COMMUNICATION VIA E-MAIL IN ESP

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The greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished

George Bernard Shaw

Introduction

E-mail is a form of asynchronous communication via computer-mediated application of the Internet. Using an E-mail extends language learning time and place beyond the classroom, offers real communication in the target language, and provides possibilities to increase the amount of time that learners spend reading and writing in a communicative context. In spite of being a relatively plain medium, e-mail can offer effective pedagogical benefit of communicative interaction to the process of learning a foreign language.

This paper describes the research into the e-mail exchange activities between two English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes of different specializations. The primary accent of this research has been to investigate e-partners' ability to negotiate the choice of materials and the content of presentations on professional themes via e-mail exchanges. Such an approach emphasizes learner's ability to search for information online, critically analyze and sort materials out and select reliable information. Appropriate use of multimedia for this purpose encourages learners to become more self-directed and autonomous in their learning. Integration of learner collaboration into e-mail exchange project develops their skills of negotiating, planning, and sharing information. The secondary aspect of this research has been an analysis of the quality of

online designed presentations that were delivered in face to face conference session. The implications of this experiment are discussed.

Literature Review of Contemporary E-Mail Learning

Current advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) affect the ways how English language is taught and students develop their language skills. In the 20th century, ICT was often referred to as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Lately nearly all learning has incorporated letter 'e', and e-learning has become natural part of English instruction.

Keeping up to date with e-learning is a fast-moving discipline on the Internet. Nowadays Internet offers the activities of reading daily e-learning newsletters, online magazines and attending e-learning conferences. Interpersonal exchanges engage learners in real life communication with key partners. E-partners can be found on the Net by employing common search engines. Unfortunately, e-mailing between at random found key pals does not lead to effective learning, and, as a rule, is limited to exchanging personal information. Even with suitable key partners, e-mailing can often be problematic in terms of time and reliability of the contacts.

E-mail seems to be the most important, unique method for communication and developing relationships since the telephone (Suller, 1998). First, it is easy to use. Second, people find it familiar and safe – it is similar to letter writing. Third, it is the most common and powerful. Unlike face to face encounters, e-mail exchanges are asynchronous, i.e. do not happen in 'real time'. A person has time to think, evaluate, and compose a message. Availability of thinking time can save e-partners from unnecessary misunderstandings and arguments. However, a person's ability to communicate effectively via e-mail depends highly on their writing skills (Suller, 1998): 'E-mail is a less spontaneous form of communicating than speech. Unlike verbal conversation - where words issue forth and immediately evaporate – writing places one's thoughts in a more visible, permanent, concrete, and objective format. Poor writing can result in misunderstandings and possibly conflicts'. Spelling, grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure and style influence the quality of the writing and reflect one's personality.

ICT collaborative project between two schools in Singapore and Birmingham explored different writing tasks through the electronic exchange of information (Mei Lin Ho, 2000). The pupils' confidence, awareness and understanding of their own and their correspondents' cultures were enhanced in this project. The study also examines the role and place of the foreign language teachers over a period of project time, and discusses the implications for both the teachers and learners. Students proved to be more motivated and displayed a positive attitude towards writing. Analysis of the electronic messages showed a level of maturity in pupils' cognitive development. Learners learnt to work collaboratively and improved their communication skills. Pedagogical implications of the project include knowledge on who, what, why, and how. In other words, teachers need to know well the people who are involved in the project, the specific areas for research and follow-up that have to be worked out clearly with specific objectives, to understand

overall purpose of the project and how it will help participants in specific areas, and, finally, to know a clear step-by-step process of implementation.

Rationale and suggestions for using e-mail in foreign language teaching are described in (Gonglewski et. al., 2001). Pedagogical benefits of e-mail are: extending language learning time and place, providing a context for real-world communication and authentic interaction, expanding topics beyond classroom-based themes, promoting student-centered language learning, and encouraging equal opportunity participation. A number of suggestions for using e-mail are offered: group e-mail exchanges, e-mail interaction within the class, e-mail interaction between classes, one-to-one e-mail interaction.

The survey of computer use at the University of Canberra revealed that a little over half of the 128 respondents were regular users of computers, spending time surfing the Internet or e-mailing (Jones, 1998). According to survey conducted at the University of Urbon, in Thailand, (Jones, 2001), 100% of 68 respondents used computers for e-mail and expressed a desire to develop computer skills in order to improve their English.

