SMILE! Students Meeting for Intercultural Learning and Exchange

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ABSTRACT

The following paper considers the viability of cyber exchanges between students in two Asian nations, Malaysia and Japan. In keeping with the theme of the conference, the paper will present the ideology and rationale for such an initiative, some applicable research, preliminary results, as well as a discussion of this emerging format’s potential.

Keywords
Classroom applications for emerging technology, Innovation for education

1) INTRODUCTION

In November 2007, the 10 member states of ASEAN signed the Charter of Southeast Asian Nations. Article 35 of the charter states that “ASEAN shall promote its common ASEAN identity and a sense of belonging among its peoples in order to achieve its shared destiny, goals and values.” In order to accomplish this, Article 34 provides that the official working language of ASEAN shall be English (ASEAN, 2007). The following paper acknowledges that there are many issues regarding the use of English as a global language. I share the concern that English is regrettably serving a gatekeeper function in all too many contexts, with a resultant overemphasis within educational environments on testing. Language is better used for communication and for the promotion of understanding and respect amongst the peoples of the world. It is also an implicit assumption of this paper that English should be adopted for communication in international contexts with full respect for its local varieties, furthermore that English should not be a vehicle for the spread of cultural values that may conflict with the first language (L1) or first culture (C1) of the context in which it is used. It is therefore with the strongest possible conviction that I affirm the value of diversity and respect for linguistic, cultural and religious differences on a global basis. With this in mind, the following paper has little to say about historical aspects of how English came to play such a prominent role in global interaction, nor does it consider the ideology of higher language policy. Rather, as Al-Salman (2006) has noted, it accepts the fact that English can provide students with wider access to opportunities such as (a) economic, political and material resources; (b) a role in the decision-making process at the international level; (c) the ability to introduce and cope with global technical developments, including the Internet and Information Communication Technology (ICT).

A key objective of this study is to create a situation where students of English are able to interact and realize the potential of English as a língua franca. An unfortunate aspect of many teachers’ approach to the English language is that they convey an impression which designates certain aspects of English as the preserve of native speakers. This can result in a situation where learners do not take full ownership of their learning experience, and it perpetuates a certain attitude toward the use of English which is counter-productive for language acquisition. As Tsuda (2008) has noted, English language instruction is all too often associated with the West exclusively, and is too closely associated with power issues. This is a situation which obscures English’s full potential to be used as a língua franca. The Students Meeting for Intercultural Learning and Exchange (SMILE) initiative seeks to alleviate this situation by allowing students the opportunity to interact in an international forum with other Asian members of their generational
peer group, to exercise their developing language skills and to test and explore emerging technologies. Implicit in this process are efforts to develop international understanding between two Asian nations and attempts to make effective use of ICT in educational settings that could be described as typical, and even those which are somewhat ICT-challenged. This paper will therefore summarize some recent studies, outline the rationale for the SMILE initiative, as well as note progress to date.

2) TECHNICAL RATIONALE

A parallel goal underlying the SMILE project is to allow students to experience language and explore emerging technologies at the same time. It is with some urgency that language teachers and materials developers should consider the use of technology where language teaching is concerned. Extensive opportunities are being made possible by emerging technology. Furthermore, an increasing number of students today are moving close to becoming what Prensky (2001) has referred to as “digital natives.” Higher education language teaching must at times make efforts to accommodate this reality, and make efforts to incorporate relevant aspects of emerging technologies in instruction and also to afford students the opportunity to use the target language in situations that will hopefully help them to mitigate demands that the ‘real world’ will place upon them once they have graduated. David Wiley’s 2006 report to the American Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education summarizes this imperative nicely by noting that:

We must recognize that not only is “the world” changing, but our students are changing along with it. Normal life experience for today’s undergraduates involves assumptions about instant, on-demand access to multiple sources of information and multiple people via myriad technologies…With significant changes occurring in its societal context and participant base, higher education must innovate in teaching and learning, as well as other areas, to hope to remain relevant.

