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## Around the World

### **Spanning the Pacific Ocean through Voice-over Internet Protocol Chat with the Hadley School for the Blind—China**

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Founded in 1920 (Hathaway, 1977; Trief, Decker, & Ryan, 2004; Wolffe, 2001), the Hadley School for the Blind is known worldwide for its tuition-free distance-education courses (LaGrow, Ponchillia, & Ponchillia, 1998; Wolffe, 2001) for people who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision). The school offers more than 90 courses (Hadley, 2006) to people who are visually impaired, family members of people who are visually impaired (D'Andrea, 1996), and professionals in the field of visual impairment (Hadley, 2004; Wolffe, 2001). Hadley serves more than 1,100 families of people who are visually impaired annually (Hadley, 2004). Instructors are available to their students via telephone and e-mail for questions and guidance (Wolffe, 2001). Hadley's web site, <[www.hadley.edu](http://www.hadley.edu)>, provides a wealth of information for students and others who are interested in its services, including its course catalog, application forms for enrolling in Hadley, a student lounge (Wolffe, 2001), and the Internet-based discussion boards on which those who are interested in the school or issues related to visual impairment can communicate with one another.

Hadley's main school in the United States serves more than 9,000 students, and the overseas school in the People's Republic of China provides vital educational services to more than 1,000 Chinese students (Hadley, 2005). The school's international enrollment spans the globe, including students from over 100 countries (Hadley, 2006). With Hadley's new e-learning initiative, international stu-

dents receive course materials quickly by bypassing traditional mail services and relying on e-mail for communication and the delivery of course materials and instruction (Hadley, 2004).

The southeastern Chinese city of Fuzhou hosts Hadley's expanding Chinese branch. Fuzhou is the capitol of Fujian, 1 of 23 provinces in the People's Republic of China. China also has five autonomous regions, four centrally administered municipalities, and two special administrative regions. Fujian's proximity to Taiwan and its warm-water port bring bustling trade to this subtropical province.

Headed by Xia Rongqiang, the Chinese branch of the Hadley School for the Blind, Hadley-China, offers distance-education courses in English, just as does the U.S. school. Students with substantial English abilities may take any of the other courses offered by Hadley to its students. Typical courses taken by current Hadley-China students include Safety in the Home, General Science, and Health 1. Hadley-China also recently expanded to offer courses to parents of children with visual impairments; these courses are in a pilot phase.

Hadley-China was founded in 1988, and its vibrancy is reflected in its continued growth. In fiscal year 2005 alone, 165 new students enrolled, representing well over a 10% increase in enrollment. This figure is particularly impressive when one contemplates the barriers inherent in studying foreign languages for persons who are visually impaired in China.

Because of the dedication of Hadley's staff members, course materials are made available to students at Hadley-China in braille, so that those who can read braille can gain independent access to the courses. Students whose native language is Mandarin are able to master English braille (Braille Authority of North America, 1994)—a testament to their diligence—and the fact that such courses are made available to the students in braille increases the students' chances of learning English. Morrow

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(1999) noted that when learning a foreign language, it is crucial for persons who are blind to have access to braille materials.

### **ENGLISH CHATS OVER THE INTERNET**

As with the birth of many innovative programs, the collaboration between Hadley-China and native English speakers sprang from a shared commitment. Xia Rongqiang, principal of Hadley-China, telephoned one of the English tutors while she was in Beijing. He and the tutor spoke at length about the need for Chinese people with visual impairments to be proficient in English. Several months later, Mr. Xia contacted two English tutors in the United States and asked if they would be willing to chat with Hadley-China students over the Internet. After the tutors agreed, the collaboration was made official with the permission of the Hadley headquarters in Winnetka, Illinois.

In June 2005, Hadley-China launched the program of empowerment through English conversation practice. Students were notified through a Hadley-China newsletter of the date, time, and Internet Uniform Resource Locator or web site. Instructions for logging on to the chat were also given. English teachers from Hadley-China were recruited as interpreters, helping to bridge gaps in communication between the students and native English speakers, and were available for technical support if students encountered problems logging on to the chat's web site. Students spontaneously provided such support to each other as well.

### **PROGRAM**

Staffed almost exclusively by people who are blind, this program uses voice-over Internet protocol (VOIP) software to connect Hadley-China students with native English speakers in the United States by way of the Internet. VOIP (see Learning Circuits, 2006) allows its users to connect their computers through the Internet in a way that simulates free telephone calls. The students, a Chinese-English inter-

preter, and a native English-speaking tutor participate in biweekly, synchronous, audio chats. Each participant uses a headset and microphone, affording him or her auditory input and output for the chat. The participants log on to a specific web site, enter their screen name, and are directed to a web site that allows them to chat with others who are logged on. Only one person may speak at a time, to maintain the orderly flow of conversation among the participants.

Students who take part in the chat range from young adults to grandparents, and their levels of proficiency in English are diverse. They establish Internet connections with the use of Chinese screen readers in their homes, places of business, and Internet cafés. Students from any province in China who have access to the Internet are welcome to log on to the web site that hosts the chat. During a typical chat, about 10 students log on from China's sparsely populated western regions, to its northern border towns abutting North Korea, to the tropical province of Hainan. The English interpreter comes from either Fuzhou, where the school's headquarters are located, or from another location in China where Hadley staff are employed. The U.S. English tutor may log on from work, home, or any Internet-ready location if he or she is traveling.

