The Contribution of Email Exchanges to Second Language Acquisition:
A Case of Cross-Cultural Communication between Africa and North America

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ABSTRACT

An online epistolary project was conducted with Cameroonian French-speaking students in order to boost English language learning. The project involved email exchanges (in English) between a small group of students from Cameroon and Canada, and it was coordinated by their teachers in both countries. At the end of the study, student emails were analyzed for linguistic manipulations, elements of lexical appropriation, and features of literacy acquisition. According to the findings, there were incremental gains in the Cameroonian students' English-language acquisition. The impact of culture, which was initially overlooked, became an interwoven highlight for the students. The study concludes with recommendations—as well as words of caution—for further international email exchanges between schools to foster second language acquisition and multicultural awareness.

INTRODUCTION

With modern technology such as the Internet, it is increasingly rewarding for language teachers to connect their second language learners with native speakers of that language in email exchange projects, otherwise known as *telecommunication* or *key-pal* exchanges. Fabos and Young (1999) define these as Internet-based programs involving a coordinator who locates a partner coordinator in another school through an education-related website. Email exchange is a way of building genuine understanding between those of different cultures, while at the same time learning a new language. Vygotsky (1981) believed that giving children meaningful and worthy experiences can trigger effective learning outcomes, and according to Harmston, Strong, and Evans (2001), genuine writing experiences can trigger students' motivation in learning. Key-pal projects that focus on language acquisition are particularly effective for beginning writers (Wollman-Bonilla, 2003; LeVine, 2002). During the course of our email exchange project, friendships between Cameroonian and Canadian students were kindled, and students developed more of a desire to learn English in order to communicate with their pals.

Subsequent to key-pal exchanges, students develop social, economic, and cultural skills (Fabos & Young, 1999; Charron, 2007), and the outcomes of each project are always unique. Gains in key-pal projects are often enormous, and can expand to cover almost the entire school curriculum (Lemkuhl, 2002). In this project, in which the objective was to inculcate EFL

(English as a foreign language) reading and writing skills onto Cameroonian students, students ended up not only learning about Canadian culture, but they also learned things about their own culture that they had not known before.

THE PROJECT

The Contextual Framework

The project began in 2004 in a Francophone secondary school in Ngaoundere, Cameroon. I had been exploring different possibilities of improving the English learning of our students, and I came into contact with a Canadian secondary school teacher, David, on the Internet; from his school profile he was interested in improving his students' knowledge about Africa in general. Our initial agreement was that as my students would practice their English, his students would learn as much as possible about the people and the culture of Cameroon. My objective was to see how much linguistic and cultural gain would be made by my Cameroonian students from the email exchange program with their Canadian counterparts. I chose Canada because it is a country where French and English are both spoken, as is the case in Cameroon, and the Canadian students would be able to understand the Cameroonian students who would draw from both languages.

This project began in December, 2004, and ended in June, 2006, when I left the school for further studies. There were 19 Cameroonian students between the ages of 16- and 17-years old who were paired up with 23 Canadian students of the same age. In order to accommodate the number of participants in Canada, four Cameroonian students had two email pals each. Initially, we had planned on a pen-pal project with the same students in Canada, but I realized that it would be difficult to monitor the students' development because letters could easily be written by senior students on their behalf. Over thirty students had declared their intention to participate in the pen-pal project, but when we changed it to an email-pal project, eleven students dropped out because there was not a multimedia center in our school; the project had to be conducted in cyber cafés in Cameroon, and this would cost extra money as well as time. I sent an email to David, my Canadian counterpart, requesting that he should scale down his own team to match our numbers, but he found this difficult because none of his students were willing to drop out of the project. He therefore proposed that four of his students be assigned to two Cameroonian pals in order to accommodate the shortage of participants in Cameroon. David then sent me the names of his students and their corresponding email addresses, gender, ages, and their gender preferences, information with which I used to pair them up with my students. I then made arrangements to take my students to a cyber café on Wednesday afternoons, which is a day and time generally set aside for extracurricular activities in Cameroon.

