

Using Videomail (Vmail) Effectively in Online Intercultural Exchanges

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Abstract

Videomail (vmail) is an asynchronous online tool available on vmail dedicated websites such as Tokbox as well as social networking sites such as Facebook. Vmail utilizes web cameras and provides language learners with opportunities to communicate in a foreign language across borders, combining the convenience of email communication with the rich visual information that video brings to the communicative experience. This paper describes an exploratory research project that took place during 2008-2009 in which Japanese university students communicated via vmail with students in Hungary, the USA, Taiwan, and Turkey. The vmail exchanges are first described, and then students' reactions to the experience are reported. Finally, suggestions are provided for designing intercultural exchanges using vmail so that benefits to students are optimized.

Keywords: asynchronous, Facebook, intercultural exchange, telecollaboration, video mail

Introduction

Serious foreign language students are often recommended to study or travel abroad to get accustomed to the accents, expressions, and culturally-based assumptions and expectations of speakers in other countries. As this can be too expensive or impractical for many students, it is fortunate that opportunities have increased for students to communicate via the internet across borders in English. The potential of the internet to facilitate language learning and cultural awareness through communicative exchanges across borders has been much discussed and experimented with since the 1990s (Warschauer, 1995; Nagel, 1999; Ho, 2000; O'Dowd, 2001; Merryfield, 2003; O'Dowd, 2007), however, most of these exchanges have been text-based, via email or online bulletin boards. Recently, there has been a growing interest in exchanges using audio conferencing (Hauk & Hample, 2004) and Skype, as well as telecollaborative exchanges using videoconferencing (O'Dowd, 2005), and the exchange of video segments using digital cameras (Carney, 2008).

A major development in the area of telecollaboration has been the spread of inexpensive web cameras which add rich visual information to the communicative experience, either synchronously, in real-time using web-based services like Skype or MSN Messenger, or asynchronously, using video mail (vmail) with vmail dedicated services such as Tokbox (www.tokbox.com) or social networking services that include a video mail recording and uploading feature such as Facebook (www.facebook.com). Unlike synchronous communication with Skype or MSN Messenger which can be difficult to organize as time zone differences increase, video mail can be recorded and

viewed at times and places convenient to both parties. An additional benefit to language learners is that vmail messages can be viewed repeatedly and studied, with friends, the teacher, or the dictionary to increase understanding of the message and improve English skills.

This paper describes an exploratory research project where asynchronous intercultural vmail exchanges were organized pairing Japanese university students with students in Hungary, USA, Taiwan, and Turkey (See Table 1). The idea for this project resulted from discussions that took place during 2007 and early 2008 on how best to facilitate intercultural communication using the internet, by members of a project funded by a Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences (JSPS) Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research C (No. 19500852) headed by Kumiko Aoki, Ph.D. at the former National Institute of Multimedia Instruction (currently part of the Open University of Japan). Members of this project team concluded that Japanese university students were strongly in need of direct communicative experiences with students from other countries to improve their English, and help them step out of fixed attitudes and stereotypical thinking about people from other cultures received from the mass media, previous educational experiences, etc.

Rather than provide students with explicit instruction about cultural differences, the decision was made to organize vmail discussions between students in the two countries on topics related to students' daily life (e.g. typical breakfast), culture (e.g. marriage customs) and views on social issues (e.g. recycling). O'Dowd (2007) questions the assumption that online contact with members of a foreign culture will automatically lead to more positive attitudes. Hence, students were asked to complete daily reflection sheets and questionnaires, and whole-class discussions with the teacher were held to encourage students to reflect on the online exchanges to help students arrive at increased intercultural understanding. Claro (2006) reviewed four studies of online intercultural exchanges finding that there were a variety of pitfalls teachers needed to avoid and that the teacher's role was key in helping students benefit from an online intercultural exchange. The goals of this paper are to describe one teachers' experiences with four different vmail intercultural exchanges and what was learned from them, discuss the results from the students' perspective, and finally, provide suggestions for designing vmail exchanges so that benefits to students are optimized.

