Meet The Globe Project: Internet Communication Activities with Overseas Volunteers

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Abstract: *Meet The Globe project (here after MTG) where Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers and high school students exchange messages through e-mail for several months as a part of their intercultural education was started in 2000. Based on the practice of MTG at one elementary school and seven high schools, six important issues are proposed in order to utilize MTG at schools successfully. They are, 1) rigidity vs. flexibility, 2) group vs. individual, 3) resource persons vs. resource books, 4) etic vs. emic, 5) self disclosure vs. self presentation, 6) related topics vs. unrelated topics.*

Keywords: Intercultural education, e-mail, overseas volunteers, management,

1. Introduction

In Japan, a subject called Integrated Studies (Sogogakushu) was introduced at an elementary school and a junior high school in 2002 and at a senior high school in 2003. Integrated Studies is the new course where a teacher can teach intercultural education, environmental issues, health issues, social welfare, information and so on, as well as the regular subjects.

Since Integrated Studies is an additional course, it is a burden for the teacher to prepare. Knowing this situation, in 2000 we started the new project called Meet The Globe project (here after MTG) where Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers and high school students exchange messages through e-mail for several months as a part of their intercultural education.

In this paper, we will present the system of MTG first. Then we will discuss the key issues for utilizing MTG successfully based on our experience at several high schools and an elementary school.

2. Meet The Globe project
2. 1. The meaning of the exchange of e-mail with the Overseas Volunteers

Meet The Globe project was established by a group of undergraduate and graduate students in Kansai University. The purpose of this project was to introduce the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers to a school and to assist with Internet communication activities with these volunteers. By managing the project, the staffs also have a chance to observe the high schools.

Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers are the international volunteers that are sent by the Japanese government to share technology with developing countries. About 1000 volunteers are sent to about 80 different countries annually. The volunteers work in the various fields such as agriculture, fishery, teaching, animal

husbandry, computer science, and stay in the assigned developing country for two years.

As a part of the MTG project at a high school and elementary school, we proposed exchanging e-mail with these Japanese volunteers in order to promote the intercultural understanding.

The usefulness of the exchange of e-mail with the volunteers is as follows:
a) Students can communicate in Japanese instead of English
b) Students can learn about developing countries instead of developed countries
c) The volunteers are often closer in age to the students than their teachers.
d) Students can understand the developing countries from the Japanese volunteer's perspective

Since ICT has become familiar in schools, there have been many activities planned in the schools. However most of the time, the language used for interaction between two schools in different countries is English. In addition, one of the purposes for exchanging mail is to improve the Japanese students' ability of English. Thus, it is common to exchange e-mail with students in countries where English is spoken mainly such as the U.S.A., Australia, and England (e.g. Liaw & Johnson, 2001). In other words, the most of the exchanging e-mail program is designed to correspond in English with the students in developed countries. This kind of program tends to end up with dissatisfaction among the students because of the unbalanced English ability. For a Japanese student English is a second language and it takes time to write and read each sentence. On the other hand, the students in English speaking countries prefer to discuss the contents in detail by writing a few pages' report. Thus the English native students easily fade up after the self-introduction unless the program is carefully designed.

Therefore the language is one of the barrier when the students want to exchange information with the people in the other countries. In this sense, MTG is useful for the students since it is conducted in Japanese and also can get the information on developing countries.

For the MTG, the Overseas Volunteers will interact with the Japanese students voluntarily as well as doing their own work in the assigned country. Fortunately since the Volunteers are interested in exchanging information with the students, they are eager to do this without any special reward.

2. 2. The system of MTG

Three years have passed since the MTG started and a total of 8 schools have become involved. Figure 1 shows an outline of the MTG mechanism.

