The JKCE Project: Japanese & Korean EFL Students
Communicating Online

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This paper provides an overview of the Japan-Korea Culture Exchange Project, an online program designed to connect EFL students studying in Korea and Japan. An outline of the project’s genesis and development is presented, focusing on the CMC technologies that have been used successfully. Details are given about specific problems that were encountered over the last 4 years, as well as solutions and communication activities that were developed to address these difficulties. Lessons learned over the course of the project will also be provided.

1. Introduction

The Japan-Korea Culture Exchange Project (Chase & Alexander, 2007) was started in the autumn of 2004, to facilitate English language communication between undergraduate students at Myongji University, in Korea, and Seinan Gakuin University, in Japan. Taking an approach consistent with the principles of communicative language teaching (Brown, 2001) project participants have been using a variety of inexpensive synchronous and asynchronous CMC technologies to communicate about their lives, interests and cultures.

2. Project Goals & Methods

The JKCE project has been guided by specific pedagogical goals and action research methods (Chase & Alexander, 2007). For students, the project’s authors attempted to provide authentic opportunities to 1) use the Internet for cross-cultural communication, to learn more about the culture and views of students from a neighboring country; 2) enjoy using English actively, providing four skills practice; and 3) gain experience with computer mediated videoconferencing and text message tools.

For ourselves as teachers, we wanted our project to 1) allow us to use communicative language teaching methods; 2) take an action research approach, informed by student feedback and teacher reflection; 3) allow us to experiment continuously, responding to problems creatively and flexibly; and 4) be inexpensive and easy to implement.

3. Project Genesis: 2004

This cross-cultural project was conceived in the winter of 2004, after I contacted members of South Korea’s KOTESOL CALL SIG, seeking a telecollaborative partnership that used Internet based videoconferencing to connect students between our nations. Paul Alexander, at that time a teacher at Myongji University, proposed a collaboration that also made use of Moodle message boards for asynchronous text-based discussions (Alexander & Chase, 2006).

The project was begun in the autumn semester of 2004, with two small groups of Japanese and Korean student volunteers, four from each country. We equipped Windows based laptop computers with Logitech webcams and installed MSN Messenger, an IM program that allowed us to transmit synchronous text messages and video over the Internet, at no cost. Paul also set up a password protected discussion forum online, using Moodle’s course management system. Students were asked to post asynchronous text messages on the discussion board during their free time. Videoconferences were held in university multimedia rooms during lunch hours, with
weekly themes provided to students for their discussions (Alexander & Chase, 2006).

While we considered the Moodle forum’s text-based communications to be successful, numerous difficulties were encountered with MSN Messenger’s audio during our videoconferencing attempts. Concerned that student volunteers were feeling a bit discouraged, Paul suggested that we mail Christmas gift boxes to each other, filled with snacks, canned drinks and other cultural items from Korea and Japan.

For our final videoconference in late December, students in both countries opened the gift boxes, simultaneously. Once again the audio failed to work, requiring Paul and myself to type text messages back-and-forth between students during the videoconference. Fortunately, the participants reported that they enjoyed the experience, and felt like they had really “connected” with one another, thanks to the project.

5. Project Summary: 2006

During the spring semester of 2006 we took a short hiatus from the Moodle boards and live video meetings in our offices. Instead, we decided to try a one-time videoconference with two whole classes of students, using our multimedia classrooms. This would be the first time we attempted to connect our students during class time, via videoconference technologies.

The results of this experiment were mixed. Unlike the videoconferences in our offices, where student-to-student communications usually flowed smoothly, the large classroom environment seemed to inhibit many of the participants. Students tended to feel shy, they spoke more softly, and the audio was harder to hear (Chase, 2007). Nevertheless, when feedback was collected from Japanese students at the end of the semester many of them described the videoconference as being the most interesting class of the semester.

Heartened by the positive student feedback we decided to try and bring everything together for the autumn 2006 semester. We arranged the Moodle discussion forum to host two classes of students for about six weeks. We also scheduled several live videoconferences in our multimedia classrooms, during class time.

The online forum discussions were a great success. With so many students we no longer had to pick weekly discussion topics and instead
created 14 general forum areas with specific topics such as movies, music, food, sports, hobbies and travel (Chase & Alexander, 2007). The level of involvement varied from student to student, but with so many participants there were usually a number of asynchronous conversations going on throughout the day.

Unfortunately, our videoconferences didn’t go as well as we hoped. Just as we had witnessed in the spring, having a conference with two computers and a large number of students is very difficult. During initial self-introductions the audio was hard to hear, students felt shy when it was their turn to speak and some looked disinterested.

