
Cultural Encounters of a Virtual Kind

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What would happen if you had students from a Japanese university and students from a Venezuelan university, writing about themselves and certain social-cultural issues of their respective countries in English, via email? When we asked ourselves this question, several answers immediately came to mind. First of all, we assumed that it would provide an excellent opportunity for the students to practice writing in English. We also thought that the email messages would constitute an interesting point of departure for discussions, thus stimulating oral participation in class. Furthermore, we believed that it would be a motivating activity since it would personalize communication between students and allow them to express their opinions and ideas authentically and spontaneously. And, of course, we hoped that in addition to promoting increased foreign language (EFL/ESP) proficiency that it would generate greater cross-cultural understanding. We assumed such understanding would be useful to many of our students upon embarking on travel and careers after graduation.

Certainly a number of authors supported our assumptions. For example, in relation to over-all foreign language learning, Redmond (1994) emphasized the importance of immersing the student in language-rich experiences, and affirmed that teaching language skills in isolation is far less effective than providing the student with real language situations. This idea was amplified by Willis and Willis (1996) who felt that "Students need to practice in the classroom the things they will need to do with the language outside the classroom" (p. 67). They suggested that the best way to improve language skills is to be in continuous contact with the target language through what they termed "task-based framework" in which the communication task is central to learning and involves student production of language. This often means that the student must draw upon personal experiences and general knowledge.

Wright (1987) has also referred to the advantages of a task-based approach and sees it as a way for students to develop their second/foreign language skills and as a method for improving competence in social communication skills. Moreover, since within this framework, students are encouraged to express personal opinions and feelings, they also learn to think critically about their environment, their culture, and the culture of others.

The underlying conviction of the task-based orientation is that when people are actively involved in their language learning process they will learn more efficiently. Furthermore, active participation in the learning process also implies that the student pursues opportunities for language use outside the classroom.

Personal experiences and aspects of culture as sources of information for writing tasks are also mentioned by Leki and Carson (1997) in their comparison of the writing experiences of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESL (English as a Second Language) university students. They analyzed student responses with regard to three types of information sources, "writing without a text source," "writing from a source text without responsibility for content" and, "text response writing" (pp. 44–52). They concluded that students must be encouraged to "experience a deeper interaction between language, personal interests, needs, and backgrounds; and a wider social world in the form of some kind of extended (in the broad sense) reality that they are accountable for" (pp. 64–65).

Numerous writers such as Gardner and Lambert (1972), Gardner (1985), Gardner and Clement (1990), Dornyei (1990), Clement and Dornyei (1994), and Belmerchri and Hummel (1998), to name but a few, have written extensively on the importance of motivation in second or foreign language learning. Most have agreed that providing relevant, interesting tasks for the learner, involving students actively in the learning process, encouraging self-evaluation, and promoting a positive attitude towards the target language and its speakers are fundamental in motivating the language learner. The relationship between motivation and task-based learning is explained by Willis and Willis (1996), who feel that students are more highly motivated because they usually want to achieve the goals of the task, causing them to use the language in order to complete the task successfully.

The issue of cultural knowledge and foreign language learning has been dealt with by various experts, including Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984), Kramsch (1993), Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) and Flowerdew (1998). For these, and other writers, cultural knowledge is essential to the development of communicative competence. According to Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996; p. 435) "The productive synthesis of cross-cultural perceptions of similarities and differences is useful for extending the concept of culture as a process in which one enhances the other." Furthermore, we felt that the necessity of "making sense" in a foreign language (English) in the case of both groups of students served to underscore the importance of not only understanding a language but also the culture of its speakers (or users).

The Activity

Taking into consideration these theoretical issues, we decided to design an activity that would follow a procedure similar to that process by Crawford-Lange and Lange

(1984). This involved the classroom discussion of the in-coming messages, the personalization of the discussion on the basis of the students' home culture, and the students' emotions and opinions with regard to the information received.

Furthermore, we also had to design an activity that would also conform to different academic calendars and the students' access to computers, as well as different course levels and course objectives. Because our trimesters did coincide for a ten week period between September and December 1998, we decided on 6 weekly email messages that covered approximately eight weeks (this took into consideration the 13 hour time difference between Japan and Venezuela and any technical problems in sending and receiving email).

All students in both groups had access to computers; however, we did encounter a vast difference in class size, 35 Japanese students vs. 18 Venezuelan students. We overcame this problem by having all students of both groups write, and hand in the message for the week. Then each teacher randomly selected two email messages and sent them. Photocopies of these two messages were then handed out to the receiving group for classroom discussion. It is important to mention that we made virtually no corrections of the original messages since we felt that authenticity was more important than grammatical correctness or spelling.