At first, the MTG staffs explain the purpose of the project to the Overseas Volunteers at three training institutes before they depart to their assigned countries. Then, about 40 to 50 volunteers express an interest in exchanging e-mail with students after they are in the assigned country and have settled down. When the staff of MTG receive the e-mail from the Overseas Volunteers, they can make a list of these volunteers. At the same time, the staff also makes a list of schools where the teachers are interested in joining this project. Before the school term begins, the staff assigns certain volunteers from the list to the school. This stage is called "matching".
After the matching, the exchange of e-mail starts at each school. The teacher in charge of the Integrated Study directly writes the first e-mail to the volunteer to set up

the exchange of e-mail with his/her students officially.   They also send information such as the subject, the lesson plan or the schedule of the classes.   When they receive the first e-mail from the teacher, the volunteers write a reply to the students by first introducing themselves.   These are the steps usually followed before starting the interaction.   Since we don't know an exact number for the volunteers who will express an interest in participating in this project every year, matching is not an easy task. It is, However, the most important step in the process of MTG.   So far among the undergraduate and graduate students at Kansai University who become the staff for MTG, one of them takes the role of "matching."

Figure 1
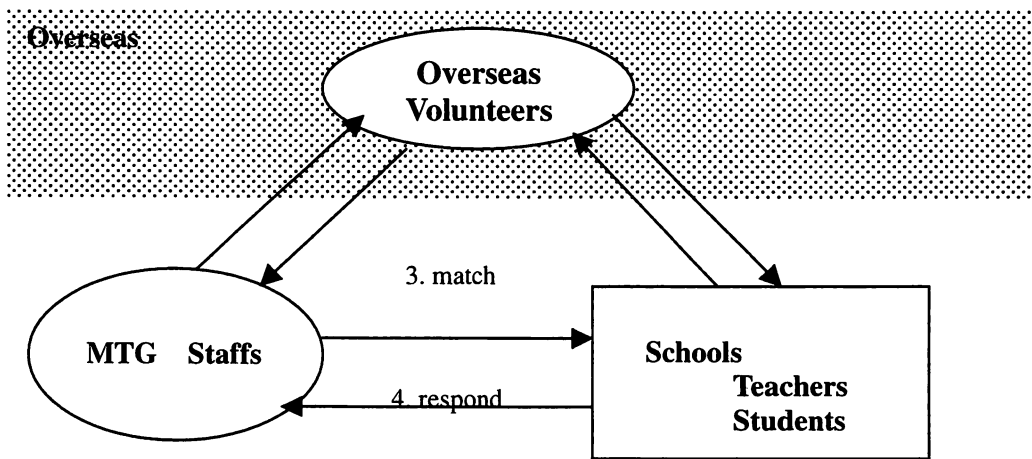
2. 3. The Uniqueness of MTG

In 2001, three senior high schools A, B, C participated in the MTG.   Thus, Kubota, Koike and Tokui (2003) looked into the cultural dimensions involved in the e-mail correspondence between Japanese Overseas Volunteers in the developing countries and those high school students.   The number of students who participated were 38, 21, and 44 respectively, and the number of volunteers who corresponded with them were 13, 3, and 10 respectively.   These Japanese volunteers were living in 18 different countries in Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands, and South America.   They worked in 20 different fields such as teaching, nursing, automobile maintenance, tree planting, water service and so on.

The content analysis of the e-mail messages exchanged between the volunteers and students revealed that after several months of correspondence from October 2001 to March 2002 (it varied depending on the schools), the Japanese Volunteers and the high school students talked about 179 different themes and communicated 1488 themes in total.   Common cultural themes occurring in the correspondence were: relationships   (9.5%),   food   (6.3%),   public   entertainment   news(4.0%), self-introduction(4.0%), weather (3.8%), holidays (3.6%), Japanese Volunteers' work (3.2%), explanation of the Volunteers' situation (2.5%), languages (2.4%), sports (2.1%) and housing (2.1%).

In addition, the transformation of the students' understanding of cultures from a

capital letter "Culture[1]" to a lower case letter "culture[2]" was found (Brislin, 1985). One of the reasons for this was that the students were able to see the cultures through the Japanese Volunteers' own experiences and views. For example, in Micronesia eating a dog is not rare. Thus when the Japanese students asked the volunteer about the food in Micronesia, he said that people in Micronesia eat a dog. He, However did not forget to add the remarks that in the islands, getting protein is very hard. If he said that Micronesian eat a dog without any explanation, the students will instantly think they are uncivilized. But he could add one more explanation because he knows well that in Japan all of the dogs are not for food but for pets. This is one of the good points to correspond with a Japanese volunteer instead of corresponding Micronesian directly.

Since the volunteers are Japanese, not only can they communicate in Japanese but also they can explain cross-cultural experiences from a Japanese perspective, which helps students understand other cultures more deeply.