In an attempt to spice things up a bit we decided to re-do the self-introductions, but to record them with handheld video cameras. Students were recorded in small groups, which was much more comfortable for them. During lunchtime several Seinan students met me at a local park, so that we could go down to the beach near our campus, videotaping interesting scenes along the way (Chase, 2007).

The Seinan students’ videotape - mailed by traditional post - was a big hit with their Korean peers. The next month Paul and some of his students used a hand-held video camera to give us a tour of their campus, as well as the Christmas lights of downtown Seoul, at night. Seeing each other up close - introducing our university campuses and surroundings - was quite enjoyable, for everyone.

As for the in-class videoconferences, probably the most successful event was a true-and-false game that we organized with the two classes. Students were put into red and blue teams, then paired with someone from the other country. This meant that half of each team’s members were on the other side of the video screen. Students asked their video-partner one of 10 prepared questions, such as “Have you ever been to Korea/Japan?” or “What is your favorite sport to watch?” The partner responded and then the questioner had to guess if they were telling the truth or not. If the questioner was right, their team received a point. Based on their written feedback, the games were enjoyed by most of the students.

Throughout the semester many students continued to be active the Moodle forums, posting messages several times a week, a few posting almost daily. We also initiated a live “chat room” time period in the evenings that was deemed successful by those who participated.

6. Project Summary: 2007

The year 2007 brought several changes to our project. First, Paul moved to SangMyung University in Seoul, where he had to contend with new students, courses and facilities. Secondly, we decided to hold our classes in CALL rooms, where our students would each have access to a computer, allowing the Moodle forum discussions to become the focus of class activity. Due to the large number of participants (now totaling about sixty) we placed students in small Moodle discussion groups and asked them to participate in live chat sessions together. We also set up our Macintosh computers to host a few one-to-one and small group videoconferences, during classes.

The results that semester were mixed. Instead of communicating throughout the week, in their free-time, many students were doing the majority of their asynchronous and synchronous posting during our joint classes. Consequently, the Moodle board’s server was overloaded several times during class, especially during our live chat sessions. While we tried to provide the students with privacy during their videoconferences, many still tended to feel shy and spoke in low voices. Finally, as teachers we felt a bit overwhelmed by the demands of coordinating simultaneous activities with two full classes from week-to-week, and assisting students individually as well.

In the autumn of 2007 we decided to use the computer rooms again, but this time with smaller classes. The Korean students that semester were all graduate level, older (many in their late 20’s), and included international members from France, China and Sri Lanka. We also initiated a major modification, inviting a teacher in the United States to join us, and changing our project name
to the *Global Culture Exchange*. My brother John Chase, a teacher in upstate New York, joined us in the Moodle forums with 6 high school students he was teaching that semester, as part of an advanced course. Videoconferences were not held that semester due to a firewall problem at SMU and time differences with classes in New York.

The results that semester were favorable, considering the lack of videoconferences and that we had students from so many different nations, backgrounds and levels of education. Although their numbers were small, most of the American students were quite active in the discussions. The international graduate students studying in Korea also posted messages enthusiastically. Moodle’s asynchronous text message boards seemed to provide a very user-friendly international meeting place, by design.

### 7. Lessons Learned

While we began our study with the intention of using a “dual mode” CMC approach - combining text message boards and videoconferencing technologies - in the end we discovered that a “multi-modal” strategy was most effective (Alexander & Chase, 2006; Chase & Alexander, 2007). Synchronous communications methods and technologies used at one time or another during our project included videoconferencing, instant text messaging, chat rooms, telephones and face-to-face conversations. Asynchronous student communications occurred via e-mail, Moodle message boards, cell phone video messages, videos created by handheld video cameras and gift packages posted.

A few other things that we learned over the last few years were that 1) student-to-student videoconferences are more successful when students have some privacy; 2) levels of student motivation effects participation; 3) outgoing sociable students make online activities more interesting and enjoyable for others; 4) meaningful synchronous and asynchronous audiovisual communications provide a sense of “real” face-to-face human contact; 5) teacher participation in CMC activities motivates students; 6) teachers need more support for telecollaborative educational projects (e.g., the EU’s program eTwinning); 7) three-nation telecollaborations seem promising; 8) most Korean and Japanese university students are already familiar with social networking text messaging technologies, but have not used them to communicate with English; and 9) to keep students motivated teachers must monitor class interest levels and respond creatively.

### 8. Conclusion

While video conferencing has recently become popular among educators in Europe and other countries, the potential for using web-camera and message board technology with EFL students has received less attention in Asia. The success of the JKCE Project demonstrates that inexpensive CMC technologies can provide new opportunities for Asian EFL students to improve their language skills by actively using English in an authentic and meaningful way, to communicate with peers in other nations around the world.

### References:


