

Creating a Community through Asynchronous Communication: Blogging vs. E-mail

Victoria Muehleisen*

Waseda University

Hideko Shimizu

University of Colorado

Abstract

This paper compares the use of e-mail and blogging in an on-going collaborative project between learners of Japanese at an American university and learners of English at a Japanese university. Asynchronous interaction through the internet (with e-mail and blogging) has been used to increase students' motivation and cultural awareness. A comparison of the two modes finds that blogging results in higher rates of student participation and interaction than e-mail exchanges do.

Keywords: E-mail, blogs, cross-cultural communication, English teaching, Japanese teaching, group interactive behavior

1 Introduction

The authors have collaborated for several years on projects in which students of the Japanese language at the University of Colorado at Boulder work together with students of the English language at Waseda University in Tokyo. The projects have gone through various incarnations, but the goal has always been to increase students' motivation and enhance their cross-cultural understanding as they develop their skills in communicating in a foreign language. Like many of the projects described in Warschauer and Kern (2000) and Zeiss (2004), our aim was to integrate multi-media technologies as we designed a net-work based curriculum and instruction based on a socio-cognitive and socio-cultural model. Because of the large time difference between Colorado and Tokyo, we have had to rely on asynchronic means of communication, including both an oral/visual component (student-made and student-edited videos) and a written component (similar to the German-American collaborative project

* First/corresponding author: Victoria Muehleisen; second author: Hideko Shimizu.

described in Ware and Kramsch, 2005). This paper compares two different forms of asynchronous written communication we have employed in our projects, namely e-mail and web logs (blogs), focusing on the students' levels of interest and participation in using them, and reflecting on the potential strengths and weaknesses of the two types of media as ways for groups to share ideas and information in creating a cyber-community.

2 E-mail: Summary of the 2003 Exchange

E-mail exchanges were included as part of our joint projects for several years. From these, we have chosen the 2003 exchange for analysis in this paper because we had kept the most accurate records of the e-mail exchange for that year. In the fall semester of 2003, the project involved twenty-nine students at Waseda from one class of first year students at the School of Law and fifty-one students from two Japanese language classes, intermediate and advanced levels, at the University of Colorado. The students were organized into twenty e-mail groups, each with eight students (two or three Waseda students together with five or six Colorado students). Each group was given a name (the theme for 2003 was astronomical terms, so group names included *Taiyou* "sun" and *Hoshi* "star"), and then an individual e-mail mailing list was created for each group, so that the students could send an e-mail message to all of the group members by sending just one message to the group address.

During the course of the semester, students were assigned to send at least four e-mail messages to their group. The first was a self-introduction, and the remaining three assignments were on other topics related to the project: students at both schools read and discussed two English newspaper articles on Japanese and American culture about which they exchanged e-mail; they were also asked to discuss by e-mail the videos they were planning to make. In addition, students were encouraged to send messages on any other topic as they wished.

Since each student was assigned to write four messages, we expected at least thirty-two messages to be sent to each group address, for a total of 320 messages to be sent in the course of the semester. However, only 328 messages (an average of 3 per student) were actually sent. The groups varied widely in the number of messages sent, with the most active group sending an average of 5 messages per student and the least active group sending only 0.5 per student. Details for each group are shown in Table 1 in the Appendix.

In a few groups, such as the Chikyuu and Suisei groups, students became actively involved and sent more than the required number of messages. In informal conversation with the teachers, these

students said that they valued both opportunity to learn “real” language from their partners, and the chance to learn about their partners’ culture. This is similar to the results for e-mail exchanges found by Torii-Williams (2004) in which students in active groups reported a great deal of interest in and satisfaction with e-mail exchanges.

However, unlike Torii-Williams’ students, some of our groups were much less active in sending e-mail, and they were rather negative about the project. Students in Tsuki group were the most extreme; some of them did not even do the self-introduction, and none of them sent messages after that. When we asked the students in the less-successful groups why they did not send e-mail, we received three very common responses: 1) “I don’t have a computer,” 2) “I don’t know what to write,” 3) “My partners don’t answer.”

