

Learning Culture and Language through a Bilingual Key-Pal Project

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1. DWC-UA Keypal Project

A bilingual key-pal project between students at Doshisha Women's College (DWC) in Japan and those at the University of Alberta (UA) in Canada has been conducted since 2001. DWC students major in English and UA students take an intermediate Japanese class. The aim of this keypal project is to exchange information and opinions in their target language and their own language concerning a common topic, such as university life, human relationships, marriage, etc., so that students will improve their target language and communication skills as well as deepen their understanding of the target culture. Such topics are proposed by the students and they select the one of their interest.

Students are divided into 10-11 groups according to the topic they selected. Each group has 4 – 6 members, including two to three from DWC and two to three from UA). At the end of the course students at both universities are expected to write an essay and give a short presentation in the target language. The length of the keypal project is 10 weeks each fall. As a communication tool, we used the *Webboard* in 2002 and 2003, and in 2004 we used the *Cyber Vine*, a discussion board developed by DWC.

2. Previous Studies

Previous studies generally indicate that a cross-cultural project yields a positive outcome, helping students understand the target culture better and improving their language skills.

Jogan et al. (2001) conducted a cross-cultural e-mail exchange between US advanced Spanish students and Chilean advanced EFL students, and found that many of the U.S. students were impressed with the similarities shared with their keypals. Similarly, Itakura (2004), using Cantonese learners of Japanese, argued that an e-mail intercultural project is 'effective in

promoting more sensitive and complex views of the target culture. At the same time, however, she cautions that such a project might lead to reinforcement of stereotypes for some learners.

In projects related to learners' second language acquisition, Greenfield (2003), dealing with a collaborative e-mail exchange between Hong Kong students learning English and American students, showed that the project increased student confidence about their English ability in general, although students did not feel the project improved their grammar or vocabulary skills.

Stockwell (2003) examined the messages of 48 Australian university students learning Japanese and 34 Japanese university students, and found that about 30% of the messages ended prematurely despite their invitation for a reply. Stockwell suggested that major causes would be (i) having multiple topics in one e-mail, (ii) ignoring the invitation and changing topics suddenly, and (iii) lack of explicitness of the invitation. Interestingly, Stockwell reported that syntactic errors counted for less than 10 % of the ended messages.

3. Goals of Study

In the present study, we examined whether our bilingual cross-cultural email exchange projects between learners of English and learners of Japanese would have the same kind of positive outcomes as reported in the previous studies. In particular, we were interested in how quantitative data we obtained would compare to the findings from previous studies, which were largely based on students' own assessments and/or researchers' observations. Therefore, our first research question is "How does the project affect students' cultural awareness?" The result of this study is reported in Study I.¹

We also conducted an ethnographic analysis of the students' messages to determine what aspects of bilingual interactions may lead to or hinder students' language learning. So, our second research question is "How does the project affect students' language learning?" We will discuss the result of this study in Study II.

4. Study I: Cultural Learning

A survey about cultural awareness was conducted in Fall 2002. 43 DWC students and 23 UA students participated in the project. To examine whether students' perception of cultural values, a

7-point scale questionnaire with 10 questions was prepared. The Cultural Value Scale was modified from Muñoz and Petrick (1993). Students were asked to indicate what they think of the target culture and their own culture by circling the corresponding scores at the beginning of the project and after the project. Figure 1 shows an example of the Cultural Value Scale we used. The data collected were analyzed statistically by *t*-test to see if there were any significant differences in perception of the target and their own cultures during the 10 weeks.

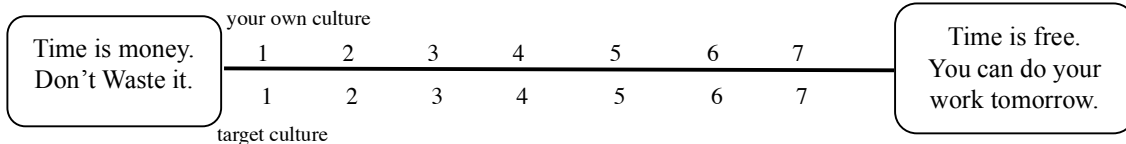


Figure 1. Cultural Value Scale (cf. Muñoz & Petrick, 1993)

4.1. Results of Study I

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the answers of the Cultural Value Scale in the pre-test and the post-test and the results of the ANOVA.

