

Reading and writing via the Internet

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Introduction

In an increasingly globally interdependent world, proficiency in a second language and the ability to function interculturally are seen as important assets, even necessities, if citizens are to function effectively in the new world of work. In Australia, the importance of second language skills has been recognised at the policy level by the inclusion of languages other than English as a key learning area nationally (MCEETYA, 1989 & 1999) and as part of the core curriculum in Queensland where Indonesian is one of the seven priority languages in the state. In Indonesia, English is the most widely taught foreign language in schools and is compulsory for most secondary students. This paper presents an account of a developing project designed to enhance the language proficiency and cultural awareness of students of both Indonesian and English through inclusion in their language program of computer-mediated exchanges. The use of computer-mediated communication means the focus will be particularly on reading and writing although the texts created will also be able to serve as a basis for in-class discussion as teachers and students work to interpret the intention of their interlocutors.

The current emphasis on proficiency outcomes has implication for schools. Teaching for even modest proficiency requires time and considerable exposure to the language in use (Crawford, 1999a; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). Similarly, the goal of intercultural competence requires increased contact with native speakers and their culture (Mueller-Hartmann, 2000a). Teachers and students must engage as frequently as possible in real dialogue, in tasks which engage them actively in language use as a means of dealing with their world. To achieve this end, for example, Queensland's new Years 4-10 Languages other than English (LOTE) syllabuses (QSCC, 2000) have adopted an embedded task-based approach designed to create contexts in which students "communicate by engaging in purposeful and active use of language in tasks which contribute to [their] understanding of a range of issues and concepts, and which involve negotiation and socialisation with peers" (QSCC, 1998:5). One of the major challenges for teachers in foreign language contexts is the task of creating activities in which the students have an audience and, therefore, a socioculturally realistic purpose for using their second language. Simply practising the target language with one another or writing texts which will only be read by the teacher is largely artificial. If the topic is engaging, there is strong sociocultural pressure to revert to the L1. By providing access to other users of the target language, particularly native speakers, computer-mediated communication (CMC) may help create more positive learning environments in which the target language can become a genuine tool of communication. Skinner & Austin (1999), for example, found computer conferencing among a group of EFL learners provided an opportunity for 'real' communication and community, thus raising student motivation. These positive effects however did not carry over to the classroom, perhaps because students reverted to more traditional student roles.

Technology in the language classroom

This paper presents an account of a developing project designed to investigate the extent to which technology can help teachers and learners achieve purposeful language use by linking students with other learners/users of their chosen language and by extending the use of the language beyond the confines of the classroom, thus potentially increasing the learners' intellectual engagement and their sense of the language program's relevance. Ten schools in both Indonesia and Queensland are being linked in this large-scale tandem e-learning project, after a preliminary year-long feasibility study (Hoven & Crawford, 2001). The project, named QUIPNet (Queensland Indonesia Proyek Internet), is supported by the National Department of Education, Indonesia and by funding from the Queensland Office of Premier and Cabinet.

The use of technology to broaden horizons and opportunities for real language use is particularly important for language students in regional and rural schools for whom the teacher may otherwise be their only expert interlocutor. A further aim of this study is to explore to what extent electronic communication with peers in another culture can assist students to engage in intercultural encounters and thus gain a deeper understanding of culture, both their own and that of their interlocutors (e.g. Lee, 1997; Mueller-Hartmann, 2000b; Furstenberg, et al., 2001; Appel & Gilabert Guerrero, 2001). As Kern (2000:2) argues "Preparing students to communicate in multiple cultural contexts, both at home and abroad, means sensitizing them to discourse practices in other societies and to the ways those discourse practices both reflect and create cultural norms". To achieve this sensitisation, the language classroom must expose students to discourse practices and provide opportunities to explore these from an insider's perspective (Galloway, 1997; Furstenberg, et al., 2001).

