



RESEARCH

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RESEARCH SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

Spring 2009 Issue 23

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From the Co-ordinators

At the Cardiff conference, we will be giving up our roles as interim joint-co-ordinators and handing over to our successor, Anthony Bruton from the University of Seville. Anthony has a wealth of experience of research in our field, and will bring freshness and enthusiasm to the role. We are sure you will all join us in wishing Anthony a fruitful and enjoyable period of office.

About this issue of Research News

As this is the final newsletter that we shall be editing, we are delighted to be able to include five contributions. There is an obvious connection between Sue Garton's study of EFL teacher's beliefs about learning and teaching in general, and Nick Andon's, based on his recently completed doctoral thesis. Given that task-based learning and teaching (TBLT) is now so widely practiced, Nick's study of teachers' actual beliefs and practices about TBLT, is to be welcomed.

The two UK-based studies mentioned above are supplemented by three from contexts as diverse as Saudia Arabia, Armenia and Bangladesh. Reima Al-jarf discusses the language needs of mainly Saudi citizens studying overseas through looking at their emails. Amalia Babayan looks at the pronunciation errors of Armenian students of Business English with reference to 'intelligibility' factors and Jennifer Jenkins' (1996) notion of an ELF pronunciation 'common core'. Finally, in Salma Ainy's article, the focus switches to secondary education, and the development of speaking skills by Bangadeshi school pupils.

We hope you enjoy this interesting and diverse collection of papers.

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From the editor

Thank you to the members of ReSIG committee for their work in reviewing submissions, and to the contributors who submitted their work for this issue of the newsletter. Please continue to support us by

sending us your ideas and works for our publication. I do hope you enjoy reading this issue.

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What students' E-mails tell us about their needs

Reima Al-jarf, King Saud University

Introduction

Technology has made it easy for students to communicate with instructors, scholars and experts from anywhere in the world. For over a decade, electronic mail (e-mail) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) have been the focus of numerous research studies. Early studies highlighted the advantages of e-mail in the teaching-learning environment. E-mail is viewed as a way to correspond easily with the instructor, and with other students sharing projects in and out of the classroom (Manrique, 1994). E-mail fosters more meaningful scholarly communication between teachers and students, and positively impacts instructional outcomes and student success (Weiss and Hanson-Baldauf, 2008). Through e-mail, instructors can send notes and materials to students and students can submit and critique assignments (Juliano, 1997; Wilkinson and Buboltz, 1998); it is used for announcements, students' questions, counseling, distribution of class assignments, quizzes, grade posting, homework hints, and attendance issues (Poling, 1994). CMC in the classroom helps develop academic discourse, collaborative and project work, build knowledge, maximize students' experience, increases participation opportunities, allows cross-cultural participation, develops reflective writing skills, and overcomes social isolation. It provides ready access to help, support, feedback, active and interactive participation, freedom from constraints of time and location, and learner control (Xu, 1996).

More recent research studies, reviewed by Luppini (2007), focus on media effects and comparisons, online courses and networks, course and program evaluations, learning processes, problem solving, writing, decision-making, argumentation, group decision-making, group dynamics, peer evaluations, gender differences, anonymity, teaching practice effects, technology integration, teacher styles and characteristics, socio-cultural factors, and professional development effects. Findings of the 170 studies reviewed by Luppini suggested partial advantages of CMC in writing, task-focused discussion, collaborative decision-making,

group work, and active involvement in knowledge construction during group interactions. Other studies showed the effects of peer interaction, group composition, group cohesion, goal commitment, group norm development, process training, mixed-sex groups, and virtual cross-functional teams. Mixed findings were found for effects of computer-mediated versus face-to-face communication on various tasks, and gender differences in computer-mediated environments.

The present study explores a new area of CMC. It aims to examine a sample of unsolicited e-mail messages received from graduate and undergraduate subjects in numerous countries, analyze their content and investigate the followings: (i) Types of requests the subjects make in their e-mails; (ii) differences in requests made by Saudi, Arab, non-Arab, male and female, and graduate and undergraduate subjects; (iii) academic needs that are revealed; (iv) communication problems; and (v) reasons for seeking the researcher's help although she was not their instructor.

Findings of the present study will help Arab and Saudi EFL college instructors, graduate students' supervisors and program coordinators understand students' academic and future needs, areas that need to be taken into consideration in curriculum design, teaching methodology, research methodology training and student advising.

E-mail samples

576 unsolicited e-mail messages received from 460 graduate and undergraduate students were collected and analyzed. E-mails received from the author's current and past students were excluded. The subjects were EFL, linguistics, literature and translation majors. The distribution of e-mails was as follows:

- (i) 10% were from non-Arab students studying in the USA, New Zealand, Australia, UK, Italy, Poland, Turkey, Nigeria, Malaysia and China; 11% were from Arab students studying in Bahrain, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman, Palestine and Sudan; 11% were from Saudi students studying in the UK, USA, Australia, Germany and France; 68% were from Saudi students studying in Saudi Arabia.
- (ii) 37% were undergraduate students; 37% were M.A. students and 26% were Ph.D. students.
- (iii) 48% were from female students, whereas 52% were from male students.

Data collection and analysis

The e-mail message content was analyzed for types of requests made; academic needs and communication problems. Frequency counts and percentages of similar responses were calculated.

To find out why the subjects sought the author's help although they were not her students, a short questionnaire with an open-ended question was sent to 25% of the subjects. Results are reported quantitatively and qualitatively.

