INTEGRATING ICT THROUGH OVERSEAS E-MAIL EXCHANGE PROJECT:  
A WAY TO RAISE STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN SPEAKING CLASS

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Background

Living in the globalization era and the advancement of technology is different from living back then twenty or thirty years ago. It is now possible for people from different regions or countries to interact without difficulties due to the inventions of more modern means of transportations. Another invention which significantly influences human interaction is the discovery of Internet and computer technology. Distance does not seem to be a constraint any longer. The Internet provides many kinds of facilities for its users, for instance searching for information, updating news, reading references, getting entertainment, watching movies or video clips, listening to music, studying foreign languages, getting acquaintances, social networking, and many more.

People coming from different ages and walks of life, especially, students studying English in universities, are familiar with and literate in digital technology. Generally, they are able to operate and deal with certain computer programs like MS-Word, Excel or Power Point to complete their assignments. They are also normally accustomed to using the Internet for different purposes. They use it for improving knowledge, entertaining, doing business or social networking. There are several kinds of social networking media, such as, e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, Yahoo Messenger, and others which are all actively used. The abovementioned media enable people to communicate, share opinions or feelings, stories, pictures, and other forms of files. Radicati Group study from May 2009 states that there are about 1.9 billion email users worldwide (http://email.about.com/od/emailtrivia/f/how_many_email.htm). The above information shows how immense the number of email users is. This should be wisely geared towards fun and hands on experience in English learning leading to better and more meaningful results.

Warschauer, Shetzer and Meloni (2000:7) suggest five reasons to use the Internet in English teaching which taken together, these reasons help bring English teaching ALIVE: Authenticity, it provides students 24-hour access to vast amounts of authentic materials on any topic they are interested in and allows authentic communication; Literacy, the combination of English and technology will support students to master the skill they need for academic and occupational success; Interaction, Internet provides opportunities for students to interact with native and nonnative speakers from around the world; Vitality, it can inject an element of vitality into teaching; and Empowerment, mastery of the Internet increases the personal power of teacher and students and allows them to become autonomous lifelong learners. In other words, it is obvious that using the Internet in language teaching-learning is beneficial not only for the language learning itself but also other skills that students will need in the near future.

Overseas e-mail exchange project between Indonesian and Laos students

According to Wikipedia, Electronic mail, commonly called email, e-mail or e.mail, is a method of exchanging digital messages from an author to one or more recipients. Modern email
operates across the Internet or other computer networks. In other words, this means of communication offers its users a fast media to transfer information. University students generally have e-mail addresses. They need or have to possess them for different reasons. Based on my simple interview with my students, they regularly send or receive e-mails to or from friends, lecturers at different levels of frequency. They exchange emails just to communicate, to share different kinds of data, like music files, video clips, personal pictures, and others. Departing from the above fact, I try to integrate what students commonly do in their daily life with the activity of learning in the speaking class. As Warschauer (1996: 175) writes “Research to date suggests that on-line learning activities are generally quite motivating for language learners ...”. So, it is expected that when the learning is motivating, the learning may lead to positive outcomes.

Sharma and Barret (2007) assert that using technology can be fun. Besides, the Internet is used to enable communication between teacher and learner or learner and learner separated by time, distance or both. Therefore, time or distance are no longer constraints for teacher and student. Interaction among students at the international level can be initiated, then it is expected that they can widen their horizons through having cross cultural understanding and friendship.

This email exchange project involves the students of the English Department of Widyatama University (UTama) Indonesia and National University of Laos (NUL). The objective of this project is to enable university students learning English as a Foreign Language from different countries to get to know one another and at the same time practice or use their English in a real situation. It is believed that when learning language takes place in a real life situation, the result can be better because it is more meaningful to the learners. Besides, they can be informants of their respective countries’ life, people and culture. Indonesian students can share about students’ lifestyles in Indonesia, trends, places of interests, and other aspects of life. This is in line with what is stated by Oxford (1997:445) cited by Brown (2001:47):

“... advantage for cooperative learning (as opposed to individual learning) on such factors as promoting intrinsic motivation, ... heightening self esteem, creating caring and altruistic relationship, and lowering anxiety and prejudice.”

Before the project is carried out, the English lecturer from NUL sent his students’ email addresses. Then, UTama’s lecturer distributes the addresses to the students. They are given freedom to choose any students to be their email exchange friends on the basis of the names. Under the instruction of their lecturer, then UTama’s students write their first emails containing introduction; sharing their personal information and activities in campus as students to NUL’s students. Then, it is expected they would get replies containing the same contents. Students of NUL are also expected by their lecturer to respond by writing about the same topics. The following is the table of topics for the project:

<table>
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<th>Email Exchange Project stage</th>
<th>Topics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction (personal Information) and Activities in campus</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Places of Interest</td>
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<td>Traditional/national costumes</td>
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Topics for email exchange project

The email exchange project serves as supplementary activity; it is conducted outside the classroom/outside the teaching and learning process. They can write the emails anywhere they want; be it in campus because there some computer Internet laboratories which facilitate the students to accomplish their tasks. They are also allowed to do it outside campus using
their personal wifi or Internet connection in their houses. Then, students are assigned to forward their emails and reply emails from their friends to the lecturers. This is carried out in order that lecturer can monitor the students' tasks and also prevent unexpected things from happening in the email writing project, such as touching on inappropriate issues.