This shows that the MTG is a unique way of learning about cultures and differs from learning by using books or just the Internet.

4. How to utilize MTG at school
4. 1. Place MTG in the annual curriculum

At most schools, MTG is placed in the second term. Then, depending on the target school year, MTG can also continue in the third term. In either case, the introduction of the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, and a basic knowledge of developing countries such as the structure of poverty, health and environment issues are studied in the first term before starting e-mail with the volunteers. For example, the students not only study about the specific country through books, video and the Internet, but also they invite returned Volunteers to their school to hear their experiences in the developing countries.

After the students have learned about their "partner's" culture, they are ready to exchange e-mail with the Volunteers. The method of exchanging e-mail varies depending on the facilities in the computer rooms at the school and the teaching plan. Here are two examples.

1) Direct interaction type

This is the type of class where the students are divided into several groups. Usually each group consists of three or four students and each group exchanges an e-mail with one Japanese volunteer. At first, they don't know each other so they start by introducing themselves briefly. Nowadays, it is common to exchange a digital picture of members' faces beginning with the first e-mail. Then they start to ask questions and answer. Basically the students interact with the volunteer directly throughout the term. It means that they exchange e-mail once in a week during the class period and continue for three to four months. Depending on the groups, they exchange e-mail at most 6 to 7 times during the term; at least 3 to 4 times. However the number of exchanged e-mail varies depending on the volunteers' situation such as

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[1] It means traditional culture such as tea ceremony, flower arrangement and so on.
[2] It means daily activity such as greeting, eating, talking and so on.

sickness, travel, or the condition of the computer and network.

2) Indirect type

At some schools, there aren't enough computers and facilities to use Internet freely. In that case, only a teacher corresponds with volunteer by e-mail and the information given by the volunteer is used as teaching material. At one senior high school, a volunteer makes a quiz about the assigned country and sends it to the teacher by e-mail. Then the students answer the quiz and the teacher sends the students' answers to the volunteer by e-mail. Then the volunteer can give detailed information in relation to the quiz and the answers. In this case, the exchange of e-mails is doubled or tripled only. Although it is limited, it is like team teaching. The teacher can follow up on the content of the quiz in his/her classes. This is one of the more useful methods of utilizing MTG when the number of volunteers and the number of the schools are unbalanced.

However, most of the schools prefer direct interaction and so far all the schools, except the above high school, e-mailed directly with the Overseas Volunteers.

4. 2. Sharing the contents of the e-mails

Since a small group of three or four students interacts with one volunteer, it becomes difficult to know what is happening in the other groups. Therefore, the teachers believe that sharing the contents of exchanged e-mails becomes a key factor in the success of the activities. One of the common ways of sharing information is a presentation in a class. The presentation is usually planned once or twice during each term. At the high schools, the students summarize the information which they got through exchanging e-mails and information from books and the Internet. Then they decide the topic such as street children in the Philippines and present the situation with their own opinions. At the same time, they show pictures sent by the volunteers or other items such as a bag, bracelet, post cards and so on. That is the way to share information and the process of interaction of each group.

At the elementary school, they use a mock newscast to report the information. They also play the roles of a volunteer and his/her friends in the assigned country. As the total number of students is large, each group has only about ten or fifteen minutes for a presentation. However it seems that the presentation is the most useful strategy for sharing information.

The teachers at the another senior high school, always make a file of the whole e-mail exchange. They print all of the e-mails and keep them in a file for each group. These days, instead of keeping a file, another teacher stores all of the e-mail messages in a Web site and makes a CD-ROM after the term. Utilizing a Web site or a file is another way to see the other teams' activities during the term. MTG also has a Web site[3] and there is a site where each school can access and upload the process. In that way we can see how each school share the information and give the encouragement to each other.

However there is still a difficult problem left in terms of sharing information among the volunteers. The volunteers in a developing country usually cannot access the Web site because of the limited Internet infrastructure. Thus each volunteer who

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[3] MTG URL: http://www.med.kutc.kansai-u.ac.jp/~meetg/

participates MTG does not have a chance to know the other groups' situation, unless the students intentionally include it in their e-mails. This is a problem which needs to be solved.