Table 1.
Description of the universities involved

School Name	Location	Number of students	Name of class	Other information
Kyoto University Foreign Studies	of Kyoto, Japan	40	Intercultural Communication (2008)	4th year English majors
Kyoto University Foreign Studies	of Kyoto, Japan	40	English Seminar - International Issues (2009)	3rd year English majors

Karoli Gaspar University	Budapest, Hungary	10	Japanese Language and Culture	English level - advanced, Japanese level -intermediate
California State University, Stanislaus	Turlock, California	15	Cultural Diversity in Education	Teacher Education Credential Program
Cukurova University	Adana, Turkey	26	English Speaking and Listening Skills	English Language Teaching Program
National Taichung University	National Taichung University	12	Computer-Assisted Language Learning	English majors

Description of the Vmail Intercultural Exchanges

Tokbox Exchanges (Spring term - 2008)

1. Japan-Hungary Tokbox Exchange (April 10 - May 29, 2008)

The author was put in touch with the instructor in Hungary by the principal investigator of the project team, who had worked with the instructor on a related project the year before. A rough plan was developed via email during the months before classes were to begin in April. In the first class, students registered with Tokbox and did some background research on Hungary. In the second class students individually recorded short self-introductory vmail messages in Tokbox and sent them to the instructor in Hungary. The recordings were done on 6 webcams purchased with JSPS grant money in a computer classroom Kyoto University of Foreign Studies provided for the project. It should be noted that the majority of vmail messages were recorded in this classroom, although a few students did record messages at home, and many students mentioned viewing vmail messages at home. At the end of each class, students were given reflection sheets to be completed and handed in at the beginning of the next class (see Appendix 1). The purpose of these reflection sheets was to encourage students to think more deeply about cultural differences and similarities, as well as help the instructor assess student progress. In the third class students began to follow a basic pattern of activity consisting of the following three steps:

- Watch and understand vmail messages from students abroad
- Compose a reply
- Record and send the vmail reply

Step 1 Watch and understand vmail messages

As the Hungarian students were students of Japanese language and culture, they needed to get Japanese practice through the exchanges. The Japanese students, on the other hand,

needed English practice, so a solution was found in which all students were asked to compose messages with both a Japanese and an English version in each message, which greatly facilitated student understanding of messages. Students worked through the messages to understand them by using a dictionary or asking group members or the instructor for help. One important benefit of vmail is that it allows for repeated viewing of messages. Each Hungarian student sent both an introductory message and a message in which they asked about a research topic related to Japanese culture. To help the Japanese students keep track of the different students and their questions, a Tokbox Contact Notes sheet was distributed to each student (see Appendix 2).

Step 2 - Compose a reply

Students then replied to Hungarian student questions about Japanese culture from their knowledge, or after doing some research about the questions they were asked. For example, questions about Japanese traditional arts such as kyudo (Japanese archery) or chado (tea ceremony), were difficult for many students to answer and Wikipedia.com was useful as a starting point for research. The instructor could then circulate and look over student plans for their replies and give feedback on the English, message composition, and content.

Step 3 - Record and send vmail reply

Recording a message successfully is itself a skill to acquire. Most people feel uncomfortable while recording a video message, so it is important to learn to continue speaking despite speaking errors that may occur. Tokbox contains a screen showing the recorded message as it is being recorded, however, there is a tendency for the speaker to watch this screen while recording, hampering eye contact with the viewer. To solve this problem some students used the screen to position the face and then covered it so that they would instead look at the camera. Also important for successful recording is establishing the proper distance from the microphone so the voice can be heard clearly. Before sending the message, students need to view their message to make sure it is easy to understand.

To ensure that all Hungarian students received messages, I assigned each group of 2-3 Japanese students the task of replying to a particular Hungarian student. Although my students had asked the Hungarian students questions about Hungarian culture and daily life, few received replies that answered their questions, so I asked the Hungarian instructor to make sure that my students also got their questions answered, which they soon did. This highlights one of the key features of a successful exchange - a cooperative relationship between the instructors involved.

During the final classes that students watched the vmail replies to their questions about Hungarian culture. On the last day students were asked to make final Tokbox "sayonara" vmail messages to the Hungarian students. A final reflective questionnaire on the overall Tokbox experience was distributed to students, and four themes emerged.

Theme 1 Appreciation of cultural similarities and differences

"We are not necessarily different. Two different countries have some of the same interests (hot springs, etc.)"

"Hungary daily life is similar to Japanese. For example, mother and father get up early for job."

"I can learn difference of our culture and Hungarian culture. I can also learn similar culture of two."

Theme 2 Increased pride and interest in Japanese culture

"I'm surprised Haruki Murakami is popular in a foreign country."

"Because the Hungarians want to know about my country's culture, sports and food I want to study my country again."

Theme 3 Initial difficulty of communicating via vmail

"Speaking to the camera was difficult for me."

"I could not hear what some students were saying so I realized I should use a loud clear voice."

