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English Language Learning Through Culture Promotion and Computer Assisted Language Learning Technology

– The English at Fudai Wiki

by Joseph Britton
Simon Thomas

Abstract

Computer mediated communication is enabling students of English as a foreign language greater possibilities for the practice and development of their language skills and technological knowledge. With English speakers based overseas this also presents opportunities for greater cultural exchange and learning. However, students rarely have the chance to meet other English speakers face-to-face in the language classroom.

At Osaka Prefecture University, students of English took part in Wiki-based asynchronous communications with a group of students from France, who then traveled to Osaka to join them in the English language classroom and reinforce the online relationships. This presented unique opportunities for learning and exchange to both groups.

Describing how this exchange took place and the developments that were made over two years in an action research process, this paper will illustrate qualitative responses to investigation on the English language learning, cultural exchange and technological levels from both the Japanese and French students. It will conclude by presenting the implications that language and cultural exchanges facilitated by Wiki technology can have on language learners and learning.

Introduction

International communicative exchange programs have been documented as aiding the facilitation of language learning and cultural awareness for many years with positive results (Barson, J., Frommer, J., & Schwartz, M. 1993; Fedderholdt, 2001; Harrison, 2006; Ho, 2000; Merryfield, 2003; Nagel, 1999; Warschauer, 1995). Studies have so far been limited to singular examinations of either Internet facilitated text-based exchange, audio-conferencing (Hauk & Hampel, 2004) or video conferencing (O’Dowd, 2005). In 2009 and 2010 at Osaka Prefecture University (OPU) this was taken a step further.

Facilitated by the English at Fudai Wiki online classroom (http://www.englishatfudai.pbworks.com) an English language text/letter exchange was initiated between students at OPU and Ecole Internationale des Sciences du Traitement de l’Information (EISTI), an engineering and technology school in Cergy near Paris in France in order to increase cross-cultural understanding. OPU students produced technology-assisted audio and audiovisual projects to increase the knowledge transfer to the EISTI students who
later travelled to OPU to take part in academic internships. Upon their arrival at OPU, the two groups of students met face-to-face in the English language classroom to take part in further classroom projects together, thereby bringing enriched meaning and purpose to the learning and use of English and technology for the OPU students. The exchanges that took place benefited the EISTI students before they left France in increasing their understanding, knowledge of, and preparations for living in Japan and studying at OPU and aided their integration into student life once they had arrived in Japan.

This paper will:
- Outline the process instigating this exchange,
- Demonstrate how the initial exchange evolved to accommodate the second groups of Japanese and French students,
- Illustrate student responses to language, cultural and technological engagement facilitated by this exchange, and,
- Discuss the student responses and the implications this has for future English language cross-cultural exchanges.

**How the English Language Cultural Exchange was Instigated**

Osaka Prefecture University (OPU) has academic exchange agreements with over 74 Universities and Institutes in 24 countries around the world. Approximately 40 international students visit OPU each year to study presenting invaluable opportunities in language and cultural exchange to many OPU students.

In both July 2009 and 2010 a total of 20 students from EISTI visited OPU on internship programs. Five months before arriving in Japan they were contacted by an OPU English language instructor through the International Student Centers of both institutes with regards to taking part in the cultural exchange. All EISTI students agreed and subsequently wrote a letter of introduction in English to OPU students and then several follow-up letters to OPU students’ replies. After arriving in Japan, the EISTI students also joined the OPU students in several English classes. A total of 120 OPU students were involved within this project.

**The Evolution of the English Language Cultural Exchange**

**Year 1**

In 2009, the first year for this exchange to take place, a thematic analysis of the introductory emails from the EISTI students to OPU students revealed that their questions and interests centered on a need for a greater understanding of student life at Osaka Prefecture University, Japanese culture and travel around Japan. From the start of the semester, over the 3 months before the EISTI students arrived in Japan, both groups of students corresponded with each
other by letter/text facilitated by the English at Fudai Wiki. While this was taking place OPU students also created audio recordings on the subject of the ‘Culture of Osaka’ using Audacity (a free open-source software for recording sound) and produced photo/video slideshows complete with audio narration on the theme of ‘Osaka Prefecture University’ using Microsoft Windows Movie Maker. All audio recordings and photo/video slideshows were made available to EISTI students via the English at Fudai Wiki before their arrival in Japan to assist them in familiarizing themselves with cultural aspects that they might encounter. The photo/video slideshows were also published and are available on the video sharing website You Tube (http://www.youtube.com).