With regard to course levels and objectives, the course given in Japan was a required, first year English language course taught predominantly in English, whereas, the one given in Venezuela was an elective American culture course given in English. Most of the Venezuelan students were slightly older than the Japanese students, were very fluent in English, and were primarily interested in practicing their language skills, while the majority of the Japanese students were at the upper beginning or intermediate level and were less fluent. These differences did not present overwhelming difficulties however since both groups were able to understand each other's messages. The Japanese students were motivated to put forth more effort into the preparation of their messages knowing that the Venezuelan students were more advanced. The Venezuelan students were required to hand in a final written comparison of Japanese, Venezuelan, and American cultures based on the analysis of the emails received course reading assignments, and discussions in order to compensate for their distinct advantage in English.

Topics

Taking into account that Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) recommend that students be involved in the selection of the topics for oral and written activities, we consulted with our students about topics that would be of interest to them. After a brief mail

consultation between teachers, the following topics were proposed for each of the weekly email messages which were to be between 150–200 words in length.

- Week 1:* Introduce yourself. This should include information about your major, your hobbies, where you live and your family.
- Week 2:* Describe the educational system in your country. Discuss the structure of the system (levels and years), private vs. public education, and college programs and university entrance requirements.
- Week 3:* Discuss attitudes toward working women and childcare in your country.
- Week 4:* Discuss attitudes towards minority groups. These may be ethnic, racial, or religious. You may also discuss attitudes towards homosexuals, interracial marriages, the homeless or the unemployed in your country.
- Week 5:* Select a social problem in your country that you feel is extremely important; describe it and propose a solution.
- Week 6:* Write a thank you message to the other group.

Results

Practicing Writing Skills

First of all, we can say that most of the students in each group participated willingly in the activity and were quite enthusiastic about it, thus indicating a high level of motivation. In fact, many of the messages exceeded the 200 word suggested limit. Naturally, this meant that the students were getting ample opportunities for practicing their writing skills in English, thus confirming our first supposition.

Cultural Differences and Similarities

Introducing oneself. The first learning experience for both groups of students was a cultural one, and was related to the preparation of the first email message. It was necessary to explain to the Venezuelan students that the Japanese do not normally like to talk about their families and therefore not to expect too much detailed information about parents and siblings. The Japanese students had to be told to expect a good deal of information about the Venezuelan students' families since it constitutes one of the main topics of conversation in Venezuelan society. This was probably an important issue because in future professional situations they will know what to expect from Venezuelan or Japanese colleagues and neither will be offended by too little or too much personal information.

The educational system. The Venezuelan students were surprised to find out that for most of the Japanese students high school and preparing for university entrance

exams were far more difficult (and stressful) than successfully completing a college course and graduating. For Venezuelan students the academic demands at the university level are far greater than those of high school. Japanese students were surprised at the effort expended by Venezuelan college students, as for some Japanese, college is a four year “break” before entering the job market. While private education, particularly at the elementary and intermediate levels, is preferable to public in Venezuela, in Japan, public schools (with some exceptions) are usually superior. Talking about one’s educational background in Japan can be a “touchy” topic as the name of the school attended is believed to reveal one’s level of academic ability—schools are ranked hierarchically, and the reputation of the school can chiefly determine the quality of the company willing to hire the graduate. Japanese students were interested in such differences in the educational system in Venezuela.

Working women and childcare. With regard to the issue of working women and childcare, the Japanese students were surprised to learn about the high percentage of Venezuelan single mothers who are responsible for raising and supporting several children. This was of special interest since divorce and illegitimacy are still fairly rare in Japan. Both groups did concur on the importance of the mother’s role in taking care of children and the difficulties encountered by professional women.

Attitudes towards minority groups. Perhaps the topic which produced the greatest number of surprises for both groups was the one related to attitudes towards minority groups. For the Japanese students it was very interesting to learn about the high degree of racial, religious and ethnic tolerance that permeates all levels of Venezuelan society, particularly related to foreign residents and cross-cultural marriages and racial mixtures. The Japanese students felt that although discrimination against non-Japanese residents and certain religious groups does exist, these attitudes are not so prevalent in the younger generation. Cross-cultural marriages in Japan are sometimes considered “stylish” by young Japanese, though perhaps even impossibly difficult, due to differences in cultural background. Japanese students tend to have, if not an accepting attitude, at least more consciousness of prejudice against mixed race children or foreign workers than their parents.

