8. この授業で Blog を使う前に、Blog のことを知っていましたか。

A. 聞いたことはあるが、詳しくは知らなかった。

B. 聞いたことがあり、だいたい知っていた。

C. 何も知らなかった。

D. すでに自分の Blog サイトを持っていた。利用サービス名：_____

9. Bloggers を使って自分のサイトを作ることは簡単だと思いますか。

A. かなり簡単

B. かなり難しい

C. どちらでもない

10. Blog は、ホームページよりも作りやすいと思いますか。

A. そう思う

B. そう思わない

A. 15以上 B. 10～15 C. 8～10 D. 5～8 E. 3～5 F. 3以下

12. Blog は、サイバースペースでの意見交換のために役に立つツールだとも思いますか。

A. そう思います。

B. そう思わない。なぜなら、_____

13. Blog に自分の作文や記事を載せるのは良いことだと思いますか。

A. そう思う。

B. そう思わない。なぜなら、_____

14. 自分の Blog を読むように、ほかの学生やあなたの友達に勧めましたか。

A. そうした。

B. そうしなかった。なぜなら、_____

15.ほかの学生やあなたの友達はあなたの Blog にコメントを載せてくれましたか。

A. 載せてくれた。コメントの数は、_____ 個

B. 載せてくれなかった。

16. 英語のライティング授業で、Blog を使うことは良いことだと思いますか。

A. そう思う。

B. そう思わない。なぜなら、_____

17. 英語授業において Blog を使うことについて、どのように思いますか。

要 約

ブログと e-メール交換の効果 —— 日本と台湾の間の交流プロジェクト ——

ジョー・ラウアー

広島大学外国語教育研究センター

喬 徳 麗

中華民國（台湾）空軍官校 通識中心外文組

本研究は英語ライティング授業における2つの実験から構成されている。第1の実験では、日本の大学1年生22名（医学専攻）と台湾の大学2年生16名（軍事士官候補生）が、それぞれブログ（オンラインで利用可能な個人的な日記）を作成し、お互いにそのブログの内容についてコメントを行った。その後、ブログに対する感想について、アンケート調査が実施された。第2の実験では、同じ学生が宿題の一部として両国間でe-メール交換を行った。また、すべてのe-メールが学期の終わりに教員に提出されて、文法的な正確さの観点より分析がなされた。その後、同じくe-メール交換についてのアンケート調査が実施された。

この2つの実験の結果、以下の3点が明らかとなった。

- (1) 実験に参加した軍事士官候補生である台湾人の学生は、医学部生である日本人の学生よりも英語学習に好意的である。
- (2) 日本人の学生は、ライティング授業におけるブログ作成とe-メール交換の有効性について指摘してはいるが、実際に彼らの作成したブログは精巧なものではなく、e-メールを送信した回数も多くはなかった。
- (3) 両国のブログとe-メールでは、文法的な誤りが比較的少ない。なお、日本人大学生によるe-メールでの最も多い文法的誤りは英語の冠詞（aとthe）に関わるものであるが、71%の確率で正しく使用されており、コミュニケーションに障害を生じなかったと思われる。

この実験において、特に日本人学生がブログとe-メールであまり英語を多く書かなかった理由の1つとして、彼らが英語学習でSkype, MSN Messenger, ブログ, e-メールといったコミュニケーション・ツールを使用することをあまり好まないことが挙げられる。日本の大学1年生の場合、彼らの多くがコンピュータを使用した経験の少ない初心者であり、インターネットを使用した経験も5年以下の学生が68%を占めることがアンケートの結果より明らかとなっている。そのため、コンピュータの熟達度が影響を及ぼしているものと考えられる。