With the above in mind, I decided to try to implement a project where students could speak to other students in remote locations via the Internet, together with Abdullah Adnan Mohamed of Universiti Malaysia Pahang. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) allows users to speak over the Internet. One of the most popular VoIP programs available is Skype. Skype functions closely along the lines of traditional telephone service, albeit in a web environment. It is user friendly, once it is installed and configured. The initial set up of the web camera and the audio can be somewhat complicated, but thereafter the operating system is largely intuitive. Skype is available for PC, Mac, and Linux operating systems. It enables users to talk with other Skype users throughout the world. Furthermore, the service is free when used between two computer-connected lines. Skype provides conference calling for as many as 10 simultaneous users. Endeavours to date which have used Skype include The CultureQuest Project and The eTandem Network. The CultureQuest Project involves students and teachers in inquiry-based classroom projects that explore other peoples and cultures. The project has used Skype to enable American students to engage in mini cyber-exchanges with students from numerous countries. The eTandem Network allows language learners to work together with a language learning partner from another country by Skype, telephone, e-mail or other media.

3) STUDIES TO DATE

Mackey, Oliver and Leeman (2003) noted that an important aspect of interaction is that learners receive various types of feedback on their non target-like output. Their study investigated the provision of feedback by native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) interlocutors in task-based interaction to assess if there was any difference in (a) the amount of feedback, (b) opportunities for modified output, (c) immediate incorporations of feedback. Such differences would have important implications for assessing the value of learner-learner pair work and inform the design of instructional programs. Analyses revealed significant differences for amount,
nature, and response to feedback according to dyad type. Results showed that feedback is less common among adult NNSs, however, even they provided it in response to 32% of their interlocutors’ non-target like forms, which suggests that such interaction can be a valuable source of target language information for learners.

Where technical versus non-technical interaction is concerned, MacLean and Elwood (2008) have found that students show no preference between face-to-face versus Internet chatting, while An and Frick (2006) have found that students prefer face-to-face discussion for most tasks, however computer mediated communication (CMC) was preferred for simple learning tasks. Abrams (2003) compared the performance of three groups of learners (a control group, a synchronous CMC group, and an asynchronous CMC group) on three oral discussions tasks, and found that there was an increase in the quantity of language produced by students in the synchronous CMC group as compared to the other two groups, albeit no significant difference was shown in terms of the quality of language indicated among the three groups either lexically or syntactically. Kotter (2003) has suggested that online voice exchanges can contribute to successful second language acquisition (SLA) and the development of learners' metalinguistic abilities. The author compared the discourse between 29 language students from classes at a German and a North American university, and found that there was a marked difference between conversational repair in spoken interactions and in the CMC-based exchanges. Repair is defined as a reaction to some trouble spot in speech or nonverbal behavior that attempts to right the trouble spot. The trouble spot can be an error, but is not necessarily so; it is sometimes found where no detectable error occurs, such as word searches characterized by silence (MacLean, 1998). Jepson (2005) compared the patterns of repair moves in synchronous non-native speaker text chat rooms to voice chat rooms on the Internet and found a higher number of total repair moves made in voice chats and a significant difference between them and those made during text chats. This suggests that voice chats offer an environment that is more conducive to the negotiation of meaning and therefore of value for second language development.

4) PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) is a competency-based technical university that specializes in the fields of engineering and technology. It is located in the East Coast Industrial Belt of Peninsular Malaysia, which hosts a large number of multinational corporations in the chemical, petrochemical, manufacturing, automotive and biotechnology industries. Participants in the SMILE initiative are first year students who are enrolled in the university's compulsory first year English Communication courses. The gender composition of classes is almost equal and most students are between the ages of 18-23. They are from different engineering majors such as Software Engineering, Manufacturing Engineering and Occupational Safety and Health.

Tsukuba University is a four year national university, located approximately 80 kilometers from Tokyo. It is one of the more competitive Japanese universities to enter. Students come from throughout the Japanese archipelago, and they thus represent a geographic cross-section of highly-motivated Japanese university students. Participants in the SMILE initiative are first year freshmen who are enrolled in the university’s compulsory English Communications course. Gender composition is mixed, with an average age of 18. They are from different majors, including Humanities, Civil Engineering, Biology and one advanced-English class.