Table 1. Average scores for pre- and post-surveys for DWC students and UA students

			DWC (N= 35)						UA (N=18)					
			<u>target culture</u>			<u>own culture</u>			<u>target culture</u>			<u>own culture</u>		
			Means	STD	<i>t</i>	Means	STD	<i>t</i>	Means	STD	<i>t</i>	Means	STD	<i>t</i>
Q1	Time is money. vs. Time is free.	Pre	4.7	1.75	1.14	2.3	1.43	0.00	2.1	1.28	-1.51	2.9	1.76	-1.02
		Post	4.3	1.62		2.3	1.28		2.5	1.15		3.3	1.91	
Q2	Money is important. vs. People are important.	Pre	5.5	1.04	2.37*	4.6	1.48	1.75	2.2	1.00	-3.76**	3.4	1.82	-0.91
		Post	5.0	1.36		4.1	1.81		3.0	1.19		3.8	1.96	
Q3	Informality is valued. vs. Formality is valued.	Pre	3.0	1.54	-0.93	4.9	1.65	0.11	5.2	2.41	0.09	3.3	1.57	-1.45
		Post	3.2	1.17		4.8	1.65		5.1	2.00		3.9	1.80	
Q4	Being direct is important. vs. Indirectness is important.	Pre	1.7	0.8	-2.28*	4.1	1.79	-1.10	5.4	1.94	1.10	2.7	1.27	0.72
		Post	2.2	1.16		4.4	1.5		5.1	2.24		2.4	1.54	
Q5	Change is important. vs. Tradition is important.	Pre	2.7	1.8	-0.33	3.9	1.88	-1.38	4.9	1.39	-0.15	2.7	1.27	-0.53
		Post	2.8	1.35		4.3	1.61		5.0	1.37		2.4	1.54	
Q6	Showing emotion is good. vs. Hiding emotion is good.	Pre	1.9	0.96	-2.16*	4.1	1.74	-1.02	5.5	1.50	-0.51	3.6	1.29	0.66
		Post	2.5	1.37		4.4	1.56		5.7	1.32		3.3	1.60	
Q7	Competition is good. vs. Competition is destructive.	Pre	2.3	1.59	-1.76	3.1	1.65	-2.90*	2.8	1.76	-1.25	2.7	1.71	0.36
		Post	2.8	1.34		3.9	1.44		3.3	1.71		2.6	1.50	
Q8	Independence from family. vs. Depending on family.	Pre	4.1	2.24	-0.15	5.5	1.62	1.31	5.4	0.81	0.53	4.3	1.99	1.29
		Post	4.1	2.14		5.2	1.3		5.2	1.47		3.6	1.82	
Q9	Everyone is equal. vs. Everyone has a place in society.	Pre	3.4	2.15	0.57	4.1	1.81	-0.45	5.3	1.07	2.76**	3.6	1.98	-0.18
		Post	3.2	1.69		4.3	1.52		4.4	1.29		3.7	1.81	
Q10	Women and men are equal. vs. Women and men have separate roles.	Pre	2.2	1.16	-2.40*	4.1	1.57	-1.36	5.8	1.15	1.82	3.4	1.97	0.30
		Post	2.9	1.59		4.6	1.61		5.3	1.02		3.2	1.26	

* : *p* < .05, ** : *p* < .01

The results indicated that UA students significantly changed their view of the Japanese culture in terms of equality in the society (Q9) and the value of money (Q2).

On the other hand, DWC students' view of Canadian culture significantly changed in the areas of gender role (Q10), value of money (Q2), directness (Q4), and showing emotion (Q6).

Moreover, the changes in the survey scores (both for UA and DWC) were always towards the neutral (i.e., score rating of 4). For example, DWC students thought that Canadian people would be direct in the beginning with the score of 1.7, but realized less so (the score is 2.2). Perceptions became more neutral after the project. It suggests that the project helped students reduce cultural bias and eliminate stereotypes.

Interestingly, DWC students' view of their own culture (Japanese) also changed in the area of competition (Q7), from 3.1 in the pre-test to 3.9 in the post-test. This indicates that prior to the keypal project they had thought Japanese would not be so competitive, but they realized, through the mail exchanges, that Japanese were a little bit more competitive than they had previously thought. A DWC student commented, "The keypals' questions made me review my understanding of the Japanese culture and helped me learn new aspects of the Japanese culture."

