

## **Practical English: from Text Chat to Free Speech**

**Susan Grohs Iwamura**

**Hye-Young Kim**

**(Korea University)**

Second semester freshmen in six sections of Practical English at Korea University (KU) participated in chat sessions via CCDL (Cross-Cultural Distance Learning) with students from Waseda University. The purpose of this program was to provide students the opportunity to communicate in English with partners at the other university.

The situation was excellent for students who had many years of English language classwork but limited exposure to using English for purposes that matter to them. Through CCDL they were able to communicate with peers with whom do not share any language except English (and Japanese for Korea University students who have studied Japanese as a foreign language). Although English, the primary language they use for online communication, is not native to any of them, what they do share is cultural knowledge of their generation. This seems especially true of young people in Japan and Korea. For the goals of Practical English, this means that they have a great deal to say to each other and are highly motivated to discuss topics that intrigue them: cinema, popular music, animation, boyfriends and girlfriends, university life to name only a few. As one student wrote: "Though different nation and culture, our generation's thinking is very similar."<sup>4</sup> In addition, many explored alternative views of the shared history of their countries as well as current political issues.

This paper will examine some preliminary observations of the benefits of the program and the expectations language teachers can entertain as technology offers us contexts in which to build learning programs. The immediate rewards in the form of student oral presentations in the classroom will be examined. We will also discuss some of the logistical puzzles students brought to our attention and suggest ways to resolve these challenges as we move forward to maximize the technical facilities that are available to us.

As one of the classroom activities related to the CCDL project, KU

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<sup>4</sup> Written report, student 027, section J9, Practical English Fall 2002.

students were required to present oral reports. The assignment was “Your CCDL Experience.” They were encouraged to cull from their personal data (all forms: CUseeme, Text Chat, MSN Messenger, email<sup>5</sup>) topics they enjoyed the most. For a grade above the minimum, they had to prepare well enough to avoid reading from notes. Short glances at notes were acceptable, however. A variety of assignments through the semester provided practice for this final requirement.

Many, if not most, of the students surprised even themselves with the excellent reports they delivered. Many achieved a fluency that allowed them to hear and immediately correct their own errors, to make their classmates laugh at the comic aspects of their experience, and to appreciate how each student created a unique experience with his or her Waseda partner (or partners). The visual materials they created added to the effect of their lively presentations.

From the point of a teaching assistant helping out the students in the CCDL facility room, many students were observed having so much fun and learning a lot from each other on various things - not only English but cultural exchanges as well. Student creativity took many forms: using the camcorder to show dance moves, to illustrate ideas by drawing pictures, to compare words and names by writing Chinese characters, to name just a few.

Research has shown that confidence, constructive strategies and positive beliefs determine the outcome of second language education (Rubin, 1975; Kim, 2001; Seong, 1998, 2001). Although it is too soon to predict what the English language capability of these students will be like in the future, they have ended their year of freshmen English with sense that they can reach out to others through English. A quotation from a student presentation captures what many said: “CCDL project is more than English language. It is the understanding of other cultures.”<sup>6</sup>

Students pursued this understanding in countless ways. They compared favorite foods and noted which dishes from one country were available in the other. In her class presentation, one student described in great detail, with pictures, a number of Japanese celebrations. When asked how she collected her information, she said she and her Waseda partner had spent hours online preparing the presentation. This was only one of dozens of collaborations that became cross

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<sup>5</sup> CUseeme is a software program that makes video Text Chat possible. A small camcorder sitting on top of the computer monitor transmits real time images while participants type instantaneous messages to each other. When video is not available, participants can access Text Chat via the CCDL homepage from any online facility.

MSN Messenger is a Microsoft product that enables participants to exchange real time messages.

<sup>6</sup> Oral presentation, student 015, section R2, Practical English Fall 2002.

cultural lessons not only for the collaborators at each end of the CCDL exchange but also for the classmates who heard the presentations.

Other indications of the maturity of student insight included comments about the language ability and the feelings of the partner. One student said that because the partner's ability in English was good, "So chatting easy, chatting not boring."<sup>7</sup> One report included the description of a partner who was shy at first but became less shy with each chat. Another by a KU student 10 years older than his partner answered her question, "What should I call you?" with the answer "Call me 'friend.'"<sup>8</sup> This last exchange also reflects aspects of shared cultural values between students in Japan and Korea that would not be present if some other culture, say American, were involved.

One constant refrain in student presentations was their appreciation of everyone who made the CCDL experience available to them. Teaching assistants at both universities were repeatedly thanked for helping students find their way around the CCDL website. Students also felt that their Waseda partners were kind and very patient, especially when KU students were late in arriving at the website for a scheduled chat session. A program like this requires tolerance and forgiveness on all sides. We believe we met the goal expressed by Prof. Kyung-ja Park in her article on "Helping Students Become Global Citizens" (Park, 2002):

to develop mutual understanding and friendship between students of different cultures and to motivate them to use and learn English as a communication tool by lowering a students language learning affective filter (defense mechanism).