2.1 Responses to the 2003 project

We regarded “I don’t have a computer” as a simple excuse rather than a real reason for not completing the assignments, because students at both schools had access to computer labs which were open for many hours each week. However, we took a more serious view of the other two complaints, and in 2004 we tried to respond to the second complaint by increasing the number of newspaper articles read by students at both ends, hoping to give the students more possible topics to write about. We also increased our monitoring, checking more often to see who was not writing and reminding the students in class to write to their partners. In the end, though, the results were still not entirely satisfactory. We still had a few groups which just “fell apart”, so for the next year, we decided to take a new approach.

In 2005, we started using web logs (blogs) as a response to “I don’t know what to write” and “My partners don’t respond.” As Goodwin-Jones (2003) explains, blogs have many features which make them naturally interactive, including comment buttons which readers can use to directly add their own ideas and cross-linking to other blogs and to web pages. Since students are able to see what others have already written, we hoped that those who were searching for a topic could get ideas from their partners and classmates. Similarly, rather than having to passively wait for a response, students would be able to actively read and comment on others’ blogs.

3 Web Logs: Summary of the 2005 Blog Project

For the 2005 project, at Waseda, there were 23 students enrolled in a seminar class for first year students at the School of International Liberal Studies, while at Colorado, there were 34 students

enrolled in Intermediate and Advanced Japanese classes. As a focus for the exchanges, students at both schools read the same book, *The Material Child: Coming of Age in Japan and America* (White 1995), a sociological comparison of teenagers in the two countries. As in previous years, the students made and exchanged videos in addition to their interaction via the internet. The videos and blog assignments focused on the five main chapters of the White's book, which covered the topics of family life, school life, materialism, friendship, and sexuality.

The blog interaction had two forms, a class blog and individual student blogs. First, the teachers set up a class blog at the Blogger.com web site. As students started their own blogs, these were linked to the class blog. The class blog also provided a place for all students to interact by commenting on topics posted by the teachers. Students were assigned to post essays in the target language (Japanese for the Colorado students and English for the Waseda students) about the five main class topics to their individual blogs. Throughout the semester, the students were also encouraged to add comments to each others' blog postings and to comment on topics posted on the class blog. Students were free to choose the language of the comments, either Japanese, English, or both.

4 Evaluation of the Blog Project: Quantitative Results

4.1 Individual Blogs

At Waseda, students were assigned to write five posts English, each a minimum of 250 words, plus one self-introduction in either Japanese or English (or both). Therefore, we expected at least 115 posts in English, plus 23 other posts (in English, Japanese or both). Actually, however, students completed more than the minimum requirements. They did 117 posts in English, 12 in Japanese, and 40 in both, for an average of 7.3 per student. Compared to the 2003 e-mail exchange, we came much closer to the goal of having all students complete all assignments--all the Waseda students wrote at least 5 posts, with at least 4 in English. See Table 2, Column B for these statistics.

At Colorado, students were assigned 1 self-introduction and 4 essays in Japanese or in both English and Japanese. Therefore, we expected at least 170 posts in either Japanese or in both languages. Actually, students wrote 152 posts: 126 in Japanese, 2 in English, 24 in both, for an average of 4.47 per student. However, the statistics were shaped by the fact that a few students dropped out of the project early, stopping after just a few posts. Among the ones who continued, more than half did five or more posts. See Table 3, Columns B and E for details.

Considering just the total the number of postings to individual blogs, it seems that blogging was

more successful than e-mail at getting students to do the required assignments. Beyond the required essays, many students did additional postings or gave links to other personal blogs that they maintained. For example, Waseda student W3 had additional postings which included photos of pocket tissues handed out at the train station, worries about upcoming exams, musings on the change of seasons, and a report about a dance competition in which she competed. Of course, students' writing was not limited to postings to their own blogs; they also wrote comments on the class blog and on the blogs of other students.

4.2 Students' Comments on the Class Blog and Others' Blogs

Periodically throughout the semester, we encouraged students to write comments on the class blog by posting questions and inviting responses. These took the form of questions about the class topics (e.g., "What do you think of Chapter 3, on families in Japan and the U.S.? Do you think White's characterization is accurate?") and questions that arose in the course of class discussions. We encouraged the students to write on each other's individual blogs choosing and discussing in class some particularly interesting postings. In the end, there were a total of 294 additional comments in all three languages, for an average of 5.1 per student. Details are shown in Table 1, Column C and Table 2, Columns C and F. The most active students at each school, W6, W17, and C30, wrote more than 20 comments each.

