

**Class Report: “Email Pals” for Pushing Students
Towards the Global English Community**
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Abstract

This paper summarizes a simple correspondence between freshman Multi-cultural Communications majors at Asia University and “overseas-Chinese”¹ students studying in Taiwan. The correspondence was mutually arranged by the author (a CELE Visiting Faculty Member) and by a Taiwanese instructor at a Taipei-area university², and involved questions asked by the Japanese students to the Taiwan-based students. Question topics included: the students’ and their families’ national and linguistic backgrounds, use of English in daily life, personal history of English study, importance of English for one’s future, and Taiwan-based students’ recommendations for the Japanese freshman students’ English study. Following the correspondence, the Japanese freshmen were asked follow-up questions regarding differences in English skill and international experience between themselves and their partners. Based on my findings, in this paper I will illustrate and argue that correspondence is an effective means for freshmen students to experience meaningful, everyday English with a non-Japanese peer, and also to enable Japanese students to see the possibility of entering an imagined global English community.

¹ “Overseas-Chinese” is the term used by National Taiwan Normal University. It means persons of Chinese parentage and/or family background who do not have a Taiwan/ROC passport. (For Taiwan university purposes, this includes Chinese people with PROC passports).

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Background

Much discussion has occurred concerning the role and effects of “global English” in Japanese educational circles. It has been proposed, (see: Seilhamer, 2013) that while Japanese students view their potential as English communicators with a global community positively, they do not necessarily view themselves as part of that community. In other words, Japanese students tend to see themselves as separate from the very global community with which they are studying English to communicate with. This seeming paradox underscores the need for Japanese university students to experience English communicatively, freely, and in a meaningful context.

As suggested by Mark Seilhamer (2013), one of the simplest ways for classroom teachers to begin enabling such a situation is to open lines of communication between Japanese students and foreign students. More than ever, international communication between students has been facilitated by the development of IT and digital devices. With this in mind, I arranged for a 14-student freshman class of Multi-Cultural Communications majors (all students are Japanese) to engage in an open-ended, but teacher-controlled, exchange with overseas-Chinese students studying in Taiwan. The overseas-Chinese students were not native speakers of English.

This class project occurred during the first semester at Asia University, in June and July of 2015.

Background of Partner-Students

Prior to the students’ initial contact, a Taiwanese professor of English and I arranged the project over a period of several months.

Although the non-Japanese partner-students were studying in Taiwan for the 2014-15 school year, most of them were not Taiwanese. Students in their program are classified as “overseas-Chinese” within the Division of Preparatory Programs, at National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU), where they studied in 2014-15. Generally speaking, the students’ parents are

originally from China or Taiwan, but the students themselves grew up and/or were educated elsewhere. According to the Taiwanese professor who helped facilitate this project, most of the overseas-Chinese students speak Chinese as their first language, while some speak other languages.

Most of these students were aged 18-19 and were studying at National Taiwan Normal University for one year to in preparation for regular degree study at this or another Taiwan university (some study a second year because of a need to further improve their Chinese skills). They study the subjects Taiwanese students study in high school, such as Chinese, Math, English, Science, and Social Science. At the time this class project commenced, in June 2015, the partner-students based in Taiwan were just completing their mandatory minimum one-year of study in Taiwan.

For purposes of my class project, the complex national-identities and multi-lingual identities of the partner-students were ideal. The primary aim was for students on both ends to communicate in English. The associated benefits of such interactions, I believe, were that as well as communicating in English, students could correspond with same-age peers in Asia about their similar interests and struggles with English. In addition, this particular group of “overseas-Chinese” were ideal language partners since many of them actually use(d) English as a daily means of communication. Furthermore, many have complex national and/or linguistic identities. The circumstances of such students allowed my students to see first-hand the communicative practicality of English, and the diversity within it.

Method

In May, my Taiwanese partner professor explained our project to a large group of students in her program at NTNU in Taipei, and she accepted all who volunteered to join. She told me that many of the students in her program were keen to practice English with Japanese

students, and were in fact quite excited by the opportunity. 22 students based in Taiwan volunteered to join the project.

After my Taiwanese partner and I had exchanged class photos, first names of students³, and contact-details (starting with email addresses), all 14 Japanese students in my class were then assigned two overseas-Chinese partners, one of whom was the preferred, priority partner (there was overlap because there were more “overseas” students than Japanese). Thus, the NTNU students each were assigned just one Japanese partner from my class.

After explaining the open-ended nature of the class project to my students, and notifying them that there were likely to be two assignments consisting of interview-style questions, I asked my students to initiate contact with their assigned partners via email. Eventually, they all did, and all later received introductory responses. This was followed by the first of two interview-style assignments.

“Interview” Questions / Responses

The first round of questions posed by my students was mainly to learn about their partners. Specific questions related to three general topics: The background of the partner-students, their language and culture, and their knowledge of/interest in Japan.