One week after their arrival in Japan, the EISTI students came into the English language classroom and met the students they had communicated with by Wiki letter. They were interviewed in English about their plans and desires for travel around Japan, and based on these interviews the OPU students researched and produced travel guides that EISTI students utilized in their exploration and discovery of Japan and cultural integration. The collaboratively produced English language Japan travel guides were also added to the English at Fudai Wiki creating a students’ portfolio guide to Osaka Prefecture University, Osaka and Japan for international exchange students.

Qualitative research conducted at the end of this first exchange indicated that access to computer facilities and technological difficulties had presented anxiety to OPU students concerned with completing projects within deadlines given. Based on this, the cultural exchange projects were adapted in an action research process for the second year.

**Year 2**

In Year 2, OPU students became engaged on language, cultural and technological levels to produce learner-initiated, collaborative group projects on the theme of “The Differences and Similarities Between Life as a Student in Japan and France”. Based on topics of the students’ choice these projects were facilitated by English at Fudai Wiki-based, written, collaborative preparation to in-class communicative activities. In-class activities, supported by web-based listening and pronunciation activities, pair and group, face-to-face and two-way intercom audio communication assisted in preparing OPU students for face-to-face interviews to take place with the EISTI students after they arrived in Japan. Having spoken with and interviewed EISTI students and exchanged cultural information OPU students produced group presentations highlighting cultural differences they had discovered. These presentations were watched and partially evaluated on their content by the students from France.
Continuing the action research process, qualitative research at the end of the semester found that technological and deadline issues that had caused anxiety in the previous years’ students did not trouble students this second time.

**The English at Fudai Wiki**

The English at Fudai Wiki (Figure 1.) is the online tool that facilitated the OPU collaborative projects throughout these International exchanges. The Wiki platform is a password protected, closed network of English language multi-media web pages. It allows students to create, share information and work together on projects in an online socially collaborative environment and community (Ebersbach & Glazer, 2004; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Jonassen, Beck & Wilson, 1999; Lund, 2008).

Wikis have previously been used in foreign language teaching to develop learner identity, autonomy, motivation, increased dialogue, relationships and interaction both on and off-line (Barson, Frommer & Schwartz, 1993; Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Warschauer, Turbee & Roberts, 1996).
The key feature of the English at Fudai Wiki is the affordance it allows to students in the construction of knowledge. Piaget’s theories of constructivism (1953) and Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of Zones of Proximal Development propose that individuals collaborate in order to learn together and create meaning and understanding in any given situation. The English at Fudai Wiki facilitates this collaboration between students and illustrates the differences that can be achieved in learning with assistance from peers for exploration and active learning. The following three examples of OPU students’ letters to EISTI students show how the efforts of group members assisted in learning and language production.
Example 1.
NOTE: As the original assignment for collaborative editing was highlighted by the colors of red, orange and blue, three different type-face styles have been chosen to signal a student’s correction suggestion: bookman oldstyle, underline, and bold

I want to answer your questions. Our lessons are normal. Let me see, we use computer(s) and screen(s). (When) We go and have lunch, (we) use (the) cafeteria(s) clubroom(s) classroom(s) and so on.

bookman oldstyle - Miki       underline - Naomi       bold - Kanako

Example 2.
My Golden Week plan is to go to the baseball stadium and watch a movie. The movie (which I want to watch) is Conan which is (which is, ) a popular Japanese animation (animation). (I’m looking) forward to going (going watching it).

bookman oldstyle - Kanami       underline - Manami       bold - Kanako

Example 3.
The buildings in OPU are put (numbered<differentiated by>) the alphabet and the number, for example A1. In B12 and B13 you can get many kinds of foods. At lunch time their (those) buildings are very jammed (with many people) (crowded with many people), so you had better (should) go to eat as soon as possible.
All students dress their favorite clothes and (of course) you may (can) dress (as you like), too.
I want to visit to (to) France, and want to go the Louvre. Please teach (tell) me the nice (any nice places) place in France.
When you come to Japan, you should visit Kyoto and go to (and to see) (you should visit Kyoto and some temples there) some temples. If you (To see) see their (those) buildings and gardens and feel their atmosphere, you’ll become easy (they make it easy for you) to understand wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi is Japanese world view, (the spirit of) aesthetic (aesthetics?) and transience. Have a nice a visit to Japan!!!