One thing we noticed but which we did not attempt to quantify was that the thread of comments on a particular topic on the class blog would sometimes change from one language to another. The threads of comments on the class blog postings were often quite long, with up to 40 consecutive comments. If the first student, whether a Waseda student or a Colorado student, commented in English, then the next several comments tended to be in English, but at some point the language would switch to Japanese. After that, several comments would be in Japanese, whether written by Waseda students or by Colorado students. At a later date, we would like to try look at this more closely to see if there are any patterns in language chosen for comments on the class blog.

4.3 Summary of the Interaction Patterns

In addition to looking at the overall number of postings made by each student, we were interested in looking at the patterns of interaction. In particular, we wondered whether students tended to comment more on blogs of students at their own school, or whether they commented more on their overseas partners' blogs. We also wondered whether they tended to form pairs or small groups, commenting

frequently on each others' postings while ignoring the others, or whether students tended to spread their comments out among many blogs. The spreadsheets we made to chart the interaction of all 57 students are difficult to reproduce on pages of this size, so we will just summarize the main findings here.

Looking first at the Waseda students' comments on Colorado students' blogs, we found 90 comments in all, for an average of 3.91 comments per student. Of these, 10 were in English, 55 were in Japanese, and 25 in both. Three Waseda students never wrote a comment on any Colorado student's blog, but the most active students wrote many and spread them out over many different blogs. Student W6, for example, wrote 15 comments on 13 different blogs; of these, 5 were in English, 6 in Japanese, and 4 in both. Student W17 wrote 13 comments on 11 different blogs, also using all three possible language combinations. Next, turning to Colorado students' comments on Waseda students' blogs, we found that there were 100 comments, for an average of 2.94 comments per student. Of these, 28 were in English, 13 in Japanese, and 59 were in both languages. As with the Waseda students, there were a few students who wrote no comments, and a few who were extremely active. Student C30, for example, wrote 20 comments on 14 different blogs, with 6 comments in Japanese, 2 in English, and 12 in both. Interestingly, we did not find any evidence of "reciprocal pairs" of students only writing to each other. The students seemed to make an effort to read and to write comments on many other blogs rather than just on one or two.

Finally, we looked at the students' comments on their classmates' blogs. The Waseda students wrote 69 messages on the blogs of other Waseda students, for an average of 3 per student. Of these, exactly one-third were in English only, one-third in Japanese, and one-third in both. The Colorado students wrote less frequently on their classmates' blogs; there were 35 comments in all, for an average of one per student. Of these, 12 were in English, 19 in Japanese, and 4 in both.

Several interesting patterns emerge from these data, although we do not yet know how to explain them. One striking thing is that the Waseda students commented almost as often on their own classmates' blogs as on the Colorado students' blogs, while the Colorado students commented much less frequently on their own classmates' blogs. One possible explanation is that because the Waseda classes met only once a week while the Colorado classes met more often, the Waseda students were using the blogs to make up for fewer chances to interact with classmates face-to-face.

Another interesting pattern is that Colorado students tended to use more bilingual comments when writing to Waseda students, while the Waseda students preferred to write in Japanese to Colorado students. A partial explanation for the latter may lie in the fact that the Waseda students had been

specifically urged to try to write at least some comments in their native language in order to provide additional reading practice in the target language for their partners in Colorado. When writing to their own classmates, they wrote in English equally as often as they wrote in Japanese. Why, though, did the Colorado students prefer bilingual messages to either Japanese alone or English alone? One possibility is that they may have lacked confidence that they were able to make themselves understood in Japanese, and so they may have decided to use both Japanese and English to convey their message, but the opposite is also possible: they may have written in both Japanese and English because they were not sure that the Waseda students would understand a message written in English only. Since we did not directly ask the students about this, we can only speculate.

Also, for the purposes of these calculations, we should note that bilingual comments include ones which have a message first in one language with a translation in the other, as well as ones which the two languages were mixed together as a type of “code-switching”. A more detailed analysis might reveal differences in the use and the number of the two types of comments.

Finally, we should point out that students could be active participants either by commenting on others’ postings or by maintaining an active log to which other students were attracted. Colorado student C3 had a particularly attractive blog, in part because of her inclusion of controversial topics such as arguments in favor of the legalization of marijuana in Colorado. She wrote few comments on others’ blogs, but responded to the many comments posted on her own.