**Start from writing**

Writing is a productive skill considered worrisome for students to perform. They can learn and perform better when they feel safe. Therefore, the affective factors proposed by Brown (2001) are facilitated in email writing. Email writing is assumed to be a friendly activity to accomplish because students are generally accustomed to writing emails using their L1. However, students are given tips on how to write a good email. This is to ensure that they are equipped with the sufficient know how to write good and appropriate emails. When they write in L2, students may have time to write, rewrite, and then edit their work, namely in terms of the grammar, spelling, vocabulary or punctuation within their knowledge.

**End with speaking**

Since the subject taken by students is speaking, then the expected end product skills are speaking activities. Students' products can be in the form of reporting or retelling. Students retell or report to the class what they have done with the project; what they write in their emails and the replies form their new friends from Laos. After retelling or presenting, students might get questions or comments from peers. Thus, their communicative skill is facilitated and enhanced. Interesting questions or comments are sometimes raised by students during the presentation or retelling sessions. This creates an interesting, lively and less threatening learning atmosphere for the students.

**Students' responses towards the project**

In general the students give positive and optimistic responses. This can be observed from their enthusiasm when the project is firstly introduced to them. They actively ask questions related to the project that they will carry out. They are also excited to have new friends from overseas learning English as they do. The former might be the most interesting part for them.

It seems that they cannot wait to start writing and get acquainted with new friends from Laos. Some students even ask about the possibility of writing and sending emails outside the assigned project by using Facebook, Yahoo Messenger, and others.

Data from students' journals and interviews also reveal that students' responses are generally positive. They admit that it is their first time to have email writing integrated in the English learning. That is the reason why they feel fascinated in accomplishing the project. They also add that it is interesting and beneficial for them. They can practice their English in a real situation and share what they know about their own countries. This can be used as a medium to heighten their nationalism and at the same time learn about another country's culture.

When reporting or retelling, students show eagerness. This is so because they are the ones knowledgeable about the matter. In the reporting stage, some students say that they actively communicate with their Laos friend in Facebook and Yahoo Messenger. It means that they extend their interaction outside the assigned activity.

**Observed constraints**

The observed constraints in conducting the project are:

1. It is found that a few addresses obtained and distributed to students are incomplete or misprinted. This has caused the emails not to be sent to the right destination.
2. A few students do not have replies from their email pals. This may be caused by incorrect or misprinted email addresses as it was mentioned in the first point or the email is merely not yet replied by their counterparts.

The constraints above may lead to an unsuccessful email exchange project. The sender cannot send the email while the receiver cannot receive the email. Therefore, the project plan cannot be carried out and the two-way communication fails. This is considered the drawback when using technology and dealing with technical problems.

Proposed solutions to enhance students’ interests in speaking class

A teacher should be aware of a variety of techniques in the speaking class so as to create meaningful, attractive, and interesting activities. By integrating those elements in teaching and learning process, the expected learning outcomes, proficiency of L2, may be achieved.

Integrating ICT in teaching English, specifically, speaking can be an alternative to create a more interesting and horizon-widening activity. However, the preparation before conducting the project should be rigorously planned and checked in order to minimize constraints that might take place.

When the problems mentioned previously in the observed constraints occur, the teacher should solve it by communicating with the fellow lecturer, pointing out the problem then fixing it. For example, knowing that the email address is incorrect, the respective lecturer should inform the students, then ask for the correct address and finally send it to the other lecturer to be handed to the students who has received the incorrect address. Therefore, they can resend their emails to the new email address and wait for the replies.

This email exchange can be employed as a supplementary activity. The topics for the project can be integrated with the curriculum or serve as extracurricular activities. Topics should be within students’ real life experiences so that they are manageable and meaningful. As a result, the content of the writing is real or genuine.

Conclusion

The overseas email exchange project can be applied as a variation or supplementary activity to enhance students’ interest in learning English, specifically, in a speaking class. This activity offers not only practice in writing and speaking but also interacting with students learning English from overseas. Besides, students are also challenged to know more about their country and culture because they will have to share about these matters in this project. Although this is an initial project, positive responses have been reported by students. However further research on this matter needs to be conducted to examine the effectiveness of this project to students’ learning outcomes.

References


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Biodata

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