With reference to homosexuals, both groups did agree that this particular group of people is discriminated against, although many students of both groups felt that this situation would improve and that homosexuals would be treated more justly in the future.

Attitudes toward homeless people by Japanese students are also becoming milder, with fewer automatic assumptions that the homeless person deserves his or her fate or enjoys his or her lifestyle. Many Japanese participants were very interested in the attitudes of Venezuelans toward these same groups, and especially toward the economically

disadvantaged. The gap between rich and poor is perceived as relatively narrow in Japan.

Social problems and solutions. With regard to social problems, the Japanese students expressed their preoccupation with the increase in juvenile delinquency, specifically bullying and aggressive behavior among adolescents. They seemed to feel that more attention should be paid, by both family and society, to the needs of adolescents. They also emphasized the importance of the role that a stable family situation plays in bringing up well-adjusted children. The Venezuelan students for the most part felt that the most serious social problem faced by the country is related to a deficient educational system, particularly the deficit of schools and institutions of higher learning as well as the lack of well-trained teachers and professors. They felt more economic resources should be invested in building schools and in teacher-training programs.

The final email, which was a thank-you letter, lent a personal touch to the activity and gave proof that both groups had enjoyed being able to communicate with peers from a vastly different culture.

The Survey

In order to determine what our students felt about the activity, and to find out whether or not they thought that it had been a positive learning experience, we polled them at the end of the course. Each of us prepared a questionnaire that included the nine items listed below, as well as questions that were relevant for our own particular courses.

1. In general, I felt that this was an interesting activity.
2. Preparing my email to send to (Japan, Venezuela) allowed me to reflect on my own culture.
3. The emails received from (Japan-Venezuela) gave me a better idea about certain aspects of (Japanese-Venezuelan) culture.
4. Receiving email correspondence from (Japanese-Venezuelan) students was a more personalized way of getting information.
5. In comparing my own email with the ones we received, I gained a better understanding for differences in cultural values in general.
6. This activity also helped me practice my writing skills in English.
7. By comparing my emails with the responses received, I could discover similarities and differences in cultural attitudes towards certain social issues.
8. I would have liked more direct contact with individual students and more questions and answers.

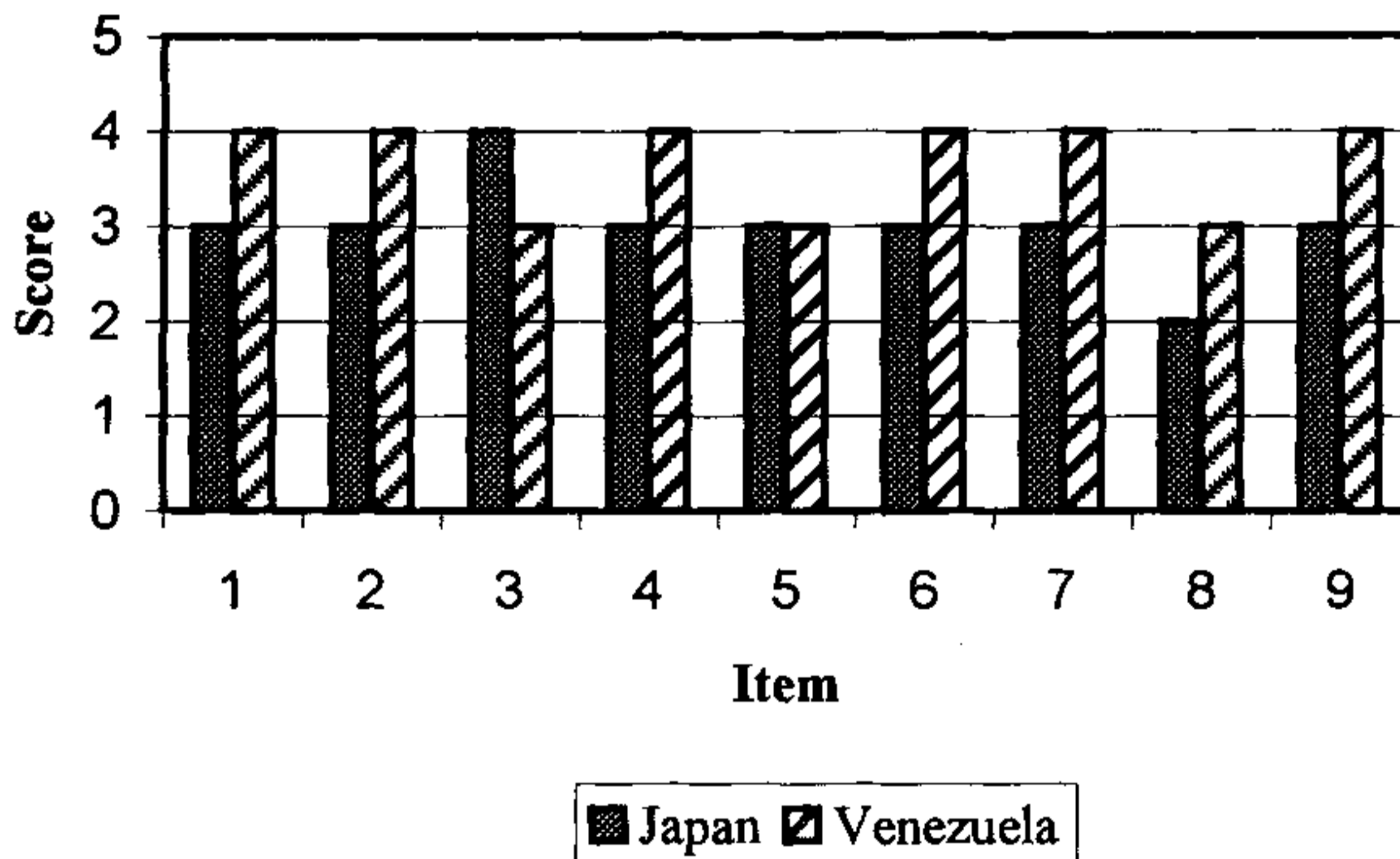
9. I would definitely include this activity in this and similar courses.

