

Chapter 10

Developing Intercultural Awareness and Language Speaking Proficiency for Foreign Language Learners through Cross-Cultural Voicemail Exchange

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ABSTRACT

To expand global and intercultural communication, the effectiveness of asynchronous online communication devices, especially email, have been discussed in the area of foreign language teaching. A lack of specific research exists that addresses the application of online voicemail. This paper reports on a five month period of voicemail exchanges between 53 EFL learners in Taiwan and 56 CFL learners in the United States. The authors examine the responses of EFL students to this cross-cultural voicemail project and assess their progress in intercultural awareness and English speaking proficiency before and after the project. This study concludes that the use of voicemail creates an impact on the English speaking performance and intercultural awareness of EFL students and increases the motivation of EFL students in using English to express ideas. Further implications for teaching are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Networking electronically has been considered a viable way to enhance the creativity, analytical capability, social awareness, intercultural communicative competence, and language communication ability of students (Belisle, 1996; O'Dowd, 2003). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) includes various forms of interaction, synchronous and asynchronous, such as e-mail, text and voice chatting, video conferencing, electronic discussion groups, and web-based bulletin boards (Son, 2006). There has been an increasing emphasis on CMC as an innovative way to increase foreign language use and intercultural awareness in the language classroom (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Liaw, 1998, 2006; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Liou, 2002; O'Dowd, 2003; Sakar, 2001).

The Internet, as advocated by researchers such as Liou (2007) and O'Dowd (2003), is a medium for CMC and a common instructional tool in the EFL classroom; it allows students to learn a foreign language independent of constraints on time and distance. According to a literature review of Uzunboylu and Ozcinar (2009), the main idea of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is for students to learn on their own using interactive lessons. Instead of a method, CALL is a tool used to reinforce what has been taught in the classroom, and help students with limited language proficiency.

Even though a growing number of educators have acknowledged the importance of CALL, related studies have focused mostly on commercial CALL software, online interactive courseware, and email interaction. Among them, a significant amount of research has reported on intercultural email projects since email provides authentic language communicative experience. Some studies (e.g., Uzunboylu & Ozcinar, 2009; Yang & Chen, 2007) have investigated various kinds of internet-based learning, including both asynchronous (web-based courses and email) and synchronous

(videoconference and chat room discussion) online communication. Most studies (e.g., Edasawa & Kabata, 2007; Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Greenfield, 2003; Ho, 2000; Li, 2000; Liaw, 1998, 2001, 2006; Lu & Liou, 2004; Sakar, 2001) have focused on asynchronous online communication, exploring the effectiveness of (key-pal) email exchanges in the area of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching. These studies have recognized that email exchanges help EFL students develop intercultural competence (Ho, 2000; Liaw, 2001, 2006), English reading and writing proficiency (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Greenfield, 2003; Ho, 2000; Li, 2000; Liaw, 1998, 2001; Lu & Liou, 2004; Sakar, 2001), and computer skills (Greenfield, 2003).

Reviewing the CMC literature revealed that the majority of CMC studies explored the reading, writing, or testing aspects of language learning; very few studies investigated the listening and speaking aspects. Those studies which paid attention to how CALL helped develop foreign language speaking proficiency (Chiu, Liou, & Yeh, 2007; Engwall & Bälter, 2007) rarely involved real communication between different cultural groups. They usually investigated how web-based oral activities helped the training in pronunciation (Engwall & Bälter, 2007) or improving speech recognition (Chiu, Liou, & Yeh, 2007). Among the few CMC studies on language learning, Cunningham, Fagersten, and Holmsten (2010) did attempt to experiment on synchronous internet-based English language learning, including speaking practices, but the sound quality with restricted internet bandwidth brought about many technological problems.

In any of the EFL contexts, opportunities to speak with native English speakers one-on-one are less likely to occur. In Taiwan, there are few opportunities for students to practice English with native English speakers, and little exposure to English culture which is necessary to acquire intercultural awareness. This is not a problem that is specific to EFL; it can occur in any foreign

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