Money was a stumbling block in this project because there were no grants allocated for such projects in my school, and I personally had to assume the responsibility of paying the cost of using the cyber café each time. But this financial sacrifice did not go on forever: As soon as my students started receiving replies from their first emails (with photos accompanying some), their interest in the project grew tremendously, and some parents started paying for their children.

English, French (which is the first official language), and Mathematics are considered the three most valuable subjects (with higher coefficients attributed to each) across the two national

school systems in Cameroon, and a poor academic performance in any of those main subjects could trigger a low average in the student's report card, leading to a student being retained in the same grade, or even being expelled. The purpose of initiating an email friendship was to boost my students' English acquisition, including reading and writing (which was going to help in the examination known in Cameroon as the BEPC). Thus, my students knew that joining the project was going to enable them to attain a better level of proficiency in English, and therefore positively impact their academic performance as a whole.

It is important to note that Cameroon and Canada use French and English as their two official languages of instruction and administration. Unlike Canada, Cameroon has over 240 native languages which are spoken by various ethnic groups, but none are taught in the schools. About 99% of the Cameroonian students in this project were fluent speakers of French as well as a native language called Fufulde (a popular language spoken throughout the northern parts of Cameroon and Nigeria), so English was a third language for most of them. All of my students in this project went through the Francophone system of education from kindergarten through the 8th grade. Today English is taught to Francophone students from the elementary grades, but my students did not have that advantage: 2004 was their second year of being introduced to English, and they needed a lot of encouragement in order to export their language skills, which was why they were excited to have email pals in Canada.

Laying the Foundation

In this project, we used the website, www.e-pals.com, that sent students' outgoing or incoming emails into their teacher's inbox for approval and validation. In the first year, emails were sent and received in blocks. My students and I would go to the cyber café during English club hours on Wednesdays to help them access their email accounts so that they could read and reply. By the second year, these students had acquired more functional computer literacy skills and were able to access their emails independently. However, they still needed help from parents, siblings, friends, and teachers, including myself, to answer some of the sociocultural questions that were challenging to them. Hence, some of them would read their pals' emails and would not respond instantly until they gathered their facts. This system gave me the opportunity to check their language-learning process, comparing their current work with their earlier writings to make sure they were progressing. This process also enabled us to circumvent any attempt by students to transform the literacy project into a dating one, which was the main reason why some parents were reluctant to participate at first; many parents expressed skepticism as to how their children would be protected from "falling in love" with adults on the Internet, and they consented only when I explained to them the process that would govern the project, that would allow me to also censor inappropriate language.

Prior to the commencement of the project, my students and I brainstormed some major themes that they would most likely be discussing with their pals, which included school, family, culture, and tourism; however, they were not limited to these themes. Additionally, part of the assignment was that when they were asked a question they did not know, they were to research or inquire instead of just responding with *I don't know*.

Most of these students had never used a keyboard before, let alone sent an email. I instructed them in the different key functions, and advised them to make drafts of their emails beforehand so that they would not waste a lot of time on typing, given that we were being charged on an hourly basis at the cyber café. The beginning was very tough for all of us,

especially for me, because students often needed my help, but as time went by, most of the students progressed in their computer skills and could work more independently. While I did respond to grammatical and lexical questions, I avoided the temptation of correcting their English, except when it was absolutely necessary. Students were encouraged to work in clusters, and as more than one person sat in front of a computer, the way was paved for social learning either in computer literacy or in English acquisition.