4. 3. Difference between elementary school and high school

In 2002, one elementary school participated in MTG. 13 volunteers corresponded with the sixth grade students. They had a presentation twice during the term. Contrary to the participated high schools, the purpose of exchanging e-mail at the elementary school seemed to prepare for those presentations. To gather the specific information for the presentation, the elementary students asked the questions to the volunteers in the e-mails. Most of the time, the students ask three or four questions and the volunteer answers one by one in the following e-mail. The volunteers also started to ask a new question to the students, but it did not help to expand the topics. It is because of the teacher's rigid attitude towards exchanging e-mail.

In order to present the situation vividly, the students also asked for pictures from the volunteers. The pictures helped a lot to promote understanding of the situation. However, once in a while, it is difficult to understand a picture by itself. In that case, the teacher herself asked a question to the volunteer and tried to understand the situation first. Thus it can be said that in the case of the elementary school, the teacher played the role of mediator.

However, at the senior high schools, the teachers seldom intervene in the process of exchanging e-mails. When they do, they mention the situation of the students or computers. For example, if the students could not e-mail on exam days at the right time and delayed their reply, then the teacher follows up and tells the reasons instead of a student. Or when a computer breaks down, the teacher explains what happened. Thus the teachers at a high school play a role of staff support for the students rather than a mediator.

These are the main difference so far found in the practice of MTG at elementary school and high school.

5. Key issues to be considered

Based on the practice of MTG at elementary school and high school, six important issues are proposed to be considered. These are the followings.

1) Rigidity vs. Flexibility

If the schedule of the teaching plan is very tight and rigid, the content of the interaction between students and volunteers also becomes rigid. For example, as seen at the elementary school, since there were two planned presentations in the teacher's mind, she seemed to emphasize the content of the presentation to her students. Thus, the students always asked the volunteers three or four questions in each e-mail without writing any description of the students' own situation. They only included a few sentences such as, "we are going to study trip to Hiroshima next week" besides these questions. Then the volunteer returned the e-mail with the answer to each question and a question to the students like "what are you going to do in Hiroshima?" But the answers sent back by the students were very short, only one line or half a line. Thus it

can be said that the rigid interaction of question and answer is very efficient and effective in gathering the information for a presentation, but not for cultivating the personal information and here-and-now information.

When the schedule of the school term is tight or the target year grade is low, this question and answer style exchange will work. Actually the students at the elementary school learned about the Sahara Desert, the life style of the children, the structure of houses, Aids, foods, education system, cultivation of shrimp and so on. The volume of the information they got from the volunteers was very rich and worth reading. However it is better to consider the purpose of interaction between the volunteers and the students.

2) Group vs. Individual

Because there are not enough Overseas Volunteers in the list of MTG, there are not any other ways besides grouping the students for their interaction. Thus grouping cannot be avoided. However in their e-mail, the students can identify their names and personality if they wish. Actually, it is common to exchange pictures of faces at the beginning with an introduction as mentioned before. However once the exchange of e-mail has started, it becomes more varied. Sometimes the group discusses the content and decides the questions to be asked before sending its e-mails. In that case, they usually do not include any signatures but write at the end like "from Thai group." When each member of one group has different questions, they ask them one by one with their signatures. In that case, the volunteer also responds to each question by writing the name of the questioner at the beginning. Making e-mail personalized by writing a signature or not influences the contents of the e-mails. The more personality appears in an e-mail, the more the contents expand in the many directions that cannot be predicted easily. It is worth considering whether to write the signature or not when a group of people interact with a volunteer.

3) Resource Persons vs. Resource Books

Although the exchanging e-mail lasts for several months, still the time is limited in understanding the other culture and society. Thus it is better to collect the information not only from the volunteers but also from other resources like books and the Internet. Sometimes you can find a question such as, "I don't know about Indonesia at all. So please tell me what it is like?" This kind of question is very vague and you can tell that this student has not studied by herself before asking the question. Questions like "What is the population? How is the weather?" also puzzle the volunteer. A volunteer is a resource person but not a resource book. The students should study about the topics with books or the Internet before asking questions. For example, after checking the weather in Chili, one student asked a volunteer whether it is really hot in his place as he had read. The volunteer said that it is not hot at all because he is working at a mountain site. This is one of the ways to understand the variety in every situation through the eyes of the volunteers. In order to use the limited time efficiently for exchanging e-mails, it is better to realize that a volunteer is not a mere resource book but a resource person with his own value system. He/she can provide a lot of information more than a student expects, but it all depends on how one asks the question. Before asking to a volunteer, it might be better to ask the same question to yourself and try to think about the answer. That way the

question can be checked as to whether it is appropriate or not.