However, there was no significant change in the way UA students viewed their own culture.

5. Study II: Language Learning

Ethnographic data in Study II was collected in Fall 2004 from 24 DWC and 28 UA students. During the 10 weeks, in total 677 postings in 150 threads were generated.

In analyzing the data, we were interested in the aspects of bilingual correspondence that might promote or hinder students' language learning. Specifically, we examined these three areas: 1) language learning, 2) communication strategies, and 3) technical issues.

5.1. Results of the Study II

Table 2 shows the number of correspondences and the number of threads within each group.

Table 2. Number of threads and postings in the keypal project 2004

	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G7	G8	G9	G10	G11	TOTAL
# of students	5	5	5	5	6	5	4	3	5	5	6	54
DWC	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	24
UA	3	3	3	3	3	3	2 (1)	1 (2)	3	3	3	30
# of threads	10	32	13	23	14	20	13	5	14	15	11	150
# of postings	35	107	54	53	79	52	44	25	99	64	65	677
DWC	18	57	31	25	41	24	25	15	50	37	31	354
UA	17	50	23	28	18	28	19	10	49	27	34	323

* () indicates the number of students who dropped the course after the start of the project.

5.1.1. Language Use

Most students, including both UA and DWC students, used both English and Japanese in their messages as instructed. In general, however, English was the preferred language for discussion.

There are three possible reasons for this:

- Although UA students started to use Japanese, their Japanese was not understood by their partners and they were requested to attach an English translation. When they had the same experiences twice or more, they stopped using Japanese or used Japanese minimally, usually one or two sentences.
- In another case, DWC students' Japanese was quite authentic and difficult for UA students, and UA students seemed to realize if they asked in Japanese, they would have a response in Japanese but that it would be very difficult for them.
- Also, we think that the UA students simply did not have time to write in Japanese or found it too hard to express their opinions in Japanese.

The following is an example of how a UA student thought the Japanese written by a DWC student was difficult.

Ex. 1. Difficulty of understanding DWC students' Japanese

UA: Sorry... I kind of noticed that you already answer my question already to my previous post! It's worded really badly I know... I thought that the Japanese you wrote in this post

was just a translation of your English but then I realized that it was actually the reply! I'm trying to translate what all the Japanese means... The kanji is killing me!

So, we can say that English was more understandable for both UA and DWC students.

5.1.2. Error Corrections

Despite our initial expectation, students were not keen on correcting the language errors they found. Out of the total 677 messages, we found only 2 cases where DWC students corrected UA students' Japanese, and 2 cases where UA students corrected DWC students' English explicitly.

We speculate the reasons as follows:

- As long as the meaning was clear, grammatical errors were not corrected. Students were not very concerned, or not as much concerned as we instructors would expect them to be.
- It seems that students found it too troublesome to correct each other's errors.
- Using the message-board may have caused students' hesitation of correction because they might have been sensitive about disclosing the partners' errors. According to Stockwell (2003), it takes a while before partners feel comfortable enough to correct each other's language use.

We found explicit correction was very rare. Perhaps because:

- Both DWC and UA students seemed to prefer to implicitly indicate their partners' errors.
- If the meaning of the question was clear, they would incorporate the correct usage in their replies.
- If the sentence was not comprehensible, students provided an alternative question by guessing what the partner had meant to say.

After all, students consider the purpose of the project is to exchange messages, not to correct errors. The following two examples are examples of implicit correction and an alternative question.

Ex.2. Implicit Error Correction

DWC: ...Are you interested to **make-up** yourself? In Japan, nowadays men's cosmetics are

*on sale. It is said that **mens** in **TV almost make-up**. How do you think about men's make-up?*

*UA: ...You say that people on TV **use makeup**, but when do they use makeup? Actors and actresses use makeup when filming to help balance colours of their faces on film. This is normal and happens when filming movies or TV shows, and especially on stage in theatrical performances. Is this what you mean, or do you mean that **celebrities** use makeup?*

*DWC: My English was wrong...sorry. I wanted to say same with you. **Actors use makeup** to help their faces....*

In this interaction, DWC student wanted to ask the partner's opinion about the use of men's facial makeup. But she wrote the word "make-up" instead of "makeup." Also she used an expression "mens in TV". Then the UA partner suggested in his reply that they might be "makeup" and "actors" or "celebrities". So, the DWC student could correct her errors.