Results

Types of Requests

Findings showed that 47% of the undergraduate subjects sought help with assignments; 31% asked an academic question about their courses; 22% asked the author to recommend a college for graduate study, 19% asked how to improve their English, 6% requested samples of college admission test questions; and 3% needed career advice.

Unlike the undergraduate subjects, 38% of the graduate sample requested a list of references and websites for their respective theses; 27% asked questions about first and second language acquisition and how to teach EFL; 22% asked for the authors' publications; 13% asked the author to suggest a thesis topic for them; 11% asked the author to validate and edit their questionnaires; 6% requested a list of criteria, reading and speaking skills; 5% asked the author to read, edit their proposals and give suggestions for improvement; another 5% asked her to administer their questionnaires or to select the research sample for them, and requested permission to translate her articles or replicate a study of hers.

Differences in Requests

Analysis of the message content revealed significant differences between the graduate and undergraduate subjects' requests (regardless of sex or nationality), but no significant differences were found in the types of requests made by the Saudi subjects studying in Saudi Arabia, those studying abroad, the Arab and non-Arab subjects, nor between male and female subjects.

Communication Problems

No significant differences were found in the communication strategies of the Arab and Saudi graduate and undergraduate subjects, and male and female subjects; however, there was a significant

difference in the communication strategies utilized by the non-Arab and Arab subjects (including Saudis). The non-Arab subjects began their e-mail messages by introducing themselves, giving their full name, institution, city, country and course of study. They gave reasons for contacting the author. Messages were courteous and showed the ability to write business letters. They wrote a thank you note following the author's reply. On the contrary, 62% of the Arab and Saudi subjects, especially Saudi females studying in Saudi Arabia concealed their identity (gave no name, gave their first name only, or used a nickname). Their messages were mostly authoritative in tone, some set a time limit for reply, some lacked courtesy and many gave excuses for their requests such as having exams. Fewer than 5% sent a thank you message after receiving a reply. Many undergraduate subjects had weaknesses in English grammar and spelling, and had difficulty expressing their ideas clearly.

The author had a problem with incomplete information provided by some subjects who tended to under-specify their requests or to omit required information such as their location, college level, English proficiency level, the skill they wanted to practice and the purpose for learning English. She had to ask for clarifications several times. Another difficulty was communicating to some subjects whose requests involved plagiarism and cases in which the subjects needed to carry out the tasks and do the assignments on their own without anyone's help. In some cases, the requests required a lot of time the author could not afford, as in a student's request for answering 25 questions, each of which required a lengthy answer and the content and detailed nature which summed up the entire research paper the student was to write.

Why Subjects' Sought Help

Students' responses to the questionnaire showed several academic, personal and social factors for seeking the author's help and not their instructors'. They felt freer to express their needs and demands via e-mail to someone who did not know them personally. The non-Arab subjects sought the author's help because they had no access to statistics about Saudi universities, needed the researcher's paper citations, or needed to study Arabic in Saudi Arabia. Many Arab and Saudi graduate subjects, in particular, indicated that they did not study research methodology, nor did they possess library and electronic searching skills. Some studied research methods theoretically and did not learn how to apply them. Others did not study thesis preparation skills, report writing, searching for information. Some thesis supervisors were not specialized in the area of their thesis, and were too busy to read, give feedback or

provide guidance. Some instructors did not welcome questions from undergraduate students. The Arab educational system encourages rote memorization and not the application and transfer of knowledge and skills, thus some undergraduate subjects asked the author to write an essay, answer homework questions or translate a text for them.

Responses to the questionnaire also revealed feelings of inadequacy, shyness, low self-image and a lack of self-esteem. Some graduate and undergraduate Arab subjects sought ready-made answers as they were used to spoon-feeding. They just wanted to pass with good grades and get a degree rather than try several times and learn. Many wanted to give their advisor a good image of themselves and their work, and wanted to pass with high grades. That is why they requested the researcher to go over their proposals, reports or research instruments and give suggestions for improvement.

Discussion

E-mail message content in this study revealed several needs related to the academic tasks the subjects were involved in and to professional and future goals. This finding is consistent with findings of prior studies. Sheer and Fung (2007) found that academic-related task was the most frequent e-mail topic. Dzuba (1994) also reported that the purposes for communication between students and their professors were guided by their roles, needs, and goals. Hahn (1997) showed that organizations provided assistance via e-mail. Users tended to make explicit requests for instructions, explanations, brief informational answers to specific questions, or staff action on behalf of the user. E-mail respondents had difficulty completing information because some senders tended to under-specify their request or omit needed information. Users also felt freer to express negative attitudes and emotions via e-mail as opposed to face-to-face communication.

Conclusion

Saudi and Arab graduate subjects' e-mails revealed several academic problems such as inability to search for information, locate references, select a thesis topic and construct a research instrument. The undergraduate subjects have a low English proficiency level, could not answer application questions, write a business letter in English, or handle academic tasks, and lacked study skills. To help solve students' academic problems and meet their needs, the present study

recommends that instructors and thesis supervisors be aware of graduate and undergraduate students' needs through meetings, seminars and workshops. Students should be encouraged to express their needs and practice EFL skills in an environment secure for making mistakes. Student-centered teaching methods which give the students an opportunity to practice, to apply knowledge and skills, and to synthesize information must be emphasized. Feedback must be given all the time and several revisions of the students' work should be encouraged. Research methodology courses need to focus on training students in electronic database searching, and in locating bibliographic information and electronic sources. Student evaluations of the teaching-learning process conducted frequently by instructors and departments would lead to a more positive and effective teaching and learning experience.

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