

Expanding Meaningful Teacher-Student Interaction Through E-mail

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/6796388>

出版情報 : 言語科学. 35, pp.15-24, 2000-02-29. The Institute of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University
バージョン :
権利関係 :



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Great changes have indeed taken place over the past 25 years regarding foreign language education. In particular, major advances in both technology and mass media have helped to invigorate the classroom by providing students with increased opportunities to aurally (tapes & CDs) and visually (video) be exposed to a wide range of modern linguistic and cultural materials. Nevertheless, the typical foreign language classroom remains a relatively passive environment with teachers controlling the pace and content of each lesson. Japanese students continue to be frustrated at their inability to use English in a practical and meaningful way. Therefore, despite all the innovations of video, language laboratories and computerized teaching, the overall English ability of most Japanese students has more or less remained unchanged.

When students are asked in numerous surveys what their greatest desire is regarding the learning of English in Japan their most common response remains the same as 25 years ago, namely "We want more opportunities to speak, interact and exchange our opinions in useful everyday English." Unfortunately, at Japanese universities large group English classes (from 40 to 50 students) remain the norm and even "small group" classes usually have from 20 to 25 students per class. As a result, the vast majority of students have almost no opportunity to have any meaningful interaction with their teachers in English apart from the typical teacher-student interaction which primarily consists of reading, listening comprehension, answering an occasional question or engaging in structured pair-work practice conversations with their partners modeled

after a particular grammatical point presented that day. Up to now the only way that students could express their opinions in some manner was through weekly homework assignments and tests. Ironically, homework assignments are not always given on a regular basis at Japanese universities, and even when homework is assigned it usually consists of rather mechanical grammar, reading or listening exercises. The reasons for this phenomenon are quite simple, it simply takes too long for teachers to correct such assignments in classes of 50 or 60 students and students are also accustomed to not having any homework in most English classes. Due to such entrenched traditions, at present very little meaningful English communication actually takes place in the English classroom at most Japanese universities.

The primary aim of this brief paper is to suggest that, thanks to modern technology, there indeed is now a way to dramatically increase the amount of real and meaningful communication between students and teachers through the use of E-mail. When homework assignments are regularly assigned through E-mail an entirely new world is opened up for the majority of Japanese university students. E-mail gives them a direct, private and even confidential means of communication with their teachers in English. From a purely practical perspective, the vast majority of Japanese university graduates will need to use computers in their careers and thus such homework assignments also provide all students with both the motivation to master basic keyboarding skills and the opportunity to write in English on a regular basis. In addition, such assignments also allow students the chance to master the use of various English technical reference materials such as dictionaries, thesauruses and spell checkers which are all essential when using English in the real world after graduation.

The most dramatic advantage of regularly using E-mail is that Japanese students invariably greatly enjoy using it to do their homework. In addition, students write more on the giving topics and also frequently go on to write in great detail about other related (or unrelated) topics about which they may merely be curious. One of the reasons that students write so much is the fact that they feel safe using E-mail since they do not have to worry about what other classmates might think and they also love to receive personal answers from the teacher. One of the most surprising aspects of using E-mail with students is that a large number of students will also write additional messages to teacher responses regarding their homeworks in order to clarify unclear points or just to ask the teacher their opinion on another topic of interest or current events.

The ideal number of students for a communicative English class with E-mail assignments is from 15 to 20 students. If there are more than 20 students then it starts to become physically impossible for the teacher to read and respond to the assignments in any type of personal and appropriate manner. The use of E-mail in English classes taught by native-speaker English teachers is especially appropriate since the teachers can respond to students in an informal way and thus both enhance the students' reading skills while also giving each student a real sense of importance since the teacher response to each class member in a personal fashion. The major problem in using E-mail often turns out to be the fact that, once they get the hang of using E-mail and also overcome their initial shyness at writing their opinions in English, some students want to exchange messages with their native-speaker English teachers on almost a daily basis. This problem, however, is easy to solve since the teacher is free to respond to the students according to his own schedule.

Over the years language teachers have been promised many breathtaking breakthroughs in the field of foreign language teaching.

Unfortunately, most such promises have often led to little, if any, real change. Recently, there has also also an increasing number of computer demonstrations which show how teachers can use computers to "chat" with their students while "on-line" or in computerized language laboratories. However, such high-tech advances actually do little to change the actual classroom dynamics between students and teachers due to the fact that the teachers can still only communicate with one student at a time. The beauty of E-mail is that is is personal, private and without any major time restraints. Students can send off their assignments with additional comments or messages at any time day or night. Thereafter, the teachers can read and respond to such messages at his or her own convenience. In this way, English teachers are able to get to know their students much better during the semester and thereby establish a stronger rapport with the class as a whole which thus vastly improves the overall classroom atmosphere.

When using E-mail to increase meaningful communication in English courses several guidelines should be followed as noted below.