4) Etic vs. Emic[4]

As mentioned before, the question and answer pattern is very popular. However if the students and teachers hold this pattern rigidly, the daily experiences of volunteer's life in the developing country will seldom be utilized in the process. The questions occurring to the students are general, in other words "etic" although they have studied hard at the library. The perspective of the students and the teachers in Japan are different from the volunteers working in a different environment in a developing country. The experience of the volunteer is more "emic," in other words culture specific. Their experience might differ depending on not only the country but also the region, society, religion, sex, age, and even personality. Thus it is necessary to think carefully when writing an e-mail. The teachers and the students should keep in mind that their questions are based on their own perspectives and their own value system, but not on the volunteers' perspectives or the native persons' perspectives. The reality should not be cut off by a certain perspective. It means that the rigid, well planned question and answer type of exchange does not utilize the perspective of the volunteer.

5) Self disclosure vs. Self presentation

E-mail is the medium which has the function of regular mail but has more publicity at the same time. Thus students tend to forget to include their personal opinions, feeling and personal experiences during this activity. This is especially true on the students' side, because they are interacting as a group. However, as I mentioned, to make the best use of a volunteer, it is better to talk more about personal opinions in relation to the topic in addition to checking the facts. The dialogue between the people who hold different values can create a new perspective. These days, some pictorial symbols are used to show their feeling and some useful URL addresses are presented in order to show the general information. By using these techniques, both the students and the volunteers can save the time for confirming the general information and can have more time to write personal opinions and feelings. Generally the more you talk about your own personal matters, the more the other partner starts to talk about their own. That is the way the interaction becomes unique.

6) Related Topics vs. Unrelated Topics

There are many ways to explore various topics. One of them is to write the opinion relating to the previous mail like an imagination game. For example, the volunteers in Micronesia once mentioned his students' hair style. The Japanese high school student remembered when she had long hair at her elementary school and started to talk about how difficult it is to keep long hair clean and beautiful everyday. The volunteer continued, mentioning that girls in Micronesia use Hashi (chopsticks) as a hair clip and some of them are infested with lice. Thus the topic of the students' hair style in Micronesia becomes the topic of lice in Micronesia and Japan after the

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[4] The words etic and emic come from phonetics and phonemics respectively. Etic approach is to study the common topics appeared across the cultures and emic one is to study the topic typically found in a certain culture.

world war Ⅱ. This is an example of how the topic is explored. Both the students and volunteer would never think of talking about lice before starting this exchange. This is the power of interaction and a valuable part of exchanging e-mails with the volunteers in the developing countries.

6. Conclusion

Although several steps have to be followed to start MTG, it is not difficult to start to exchange e-mail with Overseas Volunteers at any school. The most important factor for the successful e-mail exchange is not the mechanical part but the content. The contents vary depending on people's values. If the teacher believes the presentation is very important, then the way of exchanging e-mail becomes more or less a question and answer type to bring out as much information as possible from the volunteer. If the teacher lets the students exchange e-mail freely, then the students' style of exchanging e-mail is like a chat or a mobile phone mail. It means that the sentences are very short but with a lot of pictorial symbols and frank without having any honorific form. This kind of interaction works when talking about anguish of heart. Since the exchange of e-mails lasts for several months, both styles can be used appropriately.

The contents are determined not by the mechanisms but by the people's mind. Learning can occur even if it is a chat-like exchange. It is up to the teachers' judgment. The effectiveness of MTG will be determined based on the various factors such as the lesson plan, the purpose of the interaction, the teachers' emphasis throughout the class, evaluation, students' record and so on. We need to keep in mind that these factors are based on peoples' value system but not ICT itself. Indeed the advancement of ICT has the potential to enable worldwide communication and information sharing. However it is peoples' mind and attitude toward education which can change the "cramming" intelligence to intelligence based on the collected information.

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