Connecting Students across Universities in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The present study reports results of an experiment in which the author and her students at King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia shared an online grammar course with a professor and his students at Umm Al-Qura University (UQU) in Makkah, Saudi Arabia using www.makkahelearning.net. The experiment proved to be a total failure. Factors contributing to students' inadequate participation in the online course, and hesitation to register and interact are discussed.

1. Introduction

E-mail exchanges between L1 and L2 students have been utilized by many language instructors in many countries as a new approach to language teaching and learning. For example, e-mail exchanges between four American and Canadian college preparatory ESL students were found to be effective in teaching intercultural awareness, in creating a positive affective climate, and in making the English-for-Academic-Purposes (EAP) curriculum more relevant to the students (Ruhe, 1998). In another study by Schoorman and Camarillo (2000), 56 pairs of university-school partners participated in an e-mail-based project. Pre-service teachers and middle school students corresponded with each other for ten weeks. Analysis of the letters written during the ten-week period, end-of-semester pre-service teacher project reports, weekly instructor field notes, faculty/pre-service student dialogue journals, and a questionnaire completed by middle school students at the end of the project revealed positive outcomes including a broadening of multicultural awareness and improvement in L2 skills. In a similar project conducted by Cifuentes and Shih (2001), forty pairs of American pre-service teachers and Taiwanese university students corresponded by e-mail. Findings of pre- and post-connection surveys, midterm surveys, reflective journals, final reports, and interview transcripts

indicated that Taiwanese participants were positive about online ESL acquisition and cultural learning before and after the connection. They preferred the one-on-one e-mail exchange to the web-based environment. Students in an immersion program in Australia were linked, via the web, with students in Canada and France to produce a web magazine containing articles written collaboratively in French by the Australian and Canadian students and in English by the French students (Birch and Matas, 1999; Matas and Birch, 2000).

In addition, thousands of students and instructors around the world are using Online Management Systems like Blackboard, WebCT, Online Learning, Moodle and Nicenet in teaching all kinds of courses including EFL and ESL. The effect of sharing online courses by students in several institutes was investigated by few studies. For example, in a study conducted by Al-Jarf (2004), Saudi female students shared an online writing course with a group of Ukrainian and Russian students learning English as a foreign language. The aims of the project were to develop students' writing skills in EFL, to develop their awareness of local and global cultural issues and events, and to develop their ability to communicate and interact with students from other cultures. The students responded to the discussion topics, checked the documents and websites posted by their instructors. Students' responses to the post-treatment questionnaire showed gains in writing skills and positive attitudes among Saudi, Ukrainian and Russian students towards their online experience and showed an interest in participating in similar projects in the future. The effect of sharing online courses in grammar instruction by students at several universities was not investigated by prior research.

As in many developing countries, use of online courses in EFL instruction in some higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia is not yet known due to insufficient numbers of PC's, lack of Internet connectivity in some colleges, lack of trained instructors in IT skills, and lack of administrative support. Few individual attempts are now available here and there. Few instructors are using OWCP and Moodle to teach writing, grammar, literature, linguistics and others. For example, Al-Jarf (2005a) used an online course in the teaching of English grammar to EFL freshman students from home. She found that the integration of online learning in grammar instruction

significantly improved EFL freshman college students' achievement and attitudes. Ali Abu-Reesh, who has two Online Course Management Systems, offers several online courses in language, linguistics and literature to his graduate and undergraduate students at Umm Al-Qura University. Several instructors at Imam University and King Saud University in Riyadh, King Abdul-Aziz University, in Jeddah and the Women's College in Makkah use online courses offered by the Online Writing Collaboration Project (OWCP). All of the above courses are non-credit courses as they are used as a supplement to in-class instruction and registration and participation by the students are optional.

In the present study, EFL freshman students enrolled in a grammar course at King Saud University (KSU) shared an online course with a group of EFL freshman students enrolled in a similar grammar course at Umm Al-Qura University (UQU). The instructors and their students used Makkah e-Learning from home as a supplement to in-class grammar instruction. The aims of the study were to investigate the effectiveness of collaborative online instruction on students' achievement in grammar and their attitudes towards online collaborative learning and teaching. The study tried to answer the following questions: (1) What is the effect of the collaborative online project on freshman students' skills development in EFL as perceived by the students and their instructors? (2) What effects did the online collaborative project have on the students' attitudes towards online collaborative learning, and interaction with students from other universities in Saudi Arabia? (3) What technological, cultural and linguistic difficulties did UQU and KSU students have in the online learning environment? To answer these questions, the impact of collaborative online instruction on EFL freshman students' grammar achievement and attitudes was based on the author's daily observations and weekly notes as well as a post-treatment questionnaire administered to her students only because contacting UQU students was difficult.