Ex.3. Provide alternative question

DWC: Do you think that canada people interest about public massage?

*UA: Sumimasenga, TK-san no shitsumon ga chotto wakarimasen [I am sorry, but I do not quite understand what you are asking]. **Did you mean, "Do you think that Canadian people have an interest in public messages?"***

DWC:I am sorry my English was not good. I want to know, how do you think about public massage?

The above is an example of providing an alternative question. DWC student wanted to ask if Canadian people are interested in public messages? But "Canada people interest about public massage" was very incomprehensible for the UA student. So, UA student guessed what the DWC student wanted to say and provide an alternative. Then, the DWC student corrected the sentence in her second posting as seen in the example. Unfortunately, however, she did not recognize her typing error of "massage" for "message" at all, although she was provided the correct spelling twice.

5.1.3. Language Learning

The students' messages indicated that there was plenty of learning during this project. Besides learning through having their errors corrected, students explicitly taught each other new vocabulary or expressions.

However, most of the learning took place in a rather implicit manner. Following are three examples: one of explicit learning, one of correcting spelling by oneself, and one of learning by copying.

Ex.4. Explicit Learning

DWC: *shitsumon wa ima kangae-chuu desu. Kore eigo de doo iu ? [how do you say this in English?]*

UA: *“shitsumon wa ima kangae-chuu desu” ga [o] eigo ni naoshitara “I'm thinking of questions right now” desu.* [If you translate ‘shitsumon wa ima kangae-chuu desu’ in English, it is “I'm thinking of questions right now”].

DWC: *“Think” wa shinkokei ni dekinai dooshi da to omotteita! Arigatoo. Mata mendoo de nakereba machigaieigo oshiete ne.* [I thought ‘think’ is a verb that cannot be used in the progressive form. Thank you. If it is not troublesome, please teach me again when my English is wrong.]

In this example, a DWC student asked how to say something in English, and her partner answered. The DWC student learned the English expression, and at the same time, she learned grammar too.

Ex.5. Implicit learning of spelling

UA: *nihon wa keitaidenwa de yumei dato shinjite imasu. bokuni totte, shuubaa [シユーバ: silver] to shiroi to kuroi todakedesu kara nihon no keitaidenwa ga sukidesu.* [I believe that Japan is famous for cellular phones. Over here, we have only silver and black (cell phones), so I like Japanese cell phones.]

DWC: *nihon no keetai denwa wa ... totemo benri dato omoimasu. Iro mo oosodokkusu na sirubaa [シルバー: silver] ya kuro ni kuwae ...* [I think Japanese cell phones are very convenient. They come in various colours from orthodox silver and black to...]

UA: *...watashi no keitaidenwa wa sirubaa [シルバー: silver] desu.* [My cell phone is

silver.]

This example shows that a UA student corrected the Katakana word spelling from a DWC student's message. The UA student had a wrong memory of the word 'silver' in Japanese. He thought it would be spelled "shuuba," but his partner at DWC showed the word "sirubaa" in her reply without any explanation, and the UA student corrected the spelling himself in the next mail.

Ex.6. Implicit learning of expressions

DWC: ... *tokorode, K wa totemo nihongo ga umaine. Jibun de benkyoo shiteru no?* [By the way, you are very good at Japanese. Do you study by yourself?]
UA: *boku no nihongo wa madamada desuyo. Jibun de benkyoo shiteiru kedo, totemo sukoshidesu. ...* [My Japanese is not that good. Although I study by myself, I do so very little.]

This example shows that students often copied a phrase or expression used by their partner. The DWC student wrote, "You are very good at Japanese. Do you study by yourself?" in Japanese. UA Student answered, "My Japanese is not that good. Although I study by myself, I do so very little." in Japanese. Here, the expression "jibun de benkyousuru, (to study oneself)" was learned by the UA student himself by copying the message given by the keypal.

5.2. Communication Strategies

As you see in Table 1, Groups 2, 5 and 9 had frequent postings, while Groups 1, 7 and 8 had a relatively small number of correspondences. Then, what makes for frequent postings within groups?

From the data, three factors are thought to have influenced the project outcome, namely communication skills, shared interests, and understanding the partner's language level.

