

Exploring Learner Preferences in Cross-Cultural Distance Learning

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to highlight learner preferences in Cross-Cultural Distance Learning (henceforth, CCDL). In so doing, I administered a questionnaire targeted at CCDL participants at Korea University and Waseda University in the spring of 2003. The questionnaire is developed to examine the CCDL participants' (1) personality, (2) language preferences, (3) motivations, (4) anxiety, and (5) learner needs toward CCDL, hoping for an optimization of individual learning in CCDL. First, I describe various possible ways to implement communication-based learning in English language education in Asia. Second, I examine the relationship between learners' personality and preferences of learning in the CCDL context.

2. Computer-mediated communications used in CCDL

2.1. Characteristics of cyber learning

CCDL can provide learners with various computer mediated communication-based learning, i.e., communication-based learning via network system. Thus, CCDL participants have opportunities to communicate with distant people in either a synchronous or asynchronous way. As Herring (1996) mentions, synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) is so-called real-time communication which enables us to deliver what we type on a keyboard to the partners and immediately see what the partners write popping up on the computer screen. Internet Relay Chat is one of the examples of text-based synchronous CMC. On the other hand, asynchronous CMC is also a kind of mutual interaction but it is done not in real time. Communication via e-mails and Bulletin Board System (henceforth, BBS) is regarded as asynchronous CMC. Information technologies can be used in unlimited ways for e-learning, so I am going to focus on the three kinds of Cyber Learning here: 1) E-mail exchanges, 2) Text-based synchronous CMC and 3) Cyber Seminars and Cyber Lectures by the use of videoconferencing.

First, I would like to give an overview of research on E-mail exchanges. Second, various chatting equipments and software are illustrated in the hope of a new method for language teaching and SLA research. Third, videoconferencing issues are discussed.

2.2. Implementation of e-mail exchanges in English class

E-mail exchanges can be defined as asynchronous CMC, as stated in 2.1. Users can

send and receive messages and communicate with the other network users through the Internet. Fig. 1 shows the results of a small-scale survey by a Japanese broadcasting station, which illustrate change of the ratios of e-mail users among University students in Japan. As we can see in the Fig 1, almost all of the University students in Japan can have their own e-mail accounts and they can have access to network from home or computer labs at their universities as of 2004. Therefore, e-mail exchanges have advantage of flexible time management because it can be used inside or outside of their classes.

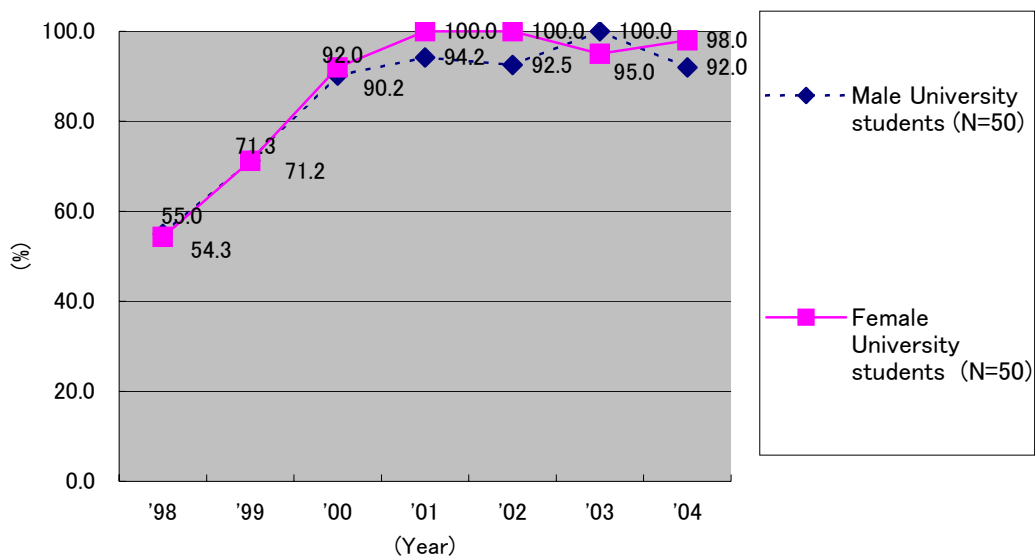


Fig 1. Change of the ratios of e-mail users among University students in Japan

(<http://www.tfm.co.jp/wakamono/>)