It occurred that more than half of the partner-students were Malaysian by nationality, while the remainder were nationals of mainland China or Hong Kong. Because I wanted my students to know more about their partners’ backgrounds, I had them ask questions about where their partners had lived and grown up, as well as where and at what kinds of schools their partners had studied at. This was of considerable interest because all of the overseas partners were already living and studying in foreign countries, though they were the same age as my

³ Certain safety precautions were of course recommended: I advised my class not to offer any personal information such as home address, and I stated that it was unnecessary to share their full names with their overseas partners.

students. Some had yet more diverse backgrounds (one had attended kindergarten in Australia, for example), and some had often moved back and forth between Taiwan and Malaysia, or between Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Of particular interest, in that we were a language class, was the overseas partners' languages of use and study. My students posed questions about their partners' parents' languages, and the languages they spoke at home or to other family members or friends. Although only two of the overseas partners were of mixed-nationality parentage, many of them used multiple languages in everyday life, as is common among educated people in Malaysia or Hong Kong. Some (unedited) sample responses to the questions: "*What languages do you speak? Do you speak different languages with your parents and brothers/sisters and friends?*" are as follows:

*[My partner] can speak Chinese, English, Malay, Hokkien and a little bit of Cantonese....
He speaks Chinese to his parents, siblings and most of his friends.*

She speaks Chinese, Cantonese, English, Malay, and bit of Japanese because her boyfriend's mother is a Japanese.... She speaks Chinese with her mother, father and elder brother. But she speaks Cantonese with her sister and her younger brother.

She mostly speak mandarin with her parents but siblings she will sometimes speak in English with them. For friends, there is three languages differently among different people: Mandarin, English and Malay.

The final question regarding the partners' backgrounds ("*How often do you use English? Why do you need to practice English?*") received diverse responses, ranging from "Every day" to

“She seldom use it”. Several of the students expressed that they used English daily when communicating with friends of other nationalities, or when chatting online. In general, respondents indicated that they either occasionally or frequently used English, and that they considered English of high importance.

The final question “About Japan” was designed to elicit what my students’ overseas partners knew or liked about Japan. The overall intention was to make Japanese students more aware of how their country was perceived by students elsewhere in Asia. The partners’ responses to the questions “*What do you know about Japanese people? What things about Japanese culture do you like?*” received a fairly predictable array of responses, ranging from references to sushi, cosplay, samurai, beautiful girls, and J-pop to more considered descriptions of Japanese people as “friendly”, “polite and tidy”, and “well-mannered and diligent”.

After everyone had completed their first interviews, my class continued with the second round of questions. This second round of questions posed by my students was again to learn about, but also to learn *from*, their partners. As before, questions related to three general topics: The overseas partner’s history of English learning/study; the partner’s expectation of speaking, using, and studying English in the future; and the overseas partner’s recommendation for my students’ English study.

Responses revealed that the partners had generally started learning English at a younger age than most students in Japan. At least half of the partner-students had been learning English since kindergarten or early primary school. Most of them had had about 12 years of English study. Accordingly, most of the overseas-partners stated that they expected to continue using English in their future. Several expressed a desire to study or to work elsewhere overseas.

Finally, the overseas-partners shared some interesting tips for my class’s future English study. Sample responses included:

*Watching American movie with English subtitles will be the best practices for you....
or dare to chat more often with people who is good English.*

Be passionate is the key to learn everything.

This second round of questions concluded the required contact between my students and the overseas-Chinese partner students. Although some students continued with intermittent contact, further contact thereafter was not required for purposes of my class.

Teacher Follow-up Questions

Following the conclusion of the partner-interviews, I asked my students to write answers to questions on four topics. These were: (1) *How did you contact your partner?* and *How many times did your partner contact you?*; (2) *Compare your English skill to your partner's*; (3) *Compare your international experience to your partner's*; (4) *What is different about your partner's life and yours?*

The results revealed that most of my students had used the instant messaging system LINE to contact their partners, though some continued to use email after the initial contact. Certain students had sent large groups of questions to their partners at once (i.e., they bundled the questions I provided), while others sent one question at a time, and subsequently had many more incidents of contact (some reported 40 to 50 contacts in total). The vast majority of my class – 10 of 13 students – reported that their overseas-partner had better English skills than they did. Two students thought their partner's English was at the same level, and one student reported their partner having a “lower” level than his own. Similarly, most students expressed that their partners had more international experience than their own, though this was virtually guaranteed by the fact that the partner-students were already “overseas” and studying full-time in a foreign country. Regarding question (4), many of my students also reported that the difference(s)

between them and their partners was that their partners were more multi-lingual and multi-cultural. Sample responses included:

His family speaks English and Chinese but my family speaks only Japanese.

She uses four languages when she communicate with her parents and brothers. I use only Japanese when I communicate with my family. And she is study hard. It is the most different things between my partner and me.