bookman oldstyle – Takuya       underline - Takaya       Bold- Atsushi

Methodology
At the end of each of the two semesters students from both OPU and EISTI took part in qualitative research to determine the responses to the principle features of the international
exchange projects. These features are the engagement of students from Osaka Prefecture University on three levels:

1. Use of Computer Assisted Language Learning Technology (CALL) and the English at Fudai Wiki
2. English Language Development
3. Cultural Understanding

Collected in Japanese the thematic analysis of the translated responses by students revealed the following data.

**Results of Investigation**

The English at Fudai Wiki was perceived by 86% of OPU students to have a positive benefit on English language learning.

Student responses illustrated that the English at Fudai Wiki compelled them to use English language. To be able to navigate within the web-based Wiki and complete the assigned tasks English had to be understood; coupled with the use of online technology this increased the motivation of students for learning.

Student comments included:

"Because it’s all in English, even if I don’t want to, I have to read it"

"I can learn because I can’t avoid facing English"

"English skill is going to improve in the environment where we are making our homepages, working together and writing compositions"

"Using computers we can study with more fun and interesting things than the traditional way of study"

"I think it’s good because it’s a new style and the opportunity to use computers will increase in the future"

**The English at Fudai Wiki is a Valuable Tool, agreed 87% of OPU students.**

The English at Fudai Wiki was seen by students to grant them affordances that were not available in other classes. It gave them access to program information and tasks via the Internet accessible both on campus and at home. The Wiki allowed students to preview and review class
activities and collaborate with other students on projects while being in their own homes; all bringing added convenience to learning.

Student comments included:

"I could check the class information either at home or school anytime"

"There is a lot of time to work with our groups even though we are at home and we can share work easily"

"I could check what I did before and group members' work"

"It was convenient because I could check the assignments of next week's plan"

"It was economical because we didn't have to use paper"

28% of OPU students thought that the English at Fudai Wiki was easy to use.

To be able to navigate around, and use the English at Fudai Wiki was seen as difficult by a large number of students. For many: 1. it was the first time to use an English language online classroom and 2. the number of pages and amount of information contained on the Wiki, in English, was seen as a barrier to its use. Despite this students were able to get used to using the Wiki. These opinions are reflected in some of the comments that were given.

Student comments included:

"There is too much information"

"It is all written in English so it is difficult to understand"

"It is very hard but I can get new skills"

"From the beginning I really didn't know how to use it but after using it many times I can remember"

"It is colorful and everything is easy to understand but it takes a long time to understand because everything is in English"
90% of OPU students said that classmates’ suggestions helped them to think about their English and improve more.

Students saw the collaborative affordances of the English at Fudai Wiki as very positive. Being able to work together, to help each other, by giving suggestions to improve each other's English was very helpful. It also forged stronger relationships within the working groups. Student comments included:

"My classmates pointed out my mistakes that I didn't notice"

"When I'm in trouble, it helps me"

"If I don't understand by myself then I can work together with my group to solve the problem"

"We can exchange many opinions in our groups and study English in a way that is easy to understand"

"Cooperating and working together makes group relationships stronger and we can get the English skills too"

"International exchange and the project assignments helped me to improve my English" – agreed by 93% of OPU students.

For many of the OPU students this was the first time that they had used English as a communicative tool with non-Japanese. This not only put students in the situation where they were unable to use their first language but also forced them to consider the English vocabulary, grammar and conversation strategies that they had learned at OPU and in their pre-university educations in order for the EISTI students to understand them. Student comments included:

"I found out that even if I use easy English but I use is well I could communicate"

"When my English didn't work then I became more able to think about how to say it again for them to understand"
"The speaking speed was really fast and the accent was really strong so it was useful to improve listening ability"

"Not only making English sentences, I had the situation where I needed to use English spontaneously so it was good study"

"When they didn't understand I tried to improve my English so they could understand"

"This lesson is important for learning about cross-cultural communications" - agreed by 98% of OPU students.