5 Qualitative results : Observations on E-mail versus Blogging

All together, students did much more writing in the 2005 blog project than in the 2003 e-mail exchanges, even though the same number of writings were assigned. Being able to see classmates’ postings as models may have reduced the feeling of “I don’t know what to write.” At the end of the project, one Waseda student wrote:

It was an interesting thing for me to read other students’ essays and blog because reading other people’s essays is not something that we usually do. By reading classmates’ essays, I think I could improve my writing skills a little bit.

Another reason may have been that active students didn’t have to wait for a response from a small set of partners. They could post a question on the class blog and were very likely to get a response. In one case, I posted a question that my students had asked in class to the class blog (“Are American schools really like the ones in the movies?”) and we received several responses from Colorado students

almost immediately.

While in the e-mail exchange, each message was seen by only a small group of students, in the blog project, in theory at least, all students had access to all the blogs. This made it much easier to make a link between the blog messages and topics of class discussions. Sometimes particularly interesting messages were brought into the classroom for further discussion. Students reported learning about their own culture as well as the target culture through the blogs:

The discussion on 'public self' and 'true self' was also interesting...After having a discussion in class and reading some comment on the blogs, I came up with the conclusion that people have two faces in order to show friendliness to close friends and respect to elder.

The access to blogs of each student is open to any students in this class so I could read other students' essays on blogs and get good points of views from them easily. In my opinion, the contents of essays were influenced by each country's culture, Japan and America, for instance, [C6] who is a student in Colorado University points out in her blog that the probability of divorce in American family is very high and she also mentions that her boyfriend have two fathers and three mothers as a illustration.

In the 2005 exchange, for the first time, the teachers were able to see clear links between the internet exchanges and the student-made video projects. In particular, the Waseda students making a video on the topic of "Family" tailored their video to fit comments made on the blogs. In the blogs, American students noted that it was rare for American families to have breakfast together, but usual for them to have dinner together, while the Japanese students noted that the opposite was true for their families. In their video, the Waseda students acted out typical Japanese mealtimes, showing the whole family at breakfast but an absent father and brother at dinner.

In the blog exchanges, we found that students valued and made use of the opportunity to post images as well as words. Students put up photos of themselves and things and events in their daily lives. With e-mail exchanges, in contrast, we had had to discourage the sending of images because of the problems with large files filling up mailboxes or being blocked by e-mail filters on attachments. About the blog project, one Waseda student wrote:

I think most people wanted to know about what American/Japanese teens do in their daily

lives, so blogs like [C2]'s were excellent...She put pictures in her blog and explained in both English and Japanese.

Students also felt that the blogs were a good complement to the sometimes out-of-date textbook.

Blogs were also useful in getting information. Faster than any book published, we could know the real situation without any flourish.

5.1 Points for Improvement

The blog project was not a complete success for all students. Although we did not hear any students complain that they did not have a computer this time (as in 2003, those that did not have a computer at home could work in school computer labs), there were some students at Waseda who had problems accessing some of the blogs with the browser software (Internet Explorer) that they were using. Although the teacher explained in class how to download and use another free browser, many students were late in posting their essays because of technical problems. Another difficulty was that some students felt that there was an overload of information. As a Waseda student put it:

The assignment of writing essay on blog was somehow tough for me, because no one pushed me to do it (lol) since it was work on a 'personal' computer. It sometimes was really hard to keep up with the class for some students who were left behind of others in making blogs by writing comments...It was not that I was not interested in the blogs, but I just could not keep up with the speed of other with a lot of other works with me. From these reasons, I became tired and could not check everyone's blogs." This student went on to suggest something like the e-mail groups, in which a small number of students would be assigned to work together and read each others' blogs.

6 Conclusion

The results from the 2005 blog project have been positive enough that we are continuing the project in 2006 as well. At the time of writing, halfway through the fall semester at Waseda, things seem to be going well. More students are participating this year at Waseda (57 in 2006, in contrast to 23 in 2005), and perhaps just because the group is larger, there have been problems this year with a few students who have not been doing the blogs at all. (They have been handing in the required essays on paper instead.) Some of the technical problems regarding browsers still continue to plague us, despite our best efforts to warn students; it seems that less technologically-confident students find it difficult to

download and use other browsers. On the positive side, however, students this year again are actively writing comments on the class blog and the individual blogs, and again we have had several interesting discussions in class based on the comments posted by students at the other school. In web logs, we feel that we have found a technology that we can continue to use in our cross-cultural exchange project for some years to come.