The students in Cameroon were excited about this project, not only because it was going to boost their English acquisition, but also because they were going to build friendships with students of a different race, country, and continent. Barksdale, Watson, and Park (2007) assert that students' desire for pen friendship is very high when they are still in their teens, which was very true of the teens in my school.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis of the emails was based on anthropological and dialogic standpoints as exemplified by Dyson (1993) and Bakhtin (1981). From Baktin's standpoint, language learners should be liberated from the hegemony of a single or unitary language. Thus, a novel—just as with an epistolary piece—should be viewed as "a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, [which are] artistically organized" (p. 262). According to Dyson, literacy goes beyond conventional standards to include drawing, story-telling, and talking, which is hardly valued in the traditional classrooms. If the informants' emails were not viewed through these lenses, the project might either not have taken off or it might have failed shortly after taking off because of the tendency to want to drive students to produce a piece of writing which scrupulously respects all the writing conventions of the language in which they are writing.

All the emails that were written by the students during the entire duration of the project were printed out for in-depth analysis. I used a constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to examine emails of the students from both countries in order to conceptualize the contextual literacy events, such as the acculturation process, the family and community involvement, and the email genre of dialogue. The constant comparative method of data analysis was further applied in generating tentative theoretical categories such as linguistic manipulations, students' culture and lifestyles, and social networking. This process continued until there was a substantive amount of data supporting each category or theme that emerged from the data. As I immersed myself further in the data, many different recurrent themes began to emerge, especially as I compared the writer and the addressee responses. The themes became more visible when I grouped similar tags together and assigned a label that epitomized the content of each cluster of tags (Cote, Salmela, Baria, & Russell, 1993).

Linguistic Manipulations

Linguistic manipulations constitute the most important theme of this study. It is composed of several subthemes which include similar language patterns, linguistic interferences, lexis, and orthographic and grammatical mistakes.

Similar Language Patterns

As a genre, an email-pal exchange is more informal than a pen-pal letter exchange. The students went straight to the point, with short sentences and limited use of conjunctions in their sentence structures, which is typical of the email genre of communication. For instance, a Cameroonian student wrote, "Dear Mary, Thank you for your letter. I am 17 years old today. I have a dog." Email discourse is often haphazard in its form because the indention of paragraphs is not observed, there is no orderly presentation of content, and there is no format of paragraph development.

Blair and Sanford (2004) postulate that literacy is one of the dominant social-cultural constructs in which students construct/affirm their sociocultural identities with other learning partners, as the authors demonstrate in their study of how boys resist traditional literacy teaching styles. Considering that this study is about language acquisition through email exchanges, a similar phenomenon could be observed from reading the students' emails from both countries. Most of the students' first emails started with self-introduction and a statement about their ages. For example, one Canadian student wrote, "Hello, my name is S. My birthday is May 30th. I am sixteen years old." Her Cameroonian counterpart responded with, "Hello, my name is J. It's a great pleasure for me to meet you. I'm from Cameroon. I'm seventeen years old. And my birthday is fourteen October." The exchanges enabled them to affirm who they were by stating their ages, nationalities, gender, names, families, and some of their customary practices. The concept of identity, be it national, racial, ethnic, gendered, aged, and linguistic, is something that is seldom explicitly underscored in formal education in Cameroon.

Language is appropriated in email exchanges, which is a component of a dialogic discourse genre propounded by Bakhtin (1981), through common observable patterns. According to Bakhtin everyone borrows textually. "We learn our words from particular people in particular places, and then we recontextualize them…We revoice them, aiming to make them bow to our will" (as cited in Dyson, 1999, p. 369). The appropriation of grammatical patterns and vocabulary from one another was very common in their emails. The Cameroonian students demonstrated a high propensity to appropriate language patterns from the Canadian students because prior to starting the project they recognized the Canadians as native speakers of English.

Andrew (2007) asserts the advantage of the first language acquisition toward the acquisition of another language: Most of the Cameroonian participants, based on their knowledge of French, understood that some complementary remarks needed to be made at the end of an email written in English, but their handicap was in vocabulary. In their first emails, some of them used their own French-derived fabricated expressions with words like "sincement," "I am forward hearing," "bye," "good bye," and, "while hoping that you will agree this message, I leaves you while hoping to read you in the next hours." But as soon as they read the replies from their Canadian pals, they began to model their salutations after them ("all the best," "thanks," "thank you," and "I hope to hear from you soon"), conforming to them more and more as time went on.