Through this online Wiki exchange and by meeting EISTI students face-to-face to examine the differences between life as a student in France and Japan, OPU students were exposed to a foreign culture in a way that they had not experienced before. Many comments from OPU students focused on the importance of receiving cultural information face-to-face rather than over the Internet or from television. By examining a different culture they were also encouraged to look at their own culture when answering the questions that the EISTI students had.

Student comments included:

"I learned about a different culture and different senses of value and could also consider Japanese culture afresh"

"Living in Japan there is no opportunity to communicate with people from other countries so I think that I had a very precious and valuable experience"

"I could find out that French students' lives are very similar to Japanese students. There are not so many opportunities to speak to French people so it was really good to hear stories from French people directly. Seeing and listening and learning for ourselves is good but speaking to French people directly was a really good opportunity"

"We weren't just checking on the Internet but speaking and listening to the French students and that was valuable"
"We could find out about French culture and at the same time we could learn English so it was good”

**Negative Responses to the English Language Cultural Exchange**

Although the results of this investigation show largely positive responses to this language and cultural exchange project the negative responses focused on 3 particular areas: technology, language and culture.

Firstly, as was previously illustrated, the Wiki technology presented some difficulties in the large amount of information that it contained along with the issue of navigating a Wiki website in a foreign language.

Secondly, negative responses received pertaining to the language aspect related to two themes: the restrictiveness of the language practice, i.e. a focus on specific language phrases, topics and techniques, in preparation for interviews with EISTI students, and that there should have been more opportunity to use English with the foreign students.

Student comments included:

"The preparation for the interview was good but I wanted to practice other usual conversation as well”

"I thought there should be more opportunity to use English”

"It wasn’t bad but as we are in conversation class I didn’t like to use only formal English”

The final negative response focused on the criticism of the time that was available for learning about the French culture. For these students there was not enough time to learn all that they wanted to know.

Student comments included:

"Time was too short to learn about French culture”

"There was not enough time to make me feel I want to know more about the other culture”
EISTI Response to the Language and Culture Exchange

The students from EISTI showed similarly positive responses to the exchanges that took place. Being invited into the English language classroom to talk with OPU students gave them opportunities to learn more about OPU, Osaka and Japan from students directly. Student comments included:

“It was the first time for me to discuss for a long time with students from OPU”

“It is a good opportunity to talk with Japanese students and speak English with them. It was very cool”

“We spoke a lot about Japanese student life”

“The English class was a good way to exchange and meet Japanese students. It was the most interesting part in my opinion”

English Language Development

As a means of practicing language skills and communication, all EISTI students agreed that this was a good method. It gave students from both countries opportunities to use and to develop English in ways that are not normally available in the language classroom. Student comments included:

“Speaking in English with other people is a good way to motivate people to learn more and more English”

“It is a good way because they can use their skills. Using English and listening to English language are the best way to increase our level”

The English at Fudai Wiki

The use of English at Fudai Wiki received a positive response for its ability to enable communication between the two groups of students while the EISTI students were in France and preparing for their time in Japan. Student comments included:
"It is convenient for the quantity of information that can be shared and for the ease of its access"

"It is valuable because we can communicate with other people and the teacher can check the exchanges"

"We can reply efficiently to students"

"It was a good first contact with the Japanese students"

Two points of constructive criticism were given about the use of the Wiki. Firstly that the open access that teachers have to students' communications may inhibit students from writing everything that they would like to write. Secondly, that forum technology would have been better, although no further explanation is given as to why this would be better. Note: forum technology, often called a message board, is an online discussion board about specific topics whereby people post comments and receive automatic email updates when messages are left. Student comments included:

"The teacher can check the exchanges and maybe some people can't say what they want to say because of that"

"In our case (writing and reading letters), Forum technology would have been better"

Cultural Exchange
The cultural aspect of the exchange was appreciated by all of the EISTI students as it enabled them to gain deeper insights into the country, city and university that they would be staying and studying in. Student comments included:

"We had a glimpse of how different our cultures were, and that's interesting!"