Robb (1996) states that teachers will meet a lot of problems at the initial stage of any cyber projects. Therefore, in order to avoid problems, we will examine what kind of teachers' tasks is needed in order to make things go well. First, I list teachers' tasks to start an e-mail exchange project and then discuss each of the following steps:

- (Step 1) Check students' language and computer literacy. (Robb, 1996; Helland et al., 1999)
- (Step2) Find partners (Robb, 1996; Helland et al., 1999)
- (Step3) Decide the schedule. (Robb, 1996; Choi et al., 1999; Helland et al., 1999)
- (Step4) Set the goals. (Miake, 1997; Helland et al., 1999)
- (Step5) Set topics, such as what they talk about. (Miake, 1997; Choi et al., 1999)
- (Step6) Track progress of communication such as assigning and reassigning partners.. (Robb, 1996; Helland et al., 1999)
- (Step7) Give students opportunities to share and exchange their opinions.

(Step8) Evaluate students (Robb, 1996; Choi et al., 1999; Helland et al., 1999)

(Step 1) Check students' language and computer literacy

Although the number of computers and users might have increased, the level of students' computer literacy could differ. Therefore, some researchers suggest that teachers should support their students technically by teaching how to write, send, receive and reply to e-mail. (see Robb 1996; Helland et al. 1999). They will also need to support how to write English e-mail i.e., linguistically well-formed sentences, such as greeting, closing, and punctuations.

(Step 2) Find Partners

When starting e-mail project, teachers have to find cross-cultural partners for students. IECC (Inter-cultural E-mail Classroom Connections) is a site to help teachers to find partner teachers in other cultures and countries for e-mail classroom pen pals and other on-line exchange projects. According to the information this site provided, 21000 teachers from 82 different countries have registered for this website as of 2004. If teachers have only clarify (1) students' age range, (2) target language and (3) what they want to do for e-mail exchanges, they can easily find their partners among a large number of teachers all over the world in this site.



IECC at <http://www.teaching.com/iecc/>

(Step 3) Decide the schedule

According to Robb (1996), the teachers on both sides of correspondence have to mutually understand each other and grasp an appropriate perception of the situation where they are. Moreover, teachers need to place similar weight on quality and frequency of the correspondence and evaluation of curriculum such as credit or non-credit. Otherwise, disappointment of students will be caused by the mismatch.

Also, differences in school terms and academic calendar should be taken into consideration. If the period of communication is short, students cannot have enough time for communication. Some teachers and researchers (Robb 1996; Choi et al. 1999; Helland et al. 1999).argue that this mismatch of the academic calendar is problematic.

(Step 4) Set the goals

When starting a cyber project, teachers can set various goals. They can focus on students' writing skills, fluency, grammatical accuracy, cross-cultural understanding, and communicative

competence. Some researchers point out that clarifying the goals will be beneficial to the project (Helland et al. 1999). In other words, just letting students engage in communication without any purpose is not adequate. If students know the goal of the project, we can assume that they will be determined in order to achieve the goals. In addition, they will not miss what they really have to do in correspondence with their partners.

(Step 5) Set topics

Miake (1997) argues that e-mail exchanges between students tend to place too much emphasis on self-introduction. However, self-introduction needs advanced conversational techniques and communicative skills, because it is quite difficult for novice language students to talk about themselves or their points of view. Therefore, it can be easier for students to talk about predetermined topics in the well-formed project. Miake (1997) states that it is important to set a topic for each exchange. For example, National backgrounds can be one of the interesting topics. During the collaboration with Korea University and Waseda University, conscription system in Korea is popular among Japanese male participants. During the collaboration of Filipino students, their Christianity was a frequent topic of their exchange.