Learners' attitudes and difficulties in learning ESP online were examined in (Kavaliauskiene, 2003). It was revealed that 71% of 74 respondents use e-mail, and 52% like learning English online. The major difficulty is evaluation of information caused by reading comprehension problems in English.

Majority of researchers concur with the opinion that e-mail writing is a hybrid of discourse, combining features of both spoken and written genres. Therefore, it has the potential to help improve language learners' oral skills. However, e-mail writing remains essentially written discourse. While writing in the target language, e-partners give each other a chance to read authentic expressions, notice grammatical structures, copy words when responding. What is paramount in e-mail learning experience is learner reflection on language and making use of various resources such as dictionaries and grammar books (http://www.well.ac.uk/wellclass/email.html).

The concept of etiquette in e-mail is known as 'netiquette', which includes some straightforward rules, like being positive, polite, accurate, brief, clear. Identifying oneself, pointing 'subject', and avoiding unfamiliar acronyms are rules of a thumb. Guidelines of e-mail writing in business communication extend netiquette rules further: clearness, conciseness, courtesy, consideration, completeness, concreteness, correctness (Jones & Alexander, 1996).

A survey conducted in Finland has shown that usage of e-mail increased five-fold in the last six years while the share of letters and faxes declined significantly (Wang & Aaltonen, 2004). In business communication, e-mails tend to be stylistically close to a writing-based telephone talk with the obvious trend from the formality of business letters to the informality of e-mails. The e-mail project between Chinese and Finnish students aimed at placing students in authentic business situations, where they were expected to perform a series of negotiation tasks with partners. The exchange of e-mails constructed a continuous communication chain, from request, reply to request, order, order acknowledgement, to complaints and adjustments. The project participants were expected and encouraged to consider what, and how to communicate in

the particular situation. Participants encountered some practical problems like different curriculum arrangements and choice of a group compatible with their counterpart group in another country. Project implementation problems included incorrect reading of e-mail addresses and the timing of the project. The international project was designed as an innovation to improve EFL Business Communication teaching and learning. Student participation was self-monitored and depended on students' motivation and willingness to take responsibility.

Certainly the most readily accessible key partners for students in a class are their classmates themselves (Porcaro, 2002). E-mail activities within the class can be effectively controlled, and structured communication is easily attainable. Possible disadvantage might be the excessive use of mother tongue in monolingual classes.

A valuable quality of e-mail communication is learners' collaboration. Collaborative learning provides the opportunities for learners and teachers to communicate, discuss and collaborate online – either one-to-one or in groups. It helps to bring together groups of learners for a learning event, i.e. create learning communities. The term peer-to-peer learning is used for groups of learners who learn together by setting up connections between the peers. A survey into quality of e-learning (Massy, 2002) indicates that EU respondents are unimpressed with e-learning. 61% of respondents rated the overall quality of e-learning negatively. Only 1% rated it excellent, and 5% - very good.

Summing up the literature, the language exchange activities via e-mail are thought to be beneficial to learners. We set up an e-mail project between two English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes of different specializations. The major objective of this research has been to investigate key partners' ability to negotiate the choice of materials and the content of professional presentations on suggested topics via e-mail exchanges. A final stage of a project is the collaborative delivery of prepared presentations in front of the audience.

Research Techniques

Each of us taught a class of learners with different specialization profile. We set up a pilot project between two classes with the objective of applying language exchange activities via e-mail for preparation of professional presentations. The project aimed to place students in authentic situation, where they could carry out a series of negotiation tasks with their e-partners. Attention was paid to outlining of ESP themes that students were expected to handle. The exchange of e-mails meant an on-going chain of communication on choice and selection of materials, negotiation on presentation layout and content, sharing and adjusting views and coming to a final consensus.

There were 24 participants – 12 from each class. Six ESP topics were assigned at random to each pair in both classes. Learner pairs were asked to contact their peers via e-mail, negotiate the choice of materials, contents of presentations and prepare PowerPoint variant for making a public presentation in front of the audience. Students were requested to send their exchange e-

mails to each other and forward them to both teachers, who were able to monitor students' progress in preparation of presentations and analyze learners' difficulties. Teachers' task was to keep track of e-mail exchange, both incoming and outgoing, and not interfere into students' communication activities, i.e. let them work at their own pace. Regrettably, two students dropped out of this project soon after its outset for some vague reasons.

Results and Discussion

Research findings are described below. The data on students' emailing activities and effectiveness of their negotiations aiming at preparation of professional PowerPoint presentations are analyzed. The performance of students in front of the audience and feedback on self- and peer-assessment are presented.