"Japan is new for us and we are here to discover the maximum of things about this country. So, this exchange is good for us and for the OPU students"
Finally, the EISTI students were asked if they would recommend this exchange to future OPU and EISTI students. The response was an overwhelming 100% Yes.

Student comments included:

"It enables each of us to learn different cultural aspects of life in our respective countries, and makes students practice English! Also, we have time, and these were good times, so why wouldn't have we come?"

"It's a good way to motivate people to learn English. And it's really interesting to speak with people from an other country!"

"It is not a constraint and it is a good experience for them to compare each culture"

"I really spent a good time during this exchange. It was a good opportunity to speak with Japanese people"

"It is a great opportunity to speak with Japanese people and learn more about Japan"

"I think, welcoming foreign exchange students into the class is the best way to communicate, exchange experiences and discover more about culture and way of life!"

**Implications of Results**

The language and culture exchange that took place between the students of Osaka Prefecture University and EISTI in France had a very positive response from both groups of students. The comments that were given in the qualitative investigation lead towards the following implications:

**Online learning platforms, such as the English at Fudai Wiki allow unrestricted access to course materials and individual and group learning opportunities.**

Provision of this access allows students to preview and review course materials and weekly classes, and work individually or on collaborative classroom projects from either the university campus or from their own homes.
Group projects and peer collaboration promotes self-reflection in learning and relationship building.
Facilitated by the English at Fudai Wiki groups were able to collaborate on projects enabling the construction of meaning and form to be negotiated between group members. This enabled students to assist each other and reflect on their own knowledge, learning and use of English. Doing so built stronger relationships within the classroom both online and face-to-face.

Technological proficiency creates independent learning skills and web-based networking opportunities.
The use of the English at Fudai Wiki created greater exposure to web-based English language compelling students to utilize and develop language skills in order to complete classroom projects. Through the use of an English web-based platform students have developed technological and web proficiency and in doing so have become enabled to communicate internationally.

Cross-cultural learning stimulates students’ international and Japanese identities.
In the position of investigating the lives of French students OPU students were stimulated into examining similar aspects of their own culture to realize the differences and similarities present.

Cross-cultural communication encourages English language development and world citizenship.
University level cross-cultural language exchange projects enable Japanese English learners to put to use the skills and knowledge that have been developed throughout their education. They create opportunities for learners to understand their own English abilities and limitations. They help learners to realize the benefits of language learning, which can be increased through communication opportunities and with it first hand knowledge of the global community.

Conclusion
From the results gathered there is strong, conclusive evidence that the English language and cultural exchange that took place between Osaka Prefecture University and Ecole Internationale des Sciences du Traitement de l’Information using the English at Fudai Wiki brought benefits to both groups of students.

EISTI students benefited from the ongoing English language Wiki letter correspondence, audio recordings and photo/video slideshows produced by OPU students through an increased understanding of situations and culture that they might encounter during their academic internships, which in turn helped them in their preparations before arriving in Japan. Once in Japan they were able to meet OPU students face-to-face thereby developing and cementing the
online relationships that had been built. This opportunity exposed them to students outside of their academic disciplines hence increasing the opportunities of integration into life at OPU. The travel guides that were produced for them as part of the cultural portfolio gave them access to information and opportunities to experience parts of Japan and its culture that they had heard about and that OPU students recommended for them while they were here.

Through this exchange OPU students became exposed to opportunities to use and experience real English not normally found in the language classroom. They were put in situations where their English abilities would be the only means of communication, such as they would encounter outside of Japan in business or travel. The projects that they produced were used by English speakers to prepare for and assimilate into a foreign culture and for that reason students became more aware of the importance and necessity of their English language and communication skills. The technology used in the classroom, including the English at Fudai Wiki, exposed students to increased opportunities for language use and development on four levels: as an individual, in groups, in the classroom and in their own homes. This increased awareness of independent and collaborative learning possibilities while also exposing web-based tools as facilitating international networking and language development. Finally, a deeper cultural understanding was developed. Through investigations into life as a student in France and French Culture OPU students became self encouraged to consider aspects of their own culture in comparison.

The real and realistic language situations that international exchange and internship programs afford, in collaboration with Wiki technology, are an invaluable source of language and cultural exchange to students and their educational development at Osaka Prefecture University.
References


