CYBER PAL PROJECT (CPP): BUILDING A CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH FACEBOOK

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Abstract: English has emerged to be a global language to connect people around the world. It is not restricted to be used for communication with native-speakers, but it is widely utilized by native and non-native English speakers. Based on this need of global and cross-cultural communication, a Cyber Pal Project (CPP) was conducted for the students in English study program at the University of Pattimura in Ambon, Maluku. This university is located in the eastern part of Indonesia and has geographical boundaries and limited access to have face-to-face communication with foreign people. Thus, the implementation of CPP was a direct attempt to combat these limitations and facilitate the international interaction. CPP was conducted as one of the projects in Cross Cultural Understanding course. Students were assigned to find cyber pals and build the communication within 2 months through Facebook. The intended topics of these virtual conversations were specific to cultural and social values. Based on the results of students' CPP report, they enjoyed new experience of learning about and sharing with people of different cultures and languages around the world.

Keywords: *Cyber Pal Project (CPP), Cross Cultural Understanding, Facebook*

Introduction

In this 21st century, English has been quickly developing as an international language among society. English then functions as a Lingua Franca is a way of referring to communication in English between speakers whose first languages are different (Seidlhofer, 2005). Jenkins (2009) highlights that the communication with English mostly has been done by non-native English speakers.. This emerging function of English has been urged by the necessities of global communication among native English-speakers and non-native English speakers. Pedagogical practices then are challenged to bring this atmosphere to classrooms as well as to prepare the students to be competent cross-culturally.

Media becomes powerful tools to connect people by using English in this globalisation era. Electronic media such as internet has an important impact on changes of global communication since it creates easy and fast way to establish worldwide network. There are many free-accessible sites for communication in the form of Social Network Sites (SNS) such as email, chat-room, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and many more. Having these digital instruments, it is expected that the educators can be receptive and adaptive to integrate internet, thus students can access to international society by using English.

Facebook has shown great promise as the forum for communication through text and videos as well as posting for status and links for news. It has around 802 million daily active users on average (Facebook, 2014). The data conveys how the users attempt to connect in Facebook with family, friends, acquaintance, colleagues and even strangers. To create social sharing among those people, some features of Facebook can be utilised the interaction including *the wall, poke, status, photos, video, messages, chat, groups and like.* Hofmann and Nadkarni (2011) elaborate the features as follow. *Wall* can function as bulletin board while *poke* can be kind of initial greeting for the users. *Status* is used for whereabouts information of its users and *photos* and/or *video* has to do with sharing visual image since it is possible to gain comments. Moreover, *messages* and *chat* facilitate private or public conversation. *Group* is for specific interest people who like to gather and discuss things virtually and *like* is for positive feedback by other users. All these features are beneficial to promote communication in digital world.

During the introduction of global communication through technology, teacher needs to foster students' intercultural competence. According to Bennett and Bennett (2004), intercultural competence refers to ability to effectively communicate in cross–cultural situations according to different kind of cultural context. The understanding of cultures not only comes from native English speaking countries but also from non-native English speaking countries. Sercu (2005) proposes that cultures there appeared to be varied and dynamic.

Meanwhile, intercultural competence is interrelated with communicative competences. Intercultural competences embrace communicative competence which concentrates on linguistics and pragmatics elements. The components of intercultural competence are proposed by Byram, Nichols and Stevens (2001), such as knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In terms of pedagogy, Jenkins (2000) believes that students, who acquire intercultural competence, subsequently become tolerant and adjust to the demands of their interlocutors and to day-to-day context. Kirkpatrick (2007) proposes that it would be better to integrate intercultural competence

through language learning in the classroom. Teacher then prepares the students to be cultural mediators in facilitating various cultures in society while they communicate to other people.

To sum, to respond the development of English as a lingua franca in global society, Facebook can be one of digital instruments to accommodate communication as well as increase intercultural competence. Consequently, students have opportunity to practice their English communicatively with their interlocutors as well as learn cultures.

Cross Cultural Understanding class (CCU)

CCU course is one of compulsory courses in English department at Pattimura University. The goals of this course is to train the students to be adaptive and receptive with the cross cultural society and are able to invest in their local cultures while at the same time cope with international and native-speakers cultures. The students came from different cultural backgrounds in Maluku province which becomes their investment for learning cultures.