1. Use of E-mail must be mandatory

At the beginning of the course the teacher should distribute a course outline with the mandatory use of E-mail for all homework assignments clearly delineated. Even if a student does not have his or her own computer, they may use computers which are available at the university. Of course exceptions may be made on a case by case basis for students who truly have absolutely no convenient access to a computer, however, such students should nevertheless be required to hand in all assignments neatly typed using an English wordprocessor since one of the main objectives is to have all students become comfortable in typing English

while using a keyboard. Almost invariably after realizing that they will nevertheless have to submit all homeworks typed in English, the majority of students who initially balk at using E-mail quickly change their minds and start to send their E-mail assignments along with the rest of the students.

2. All students must have their own E-mail address

All students should have a university E-mail address. For students who still have no E-mail address the teacher should explain how to obtain such an address on any one of numerous websites that offer free E-mail such as "**@hotmail.com**" or other locations. Other classmates can almost always help such students to obtain their own E-mail addresses with little difficulty.

3. Assignment deadlines must be strictly followed

In order for teachers to efficiently and effectively respond to E-mail communications from the students, firm deadlines must be established at least 2 days before the next class meeting so that the teacher can read, correct where necessary, and respond to the homework in a responsible manner. If the teacher strictly enforces this rule, i.e. by refusing to accept any late assignments over the first three or four weeks of the course, then the students will normally quickly adapt to the new guidelines.

4. Normal E-mail etiquette must be followed

Students should be taught typical E-mail etiquette and be given several samples of common types of E-mail communications. Teachers must be careful to require that common courtesy be strictly followed in all E-mail exchanges. For example, teachers should inform students on how he should be addressed, i.e. Mr. Smith, Professor Smith or Dr. Smith. Teachers should avoid allowing students to address them on a first name basis since this may lead to a perceived lack of respect on the part of some students. All types of "Flaming" (i.e. angry and obnoxious comments) should be avoided and students should also be taught about the subtle nuances that exist when using upper case and lower case letters so that students do not run into trouble when using E-mail with foreigners in the future.

5. Good spelling and grammar should be strongly encouraged

Even though the main goal of have students submit their assignments by E-mail is to offer them the opportunity to express themselves more freely in English, it is important that English teachers constantly urge students to also use good grammar and proper spelling. The first attempts of many students at the beginning of such a course will frequently result in far from perfect English and teachers should indeed be patient with their students as they simultaneously learn how to; a) use the keyboard correctly, b) clearly express their opinions, c) use English freely, and d) grammatically try to write as correctly as possible. At the very least students should be expected to learn how to use the spell checking and grammar checking software that is available on most computers. In this way the students will acclimatize themselves to writing clearly and concisely about any given topic while using good spelling and grammar.

It normally takes student about 3 or 4 weeks before they can start to produce relatively well-written E-mail assignments in English.

Types of E-mail That Should Be Mastered

In the first part of the course, English teachers should give E-mail samples along with each assignment so that the students can thoroughly learn the correct writing patterns. The following types of E-mail are considered to be valuable for students to master since there is a high probability that they will need to write such E-mail messages in the future if they use English in the workplace:

- 1. Self -Introductions**
- 2. Expressing Thanks**
- 3. Offering Congratulations**
- 4. Giving Encouragement**
- 5. Expressing Concern**
- 6. Making an Invitation**
- 7. Apologizing**
- 8. Talking about a Movie or a Book**
- 9. Asking for Advice**
- 10. Making a Suggestion**
- 11. Asking a Favor**
- 12. Making an Appointment**
- 13. Sending a Gift**
- 14. Asking for a Clarification**
- 15. Making a Polite Request**
- 16. Making an Enquiry**
- 17. Making a Complaint**

18. Shopping on the Internet

19. Booking a Plane Ticket

20. Job Hunting

After students become accustomed to using E-mail on a regular basis they often also begin to express themselves in English better in class and also frequently show a greater interest in English itself once they discover that English indeed is not merely that dreaded subject that had been forced on them in both secondary school and cram school. In addition, one of the most interesting "side-effects" of being forced to use E-mail for homework assignments is that many students will begin to "surf" the Internet in English and even start to find numerous "friends" on-line related to topics of academic or personal interest. Using E-mail in the classroom can thus result in a large number of students discovering a secret world of information that is available in English which, in some cases, can sometimes even lead them to making changes in their professional career goals. Other students may also use E-mail with native-speaker English teachers as a type of advice counseling device to gain a broader perspective on their own lives.

In conclusion, despite all the technological changes that have taken place over the past 25 years very little has essentially changed in the English classroom. The use of E-mail, however, when used properly for class assignments and other projects, can help Japanese university students significantly improve their ability to use English for truly meaningful communication. The regular use of E-mail for all English assignments should therefore be strongly encouraged by all English departments at Japanese universities for both native-speaker and native-Japanese teachers of English in order to help better meet the students high expectations for

becoming more competent in English by offering them extensive practice in both useful and meaningful communication.

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