In contexts such as Australia where the place of a second language in the curriculum is frequently challenged, another reason for using the new communications technologies is the contribution this can play to enhancing the status of language studies by developing students' computer literacy. The new technologies are radically changing access to knowledge and how learning and many other aspects of daily life are carried out (Ortega, 1997) and schools need to respond to this and ensure teachers and students can deal effectively and critically with the quantity, quality and cultural authenticity of the ever expanding diversity of information available via the World Wide Web (Kern 2000). Combining LOTE and technology adds a powerful intercultural perspective to students' encounters with these new literacies and "can add greatly to the provision, enjoyment and outcomes of LOTE at all levels and in all learning situations" (Rix, 1999:3).

Despite the proliferation of computers and electronic communications in modern society, many school children still appear to have quite limited access to this technology during their formal education, particularly in the area of language learning. In Australia, for example, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1996 report found use of interactive technologies in schools 'patchy' with less use of computer-mediated communication than at the tertiary level (NBEET, 1996). White (1996) also reported that computers are generally seen as peripheral to the curriculum with language teachers 'last in the queue' to gain computer access. A recent Australian survey of the use of online technology in schools (Cooper et al., 2001) likewise found access a key issue. As a result, even committed classroom-based language teachers are mostly only occasional users of technology in their teaching. Singhal (1998:5) reported a similar situation in the States where language teachers "have little experience with" online technology because, "for the most part, computers in schools are used for business or computer science courses". Education Queensland's report

on literate futures also suggests that “there is very little across-the-curriculum and pedagogical support or resources for innovation in engaging with the literacies of new technologies” (Education Queensland, 2000:77/78). The feasibility study for the current project - carried out by the authors in 2000/1 - established that, while many of the tools and much of the infrastructure necessary for greater use of technology in language programs is already in place, both in Queensland and Indonesia, there is little evidence that teachers are currently taking advantage of these tools. This is consistent with the earlier findings of Lankshear *et al.* (1997) that, even when the technology is available and teachers have received in-servicing in its use, this does not necessarily lead to innovative pedagogies. This may be because the discourse implied in electronic exchanges is difficult to integrate into traditional language programs and may require a considerable change in approach for many language teachers and learners who are not used to dialogic interaction in which the teacher is no longer the central participant (see, for example, Foster, 1998; Thornbury, 1998; Mangubhai, Horwood, & Dashwood, 1999; Crawford, 1999b).

The possibilities of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) have, nevertheless, developed over recent years so that interactive technology can now potentially facilitate new forms of person-to-person interaction as well as providing access to a richer supply of authentic and pedagogic materials than is normally available in regular classrooms. Felix (1998) suggests that the increase in interactivity available parallels the changing perspectives on language learning and teaching which have seen agency shift to the learner with the emphasis on his/her interaction with other humans *via* the computer rather than interaction *with* the computer as was the case with earlier CALL (Kern & Warschauer, 2000). From the current perspective, the principal role of the computer is to “provide alternative contexts for social interaction; to facilitate access to existing discourse communities and the creation of new ones” (Kern & Warschauer, 2000:13). It is at this highest level of interactivity that technology can contribute to learning environments in which learners, irrespective of where they live, can become “world communicators” (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998:55) “engaged in true to life social interactions in which they are expressing their own personalities and beliefs in a completely authentic environment” (Felix, 1998:7).

Such networked communication is consistent with current theories of second language acquisition which stress the importance in the learning process of language use and the contextualised negotiation of meaning, form and content (Van den Branden, 1997; Gass, Mackey & Pica, 1998; Pica, 2000). Thanks to the links made possible by technology, learners can interact and negotiate meaning in authentic tasks and use their language with an authentic audience (Egbert, Chao & Hanson-Smith, 1999). Technology, in other words can provide access to the culture of the target language and the practices of this community (Kung, 2002). The resulting discourse can then become a focus for learning with teachers and students stepping back to analyse the language used and the meaning conveyed.