Engaging six sections of freshman English students in CCDL was different from previous programs since CCDL started in 1998. In addition to the 150 in these six classes, there were three English elective classes. And as for Waseda University, seven classes participated. This brought the total to more than 200 students from each university; in all, over 533 students from both participated in CCDL during this semester.

The size of the cohort was a challenge. Every one of those students needed to be in a chat group of two or more and all members of a partnership had to

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<sup>7</sup> Oral presentation, student 026, section J9, Practical English Fall 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Oral presentation, student 950001, section J9, Practical English Fall 2002.

have the same available time during the week so that real time chatting could take place. Creating the chat groups was accomplished early in the Waseda semester (Korea University had already been in session for over a month). Since Waseda and Korea University have a one-month gap in starting a new semester, we found ourselves taking a long period of time adjusting students scheduling and matching. However, even after pairing was done, a number of students went through changing partners. The possible reasons are: first, some students came to change their own schedules, and, second, they had a hard time in contacting the assigned partners.

We wanted to find out more about the students scheduling difficulties. An informal survey was made at the end of the semester with follow-up questions for those students who could be contacted. Since this was accomplished at very end of the term, not all students could be included and some of the responses were ambiguous. We consider the results suggestive but not conclusive.

First, we wanted to know how many students had experienced one or more partner changes. We could not arrive at a total but what happened in two classes illustrates the problem. Among 27 students in the first class, four students had three partner changes, another four students had two changes, and five students had one partner change. Hence, in all, 13 students out of 27, which is almost 50% of the class, had changes. The second class had 25 students; one student had two partner changes, six students had one partner change. These were two severe cases, and the experience of several classes was almost without partner change.

At Korea University, we have one CCDL facility room that has only 15 computers available. A number of groups were scheduled to chat when this room was not available. Since this is a dual-purpose facility, chatting cannot occur when a distance learning class is scheduled. Also, due to limitations of staffing, the room must be closed during the lunch hour and other times when students might have an hour or two between classes.

In some cases, students found alternatives when they could not use the CCDL room: email, Text Chat and MSN Messenger. These options work only if all parties have access to computers outside the CCDL facility. We did not hear of a single KU student who did not have a computer at home or at a dormitory. When we took our informal survey of KU students, 130 students responded. Of these, 49 (38%) told us that their Waseda partners did not have a computer they could use except when they were at school. We need to assume that some chat groups, possibly as many as 38%, will always need to use CCDL facilities exclusively. Anytime one of these groups is scheduled to chat when the CCDL

room is not available, they will have no recourse to other forms of online communication such as MSN Messenger or email.

Since our goal is a similar experience for all students, we believe we need to find ways to ensure that every student has the same partner throughout the semester and that all students have the same opportunities to communicate even if they have computer access only at school.

### *Recommendations*

#### 1. Registration and collection of students' schedule information.

This can be done early in the process. We can keep the process short but complete by combining orientation, registration and schedule inputting in a single session. At that time, we can train students in Text Chat as well as CUseeme. Since academic schedules tend to be in flux through the early weeks of any term, we can allow students to return to change and add information.

Once students have input their personal information, they are more likely to retain technical information. The orientation, which preceded registration this semester, seemed to be a distraction rather than a learning opportunity. Students were not sure what the start of the program would feel like.

#### 2. Pairing

In order to prevent multiple changes in partners, we should set a more realistic goal: perhaps 4 weeks after the Waseda semester begins. This recommendation may reduce the number of weeks available for chatting but if pairs are not changed after the initial matching and if chat times are scheduled only when the CCDL Room is available at KU, several results can be anticipated:

- a. Students will have better opportunities to develop online relationships. They will learn more about each other and the topics they discuss are more likely include a wider and deeper variety of subjects.
- b. Since schedules will be set and not changed from the beginning of the program, staff on both sides will be able to check on the progress of the chat groups. If some students are not participating as expected, we will be able to follow up and fix problems before they have an impact on the work of other students.

#### 3. Monitoring

On both sides, we can monitor the situation more closely. Several weeks went by when we all thought everything was going smoothly but, in fact, students on both sides were either having difficulties or were not showing up for

scheduled chat times. During their final presentations, a number of KU students confessed to being late and missing chat times altogether. We rarely heard about this from the Waseda side so we were not able to follow up with KU students as we were prepared to do.

### *Conclusion*

The value that CCDL added to the freshmen English experience of KU students cannot be measured in empirical data at this time, but it can be seen in the enthusiasm and appreciation these students expressed in their written reports and oral presentations. Additional benefits are likely to accrue if partners are not changed during the semester and if additional resources can be found to extend the hours of the CCDL room at Korea University. The authors believe that these two steps will enhance the already existing learning opportunities for the next cohort of students at both campuses and perhaps create similar prospects for even more students in the future.

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