(Step 6) Track communication and assign partners

Assigning partners is a big issue in this kind of project. Teachers cannot make pairs perfectly, since there can be much difference in either technical or linguistic literacy level among individuals. The class-size is also one of the concerns. Therefore, Robb (1996) suggests that teachers should assign several partners to each student. However, the mismatch of frequency of communication cannot be smoothed out because some students have one partner but some have two. For example, some students can receive frequent while others do not. One solution to this, therefore, should depend on teachers' efforts. As Helland et al. (1999) point out, students' activities may be more active and stimulated by showing teachers' constant efforts and care. Teachers are expected to track the progress of communication and enhance smooth interaction. If necessary, reassigning a pair is needed after mutual consultation with the partner teachers. If teachers do not assign another partner to the student as soon as possible, they lose fruitful opportunities for communication, especially when communicating with our partner school whose terms differ from each other.

(Step 7) Give students opportunities to share and exchange their opinions, such as presentation
As stated before, students should participate in the project with a predetermined goal in mind. Therefore, teachers should offer some opportunities to present students' own benefits through the experiences of the cyber project. Students can share and learn from other students. In turn, they can make the most of it when communicating with their own partners afterwards.

As Choi et al.(1999) states, the project makes a good influence on students who do not participate. It is important for all the students to be informed what is happening to participants. Students' presentations can be one of the assessments for teachers.

(Step 8) Evaluate students

Evaluation can be done in several ways, such as students' presentation as noted in the previous section. Teachers can analyze how much their proficiency of English has improved. The assessment of communication data is a difficult and delicate matter, lots of students talk about their personal issues. Therefore, some students are unwilling to show their e-mail data because they worry about disclosing their privacy. Robb (1996) suggests that students write down the information as follows and submit it.

Date	From/ to	Sent/Received	Lines in Message	Total Lines
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He assesses his students on the basis of the total lines of their sent and received messages because he assumes that those who write stimulating messages are likely to get longer responses. That can be one of the methods to evaluate students, although the number of communication or the number of lines in e-mail cannot exactly reflect the attitude, enthusiasm and proficiency of students.

Students' communication data can be analyzed in some technical ways, in terms of development of grammar, vocabulary, or communicative strategies and so forth. In chapters 4 to 6, I discuss how we can evaluate students' progress in those chapters more in detail by the use of basic analysis in practice.

2.4. Synchronous CMC

Text- based synchronous CMC is discussed here. Chatting is more of a colloquial and familiar term. On the Internet, there are many channels for chatting. For example, TALKCITY, which is one of the famous chat communities on the Internet, has a wide range of channels classified by topics. Therefore, there is no difficulty finding chatting users that can match interests among on-line members all over the world. Furthermore, synchronous CMC provides various styles. The text-based CMC can be classified into three types, only- text CMC, text CMC with image transfer, and Character chat. Three kinds of synchronous CMC and compare and contrast them by examining the possibility of pedagogical use.

2.4.1. Text-based CMC without image transfer

Some of the characteristics of text-based CMC without image transfer are:

- 1) It is not expensive because a great deal of software for text-based chatting is distribute free

of charge.

2) Chatting is possible anytime and anywhere with the Internet access.

3) Communication can be done fast and smoothly, since this kind of CMC aims to exchange text messages, not pictures which can place a burden upon network load. According to Yamamoto (2000: 74), Web Chat makes CMC possible without installing any software besides a browser such as Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator. Therefore, the inexperienced CMC users can start at once. However, one of the disadvantages is that one tends to get an unstable environment since all the transactions are done through Common Gateway Interface (CGI) on the remote host. Therefore, time-lag occurs occasionally. In other words, it takes time to update messages. Conversation is sometimes stopped by any other accident such as sever down. In Textchat, since users can keep themselves anonymous, they may feel at ease during communication. According to Kitade, (2000) receptive and quiet students can engage in communication actively under such anonymous environment. However, anonymous chatting causes “Flaming” easily: (Siegel et al., 1986; Matsuo 1999).