Analysis of E-Mail Messages

The purpose of e-mail communication between key pals was the exchange of information and negotiation of content and choice of material for the final stage of the project - delivery of presentations.

Having no opportunity to meet face-to-face learners had to plan their final product of the project - a PowerPoint presentation. Learners could enjoy full independence in use of information sources, choice of material, frequency of e-mail correspondence. E-mail provided students with an opportunity to interact with their key pals in the 'specialist' language, thus increasing their fluency in writing on professional topics. Teachers have been able to monitor learners' progress in preparation of their presentations via e-mails forwarded to them. There has been no teachers' interference into students' activities.

52 e-mail letters were exchanged by the participants of the project in the allotted period. However, the frequency of correspondence between partners differed greatly. The most active learners communicated on regular basis sending 15 e-mails, whereas one group of learners sent only 3 messages.

Every message dealt with some kind of information or data on the chosen topic, very often with attached files of information dealing with a specific question. Thus, e-mailing between key pals performed a referential function. The most typical scenarios of correspondence were as follows: a) introducing; b) suggestions on the plan for the presentation on the selected theme; c) exchange of information, website addresses; d) negotiating the content of the presentation, agreeing or disagreeing on the chosen material; e) discussing the delivery of the presentation, technical aspects, possible difficulties with PowerPoint equipment.

The most challenging aspect of the e-mailing between key partners from two groups of different specializations was students' autonomy and collaborative responsibility in decision making process. All collaboration and e-negotiations proceeded in the learners' spare time at their own convenience.

Learning Effects

Learning effects are usually estimated by analyzing the students' performance. When learners manage to get the message across correctly, this part is categorized as successful communication. When learners fail to get their message across at the first attempt, the second attempt is usually categorized as reformulation. The remaining parts of erroneous communication are coded as other attempts (Sakai, 2004).

In our settings, there have been neither reformulations nor other attempts. Learners have been able to get their messages across at the first attempt, and their performance can be coded as successful communication.

However, the learners produced a variety of writing errors, such as lexical, grammatical, and syntactic errors, which were counted for each learner. The analysis of the present study is based on error points defined as the absolute number of errors identified in learners' e-mail messages. The errors included the omission of the definite or indefinite articles, the 3-rd person singular form, and the word order in the main or subordinate clauses. Errors in spelling have not been taken into account because this type of errors has not caused any misunderstandings in communication.

Two types of statistics are used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics are used to characterize a set of data in terms of central tendency and to show how the numbers disperse or vary around the centre. Central tendency is defined as the propensity of a set of numbers to cluster around a particular value. The important thing, however, is to note that descriptive statistics do not allow drawing any general conclusions that would go beyond the sample, but data would show a trend in the research area. Three computations are often used to find central tendency: the mean, the mode, and the median. The mean is the average of all numbers. The median is the point in the distribution below which 50% of the values lie and above which 50% lie. The quantitative statistics are usually used to find the level of significance in obtained data, and a variety of tests is used for this purpose. The most reliable for small samples is considered to be the *t*-test.

The aim of analysis has been to compare the performance of two groups - 12 women and 10 men. Individual scores of error points are summarized in Table 1. Participants are presented in pairs.

Participants	**Gender**	**Error Points**
Saule & Marija	Female	14
Aukse & Egle	Female	16
Gintas & Povilas	Male	6
Ilona & Darius	Female & Male	8
Algis & Simas	Male	6

Rasa & Rimas	Female & Male	14
Rita & Daiva	Female	16
Tomas & Mindaugas	Male	6
Migle & Daina	Female	10
Simona & Ruta	Female	8
Petras & Gediminas	Male	16

Table 1. Error Points for Each Pair of Participants. (Note: all names are fictitious).

Let us look closely at the differences in performance between females and males. At the first glance, the males seemed to make fewer errors than the females. As it can be seen in Table 1, the learners of the female group (N_w = 12) made a total of 75 errors, and the learners of the male group (N_m = 10) made 51 errors. The average number of errors, or the mean value M_w calculated for the female group is 6.25, and the mean value M_m for the male group is 4.5. Computed Standard Deviations are SD_w =1.358 and SD_m =1.597, respectively. Thus, on the average it seems that males performed better than females.

However, it is important to know if the difference between the two mean values is significant or not. The *t*-test is the most frequently used measure in second language research to solve such a problem when comparing mean scores for two groups. The adjustment for group size is made by using a table showing degrees of freedom *df* (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). A degree of freedom *df* for *t*-tests can be determined by subtracting 1 from the number of participants in each group and then adding the two resulting numbers together. In our settings, *df* = 20.