While there has been considerable research on computer enhanced language learning, a lot of this has focused on tertiary programs (e.g. McMeniman & Viviani, 1997; Debski, 1997; Kern, 2000; Furstenberg, et al. 2001; Sengupta, 2001; Gonglewski, Meloni & Brant, 2001). Gray & Stockwell (1998), for example, report increased usage of Japanese and self correction by university students in email interactions with native speakers despite the absence of explicit instruction. Beauvois (1997) reported that CMC increased total class participation to 100%. There is evidence, also, that students using email or online conferencing engage in potentially authentic and autonomous communication which is likely to be longer and more complex than language produced for purely pedagogical purposes (Weckert, cited in

Malcolm, 2001) or in face-to-face classroom oral discussions (Kern, 2000). Gonzalez-Bueno (1998) found that some students in her study took advantage of the opportunity offered by the electronic medium to develop conversation-like language which they did not develop in in-class speaking activities because of shyness and/or fear of making mistakes. She likewise found that email dialogue discussions with the teacher were longer and therefore potentially more conducive to language acquisition than paper-and-pencil journals and that students writing from home wrote more than those using the university's computers. The asynchronous nature of the communication meant students could work at their own pace and in their own time. They could consult dictionaries or other references thus having an opportunity to stretch their output in achieving their communicative goal. Sotillo (2000) found similar results in terms of length and syntactic complexity in a comparison of synchronous and asynchronous discussions but found the teacher played a much less dominant role in the synchronous discussions. These appeared to facilitate learner output but were not always as focused on the topic under discussion. The asynchronous discussions, on the other hand, tended to stay more on task, perhaps because they were more similar to the interaction found in traditional language classroom discourse: teacher request - student response - teacher evaluation. Felix (2001) focused on the attitudes of the primary, secondary and tertiary students in her two studies. She concluded that learners at least see this environment as viable for language learning with advantages such as flexibility, variety and access to a wealth of information and authentic materials potentially outweighing disadvantages such as distractions, getting lost or not having access to the teacher. The school students, however, were noticeably more negative than the tertiary students, particularly with regard to malfunctioning technology. This may be because schools are currently less well equipped and offer less technical support than their tertiary counterparts. Stojanovski *et al.* (2001) likewise reported that students found the online environment "effective and meaningful, once the technical and other frustrations are overcome". Many of these disadvantages, in other words, may be both temporary and fixable, once schools develop appropriate access to adequate computing resources.

The QUIPNet Project

This study seeks to investigate the potential for computer-mediated interaction to expand the discourse options available to teachers and their students and to engage them in real written dialogues in which they can make full use of their evolving language repertoire (Swain, 2000) as they negotiate meaning and explore differences in perspective in collaborative tasks with a worthwhile, non-linguistic purpose. The goal is not only that teachers and students develop a sense of ownership of these exchanges so that the texts produced are personally and culturally meaningful but also that the interaction serves as a basis for language development through appropriate focus on form (Long & Robinson, 1998; Skehan, 2000). The text-based nature of the language currently produced through CMC lends itself to this as it makes the written performance available for detailed revision and hence further learning (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Sotillo, 2000; Sengupta, 2001; Gonglewski, Meloni & Brant, 2001). Such texts can also be used as learning materials for subsequent groups of students. The language focus made possible by CMC can occur either during the written exchange or in the post-task reflection advocated by Willis (1998) in her model of task-based learning. Such revisiting and re-interpreting may prompt noticing gaps in knowledge which, in turn, can "trigger cognitive processes which might generate linguistic knowledge that is new for the learner, or that consolidates their existing knowledge" (Swain, 1995:126).

As well as exploring the discourse possible through the use of technology, the QUIPNet project is also investigating the pedagogical implications of such uses of technology,

particularly in school contexts and with school-age language learners. One of our aims is to identify a plan of action and a series of tasks to give students in schools a wider and more comprehensive exposure to language learning using communications technology and to assist teachers in developing appropriate pedagogies to ensure this contact is effective linguistically and interculturally. Bax (2000), for example, suggests that few language teachers are currently sufficiently knowledgeable about the potential strengths and limitations of technology or confident enough in its use to be in a position to recognise its proper role in the language classroom. To help tackle this and ensure the technology “value-adds” in the classroom and does not merely replace current practices for the sake of novelty (Bax, 2000), participating teachers will be encouraged to identify ways in which they can access existing school computing resources and then develop and evaluate pedagogies that integrate their use coherently in achieving improved communicative outcomes in the language programs. Their findings will be shared by means of the Project Web page¹ which will provide ideas and suggestions as well as a basis for publishing student work, thus ensuring the presence of an authentic audience for the tasks undertaken.