The purpose of the Internet chats is for the Chinese-Hadley students to practice English with guidance from native English speakers—an opportunity that is rarely afforded to Chinese people outside major cities (D. Turco, senior vice president of educational operations for Hadley, personal communication, February 21, 2006). This interaction builds students' self-confidence and facility in the English language. The students also have an opportunity to enroll in English courses and receive instruction from Hadley-China faculty independent of the Internet chat. During the biweekly Internet chat sessions, which facilitate distance learning, Hadley-China

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students practice the English they have learned in their correspondence courses.

To demonstrate the unique features of the Hadley-China English chat, an explanation of distance education is called for. The Instructional Technology Council (ITC, 2006) defines *distance education* as

the process of extending learning, or delivering instructional resource-sharing opportunities to locations away from a classroom, building or site, to another classroom, building or site by using video, audio, computer, multimedia communications, or some combination of these with other traditional delivery methods.

The ITC suggests that distance education makes learning accessible and available to more students than do traditional delivery methods. VOIP, the specific form of distance education used by Hadley-China, lends itself particularly well to this venue. No travel costs for students, interpreters, or tutors accrue, since access to the virtual classroom is gained merely by logging on to a web site from one's office, home, or Internet café.

Content, instructional delivery methods, and teaching roles in the chats vary to keep interest levels high. The native English tutors select content to present, and the students' questions often provide the basis for chat lessons. Holidays and customs of China and the United States are enthusiastically explained. Those who are less proficient in English are helped with pronunciation through the use of simple examples. More advanced students are assigned as English-Chinese interpreters, and the Hadley-China staff monitor their interpretations to ensure that correct information is given. Students who are particularly adept at reading English often prepare short articles or essays to read to the class to be critiqued. Some students even sing songs in English.

Because of the open-ended nature of the Hadley-China chats with English speakers,

students do not complete the program after a specified time. They are welcome to participate in any chats that suit their schedules or learning styles. Approximately five regular students log on to almost every chat that is offered, and others come and go as they please.

Program evaluation remains informal, with English instructors and Hadley-China interpreters frequently polling students for their feedback. To date, the students have been pleased with the chats, citing their increased English vocabulary and fluency. After the formal chats come to an end, the Hadley-China interpreter and the English tutor often continue to converse to assess the teaching strategies and content that is presented, with the aim of continuous improvement.

#### **BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM**

Tangible benefits of the English chats have accrued to students and native English speakers alike. As of this writing, both native English speakers who regularly participate in the chats with Hadley-China students have visited the school in Fuzhou. One of them has met some of her students while traveling in the Chinese cities of Guangzhou and Zhuhai.

However, the most life-changing benefits of the English chat sessions have been realized by two students. One student was hired by a travel agency to translate documents from Mandarin into English. This accomplishment is especially significant, since the employment options for Chinese people who are blind have only recently been expanded from the traditional career path in massage. The other student passed the General Examination in Spoken English, which is administered by Trinity College of London, and anticipates being employed as an English interpreter or translator.

The promise of the English chat program extends much deeper than English conversation, however. Since all the Chinese students, several of the Chinese-English interpreters,

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and some of the English instructors are blind, a mutually beneficial stream of empowerment, encouragement, and learning flows back and forth across the Pacific Ocean. Building on the English they have learned from Hadley courses, the Chinese students ask the American instructors about university life, employment, and assistive technology in the United States. The American instructors' understanding of Chinese culture and language grows and is used to improve teaching techniques and cultural sensitivity.

As has been documented in the literature, people who are visually impaired from rural areas may want to gain more contact with others than may those from urban areas (Moisey & Golembiewski, 2002), since services may be less prevalent in these areas. The Hadley-China English conversation program can be particularly beneficial for rural students, who need only an Internet connection and a computer with assistive technology to participate. Therefore, the socialization benefits that are inherent in the Internet sessions are as important as is the opportunity to practice oral English.

#### DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED

Certainly, difficulties can arise in distance education (Huebner & Wiener, 2001). Depending on the amount of traffic on the Internet when the chat takes place, delays can occur between sending and receiving audio. At other times, the audio transmissions are broken up, which can contribute to struggles to comprehend what is being said. If such problems become acute, the chat is often halted for one day. At other times, an alternate chatting software program, such as Skype (<[www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)>) is used. Occasionally, difficulties in communication occur as the students and instructors strive to find mutually understood words to express themselves. The Hadley-China staff interpreters or the most proficient English language students often research the communication difficulties

and share their newly discovered words with the class the next time the chat occurs. These difficulties hardly dampen the students' participation, however, since more than 10 students often log onto the chats.

#### CONCLUSION

In the increasingly interdependent global economy, bolstered by advances in technology and communications (Arthur, Chong, Rujkorakarn, Wong, & Wongpanarak, 2004; Hampton, 2000), programs that seek to strengthen linguistic and cultural commonalities between the East and West are proliferating. Unfortunately, such opportunities remain rare for people with disabilities (Scheib, 2004). The learning that takes place and the friendships that are formed at the Hadley School for the Blind-China represent promising practices that are available for adaptation by others.

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