Our application of *t*-test computation to the data in Table 1 gives the *t*-value of 2.738. In the *t*-test Table (Brown & Rodgers, 2002), for *df* = 20 the critical values for *t* are:

at the p = 0.01 level of significance (two-tailed) *t* is equal to 2.845,

at the p = 0.02 level of significance (two-tailed) *t* = 2.528,

at the p = 0.05 level of significance (two-tailed) *t* = 2.086,

at the p = 0.10 level of significance (two-tailed) *t* = 1.725.

The *t* value that we calculated using the Means and Standard Deviations for both groups was 2.738. This value is greater than the critical values in the *t* –test table both at the 0.10, 0.05 and 0.02 levels of significance, but smaller than tabled value at 0.01. Therefore it means that statistically we have found a significant difference between men and women at $p < 0.01$, i.e. men are significantly better than women at avoiding errors in e-mail writing.

Analysis of E-Mail Language Style

The vast majority of people, 82%, believe good manners matter online, and 56% of 2000 adults questioned get annoyed by e-mail messages that were over-familiar, included spelling or grammatical errors, or lacked a proper greeting (Ward, 2001). Debrett's and MSN have provided a short guide to help the e-illiterate, which suggest adopting the correct tone for each occasion and remind e-mail users 'you are what you write, you will be judged by the content and style of your e-mail so do yourself justice'.

Analysis of email language supplied information on students' abilities to explore a foreign language for meaningful communication. Students use a typical mixture of formal and informal styles. Beginning a letter with "Hi!" or "Hello!" they finish it with "Sincerely yours". Many researchers note that e-mail communication reminds of a delayed conversation. The analysis of students' correspondence indicated this similarity with the oral communication. Some letters had no introduction or greeting, and just delivered important information. This is peculiar to male letters.

e.g.

"It looks like we are in the final stage of our project.…."

Or

"If you have the blue book, you can find information related with our subject…."

All students who participated in the project benefited from the opportunity to negotiate the contents of the professional topics and develop their social and collaboration skills. It is known that e-mail language performs referential and affective functions. Referential function is to convey information or content, whereas affective expresses feelings, emotions and social relationships between partners of correspondence. Women use more compliments and apologies. Generally speaking, women's e-mail language is more affective than men's. Lithuanian female students' letters contain more features of affective language, i.e. thanks, compliments, or apologies. The women's letters sound more personal and friendly.

E.g. Female message:

"Hello,

Thanks for your letter, and sorry we haven't written for so long.……"

"Hello, Simona and Ruta.

Sorry for not replying to you at once……..”

E.g. Male message

“Hi, you know I had time, therefore I have made an example of our presentation. ….”

Some findings on gender-based affective aspects of e-mail messages are presented in Table 2.

Affective aspects	Female	Male
Apologies	4	0
Compliments	5	1
Thanks	6	1

Table 2. Affective Aspects in Participants’ e-mails.

Gonglewski et.al. (2001) in their research into e-mail use in foreign language teaching among other positive aspects note that it is a practical opportunity to improve vocabulary and writing. The aim of Lithuanian e-mail correspondence was particular: to discuss and negotiate the material for preparation of PowerPoint presentations upon professional topics. Therefore, no visible improvement of written language was observed. Students had an opportunity to clarify their opinion, or offer some help, or reject peers’ suggested plan or idea. Thus, the focus was on communication.

Timing and Delivery of Presentations

Students were allotted five weeks to prepare their presentations via e-mail negotiations with e-partners they have never met before. Teachers have been able to monitor learners’ progress in preparation of their presentations via e-mails forwarded to them. There was no teachers’ interference into students’ activities. All collaboration and e-negotiations proceeded in the learners’ spare time at their own convenience.

All the teams met the day before the formal presentations in order to practise using multimedia and to check the adherence to e-specification. Next day students delivered their presentations in front of the audience, and their performance was video-taped. Presentation time

for each team was limited to 20 minutes. Regrettably, not all presenters managed to deliver their talks within the time limit.

Self- and Peer-Assessment of Preparation and Delivery

After the delivery of presentations, we conducted the self-assessment and peer-assessment session by administering a specially designed questionnaire. Students were asked to assess the difficulties that they faced in stages of preparation and delivery of presentations.

Learner self- and peer-assessment provides teacher with extensive first-hand information about their anxieties and reactions to teaching techniques and materials. The major benefit of learner self-assessment is its impact on the learning.