The project will involve tandem learning in which learners “with different native languages work together to learn more about the language, and life and culture of the other” (Glaesmann & Calvert, 2001:12). Tandem projects function on the principles of reciprocity and learner responsibility. “Both partners, being experts in their language and culture and depending on each other for mutual support, contribute and benefit equally in terms of their time, energy and interest” (Mueller-Hartmann, 2000a:596). In keeping with the principle of reciprocity, therefore, participants will be encouraged to make equal use of the two languages, thus ensuring learners in both countries encounter authentic texts prepared by native speakers of their target language as well as having an audience and purpose for their own L2 texts. This use of both languages may also allow for greater depth in the treatment of issues as learners are not limited to what they can say in their L2.

The implementation of tandem e-learning varies considerably from context to context. Glaesman & Calvert (2001) discuss a range of models which may include in- and out-of-class interaction by individuals, groups or whole classes. These interactions may be synchronous or asynchronous and involve tasks which are teacher-supervised and initiated or unsupervised and student-initiated. The exchanges may be purely virtual or part of a wider on-going exchange between the schools involved. They may involve students in both countries engaging in the same tasks or in different tasks. The outcomes may be formally assessed, included in a portfolio or treated as an extracurricular or extension activity. Partners may be explicitly required to provide feedback on the language used or negotiation of form may occur implicitly through questions focused on meaning. Task may be completed using school facilities or using non-school facilities (internet cafes, home computers, public libraries, etc.). Goglewski, Meloni & Brant (2001) suggest these possibilities can increase the time learners spend both composing and reading in the target language in a communicative context.

Because of the diverse nature and number of schools participating in QUIPNet, several of these models will be implemented in the project. In schools which already have classrooms of networked computers, students will be able to work individually or in pairs in class time to prepare and send messages and responses to their partners. The principle of autonomy suggests participants should set their own goals and take responsibility for their own actions and feelings. Tasks, however, will be proposed to structure the initial encounters and create a

¹ <<http://jcs.ed.qut.edu.au/QUIPNet/>>

context in which participants can get to know one another and have a shared purpose to direct the interaction (Kung, 2002). In setting up these tasks, teachers will negotiate with colleagues from the other country to choose and structure tasks of mutual interest and which “fit” with the local programs. Teachers will also need to help learners use the experience effectively for language development and critical cultural awareness. To this end, for example, tasks will need to build in phases in which students give feedback or seek clarification in order to encourage negotiation of meaning and form. Teachers may need to work with students to develop these skills. Cho (2001), for example, found it useful to give training to his native speaker participants to make their interaction with learners of Korean more effective.

Given the “newness” of such projects for the participating teachers (and students), it is anticipated that many will choose not to include the tasks in their formal assessment programs, at least until they have established reliable cooperative relationships with their partner schools and are confident task completions can fit with school assessment requirements and that all students have equitable access to the required internet facilities. Likewise a decision has been made not to include models which involve real-time or synchronous communication as part of the project in the initial stages, mainly because of the three-hour time difference between the two countries, the difference in school attendance times, and the disparity in the facilities both among schools and between the two countries.

In order to support the teachers as they develop effective ways to include technology in their language programs, the project is to develop an interactive Web site which will allow teachers (and students) to discuss the pedagogy involved in virtual tandem projects of this kind. This will encourage teachers to learn from the experience of others before they embark on such projects and will provide models both in terms of tasks and the work produced by learners. The “publication” of the results of the various tasks also motivates a final editing and inclusion of feedback from the partner school. Over time, this will develop a series of resources on which teachers can draw either within their own classes or when engaged in similar tandem tasks.