A four point, Likert-type, bi-polar scale (total disagreement-total agreement), located directly beneath each statement was used for recording the students' responses to each of the items. Students were instructed to circle the number on the scale which best reflected their opinion. This scale was used since it is commonly used to measure opinions and attitudes.

The responses of all students of each group were then tabulated on a double entrance matrix and the mean for every item was calculated. This data corresponds to the answers of 16 out of 17 Venezuelan students and 34 out of 35 Japanese students who were present on the day the questionnaire was administered. This information is synthesized in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Mean scores per item for both groups



In comparing the means, we find that the Japanese students were slightly less enthusiastic about most aspects of the activity and were more uniform in their opinions than the Venezuelan students. This may also reflect specific cultural characters; the Japanese tend to be less effusive than Venezuelans. More importantly however, with a single exception in the Venezuelan group, all of the students from both groups had a very positive attitude toward the activity. The frequency of the responses per item for each group is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Frequency of responses per item of Japanese students

Item	Frequency		Ss.		%		Ss.		%	
	Score	4	3	2	1	1				
1		8	24	18	53	7	20	2	3	
2		22	64	10	29	2	5	1	2	
3		25	74	7	21	2	5			
4		6	18	19	56	9	26			
5		14	41	16	47	4	12			
6		10	29	15	44	9	26			
7		15	44	15	44	4	12			
8		5	15	7	21	16	47	6	17	
9		7	21	18	53	6	17	2	9	

Data corresponds to 34 out of 35 students.

4 indicates total agreement while 1 indicates total disagreement with statement.

As can be seen from the data on Table 1, the responses of the Japanese students to eight out of the nine questions was very positive. The only statement that received a predominantly negative opinion was related to having more personal contact with the Venezuelan students and asking and answering more specific questions. The overwhelming majority felt that the activity caused them to reflect on Japanese culture as well as giving them greater insight into Venezuelan culture. Another large number of Japanese students believed they had gained a better knowledge of cultural values in general and learned something of the similarities and differences between Japanese and Venezuelan attitudes towards certain social issues.

Table 2

Frequency of responses per item of Venezuelan students

Item	Frequency		Ss.		%		Ss.		%	
	Score		4	3	2	1				
1		12	75	3	19		1	6		
2		11	69	4	25	1	6			
3		6	38	8	50	2	12			
4		11	69	3	19	2	12			
5		8	50	5	32	2	12	1	6	
6		14	87	2	13					
7		13	82	2	12	1	6			
8		2	12	10	63	3	19	1	6	
9		12	75	4	25					

Data corresponds to 16 out 17 students.

4 indicates total agreement while 1 indicates total disagreement.

