Chapter XVIII
A Task–Based Design for Integrating E–Mail with FL Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

A task-based approach to e-mail provides a sound pedagogical orientation for real language interactions between learners and native speakers. The literature suggests that e-mail-oriented tasks are important for successful e-mail experiences (e.g., as evidenced in Kung, 2002; Müller-Hartmann, 2000) and demands a greater pedagogical role for e-mail (e.g., Marcus, 1995; O’Dowd, 2004; Warschauer, 1995). Nunan’s concept of task-based teaching (2004) appropriately links e-mail and pedagogy. This chapter presents a discussion of e-mail tasks within the Nunan task-based framework, and follows it with evidence from a study of tasks in senior secondary Indonesian as a FL classes in Queensland, Australia. With this proposal, the author hopes to inform teachers, and stimulate research of task-based e-mail as a pedagogically rigorous teaching method. The impacts of context and a teacher’s personal theories on outcomes are areas requiring further research attention.

INTRODUCTION

E-mail is best for connecting language learners in all parts of the world (Brammerts, 1996); allowing teachers to provide experiences that take communication beyond the classroom (Jiang & Ramsay, 2005) and into native speaker communities (Kung, 2002; Mathiesen, 1993). Experiencing communication by e-mail and thus using the target language motivates learners (Ho, 2000; Warschauer, 2001), enhances language knowledge (Li, 2000; Stockwell & Harrington, 2003; Tella, 1992), and develops cultural knowledge and understanding (Fischer, 1996; Liaw & Johnson,
However, e-mail key-pal exchanges in the style of pen-pals are likely to be “a very empty and frustrating experience” (Nagel, 1999) and not likely to work (Fischer, 1998). Such pedagogically weak e-mail exchanges can also lead to loss of learner interest and involvement (Liao, 1999; Warschauer, 2001), missed learning opportunities (Fischer, 1996; Ware, 2005) due to such factors as intercultural clashes (O’Dowd, 2003; Ware, 2005), and early cessation of e-mail conversation threads (Stockwell, 2003; Stockwell & Levy, 2001).

Contemporary views on effective practice of ICT in foreign language classroom contexts hold that increasing the interaction between learners’ e-mail practices and teachers’ pedagogical practice is imperative (Cooper & Selfe, 1990; Nagel, 1999). However, increasing the teaching-learning-e-mailing interaction is only one step towards improving the effectiveness of e-mail for language learning. Marcus (1995) advocates that e-mail for language learning needs sound pedagogical practice that is underpinned by relevant theory. The research field is limited by the lack of research developing and investigating e-mail with sound pedagogical practice and theory.

As well as proposing a task-based approach for a pedagogically sound practice for e-mail, this chapter addresses a lack of research that acknowledges e-mail as an integrated part of the teaching methodology and the curriculum which it serves. In Queensland, Australia, teachers teach both the lower secondary and senior secondary syllabuses. The lower school foreign language syllabus is task-based, while the senior secondary curriculum is methodologically eclectic but includes tasks for effective classroom practice. The task-based teaching approach for e-mail thus is not only relevant to e-mail, but is applicable and potentially beneficial for implementing e-mail in the Queensland senior secondary Indonesian syllabus.

This chapter reviews the e-mail literature to demonstrate the increasing interest in tasks and role for pedagogy in enhancing the e-mail experience presents a task-based approach to e-mail through matching Nunan’s approach to task-based teaching with examples of tasks in e-mail literature demonstrates the approach with evidence from a classroom-based research study.

THE BACKGROUND

Classroom-based research of e-mail shows positive outcomes for second language acquisition in non-teacher-intervention applications. Stockwell and Harrington (2003) found qualitative and quantitative evidence of syntax and vocabulary development in learners who shared e-mail exchanges in the target language, Japanese, with native speaker university students in Japan for five weeks. These findings support claims that e-mail provides rich input (Aitsiselmi, 1999) determined a necessary condition for language acquisition in Krashen’s input hypothesis of language acquisition (1982). However, there have also been warnings that e-mail can provide inappropriate input—too easy or too difficult for learners—and thus does not aid language learning (Fischer, 1996; Woodin, 1997). Li’s (2000) findings that e-mail tends to develop students’ richness and complexity of language use but not necessarily their accuracy also suggests the input theory for supporting e-mail in classroom contexts is inadequate. Swain’s (2000) suggestion for “collaborative dialogue” in asynchronous exchanges, supported by O’Dowd and Eberbach’s (2004) proposal for developing student ability with dialogic rather than monologic participation, tends to an interactionist understanding of the role of e-mail for language learning (also see Stockwell & Harrington, 2003).

More prolific attention has been to e-mail for learning about the target culture. Although much literature has assumed that e-mail is a chance for learners to develop cultural understanding via ask-and-answer searches for cultural ‘facts’ about the target country from the perspective
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