In summary, then, the QUIPNet project aims to:

- provide opportunities for intercultural interaction among peers (teachers and students);
- engage students actively in real dialogue;
- engage students in real world tasks;
- create networks of students and teachers within and between countries;
- help language learners and teachers develop useful IT communication & collaboration skills;
- investigate types of tasks most appropriate for these situations;
- investigate the discourse strategies and dialogic interaction of students participating; and
- compile a handbook for new teachers and students coming to this kind of interaction (protocols, warnings, suggestions, advice).

Emerging Issues

The project is in its initial phase with schools matched with partner schools and teachers at various stages in negotiating with colleagues what form their initial project will take. Several inservice workshops have been held in Indonesia to explain the project and how it might be

integrated into their program. Similar workshops are being planned for Queensland participants in the next few months.

In the course of the pilot study and this initial phase a number of issues have arisen which will influence the form of interactions which are established.

(i) Choice of language

One of the issues teachers will need to debate and explore is the language in which tasks are to be carried out. The tasks proposed to date (see Appendix A) will require careful consideration to ensure that the tasks undertaken develop the learners' language ability. The time spent providing input for the partner schools in L1 will need to be balanced by receipt of relevant L2 input in return from these partners. Failure by one or other participant to respond will challenge this reciprocity. In programs where there is language work across the curriculum, students may be able to use work done in other subjects but, where language classes are seen as separate, teachers may not wish to see time spent on work that is not directly language related. This is particularly so if language classes focus on language rather than content.

(ii) Balancing numbers

The process of finding partner schools quickly revealed that there is a considerable imbalance in class sizes. In Indonesia most students do English throughout their secondary schooling and class sizes are large. In Queensland, a language is only compulsory in Year 8 and becomes an elective from Year 9. Classes beyond Year 8 are often small and sometimes even cease to exist for want of numbers. One way to deal with this imbalance has been to assign two Queensland classes to one Indonesian class. This will add complexity in terms of coordination but will also ensure more respondents to engage in the tasks. Proposing tasks which involve class projects (e.g. preparation of a web page) can work well with small classes but may be difficult for Indonesian colleagues who need to ensure that everyone has some input. The difference in class sizes is going to challenge in terms of reciprocity.

(iii) Integrating tasks in the overall program

An issue to emerge is the difference in the syllabuses in the two countries. Teachers obviously want to develop tasks which relate to the requirements of the syllabus. Part of the negotiation between teachers will be to find which topics they have in common and when the classes will deal with these. We are also trying to develop tasks which allow for local differences in the topics worked on but encourage feedback and interaction. Students will be using common functions even though they are working on different topics. Cooperation will require careful planning so that responding does not become an interruption to the ongoing work in class and, at the same time, partners receive responses in good time to achieve their own purposes.

(iv) Negotiating interaction

Schools are busy places and teachers who expressed interest in participating often were then slow in responding to the other school. Alternatively, teachers had all their students send a greeting to the researchers rather than setting up an exchange with their school. This was rather overwhelming and made a really personal reply impossible. Another ongoing issue is the difference in the academic calendars. Schools identified in the pilot study were tentatively matched towards the end of 2001. This suited the September start of the academic year in Indonesia but was less suitable for the Australian teachers who were winding down for the December end of their academic year. Several of the Australian teachers at that time were not

sure if they would have an appropriate class in the new school year and have, indeed, had to withdraw because they no longer have a senior class.

(v) **Data collection**

The very learner-centredness of communication via e-mail is creating problems with data collection. Participants were asked to forward copies of all communications to the researchers but this is proving difficult to achieve. Learners, for example, may forget to send copies to their teacher or the researchers. As the project evolves it is becoming clear that schools will participate in quite varied ways. Some will engage in projects as in-class activities, for example, while others will need to involve learners working independently in their own time. In the latter instances, of course, teachers have less control over what messages are exchanged and, as researchers, we will depend on the good will of students in keeping and sharing the messages they receive.