Linguistic Interferences

A good number of Cameroonian students also made use of their French in order to construct meaning in their emails, especially at the beginning of the project. As time went on, they appropriated a lot of linguistic constructs from their "zone of proximal development," which

is "the distance between the actual level of development as determined by independent problem solving [without guided instruction] and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), and as a result, they increased their language competency. For instance, a Cameroonian student wrote a reply to his Canadian pal, "Dear O, I am writing to tell you that yes lions in Cameroon but no lions in ma city. I see no lions, only on TV Cameroonian. Tell me about 'la neige' in Canada. It is glacé or salt?" This short email has a lot of linguistic interferences and deceptive cognates based on the student's experience with French. This student was quite aware that "la neige" is not an English word, but he decided to use quotation marks with the hope that his counterpart, who was also from a bilingual country, would deconstruct the meaning of that noun phrase, which the latter, of course, did in his reply.

But the Cameroonian student was not aware of other problems (such as deceptive cognates) in this email. He used "glacé" instead of *ice* because it resembles an English word in terms of its structure. He used "ma city" instead of "my city" because the word "ma" is a French feminine possessive adjective. Lastly, the student was influenced by French syntax in which qualifying adjectives appear after the noun it describes instead of before the noun, as is the case in English. For example, "TV Cameroonian" in French would be "tele camerounaise," while in English it is "Cameroonian TV." However, from his pal's response, it was clear that the message was successfully decoded:

> Dear R., I am sorry I thought there are lions everywhere in Cameroon. *La neige* is called *snow* in English. It looks like salt and it can turn into ice and melt. Which exotic animals are in your city?

Thus, it is clear that O was able to deconstruct, then reconstruct meaning in R's email.

Lexis

Throughout the emails, the Cameroonian students were not deterred by their lack of English vocabulary; they either said it wrong or they borrowed from French. A Cameroonian student said, "I have 16 years old" (the use of *have* when talking about one's age is a French convention), and when her counterpart responded by using the verb *to be* to say how old she was ("I am 16 years old"), the Cameroonian corrected her mistake when she turned 17, writing, "I am 17 years old today." It was fascinating to see how these students easily imitated their counterparts as they strove for the right usage. Sometimes they simply mixed both French and English in the same sentence, as in the concluding sentence of one student, "merci [thanks] and to the prochaine [see you soon]."

Orthographic and Grammatical Mistakes

There were a lot of grammatical and orthographic mistakes mostly on the part of Cameroon students who were still learning English. Some of those mistakes originated from the influence of French, which did not obstruct the Canadian students understanding because most of them had a background in French. Fortunately, the Canadians had a subtle way of correcting their Cameroonian friends, not pointing openly to their mistakes, but replying with the same sentence structure in the right way. However, on one occasion a Canadian student wrote, "I have a dog. He is called Max," and her Cameroonian counterpart wrote back, "My friend, why you

call your dog he?" This Cameroonian revealed part of her school culture, where any language mistake is corrected openly—and sometimes in a humiliating way—either by classmates or by teachers.

Student Cultures and Lifestyles

The email exchanges were quite revealing as far as their respective cultures and lifestyles were concerned. Based on Barksdale et al.'s (2007) model, I have categorized them as cross-cultural similarities and dissimilarities, assumptions about cultures, and community roles in cultural mediation.

Major Cross-Cultural Similarities and Dissimilarities

Cultural similarities are expressed in all the emails by both groups of students at the introductory level. For example, both cultures have a tradition of greeting and bidding farewell: Students started their emails with "Hello," "Dear," or "Salute" (a French word for *hi*), and ended them with expressions like "bye," "see you soon," "thanks," and "all the best." Even when some did not know how to compose a greeting in English, they tried to do it in French.