"I learned that I should be more active. I must not just waiting. I'm sure conveying information is important but asking is also important."

Theme 4 The impressive potential of vmail for learning.

"I think that was fun and talking with people from other countries is the best way to understand or know each other. Watching movies or reading books are not enough to know the culture."

"I can see changing face of Tokbox so I feel it is more friendly than email." I login from my house and was very happy to get a message."

"I deepened friendship with Hungarian people. Its wonderful for us to establish friendly relations passing across in the world."

"When we use Tokbox in the internet I feel that the world is small. I felt Tokbox is a revolutionary idea."

2. Japan-California Tokbox Exchange (June 1- July 17, 2008)

As the results of the first exchange with the Hungarian students were encouraging, the author contacted a friend who is a professor at California State University, Stanislaus and proposed doing an exchange. This next exchange lasted six weeks and followed the basic three-step pattern developed in the Hungarian exchange, however, there were some differences worth mentioning. For example, in the Hungarian exchange we learned that whole group messages can be very effective, so in this next exchange we began by sending a group message where each student came up to the camera and introduced him/herself briefly. This resulted in a lively and fun introduction to the class and motivated the Californian students to respond. The following week the Californian students responded with their group message, which was considerably more animated and enthusiastic than the Japanese students had made. The Californian students'

enthusiasm and lack of shyness was a cultural difference that would continue to emerge throughout the exchange.

The next week students created and sent individual vmail message in which they introduced themselves again, and gave some details about some aspect of their daily life, e.g. their part time job, club, hometown, family etc. The plan was to share something about their own life and culture, and ask the Californian students to respond with either questions or details about their lives. California student replies were difficult for students to understand, so the instructor reminded her students that when communicating with second language learners they should: 1) modify the speed of speech, 2) be careful of word choice, 3) increase repetition to increase understandability, and 4) do these things while keeping speech as natural as possible. The students in California, on the other hand, had problems understanding the Japanese students and asked that they speak more loudly.

From there the exchange took a turn, as the professor in California decided that as her students were training to be teachers, they would benefit by asking the Japanese students questions about the Japanese educational system. As the comments below indicate, Japanese students learned quite a bit about schools in America in the discussion that followed. When the exchange was finished, students completed a final reflection form on the California Tokbox exchange in which they reflected on the Tokbox exchange and compared it to the exchange done with the Hungarian students. Responses such as these were common:

What did you learn about American culture by doing the Tokbox exchanges with the students in California?

"I learned American elementary school have multicultural cultures. This is different from Japan. Teachers there think that they need to understand what students think and every students are different."

"I learned American elementary school have multicultural cultures. This is different from Japan. Teachers there think that they need to understand what students think and every students are different."

"I thought that many Japanese are very shy to talk to camera, but some American student are also shy."

"I feel their very open mind to anyone. I mean their brightness. The mood was different. I want to go to California again!"

Did you notice any cultural differences between the Hungarian students and the students from California?

"I couldn't find any cultural differences." (several like this)

"I think Hungarian is warm people. But California is interesting and full of vigor people."

"I felt American students are more passionate. Hungarian students looked shy a little like us."

"Hungarian students I met are more shy than California students. I feel much closer with Hungarian students, they are close to Japanese behavior."

3. Facebook Vmail Exchanges (2009 Spring term)

In these exchanges Facebook was used as the medium to connect Japanese students with students in Taiwan and Turkey. The Turkish instructor had contacted the principal investigator through a mutual acquaintance, and the Taiwanese professor had attended a poster session we did on videomail exchanges at the WorldCALL conference in Fukuoka, Japan in August of 2008 and became interested in doing an exchange. For these exchanges each student first needed to create an individual Facebook page if they didn't have one already, and then join a Facebook group page, which I created for the project (e.g. The Japan-Turkey English Study Group and The Taiwan-Japan English Study Group). Facebook has a variety of features that students used in the exchange, however, in this paper only student use of the vmail feature will be discussed.

The two exchanges between my students in Japan and students in Turkey and Taiwan took place concurrently during the spring term of 2009. These exchanges proceeded in a similar fashion although the Taiwan exchange went a bit longer, so I will mainly discuss the Taiwan exchange, and only discuss the Turkey exchange where it differed substantially.