Japan is mostly a monolingual country with a large degree of cultural homogeneity. Understandably then, the majority of students have had limited opportunity for discourse in English, and their knowledge of the world beyond Japan is limited and academic. A survey of 250 student-participants found that their knowledge of the Muslim world was particularly limited. Using an eInstruction Interwrite Personal Response System (PRS),
students were asked to rate their knowledge in increments of 10 between 0 and 100 (see Figure 1). Results revealed that students largely perceived that they had very little knowledge of the topic, with an average answer of 20. This suggested that an exchange endeavour, such as SMILE, would be a worthwhile undertaking if it could promote further understanding in this one area alone. Additional motivation to undertake the project was that learners do not receive enough feedback or opportunity to interact in large classes and that they do not use the target language enough during interaction-inspired activities. Discussion between the researchers found other common obstacles to language learning, such as those described by Kassim and Mohd Radzuan (2008).

Conversing in a second language particularly in English can be demanding for second language learners; they [students] are often reluctant and embarrassed to communicate due to the fact that they are afraid they will commit grammatical inaccuracy. Concerns over accuracy often hinder students’ ability to speak fluently.

It was therefore decided to give students the opportunity to converse with peers from another country, and to observe if this resulted in more use of the target language. It was also hoped that such experiences would improve students’ fluency as well as give them an opportunity to use their English in an intercultural communications setting.

5) RESULTS TO DATE

Results of the SMILE initiative thus far are limited due to the short time since the project was conceived. It will take yet some time before the program is able to harmonize its objectives with existing curricular demands and develop tasks accordingly. Still, contact has been established between instructors at both locations, using Skype. An initial session between student representatives in Malaysia and the instructor in Japan has also been accomplished. Students were shown a PowerPoint presentation about places that the instructor went during his summer vacation as well as his activities. There were approximately 7.33 million users online when the exchanges were undertaken. Initial exchanges were attempted using audio and visual communication. Seven attempts were undertaken, with connection times ranging from 0.28 to 3.30 minutes. Particular difficulty was encountered establishing video communication, and sound quality varied. The eighth attempt resulted in a 5.13 minute connection, and a conversation with a student who spoke very well resulted; however technical difficulties thereafter required a switch to Skype’s text messaging. Questions ensued regarding the instructor’s houses Canada and Japan. Conversations typically featured self introductions, procedural discussion and questions regarding the PowerPoint presentation.

6) LIMITATIONS

Several limitations have been revealed thus far in the SMILE project, which present challenges to overcome before the full potential of this endeavour is realized. The most obvious shortcoming regards technical obstacles to effective VoIP communication. Notably, a lack of sufficient bandwidth prevented effective use of Skype audio and visual features, as mentioned above. Additional difficulties occur regarding differences in the school year and the scheduling of various holidays. To date, it has been challenging to find an extended period when both countries are in school, so as to properly introduce the format to students. The timing of each school’s class schedule and the length of classes also vary. Tsukuba University classes are 75 minutes whereas Universiti Malaysia Pahang classes are 90 minutes. Finally, the student ratio is unbalanced in some classes. Tsukuba University classes typically have 40-48 students, whereas the number of students in Universiti Malaysia Pahang classes is in the low thirties. Thus, there are a number of issues to be resolved before further progress can be accomplished; however, both instructors are optimistic that accommodations will ensure that further exchanges are carried out.

7) CONCLUSION

The above account describes how students...
from different cultures are currently or will soon be able to meet & learn about each other using VoIP technology such as Skype. It suggests that the incorporation of such experiences into the language learning curriculum will expose students to ‘real world’ skills and better prepare them for their futures. It also contends that such experiences will help them to better perceive the usefulness of English as a lingua franca and to develop fluency. Results of the SMILE initiative are admittedly limited to date, and several obstacles have been identified. However, essential progress has been achieved and further accomplishments in the near future are anticipated.

REFERENCES


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