One of the major cultural differences that I observed in the students' email was with agriculture. The juxtaposition of rural lifestyles in both countries showed a stark difference between a developed and a developing world. For instance, a Canadian student said, "I live in the countryside with my parents. My mom drives me to schoo [school] everymorning [every morning] and my father picks me up every afternoon." The Cameroon student replied, "We live in the country [side] too. My parents don't have car. I go to school by foot." Both cultures practice agriculture, but Cameroon uses rudimentary tools (like hoes and cutlasses) to farm, while Canada uses mechanized agricultural tools (like tractors). Another major cultural difference was with students' home activities. A Cameroonian student stated that "after school, go to the bush and woch [watched] my father's cattle till night." His Canadian pal questioned him: "Do you not study after school?" The nature of domestic work that Cameroonian students do after school may be considered in Canada as unfair child labor, but it is tradition, and no Cameroonian finds anything wrong with it; parents in Cameroon think it is a way to train children to become hard workers when they grow up.

Assumptions about Cultures

A good number of cultural assumptions were noticed in the emails of both groups of students. A Cameroonian student talked about his favorite food as though his counterpart across the Atlantic Ocean would easily know what he was talking about, saying, "I call you to come see my village and eat gari and okro sauce." There are two assumptions in this single sentence: Gari with okro sauce is a traditional dish common to Cameroon and Nigeria. He did not think to explain what type of food it was, possibly thinking that the food is so popular that anyone from any country would obviously know what he was talking about. The second assumption was that people living in the western world are very rich, and they can always travel if they want.

Based on information about a film that he had watched, a Canadian student thought that lions could be found everywhere in Cameroon: "Dear R., I watched a film that was talking about lions in Cameroon. Can you tell me stories about them? Do you often go near them? I look

forward to your reply." He was surprised to learn that his pal had only seen lions on TV (the earlier cited reply, "… but no lions in ma city. I see no lions, only on TV Cameroonian"). The Canadian student sent an apology, seeming to recognize he had fallen into a negative stereotype: "Dear R., I am sorry I thought there are lions everywhere in Cameroon…"

Parents and the Community Roles in Cultural Mediation

As echoed in the work of Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984), there was a kind of cultural dialogue going on in this project which encompassed ethnographic dialogue between the students in Cameroon and their parents, and then email dialogue between the students in Cameroon and those in Canada. The role of the students' parents and their community in this project cannot be overemphasized; as a coordinator of this project, I encouraged participants to go to their parents and others in order to answer their questions. Most of the time neither Cameroonians nor Canadians responded to their emails instantaneously, especially if there was a question which they did not know or could not respond with assurance. They deconstructed meanings, asked their friends if they knew, contacted their teachers, or inquired at home from their relatives or parents. However, most of them did not state in their emails that they got the information from others; they took for granted the contribution of their respective and diverse zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87). The Cameroonian students had to rely on other people for the right information before transmitting back to their pals, and in this process, they learned a lot about their own culture as well as Canadian culture. Below is a typical example of cultural appropriation based on what the students said they learned from their parents:

> M: Can you tell me about masqueraders in Africa? I watch them dancing on tv. Are they monsters?
> S: I don [don't] know about masqueraders. I ask my parents and they set [said] it is people who cover faces to danse [dance] in culturel [cultural] ceremonies.

Social Networking

The principal motive of engaging in such an email project for most Cameroonian students was to network with young people around the world. Based on the students' emails from both countries, one could easily discern a fervent determination to sustain the relationship with the hope that they could one day visit each other. In some of the emails, students invited their pals to visit them in their own country. For instance, a Cameroonian student wrote:

> Salut L…1 it is for a very big pleasure to join me to you by the mediator of this informatique [computer]. j'espere [I hope] that you will be well by the day this electronic mail you parviendra [will reach you]. It is well a pity for me not to you connaitre [know you] mais [but] I write in the hope that one day us verons [we will see each other] in Cameroon or Canada. Can you come for [to] Cameroon? tu auras [you will have] the rests of my information the next fois [time]. merci and to the prochaine [see you next time. bye.].

The Canadian student did respond by saying that he would like to visit Cameroon one day with his parents. His response to the email above showed that he understood everything that this Cameroonian student said.