This course provides variety of cross-cultural and intercultural communication experience to sharpen students' ability and awareness. The CCU course was available for students in their 3rd semester in English Department at Pattimura University, located in Maluku province in Indonesia. In general, this class was held for 14 90-minutes sessions over the course of a semester. The number of students who usually took this course is 60-70 students. Being an archipelago, Maluku is one of the eastern provinces in Indonesia which has more than thousand widespread remote islands, resulting in poor infrastructures and lack of informational access. This condition then triggered the writer to provide opportunity for the students to experience multiple cultures besides native English speaking countries.

a. Cyber Pal Project

It is necessary for the students to encounter different types of cultures in the world. From those cultures, students enhance their intercultural competence and broaden the understanding as the communicators in cross-cultural communication. Nevertheless, cross cultural understanding class cannot facilitate all the cultures in the classroom. Thus, teacher should create opportunity for the students to connect and to communicate with people other than Indonesia, therefore they can use their English and learn new cultures, lifestyle and customs at the same time. As a result, students are able to incorporate what they have learned about cultures and practise intercultural competence as they may find in their daily lives. Facebook will be used as the social network for students in this project. It is acknowledged that this technological media is accessible and easy for students to use in their computer, notebook or mobile phone.

b. Classroom procedure of CPP

1. Teacher introduces CPP to the class and its goals then ask students to sign in on Facebook site if they do not have one.
2. Teacher assigns the students to find foreign friends other than Indonesian friends who can speak English. Students can build communication with someone who uses English as their mother tongue or foreign language. The communication will be done with one or more CPs as long as students can maintain their chat. The topics include, but are not limited to, the following: Cultural values, Family, Relationships, Emotions, Religion, Lifestyle (work/pleasure), Education, Gender, Money, and Language.
3. Teacher gives instruction clearly for the "scope and sequence" of the project.
   a. CPP will last 2 months for the communication. Cultural tips can be provided by the teacher regarding the anticipated issues that they may found during chat. For instance, students cannot discuss about provocative issues which can lead to communication breakdown such as sexual or races discrimination or verbal attack to certain physical features.
   b. CCU Facebook group is set up for discussion forum about difficulties that the students may encounter. Moreover, students can use this forum to share their experience of looking for CPs in certain sites on the internet as well as to recommend some foreign friends to be CPs if they think that they have enough CPs.
   c. Teacher explains the students that there are two ways of communication. First, students can have back-and-forth chatting conversation with their CPs if they can arrange the time to have same-time chat. Secondly, students can write for their CPs and wait for the response in other time. Students need to understand that CPs have their own schedules, cultural norms and comfortable levels of communicating with their interlocutor. Hence, students can use either way as long as they can cover all the topics of the project assignment and suit the time for communicating.
   d. Students need to record their conversation with their foreign pals in a diary as well as to copy their actual transcript of conversation. Those two documents will be submitted for this project. CPP diary will be used for students to track the topics and issues that they have talked about with their CPs. In

their diary, they also can describe kinds of difficulties that they meet before and during the chat as well as describe emotions and reactions that they have in this project. This diary can become personal but shareable for other friends.

e. Having two-month project, students are expected to write report based on the guideline*(see Appendix 1)* and submit it.

c. Additional consideration in CPP

There are some considerations in conducting this project since this project is done outside the classroom therefore these concern are based on the researcher experienced as the teacher who has experienced in implementing CPP.

1. This project can be done not only in the level of tertiary education but also can be applied in secondary level. Teacher can adjust the field of study and students' level of proficiency in English.

2. During the conversation with students' cyber pals, students may find some difficult diction that can obstruct their communication. To challenge students' creativity, teacher can guide them to confidently ask questions to their CPs if they do not know the meaning related to the difficult dictions. Moreover, during their online chat, students can use Google Translate or online dictionary such as Webster or Oxford dictionary for meaning-findings during their chat. This process is also useful particularly if the CPs are non-native speakers of English. Dictions can be English or local language words from the CPs.

3. Since the conversation will happen in virtual world thus there is possibility of dealing with fake identity. Teacher needs to inform this in the first place before students explore and look for friends. It is essential to check the account of their potential cyber pals like their details and their updating status and conversation with their friends as well as try to look for his/her mutual friends whether they are real or not. This anticipation will be useful for the sake of sustaining communication.