2. Participants

Two groups of students at two Saudi universities participated in the online collaborative project in Fall 2004. The first group consisted of 70 freshman students from Umm Al-Qura University (UQU), in Makkah. They were both male and female

and were majoring in English literature and linguistics. The second group consisted of 40 female students majoring in translation at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University (KSU) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The subjects in both groups were all Saudi and were all native speakers of Arabic. Their ages ranged between 17 & 19 with a median age of 18 years. All the participants had 6 years of EFL instruction in grades 6-12 prior to their admission to college. Their English proficiency level ranged between elementary and upper-intermediate. They were all freshmen and were enrolled in their first grammar course. UQU students were concurrently taking English (2 hrs), English Structure (3 hrs), Listening & Speaking (3 hrs), Writing Practice (3 hrs), Reading Practice (3 hrs), whereas KSU students were concurrently taking Listening (3 hours per week), Speaking (3 hours), Reading (4 hours), Writing (4 hours) and Vocabulary Building (3 hours) courses in English as a foreign language. All the students were studying English in a gender-based environment as it is the case in all schools and colleges in Saudi Arabia. Students in both groups had no prior experience in online learning.

The UQU students were taught by Ali Abu-Reesh who owns two Online Course Management Systems: www.abureesh.net and www.makkahelearning.net. He taught several online courses using www.abureesh.net and www.makkahelearning.net. He teaches male students face-to-face and female students through closed-circuit T.V. In addition he is the head of the English Department at UQU. KSU students were taught by the author who had prior experience with online teaching using Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle and Nicenet. She has taught 15 language courses online including writing, grammar, culture, study skills and ESP to graduate and undergraduate female students.

3. In-class Instruction

Before in-class instruction began, Ali Abu-Reesh and the author agreed on the grammatical structures to be covered in class and the textbook to be used. Both groups used Betty Azar's *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (3rd Edition). They covered the same grammatical structures in the textbook. The grammatical topics covered were: *parts of speech, prepositions, prepositional phrases, transitive and intransitive verbs, linking verbs, regular and irregular verbs, adverb placement,*

information, tag, negative and yes-no questions, negatives, regular and irregular plurals, use of definite and indefinite articles, pronouns, subject-verb agreement, 9 tenses, modals, pronunciation of –ed, -s and -es at the end of verbs and nouns, spelling of –ing, -ed, -es. The grammar course was taught for 12 weeks.

4. Online Instruction

Ali Abu-Reesh and the author used Makkah e-Learning which is owned by Abu-Reesh as it did not require any fees or license. Makkah e-Learning is a Moodle-type, open source course where instructors can tailor the course tools to the course requirements and students' needs. The course tools were already set up by Ali Abu-Reesh. Makkah e-Learning consists of the following tools: online discussion forums (news forums), resources, a calendar, announcements and personal messaging. Webpages, Powerpoint and Flash presentation, pictures, video clips, questionnaires, tests and exercises can be designed and uploaded. The students can view their grades. Instructors can also obtain website usage statistics for each participant. Both instructors served as course administrators and Ali Abu-Reesh was the designer.

After creating the grammar course, all of the students were given the course URL and they were asked to register. UQU students accessed the course from home and from the UQU Computer Center, whereas KSU students used their own PC's and Internet connection from home, as no Internet access was available at the their college and no PC's were available in the classroom. Online grammar instruction was used as a supplement to in-class instruction that depended on the textbook.

Prior to online instruction, the author assessed her students' computer literacy skills by a questionnaire. All of the students had a PC at home and could use MS Word and some could use Powerpoint. Although 45% had access to the Internet and had an e-mail, none of the students had prior experience in online learning. A tutorial was given to them for reference. The Makkah eLearning course tools were described and instructions on how to use certain course tools were given. Online instruction was initiated by posting a welcome note and by starting a discussion thread.

Each week, we posted a question or a discussion thread that required the students to use a particular tense or grammatical point in the "News Forums". We added grammar websites related to the grammatical structure discussed in class in the "Resources" section. The grammar websites contained explanations, exercises, a daily grammar lesson, and quizzes. Documents on study skills, Powerpoint and animated Flash presentations were also posted. The students were encouraged to check the grammar links, respond to the questions and threads in the "News Forums" and to add grammar links and write about any topic that is of interest to them.

Throughout the semester, the author served as a facilitator. She provided technical support to her students on using the different tools of Makkah e-Learning, and responded to individual students' comments and requests. The author sent public and private messages to encourage her students to register, interact and communicate. She had to look for relevant websites and post them in the "Resources" area. She had to post questions and discussion topic and write model responses. Using the online course was optional as some students had no Internet access and were not able to participate. Extra credit was given for using the course, since online instruction is not currently used at the College of Languages and Translation (COLT), King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. COLT has no Internet access and no PC's in the classrooms, therefore she could not provide hands-on practice.

5. Project Outcomes

Despite the encouragement, extra credit given and messages sent to the students individually and as a group, only one student from UQU and 4 students from KSU registered in Makkah e-Learning and there was very little interaction in the discussion forums throughout the semester. Only five messages were posted by the KSU students throughout the semester and no messages by UQU students. The online collaborative project shared by UQU and KSU students proved to be a total failure. The author's students were shy, apprehensive and hesitant to register, as they were used to learning in a segregated environment (female students and female instructors only). Some wanted to conceal their identity by registering using a male's name, using their first name and initials, deleting their e-mails, or using "anonymous" instead of their real names. My

students thought that sharing an online course with students from other universities would be like a chat-room, where male and female students chat rather than study. Although I assured them that all course activities were monitored by both instructors and that UQU students were respectful and serious, they did not register. The author encouraged the students to register using their real names and gave them extra credit for that, yet they declined. Responses to the post-treatment questionnaire showed several factors contributing to the inadequate participation and interaction in the online project. Those are summarized below.