The Venezuelan students also evaluated the activity very positively. However, their opinions differed from those of the Japanese students in relation to the aspects they considered to be most valuable. Although the Venezuelan group shared the opinion of the Japanese group with regard to statement two, they were less enthusiastic about items three and five. In contrast to the Japanese students, the Venezuelans were extremely positive about statements six, seven and nine. While 73% of the Japanese students believed that the activity helped them to practice their writing skills in English, 90% of the Venezuelans felt they had gained significant practice. Ninety-four percent of the Venezuelans thought that the activity was a good way to discover cultural differences and similarities as compared to 88% of the Japanese. Finally, the largest difference encountered in the opinions of the two groups was related to the final question. One hundred percent of the Venezuelan students would definitely include the activity in the same course or a similar one while 74% of the Japanese students expressed this opinion.

Discussion

Taking into consideration these results and our initial assumptions we can say that the activity did provide an excellent opportunity for the students to practice their writing skills in English. In terms of language, both groups were able to practice using various language functions such as describing, comparing and contrasting, explaining, and expressing opinions and feelings.

We can also conclude that this type of task-based activity is motivating for the student since it does indeed involve him/her actively in the learning process by encouraging him/her to express personal opinions and feelings. In many instances students began to spontaneously ask and answer questions which we interpreted as an indication of the progressive development of social communication skills.

With regard to stimulating classroom discussion, the email messages received by each group definitely promoted participation. This was due primarily to the fact that both groups of students were receiving "first hand" information from members of a peer group as opposed to textbook data and academic explanations. This also concurs with the findings of Chavez (1998) who found that the quantity of authenticity factors was of great importance to the students that participated in her study.

Although the exchange of electronic messages is no substitute for actual personal interaction, the element of authenticity and personalization of student messages produced a greater awareness of cultural differences and similarities and most definitely produced greater cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, the necessity of achieving communication between members of two very different cultures reflects a reality in which our students will likely find themselves in today's world of advanced telecommunications, tourism, and multinational corporations.

Language teaching organizations throughout the world have taken notice of the need to teach language as well as culture to both foreign language and second language students. Organizations such as TESOL, IATEFL and JALT, for example, have special interest groups devoted to intercultural communication and global education in ESOL, and publish an ever-increasing number of articles relative to the topics of cross-cultural understanding and even environmental and peace studies. ESL teachers frequently aid immigrant students not only in acquiring linguistic, but also cultural competence to help them acclimatize to their new life situations. EFL teachers, on the other hand, may be preparing students for work or study overseas. Also, EFL teachers of students in required language courses who seemingly possess no real need for using English or another foreign language may use multicultural and world issues primarily as a way to “enliven” their language courses or offer stimulating content. However, the current wisdom is that a great many, if not all individuals, could benefit from increased cultural sensitivity, if not concrete understanding, of a specific culture that they may likely find themselves in contact with, in an increasingly interdependent world.

In some FL situations, such as in Japan, generally, students are required to study a foreign language but have little if any direct contact with non-Japanese. Using an email cross cultural exchange was one way to give the Japanese students a genuine opportunity to communicate with others in a foreign language, versus the artificial situation of students who can more easily speak Japanese with each other and who “practice” speaking English to each other in class. However, for those students planning to go into fields such as tourism, being able to use English and deal skillfully with foreigners will be a tremendous asset. But even for students whose future professional goals do not require English, the cross-cultural exchange, creates, if not a more useful course, at least a more exciting one, and a legitimate need (if only temporarily) for English, while providing an authentic situation for students to use the language. This type of activity also broadens the worlds of the Japanese students, the majority of whom have had very little direct contact with non-Japanese and whose images tend to be restricted to common stereotypes.

Although many of the Venezuelan students have traveled abroad (mainly to the U.S. and Europe), their contact with Japanese people and culture has been very limited and their images were also somewhat stereotyped. Therefore, this activity helped to dissipate many of their preconceived notions and, in several cases, motivated them to enroll in the Japanese language and culture courses offered by the language department of the university. Even though one of our primary objectives was to provide an opportunity to increase cross-cultural understanding, we discovered that the activity also increased the students’ understanding of their own cultures. In describing and discussing various social issues in their own countries, they were obliged to analyze, compare, and question many customs and situations. In this sense, we can say that the activity contributed

towards making them into what Saltzman (1986) has referred to as "150% persons" (p. 251), able to find value in both their own culture and that of others.

In spite of the fact that this is a time consuming activity that demands a significant amount of organization and coordination on the part of the teacher, it is also a very rewarding one. Given the high percentage of students of both groups that felt that the activity had caused them to reflect on their own culture as well as gaining a better understanding and awareness of another culture, we can only conclude that it is an exceedingly valuable tool in the EFL/ESL context.

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