- One of the key factors was that there was at least one good communicator who was very fond of letter writing and wanted to expand their communication topics. For example, one DWC student in Group 9, when she was told it must take her a lot of time replying to three UA students, said, "Oh, well replying to you is not a big matter for me, cuz I like

sending mail or discussing with someone. No worries!”

- Promptness also influenced the outcome of the project. A delay in responses would deter their partners from pursuing the communication further.
- Also, if a student had the ability to expand topics, such as asking questions on a related topic, it facilitated further communication.

Regarding communication strategies, we found that shared interests are important. Students who shared and discussed general interests with partners, such as music and movies, had better results than those who only discussed the research topics. ‘Small chats,’ talking about the weather, their school, and so on, were especially effective. One UA student when he gave his e-mail address to his partner said, “Instead of posting the file only, please write whatever you want to talk about. I will be looking forward to receiving your mails.”

In contrast, some groups did not do much more than asking and answering each other’s questions. When the research topic was not familiar to them and they had not much else to talk about, the messages also tended to be short and infrequent.

The data also suggested that the more sensitive students were to each other’s language level and needs, the better results they had in the project. As we have already discussed, when a student’s question was not clear and the partner requested him/her to simply rephrase or repeat it, the communication tended to end. On the other hand, when the partner was provided an alternative question by trying to guess what he/she had intended to ask, communication continued. The answers written in Japanese by DWC students with specific terms and difficult concepts were often overwhelming and incomprehensible to some UA students, especially if their language skills were not very high.

In order to have good communication, modified Japanese or English and providing translation would be helpful. It might be necessary to give modified Japanese by adding an English glossary for some kanji words, by using simpler terms, or even by providing an English translation.

5.3. Technical Issues

While proceeding with the keypal project, we found some technical problems, especially about

the communication tool. For example, while the discussion board has an advantage for a group project that involves multiple participants, it is not easy for students to keep track of the question-answer sequences. Moreover, since the instructions were in Japanese on *Cyber Vine*, it took a while for some UA students before they found out how to post their messages. In fact, five students mentioned that they had some trouble before they finally understood how *Cyber Vine* worked. Another UA student lost her password and could not log in for a few weeks. It was also found that since *Cyber Vine* does not have a file attachment function, some students had to use their own homepage or other e-mail accounts for this purpose, especially when they wanted to send a long questionnaire or when they wanted to show their images in color.

Therefore, an easy communication tool and a good support system on each side of the project would be necessary to ensure students' active involvement in the discussion.

6. Summary

Although there are several things to be concerned about, we believe the bilingual keypal project provides invaluable experiences for students who would otherwise have little chance to communicate with native speakers and exchange ideas.

The survey data suggested that the project

1. improves cultural awareness in both the target culture and their own culture
2. reduces students' cultural bias and eliminates stereotypes,
3. improves students' language skills of vocabulary and writing, either by learning new expressions in the messages or by directly asking their partners questions.

However, at the same time, we found that:

1. students concentrate on communication, not on learning or improving their target language. The amount of peer correction was found to be very little in this study,
2. students prefer implicit error correction, probably because they hesitate to show explicit correction or in order to save time, and;
3. students prefer to use English because English is a more understandable language for both DWC and UA students.

After all, we can say that in this bilingual project, students tried to enjoy learning each other's ways of thinking and living. In other words, they had good communication.

7. Keys for Successful Keypal Projects

This study indicates some of the key factors that influence the project outcome. They are the role of the students, the role of the teachers and the role of the communication tool.

Students should:

1. try to develop good communication skills,
2. try to share interests and discuss interesting topics,
3. try to understand their partner's language level.

Teachers should:

1. plan well, such as knowing the differences in school calendars, letting students know about the keypal's timeline, and forming effective groups ,
2. provide students with necessary information about keypals, such as their language levels and their needs.

Finally, the communication tool should be easy to use for both Japanese students and Canadian students.

Obviously, we still have a lot to find out before we understand how this type of bilingual project can best be incorporated in second language teaching. We think other types of data, including data from an objective assessment or quantitative data based on a larger corpus, should be examined in the future. We also hope to look at more data in detail, in order to determine the patterns of message exchange that lead to a successful bilingual project. We hope our findings will be useful for those who are interested in a similar project.

Note

1. The preliminary results of this survey study were presented at WorldCALL 2003, which was held in Banff, Alberta, Canada, May 7-10, 2003.

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