The results of self-assessment of difficulties are shown in chart 1. It is seen that slightly more than a fifth of respondents (23%) had problems in searching for relevant materials, which is shown by the lowest bar in the chart. Only 5% of students found it difficult to coordinate their efforts in choosing the contents – this is revealed by the second bar in this chart. 18% of learners had problems in using PowerPoint software – the third bar in the same chart. Interestingly, only 9% of learners have admitted being familiar with the PowerPoint software before this project. Therefore, the vast majority of students had to master the technique in the process of preparing their presentations. Almost half of respondents (45%) had difficulties in delivering their presentation – it is depicted by the fourth bar in the chart 1.

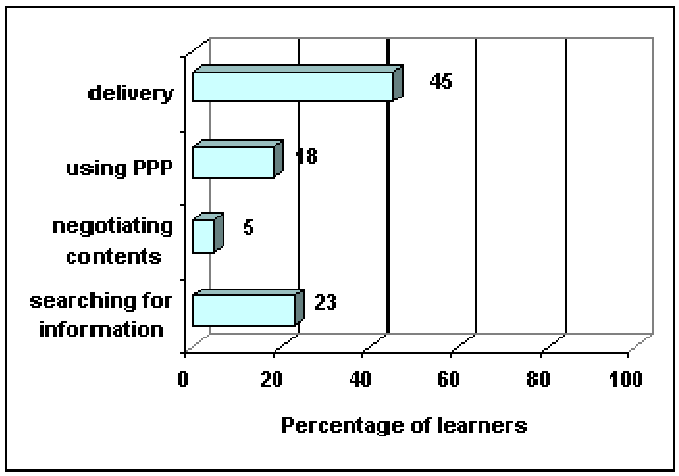

Chart 1.

E-partners' difficulties in preparation of presentations online.

These results are consistent with the findings shown in chart 2. Multitude of respondents (86%) feel their performance was successful – the upper bar in chart 2. Over the third (36%) consider their talks interesting, and 14% - professional. None of the respondents ticked other choices of a questionnaire like an unsuccessful, unprofessional, or boring performance. Nobody considered their performance faultless and perfect, although some of them were extremely good. Learners' modesty or shyness explains such responses.

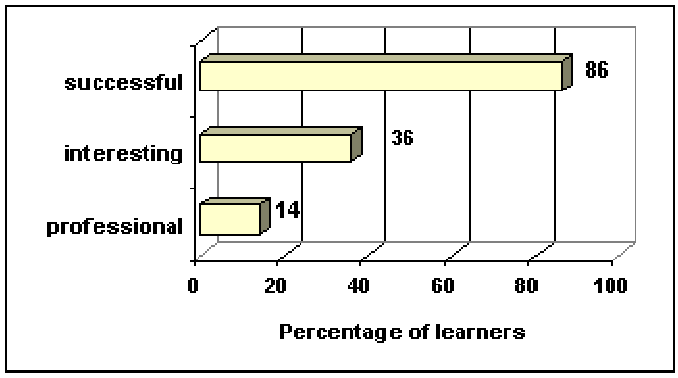

Chart 2.

E-partners' feedback on their performance

In a questionnaire section of specifying one's responses about quality of performance, there were such answers as lack of allotted time for presentation, a necessity to contemplate and reflect on delivery, and anxiety and thrill during performance. None of respondents thought they were relevant.

Peer-assessment allowed identifying the best presentation. It happened to be 'War on Terror' as the most informative and picturesque. All participants expressed feelings of fulfilment at having accomplished their assignments.

Conclusions

The research was conducted into gender differences on error points in e-mail messages in ESP. Female participants had a mean value M_w of errors of 6.25 and Standard Deviation SD_w = 1.358 while male participants had a mean value M_m of errors of 4.5 and SD_m = 1.597. A *t* –test analysis of the differences between the Means yielded a *t* = 2.738. This is significant at the p <

0.01 with freedom degrees *fd* = 20. Therefore, statistically men participants are proved to be significantly better at writing e-mails than women participants.

The significance of this study is its relevance to meaningful communication in ESP. Language exchange activities via e-mail with the objective of preparing presentations demonstrated their expedience as teaching tools in English for Specific Purposes. Learners succeeded in preparing presentations online and successfully delivering professional presentations in front of the audience.

Analysis of e-mail messages and delivery allows concluding that inter-group collaboration fosters learners' autonomous learning, improves writing and speaking skills, develops learners' ability to negotiate and get the meaning across, demonstrates the significance of the meaningful learning, i.e. learning subject through English, and allows learners to experience sense of accomplishment.

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