2.4.2. Text-based CMC with image transfer.

Some chatting software for synchronous CMC such as CU-SeeMe and BizMate are briefly illustrated in this section. CU-SeeMe was developed by Cornell University and was spread by private and pedagogical use. Schools engaging in CCDL project are using this software and most of the students have a chat with partners via a terminal that CU-See Me is preinstalled in. A charge-coupled device (CCD) camera on the top of computer films our faces and sends it to our partners, as shown in fig. 2. Chatting orally with a microphone is also possible.

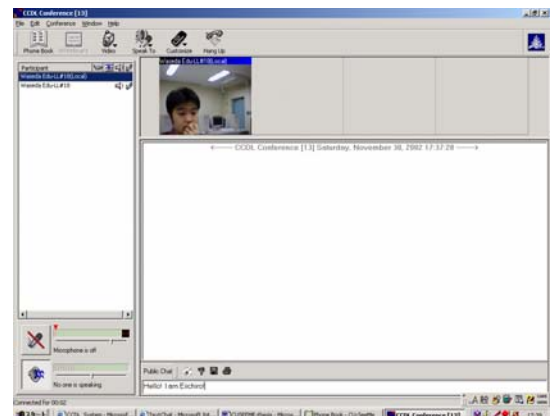


Fig. 2 CU-SeeMe

From this standpoint, the advantage of CU-SeeMe is that users can have more lively and human-to-human communication than Text Chat, because one can see partners’ “real” faces. On the other hand, one undesirable aspect is that CU-SeeMe communication is greatly affected by the network environment, because CU-SeeMe needs to send and receive more data than text-based chat. Therefore, it is necessary to check whether or not mutual communication by a CCD camera and microphone functions well in the network environment on both sides of correspondence, before starting the cyber project. Even if the server performance has no problem to use the system, the partner side may have trouble with the network environment.

As a solution to its network load, Waseda University has three servers for CU-SeeMe chatting and each server allows no more than 25 participants to log in at one time. The idea is to lessen network load by restricting the number of people to log in.

Netmeeting or MSN Messenger is chatting software freely and widely distributed by Microsoft. The course called “Learning on Information Technology and Multimedia” at Keio University promotes distance learning by the use of Netmeeting as explained in <http://www.sfc.keio.ac.jp/liam/html/netmeeting-use.html>.

2.5. Videoconference

Here, I would like to define Cyber Seminars and Lectures as Cyber joint classes by the use of videoconferencing equipments. Shown in Fig. 3, point-to-point connection is one-way connection between two universities. When using multipoint connection, several universities are connected at the same time. The universities are connected either through regular phone lines such as analog line and Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN). Internet Protocol (IP) connection is also possible. IP connection is greatly influenced by the network environment and tends to be less stable than ISDN connection, in the case of Waseda University and its affiliated universities. Now that the network environment has been evolving, IP connection is demanded in terms of economical reason. For example, according to Waseda University’s survey, in the year 2001 almost all of the video-conferencing connections in Waseda were used by ISDN, from September 28 to December 2 in 2002, 104 out of 132 (79%) videoconferencing sessions are connected with IP connections. IP connections are of great advantage to cost performance in Waseda and that could be one of the reasons that the number of sessions of communication increased in Waseda University.

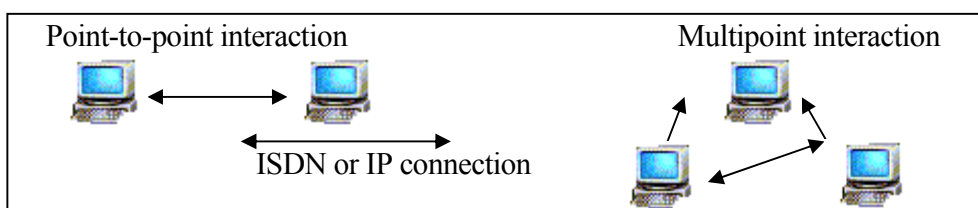


Fig 3. scheme of videoconferencing (Yoshimoto, 1999:138)

However, teachers have to notice that Cyber Seminars and Lectures may encounter accidents because video-conferencing needs large data transfer of all CMC. According to a four-month survey from April 7 to July 27 in 2002 by Waseda University, 22 sessions out of 134 were accidentally postponed. In other words, the 20 % of sessions had problems with communication in classes. The reason of this is as follows:

- 1) No call because of the technical problem of equipments.