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Appendix

Interaction of Colorado and Waseda students by e-mail and blogs

| Group | Totals Number of Messages | Average Number of Messages per Student |
|---------|---------------------------|--|
| Taiyou | 32 | 4 |
| Hoshi | 20 | 2.5 |
| Mokusei | 21 | 2.6 |
| Kisei | 16 | 2 |
| Tsuki | 3 | Less than 0.5 |
| Chikyuu | 37 | 4.6 |
| Kasei | 19 | 2.4 |
| Suisei | 40 | 5 |
| Ryuusei | 30 | 3.8 |
| Dosei | 24 | 3 |

Table 1. Summary of the numbers of messages sent in 2003 e-mail exchange project.

| A | B | C |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Waseda Students | Total # of Postings on Own Blog | Total # of Comments on Class and Others' Individual Blogs |
| W1 | E6, J3 | E4, J1, B1 |
| W2 | E5, B3 | J1, B2 |
| W3 | E6, J1, B4 | E1, J1, B2 |
| W4 | E6, J1 | E1, J11, B2 |
| W5 | E5, B1 | E2, J2, B1 |
| W6 | E6, J3, B2 | E7, J8, B5 |
| W7 | E4, B2 | J2, B3 |
| W8 | E5, B2 | J4, B1 |
| W9 | E5, B2 | E1, J4, B8 |
| W10 | E5, B2 | E1, J7, B2 |
| W11 | E5, B2 | E2, J2, |
| W12 | E5 | J1, B2 |
| W13 | E5, B2 | J2, B1 |
| W14 | E5, J1 | B1 |
| W15 | E5, B4 | B5 |
| W16 | E5, B3 | E1, J5, B3 |
| W17 | E5, B3, J3 | E5, J15, B5 |
| W18 | E6, B3 | E3, J2, B1 |
| W19 | E5 | J1 |
| W20 | E5, B2 | E3, J3, B7 |
| W21 | E5, B1 | E3 |
| W22 | E4, B1 | J3, B1 |
| W23 | E4, J1 | - |

Table 2. Blog comments of Waseda students in 2005 exchange. The letter representing the language used (*E* = English, *J* = Japanese, *B* = both Japanese and English, used in some mixture) is followed by the number of comments in that language, so *E5*, for example, means “5 comments written in English.”

| A | B | C | | D | E | F |
|-------------------|---------------------------|---|--|-------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Colorado Students | # of Postings on Own Blog | # of Comments on Class and Others' Individual Blogs | | Colorado Students | # of Postings on Own Blog | # of Comments on Class and Others' Individual Blogs |
| C1 | E1,J2, B3 | - | | C22 | J4 | E2, B2 |
| C2 | J4 | E5, J1 | | C23 | J3 | E1 |
| C3 | J 8, B1 | E1, J2 | | C24 | J5 | J2 |
| C4 | J3, B3 | E6, B6 | | C25 | J4 | E3, J1, 2B |
| C5 | J6 | E1, B2 | | C26 | J5 | E1 |
| C6 | B3 | E3, J2, B2 | | C27 | J5 | E1 |
| C7 | J2 | - | | C28 | J5 | E1, J1 |
| C8 | B2, J1 | E3 | | C29 | J5 | E1, J3, B2 |
| C9 | B2, J1 | E1 | | C30 | J6, B1 | E2, J8, B12 |
| C10 | J5 | J1, B2 | | C31 | J3, B3 | E1,B3 |
| C11 | J5 | E1, B2 | | C32 | J1 | E1 |
| C12 | J4 | - | | C33 | J2 | E2 |
| C13 | J3 | E1 | | C34 | J1 | B1 |
| C14 | J5 | J3, B3 | | | | |
| C15 | J4, B3 | J3, B5 | | | | |
| C16 | J7 | J1 | | | | |
| C17 | J4, B1, E1 | E2, B6 | | | | |
| C18 | J3 | - | | | | |
| C19 | J4 | J2, B1 | | | | |
| C20 | J3, B2 | B3 | | | | |
| C21 | J4 | E1, B4 | | | | |

Table 3. Blog comments of Colorado students in 2005 exchange. The letter representing the language used (*E* = English, *J* = Japanese, *B* = both Japanese and English, used in some mixture) is followed by the number of comments in that language, so *E5*, for example, means “5 comments written in English.”