4. Besides fake identity, there is possibility for students to meet inappropriate conversation with their CPs. It can lead to sexual or racial harassment through verbal language for instance. Consequently, teacher can encourage students' openness during class by asking them to share their experience during class meeting and bring their diary as it can be read by other friends if it is preferable for them.

5. During the implementation of CPs communication, poor internet and CPs' chronic availability in Facebook may become the barrier for communication. Hence, teacher needs to guide the students to adjust the time with their CPs but still consider also their convenience. This condition can happen particularly because time difference between Indonesia and other countries.

6. Other options of sites that students can use besides Facebook are twitter, email, Paths and other sites that they feel comfortable and easier for them to find virtual friends.

d. CPP Assessment

There are criteria of achievement which are used in this project. Since it is in the form of written report accordingly, there are several components to be regarded. For the first section, the content of report is assessed. Second section is related to language controls in their report. The assessment of language controls is prevalent since students are language learners therefore it is important to know their competence in language. The third section is related to the completeness of the documents. Students need to submit report, transcript collection of their conversation and diary which is used to track the process of their conversation *(See Appendix 2)*

e. Learners' Feedback

Since this CPP has been conducted in writer's CCU class, thus there are some feedbacks that have been highlighted for better improvement. Based on students' reports, it is found that CPP gave wide opportunity to build communication and friendship for CCU students with people whose cultures they had never thought before such as Mexico, Brazil, Mynmar, Vietnam and many more. Students immersed in various cultures like Anglo-saxon cultures, Asian cultures, Latin American cultures and others. Based on these experiences, students rooted understanding, knowledge and respect to other cultures which were different from theirs.

Students in CCU course admitted that the potential of partial knowledge which led to stereotyping could be reduced in this project through interacting and sharing culturally with foreign friends. In addition to enriching their understanding of cultures, students recognized that they gained more awareness in understanding their own cultural perspectives and identity as Moluccan when sharing about their own local cultures and values.

Conclusion

CPP creates opportunity for students to connect virtually with other English speakers by using English as a lingua franca. This project can be integrated or conducted in CCU course to assist the students to culturally connect with various cultures from their virtual pals. Also, the students can develop new way to practise and use their English with foreigners besides traditional way, face-to-face meeting. The functionality of Facebook as a

media of communication can assist learning cultures in CPP project since it opens the access for the students to build network with global community. This project is then recommended for teacher to apply it in the classroom in order to facilitate communication and cultures learning.

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Appendix 1
CYBER PAL DETAILS

Name   :
Gender   :
Country of Origin   :
Profession   :
How long did you connect with your cyber pal :
The media of Communication : (e.g. Facebook, Email, other)
(If it is more than one cyber pal, please add it)

I. BACKGROUND
This section includes:
- The process of finding Cyber Pal on the internet via email/FB, etc. (difficulties, issue with internet, etc.)
- What is your prior expectation when you did this project about the culture of your cyber pal and the project itself *(100-150 words)*

II. DISCUSSION
To elaborate this section, you can do it according to:
a. <u>2-3 TOPICS</u> e.g. Cultural Values, Family, Relationship etc (Please refer to CCU Syllabus) or
b. <u>CYBER PAL'S NAME</u> e.g. John, Viona etc.
This section is comprised of:
- Any stereotypes about your cyber pal
- Similarities and differences of your Cyber Pal and your own culture/values
- Interesting cultures/values you have found out/learned from your Cyber Pal
- How you maintained your communication with your Cyber Pal
- Several CCU theories e.g. Culture, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Lingua Franca etc (Please refer to your previous readings) which reflect you experience *(300-350 words)*

III. CONCLUSION
This section consists of:
- What you have learned from you cyber pal communication and how you felt.
- Anything you have found different about yourself or changed you now after experiencing this project *(100 words)*

Appendix 2

CYBER PAL PROJECT SCORING RUBRIC

Name :
Cyber pals' names :

NO	CRITERIA		SCORE	COMMENTS
1.	Content	a. Background	/10	
		b. Discussion	/40	
		c. Conclusion	/10	
2.	Language controls	Grammar, spelling, expression	/30	
3.	Additional materials	Word count, journal, transcript	/10	
	Total		/100	