5.1 Cultural barriers

In Saudi Arabia, male and female students study in a gender-based environment from first grade through graduate school. Male students are taught by male instructors and female students are taught by female instructors (with the exception of the College of Medicine). Male instructors may teach female students through closed-circuit T.V., but female instructors do not teach male students at all. In addition, they felt that the Internet should be used for fun not for credit or as a proper course. As a result, they did not take it seriously. They were passive rather than active learners. They read and checked the websites and posts only. They did not want to be recognized by a male professor and male students and were afraid of making mistakes in public. They were afraid there might be critiques or negative comments.

5.2 Technological Issues

The students reported that Makkah eLearning was too complicated to use. Many participants were technologically novice. Registering and logging in were complicated processes for them. They had to go through several pages and found the main page overwhelming. Some had difficulty using the password again and again. They had difficulty getting to the course tools, the hyperlinks, the discussion forums and presentations. They did not know how to post a thread and did not know where to go and in what sequence the tools should be used. The author could not have the students use Makkah eLearning from college under her supervision. Hands-on practice could not be provided due to lack of Internet connectivity and PC's in the classroom. Explanations

were abstract and the author could not show the students on the screen how a problem could be solved or how a tool could be used.

5.3 Linguistic Factors

The students were in their first semester in college and many had a low proficiency level. Their English was limited. Many had difficulty with the technical terms used in the online course. They did not know what the terms for the course tools meant.

5.4 College Culture

Participants reported that they only work if activities are part of the course mark. Since participation was optional, and no portion of the course grade was allocated to use of the online course, many students were not motivated to participate as they felt it was not mandatory. Although extra credit was given, they did not seem to care. Since students were using online course from home, she had no control over what they were doing. The rest of the instructors and students at COLT do not use online courses in language teaching at all. That made them feel odd. The author was the only one using online instruction. Furthermore, freshman students are used to studying with the same group of students and the same sex. Some of their classmates in college were their classmates in high school as well.

6. Conclusion

Online instruction in EFL is not widely used in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, sharing an online course by two groups of freshman students at two Saudi universities was found to be ineffective and unsuccessful. The interaction between the two groups was lacking. The students reported that they were inhibited and unfamiliar with online instruction. They had negative attitudes towards online instruction and collaboration with students from another university.

For online instruction to be effective, the instructor should proceed gradually. First, freshman students in the same class may be exposed to online instruction with Nicenet,

as it has fewer tools and is easier to use. Al-Jarf (2005a) used an online course with Nicenet in the teaching of English grammar from home to two groups of freshman students at the College of Languages and Translation, King Saud University. Comparisons of the posttest means scores of the experimental and control groups showed that the experimental group, that used an online course from home as a supplement to in-class instruction, made higher gains than the control group that used in-class instruction only.

Second, when the students are familiar with online instruction, they may proceed to an online course with more tools as Moodle. In order for the instructor to provide hands-on practice to the students, a small network can be built in the classroom using a router and connection cables. Since COLT has no Internet access, the small network can be connected to the Internet through mobile technology using a wireless modem and a mobile phone rather than dial-up or university LAN. Al-Jarf (2005b) built a small network in the classroom consisting of 5 laptops, a router, connection cables and connected to the Internet through a phone line. The small network was used to teach English for art education to doctoral female students at the College of Home Economics. The experiment proved to be effective in enhancing students' proficiency level in English and their attitudes towards learning English and technology.

Third, students of different college levels (i.e., lower and upper class students at COLT) enrolled in courses focusing on the same skill such as reading or writing may connect to the Internet from home and share the same online course together with their instructors.

When the students are more confident using online courses, have more experience with college courses, they may be connected with students at other universities within Saudi Arabia or abroad. In a third study conducted by Al-Jarf (2004), Saud students shared an online writing course with Ukrainian and Russian students using Nicenet. Unlike the present study, that project was effective and had positive outcomes on achievement and attitudes. Saudi participants in that project were in their forth semester in college and had prior experience using online courses. They were concurrently

enrolled in an online course from home as a supplement to a language and culture course that they were concurrently taking. When they were freshmen, they used an online course with Blackboard from home as a supplement to in-class writing instruction. At first they were inhibited and wanted to conceal their identity, but later they could overcome their hesitation and found the online project fun and effective in enhancing their EFL skills and cultural awareness.

Finally, collaborative online projects could become more effective in enhancing students' attitudes and skills if discussion threads are brainstormed in class, before and after posting messages. To help students take an online course more seriously, it must be part of the final exam and course credit. Taking the above steps into consideration are believed to help technologically novice and limited English proficient students become willing and more confident in using online courses.

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