Conclusion

Finding solutions to these problems is essential to the success of the QUIPNet Project. We are particularly concerned with collecting data which allows us to explore the discourses in which learners engage in the different tasks in order to establish whether they “yield similar psycholinguistic effects” as those in oral face-to-face linguistic exchanges (Salaberry, 1999:105). To date, there has been a dearth of detailed evaluation of the use of technology in language programs (Chapelle, 2001) with most of the assessment of the pedagogical value of such use involving surveys and self-report data rather than actual measurement of gains in language proficiency (Felix, 2001; Salaberry 2000). A survey of the use of technology by McMeniman & Evans (1998), for example, concluded that it may be premature to claim that online technologies result in significant gains in language proficiency. The potential, however, is there and so the analysis of outcomes in terms of language as well as attitudes is essential. It is such data, for example, that will ensure better access for language teachers to the computing facilities they need to improve their program and ensure that, through language programs, schools do become “a window on the world” for students (Rix 1999:39). Linking students across the world can help expand their knowledge and understanding of their place in the world, the international possibilities for their own careers and the place of languages in smoothing contacts with the rest of the world (Rix, 1999).

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Appendix A

Sample tasks

(i) The class's favourite music (Ss work in TL)

Syllabus theme: Leisure, recreation and human creativity

Topic: Music

a) Survey everyone in your class to find out:

- who they list as their top three groups/performers (list these from the most frequently mentioned to the least frequently mentioned)
- who plays a musical instrument (which one? how often? how well?)
- who sings in a choir or group (what sort of music? church? folk? pop? country?)

- approximately how much time a week they spend listening to or performing music
- where do they do this (at home, at school, in clubs, at church, etc.)

Prepare a Webpage presentation giving the results of your survey.

b) Choose one of the most popular group/performer and prepare a brief background piece about them and their career (.e. g. age, nationality, type of music, etc.). Discuss why you think they are popular (i.e. what makes them different from/better than other groups?) and add this and your background piece to your Webpage. Include the lyrics of your favourite song plus any websites you have found that contain information about the group/performer.

c) Consult your Indonesian partner class's Webpage. What similarities and differences are there in their responses to these same tasks? Do you have any suggestions for how they might improve the English on their page. Send an e-mail to your partner in which you ask at least three questions about the information on the Webpage or on the websites included and make any suggestions for improvements. (Remember that 50% of your message should be in English and 50% in Indonesian.) Be prepared to answer your partner's questions about the information you supplied and use his/her feedback to improve your use of Indonesian on your own page.

(ii) Word associations and sentence completions (adapted from Furstenberg et al. 2001) (Ss work initially in L1 but interaction by e-mail will be 50% in English and 50% in Indonesian)

Syllabus theme: School & post school options

Topic: School & future plans

a) Work individually to complete the following sentences (in English):

1. A good school is one which . . .
2. A good teacher is one who . . .
3. A good student is one who . . .
4. A good friend is someone who . . .
5. For me, a good job is one which . . .
6. A good employer is one who . . .
7. When I leave school I want to . . .
8. The thing I'll miss most about school when I leave is . . .
9. The thing I'll miss least about school when I leave is . . .
10. In 5 years I hope I will . . .

b) Collate the answers of all your classmates and forward these to your partner in Indonesia. When you get his/her responses to the same task, do the following:

- (i) Look at the answers and compare them with the answers from you and your classmates. Think about what might be the cause of any cultural differences you notice.
- (ii) Discuss your hypotheses with your classmates. In what ways are the Indonesian responses different from yours? Why do you think there are these differences?
- (iii) Send an email to your partner in which you outline your observations and hypotheses and ask any questions you may have about the Indonesian responses. Respond to his/her questions and observations about the Australian data.

c) Share the information you gain with others in the class and prepare a summary of the differences you have all observed for inclusion on the class website (This time in Indonesian.) Add at least three questions to get further information from your Indonesian counterparts.

d) Visit the Indonesian summary on the website and compare this with your class's conclusion. Email answers to their questions and add any comments or suggestions you would like to make. Don't forget to provide feedback on the language used and use any feedback you receive to improve your own page.