The level of inquisitiveness in the students' emails exposes their desire to know not only the realities of other cultures in different parts of the world from a distance but to be able to see, feel, and touch them in person. For the student who asked whether snow is like ice or salt, or the students who asked whether masqueraders were monsters, the best answer to their queries is seeing those things in person. Nevertheless, such a conversation on the Internet bolsters a desire to learn more about different cultures, weather, agriculture, and lifestyles, as well as be more racially and culturally tolerant.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prior to the project, the Cameroonian students were not motivated to learn English, viewing it as a difficult language to learn. The best solution was to get them involved in an activity that they were excited about. This project was collaborative on a number of levels. In addition to connecting with the Canadians, they also worked with each other: these students had different levels of English proficiency (even though they were in the same class), and this email exchange enabled the less proficient ones to learn from the more proficient. For example, information about a Canadian student's father who practiced mechanized agriculture was shared with the entire group. Some of the emails were printed, and their grammatical, lexical, and cultural contents were analyzed in class, thereby facilitating a maximum circulation of the information, as well as fostering English language acquisition.

As per the gains of the project, it was a huge success. Cameroonian students became more enthusiastic regarding literacy activities in the classroom because they knew such activities would help them improve their communication skills with their Canadian counterparts. After two years, most of them could read and write in English better than their classmates who had not been part of the project. Students learned from their Canadian pals about Canadian weather, family size, mechanized agriculture, working parents, and so on, and became more knowledgeable about their own culture as well. To enable a thorough follow-up of the gains of the project, I requested that all the participants be members of the English club that I was coordinating. The English club was an extracurricular activity that was held every Wednesday afternoon after school. In this club, we discussed at length the intricacies of the project outside of the constraints of the rigid national curriculum, and the students' vocabulary and grammar continued to improve. It is worth mentioning that school curriculum in Cameroon is harmonized and standardized at every grade level. Therefore, many teachers are minimally flexible in their instructional approaches. Thus, the English club was the only flexible avenue where the learning of other cultures, vocabulary, and grammar that were outside a specific curriculum could take place.

The Canadian coordinator, Mike, and I had a very cordial relationship throughout this project. We were constantly emailing each other, brainstorming ways that we could both attain our respective objectives for the project. We talked about the pace of the project, topic and language issues of the students, and the limitations of my students in using the Internet and English. We also exchanged pictures of our families, and discussed politics and economic issues of both countries.

Email- (or pen-) pal partnership with schools across the African continent remains one of the best ways to promote transnational understanding and a cosmopolitan education. Some of the international conflicts we are experiencing today are due in part to ignorance about one another's

cultures. Schwarz (2006) postulates that, "if you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change" (p. xi). The most effective strategy to change the way we look at things is through direct experiences with the "other" (Haberman & Post, 1992). Those direct experiences can begin and end with email exchange projects which involve information, picture, and video sharing, or they can begin with email exchanges and extend to face-to-face visits. For example, Ronny Edri, an Israeli, founded a website, www.israilovesiran.com, for citizens of both Israel and Iran to share love messages about one another. The website has attracted tens of thousands of admirers around the world. This kind of grassroots cultural exchanges via the Internet can not only diffuse the nuclear conflict that is currently bubbling between the two nations, but they can prevent it in the long run, especially if students between both countries begin to learn positively about their commonalities. The closer you get to people, the better you know who you are dealing with, and are able to empathize with them.

Private schools are the best choice for email/pen-pal exchange programs in Cameroon because the administration of those schools can finance the cost of using the Internet or pay for the postage stamps for student letters. Principals in public schools in Cameroon are often overwhelmed and short of money; choosing a public school like ours would require the presence of a dedicated teacher willing to sacrifice personal time and resources to ensure the success of the project, and a project of this nature will not often feature on their lists of priorities. Having said that, most teachers, across all disciplines, in Cameroon are very interested in pen/email friendship projects between their students and those from different continents around the world.

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