Japan-Taiwan Facebook Exchange (April 10-June 18)

Before my classes began in April, I uploaded a short self-introductory vmail message to the group page that was designed to give the Taiwanese students some basic information about the exchange and provide a model for their self-introductory messages. The Taiwanese students uploaded vmail messages introducing themselves, which were quite creative, and gave my students good ideas on how to do an interesting introductory message. For example, one group took turns introducing themselves, but said hello and goodbye in unison. Another put their names on the board and then did the short introduction alternating sentences. A third group had pairs introduce each other and ask each other questions. Showing these to my class motivated them to communicate with the Taiwanese students.

My students then brainstormed the kinds of basic information they would need to know before visiting a country, i.e. the country's location, food, population, arts, etc., and they used the internet to do some basic research on these topics. They next created introductory vmail messages containing questions about Taiwan and its culture.

Example:

Hi.... We're Asako, Aya and Yumi!!
We love your country!!

Here are our questions.

Yumi: who is the most famous person in Taiwan?

Aya: I found the information on the internet that beef noodle soup is famous in Taiwan, but this information is from the internet. I don't think you eat it everyday. So, what do you eat often?? Please tell me your recent eating habits??

Asako: Where is famous city for tourists in Taiwan?

After a lot of trouble uploading video messages due to the Facebook server being busy, students were finally able to do so. However, the following week there were no responses from the Taiwanese students. The Taiwanese professor wrote saying her students had found my student's video messages difficult to understand, so I asked my students to add text versions of their video messages to the textbox that lies below the vmail message to clarify what their questions were. In addition, I mentioned to students that their questions would be more interesting if they added some information to the questions about Japan to set the context, e.g. "Kyoto is a famous city in Japan for tourists. What's a famous city for tourists in Taiwan?"

For the next few weeks students were busy using other features of Facebook, but each week we checked and my students still had not received replies to their video messages. This was disappointing for students, so I wrote another email to the professor explaining that my students really needed to have her student's replies for a paper on Taiwan they had been assigned, and in the next week all my students received replies.

Example:

Yumi, I think Ang Lee, he is a famous movie director, 'Crouching Tiger Hidden Tiger' and 'Brokeback Mountain' were directed by him.

To Aya, I love Beef noodles!!! Of course I'm not having it for every meal, it would be disgusting...lol ...We have a lot of food in Taiwan, sorry, it's countless, I can't tell you how many kind are there. Usually we eat rice, like you guys, and we also have dumplings, etc... there're too many types of food!! Come and visit, and I'll show you!

To Asako, the most recommended by me is Taipei, it is where I grew up, it's similar with Tokyo, it's a very convenient city. Sorry, I've never been to Kyoto so I can't compare it to Taipei. There is a famous building in Taipei, that is.... Taipei 101!! I believe you heard about it, it is the tallest building in the world so far! Welcome to visit Taiwan! So that you can get your answers by experiencing them!!

In the final weeks, Taiwanese students uploaded elaborate vmail messages they had converted from Powerpoint presentations in which they talked about their hobbies and interests. Japanese students were asked to reply to each message with comments or questions. For example, one Taiwanese student's video message concerned his interest in hip hop dance, and Japanese students replied with comments like this:

Hip-hop is not just a type of dance, it is spirits. Keep up the good work!

Wow~!!! You are so cool!!!!!! I don't know about hip-hop at all, but I am really attracted by your great performance :) What is the best attractive point of HipHop for you???

Cool! can you recommend some hip hop music??

You're so cool! Hiphop is difficult, isn't it? I have done it too, but it is difficult for me.

Japan-Turkey Facebook Exchange

In the Turkey exchange, students had the same problems uploading vmail messages to Facebook as in the Taiwan exchange, but Turkish students replied more promptly to students' messages, which may have been due to both classes being English classes and having similar goals. The class with the Taiwanese students was a CALL class and seemed more focused on helping students learn to use technology than it was on helping them improve their English skills through interaction.

Results from the Facebook Exchanges - Student Feedback

Students in both Facebook exchanges gave feedback at the end of the class on their experiences via a questionnaire asking about the advantages and disadvantages of Facebook compared to a typical English class. There were many positive comments about how Facebook facilitates communication between people from other countries.

"We could communicate with young people same as us. Something teachers teach us is not enough to improve our English."

"Feel familiar with foreigners."

"We have been studying English to speak with someone, so using Facebook and communicate with people who is from other country really makes sense."

Regarding disadvantages, however, there were several complaints about the difficulties students had uploading the vmail messages and the long wait for students in the partner class to respond. This indicated that students were critically evaluating their experiences with this new technology, and perhaps less understanding than the instructor of the inevitable problems that arise when using new technologies in an exchange across borders.