2) Sudden cancellation or miscommunication. Because the other group forgot about the session or forgot to tell the day for a session is holiday.

Unfavorable environment. There was something wrong with voice or image transfer. Images or voices stop occasionally.

In sum, teachers always need to be aware of cases where they cannot have sessions because of technical problems and human-caused problems. Therefore, it is preferable to prepare for another guidance plan and ensure emergency contact on the partner's side when incorporating Cyber Seminars and Lectures into classrooms.

3. Survey 1: Relationship between personality and learning preference

3.1. Aim of the survey

I administered a questionnaire targeted at CCDL participants at Korea University in Korea and at Waseda University in Japan in 2003. It was conducted in English and designed to investigate learners' personality, motivation, strategy, anxiety and learning preferences. However, this study focuses only on items asking about learners' personality and Cross-cultural distance learning preferences. The participants are 39 Waseda University students (M=20, F=19) and 128 Korea University students (M=59, F=69).

3.2. Personality: extrovertness

The factor of "extroverts" were used, based on the study of Yukina (2003). The English version of Yukina's personality test (2003) consists of 7 questionnaire items. These are five Likert scale items. As the result of factor analysis, only one factor "extrovertness" was extracted and the 4 obtained items are the following ($\alpha=.78$).

1. I am sociable.
2. I am lively and active.
3. I exercise leadership.
4. I like to mingle with friends.

In this study, learners' extrovertness was defined by their cumulative raw scores of the above 4 items. The participants whose score range is 6 to 12 are regarded as "introvert group" (N=44). Those whose score range is 13 to 16 are regarded as "average group" (N=78). Those whose score range is 17 to 20 are regarded as "extrovert group" (N=45) in this study. Table 1 shows the number and proportion of the introvert, average extrovert group. Japanese male students tend to be accommodated in the introvert group, although there is no statistical significance.

Table 1. The number and proportion of participants' personality

		Personality			
		Sum	Introvert	Average	Extrovert
Sum		167 100.0%	44 26.3%	78 46.7%	45 26.9%
Nationality	Japanese	39 100.0%	13 33.3%	16 41.0%	10 25.6%
	Korean	128 100.0%	31 24.2%	62 48.4%	35 27.3%
Sex	Male	79 100.0%	21 26.6%	36 45.6%	22 27.8%
	Female	88 100.0%	23 26.1%	42 47.7%	23 26.1%

3.3. Preferences: CCDL activities

The questionnaire has also attempted to examine what kind of computer-mediated communication activity CCDL participants prefer. The following 7 activities were asked in the form of Likert-type scales.

1. E-mail exchange
2. Text chat without seeing a partner's face.
3. Text chat while seeing a partner's face.
4. Oral chat without seeing a partner's face
5. Oral chat while seeing a partner's face
6. Cyber Lectures through videoconference.
7. Joint-Class Discussion by videoconference.

As a result, several tendencies were observed: (1) the introvert group and the average group like asynchronous communication "E-mail exchanges" the most, while the extrovert group does not mind synchronous or asynchronous communication. (2) The introvert group does not mind "with or without a partner's face", while the extrovert group prefers chatting while seeing the partner's face. (3) The introvert group likes private chat with a partner on one-on-one basis, not in group.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have overviewed the possible ways of computer mediated activities in

English Education. Moreover, I have considered the relationship between personality and chatting preference. It is worth noting here that personality (e.g. extrovert or introvert) affects learner preferences of communication styles in the CCDL context. As Herrings (1996) explains, there are a lot of choices for users in computer-mediated communication environment. In other words, depending on individual personalities, preferences and needs, CCDL participants can choose their communication styles on their own. Thus, computer-mediated communication would be helpful for learning for both introvert and extrovert participants.

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