When [my partner] was child, he spoke English, Malay and so on... I can speak just only Japanese. He is good at the science and math. I respect him.

My partner is surrounded by various foreigners.

These last two responses are noteworthy in that they are not particularly accurate as points of distinction. The former writes that she “can speak just only Japanese”, but she can in fact speak English at a lower-intermediate level. The latter comment that the partner is “surrounded by various foreigners” is presumably true, but the same could be said of my own students. Asia University has a large population of international students, and of course Tokyo itself has a sizeable number of foreign residents and visitors. These appear to be cases of my students not viewing themselves (or not viewing Japan) as part of the global English community in Asia, despite evidence to the contrary.

The first two quoted responses above both note what I consider a more salient distinction: the large differences in linguistic / national identities in the domestic sphere between the overseas Chinese and my Japanese freshman students. To my knowledge, not one student in my class

spoke any language but standard Japanese with family members, nor did any have notably “mixed” parentage. This contrasted sharply with the overseas-Chinese partners – a difference noted by several of my students.

Reflection

One of the logistical challenges in having Japanese university students contact overseas students is the unique dates of the Japanese school year. In fact, my class’s period of contact was slightly rushed because, by request of my Taiwanese partner professor, we could not begin the contact until her students had completed their end-of-year exams (in June). This, however, left only about six weeks for the communication to be completed. Although I had originally judged this to be sufficient time, unanticipated logistical matters (partners not responding promptly; mis-typed email addresses, etc.) slowed the whole process down. To reap the full benefit of the experience, it would be ideal to have an entire semester or year for the partners to interact. Unfortunately, CELE teachers are assigned freshman International Relations / Multi-cultural Communications classes for one semester only, making international “pen pals” more logistically challenging, though (as evidenced) certainly still possible. Unfortunately, this difficulty left less time than I would have liked for reflection and peer-sharing. I strongly advise CELE instructors interested in a similar “pen pal” activity to plan carefully and allow students a significant period of reflection. For example, leaving time for students to do a simple presentation of sorts about their overseas partner – and, in particular, their overseas partner’s use of English – would be ideal.

This project was not designed to reveal any particular insight into my students’ self-image vis-à-vis their status as (Asian) members of a global English community; however, student responses to the project did suggest that my students generally do not consider themselves “international”, or as members of that community. Ideally then, by being motivated to speak and learn English via contact with non-Japanese overseas, our students can see a “model”, via first-

hand experience, of same-age peers in Asia who are more likely to see themselves as members of that global English community. And from there, our students may in fact see themselves as capable of entering that community as full members, rather than as distant observers.

Furthermore, I strongly recommend that CELE teachers who wish to employ a similar activity select largely multi-lingual overseas students with as broad an international experience as possible.

Conclusion

Enabling a correspondence between freshman Multi-cultural Communications (or International Relations) majors at Asia University and overseas students, via email or social networking, is a very easy and highly recommended activity despite some logistical challenges. Such an activity provides a means for freshmen students to not only enjoy personal English communication with a non-Japanese “friend”, but also to experience meaningful, everyday usage of English with a same-age peer. Provided the activity is carefully planned and opportunities for further exchange are left open, this form of correspondence will potentially encourage Japanese students to feel more confident “entering” the global community of English users.

Reference

Seilhamer, M. F. (2013). Obstacles to Japanese membership in the imagined global community of English users. *The Language Teacher* 37(5), 39-43.

Appendix

The first set of interview questions:

Background:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Where were you born?- What's your nationality?- Where do you live (usually)? In what places have you lived (before)?- What kind of schools have you studied at so far? Where were they?
Language & Culture:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Where were your parents born?- What language(s) do your parents speak?- What languages do you speak? Do you speak different languages with your parents and brothers/sisters and friends?- How often do you use English? Why do you need to practice English?
About Japan:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Do you know a lot about Japan? Have you been to Japan before?- What do you know about Japanese people? What things about Japanese culture do you like?

The second set of interview questions:

SPECIFIC history of English learning/study e.g., - When did you first begin English (including what age)? <ul style="list-style-type: none">- How many years of school in English (full-time/part-time) did you have?- How many years of school in English (full-time/part-time) did you have?- Have you ever studied/lived in an English-speaking country?- How often do you use, speak, and write English these days?
Do you expect to speak/use/study English in the future (for example, in your job)?
Recommendation for MY English study? e.g., - What kind of books should I read? <ul style="list-style-type: none">- What kind of English practice is best for me?- What kind of study should I do?

The in-class follow-up reflection questions (further discussed by the instructor and students):

Follow-up reflection regarding overseas partners:

1. (a) How did you contact him/her?

 (b) How many times did your partner contact you?
2. Compare your English skill to your partner's.
3. Compare your international skill to your partner's.
4. What is different about your partner's life and your life?