"Facebook is complicated and it took a lot of time to do something."

"We couldn't get responses from foreign students or response was waiting. It's really uncomfortable and less enjoyment on this class."

Also, another common response was that students wanted to have communication with foreign students in real-time. In the future, I will try to arrange at least one face-to-face realtime exchange for students.

"It is better to use Skype."

"I want to discuss with students in realtime."

Practical Matters

Videomail exchanges such as these may cost little or no money if web cameras are already installed in the computers being used. As the computers in the Kyoto University of Foreign Studies computer rooms were not configured with web cameras, 6 Logicool web cameras were purchased with JSPS grant money at a cost of approximately 48,000 yen or about \$500.00US for use in this project. Before deciding which internet service to use (i.e. Tokbox, Facebook, etc.), it is important to test them out during normal class hours to see whether sending and uploading messages is relatively easy to do.

In the case of this project, a computer room was requested before the school year began, however, it would be possible to work from a typical classroom and visit a computer room regularly if it were provided with webcams. Alternatively, motivated and "tech-savvy" students could be instructed in the use of the web camera and the vmail

interface, and then asked to use the computer room or their personal computer at home in their free time to view and create vmail messages for homework.

The amount of class time spent working on the vmail exchanges will depend on the nature of the class they are being used in. With the Tokbox exchange, the class was an Intercultural Communication class where one of the main objectives was for students to communicate directly with students from other countries, and the whole class period was used for about two months. In the Facebook exchange, the class was an English Seminar with an International Studies focus which was more content-based and oriented towards students learning about international issues and presenting the results of their research. In this class, Facebook was used for half of the class period, and more as a source of information about the international issues students were studying.

Finally, one of the biggest challenges in organizing an intercultural exchange is finding partners with similar goals and interests. In the case of these four exchanges, ICT and CALL related conferences were good places to meet potential partners. Additionally, there are sites online where one can connect with people with interest in internet-based exchanges, e.g. Webheads - <http://webheads.info/>, Tandem - <http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/index.html>. (Also, feel free to contact the author if an exchange like this seems interesting!)

Conclusion and Suggestions

Vmail has excellent potential for providing students with intercultural experiences that can help them learn firsthand about other cultures and get practice communicating with people with different accents, expressions, and culturally-based assumptions. Vmail combines the convenience of email communication with the rich visual information a web camera provides and allows for repeated viewing which is a great benefit for language learners. Feedback from students in the exchanges indicated that although they were impressed with the potential of vmail exchanges to aid language learning and increase cultural awareness, they were aware of the time spent solving logistical problems, and considered this when evaluating the usefulness of the exchanges. To optimize student benefits, instructors should consider the following suggestions:

1. Teachers need to collaborate to clarify class goals and expectations for students early in the planning process.
2. If possible, have students practice using vmail with other students in their class before using it in an intercultural exchange.
3. Before the exchange, students need to do preliminary research to understand the country the other class is in, i.e. its geography, economy, history, etc.
4. Teacher-led explanations and demonstrations at the beginning of class using one computer or a projector help students work independently later.
5. Forming student groups facilitates cooperation and student understanding of messages and class procedures. The whole group and small group vmail messages are also effective.

6. When students send vmail, it is useful to also write in the accompanying textbox anything important that they want the viewer to respond to.
7. Messages can benefit from props or by having students speaking in unison, taking turns, interviewing, etc.
8. Students can learn a lot about a culture from nonverbal communication - i.e. American students were quite expressive and not embarrassed to show excitement.
9. Peer and/or teacher correction of message scripts help students improve their English and result in messages that are easier to understand.
10. When doing an exchange with native speakers, remind them to modify their speech to increase understandability by modifying speed, word choice, adding repetition, all the while keeping it natural.
11. When asking a question about another culture, it is useful to remind students to first add some information about their own culture in their questions, i.e.... In Japan we do X, how about in Turkey?
12. If possible, arrange for at least one face to face realtime encounter during the exchange using Skype or the chat function in Tokbox.
13. Frequent communication between instructors and consideration of the needs of the other instructor and his/her students is important for a successful exchange.

Note

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Appendix 2 Tokbox Contacts Notes sheet

Tokbox Contacts Notes

Name/Username:

Information about student:

Questions you were asked:

Questions you want to ask:

Name/Username:

Information about student:

Questions you were asked:

Questions you want to ask:

Name/Username:

Information about student:

Questions you were asked:

Questions you want to ask: