

# UC Berkeley

## The CATESOL Journal

### **Title**

A High-School/University E-mail Partnership Project

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6b46d8b7>

### **Journal**

The CATESOL Journal, 10(1)

### **ISSN**

1535-0517

### **Authors**

El-Wardi, Rita  
Johns, Ann M.

### **Publication Date**

1998

### **DOI**

10.5070/B5.36503

### **Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## A High School/University E-mail Partnership Project

- In this paper, two ESL teachers describe their attempts to encourage student mentoring, reading, and writing through a cross-institutional e-mail project. Their assignments and student interactions as well as the successes and problems related to the project are discussed. The e-mail correspondence between two pairs of students and comments on the impact of the project on these and other students in the class are presented.

Technology is an integral and important force in American society, so much so that many employers require those hired to have basic computer skills, and some college classes require computer acumen of enrolling students. Because it is central to individual success, “[computer use] needs to become as interwoven in educational delivery as it is in society in order to become an integral part of teaching and learning” (Berge & Collins, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 1).

This is a story of two ESL teachers, one at a secondary school and one at a university, who decided to embark on an e-mail, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) project<sup>1</sup> in which our two groups of students were pen-pals and co-workers throughout a semester. (See appendix for more information on forming e-mail partnerships.)

In a useful volume, Warschauer (1995) encourages teachers to use CMC approaches but also warns them that:

E-mail and other forms of electronic communication are a valuable tool for English teaching. Yet e-mail will not in itself solve problems. It will be up to you, the teacher, to develop the right

ways of using e-mail based upon your general goals, your teaching style and approach, an analysis of your students' needs, and the technological tools you have at hand. (p. 91)

Following this author's advice, we attempted to make our CMC goals appropriate to the goals of our institutions and classrooms and to create tasks that were both possible and meaningful to the students.

## **Contexts for This E-Mail Project**

### **Secondary School**

Hoover High School is an inner city institution located in the highest poverty area in San Diego, often referred to as "San Diego's Ellis Island." It has a student population of nearly 1800, more than 40% of whom are bilingual or ESL students, speaking 23 different languages. This 40% of the students ranges from newly arrived immigrants to "emerging English-dominant learners"<sup>2</sup> who have lived in the United States for most of their lives. The Grades 11-12 ESL class involved in this project consisted of approximately 30 advanced-level students<sup>3</sup> from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, Vietnam, China, Ethiopia, Somalia, Haiti, and Nigeria. Most of the students had been in the United States from 3-6 years, and they scored between the 2nd- and 4th-grade reading levels on standard assessments such as the Stanford 9. The students had either passed through the beginning and intermediate levels of ESL, or they had been promoted after having repeated each level at least once. Most planned to find entry level jobs upon graduation from high school, though a few hoped to enter community colleges. Some Mexican-born students were returning to their home countries after graduation.

### **University**

San Diego State University (SDSU) is a large, comprehensive university in the California State University system, with about 25,000 students enrolled, the majority of whom are balancing demanding work, school, and family responsibilities. One-half of the student population is ethnically or linguistically diverse. About 30% of the total population is bilingual, with a considerable number of different first languages spoken.<sup>4</sup>

The university classroom in which this project was launched consisted of 16 students,<sup>5</sup> the majority of whom were junior and senior transfers from community colleges who had failed the SDSU Writing Competency Test (WCT) that is administered to entering transfer students. Ten of the students were Vietnamese speaking, one spoke Tagalog (Filipino), and three, Japanese. There was one speaker of Mandarin Chinese and one

Spanish speaker, a relatively new immigrant from Mexico. The class in which they were enrolled, Rhetoric and Writing Studies 95 (RW 95), focused primarily on composition, though reading<sup>6</sup> and oral work supplemented the writing tasks.

The students in RW 95 were under a great deal of pressure, for until they met the requirement for writing competency, either through RW 95, which culminates in a 2-hour timed essay examination, or through retaking the university's WCT, they would not be able to enroll in the core classes in their majors. Fortunately for two students originally enrolled, the prompt for one of the WCTs administered during the semester was quite simple,<sup>7</sup> so they were able to meet competency and take a late drop before the semester was over. Fourteen students remained in the class to participate in the entire e-mail project.

## **Our Goals**

### **Secondary School**

All classes at Hoover High School have adopted the same set of general, institution-wide goals based upon the Hoover Learner Outcomes (HLOs). These goals provide the basic structure for the senior portfolio, required of all graduating students.<sup>8</sup> Listed below are the HLOs:

1. The student demonstrates habits of inquiry.
2. The student experiences technology .
3. The student collects, analyzes, and organizes resources and information.
4. The student communicates ideas and information.
5. The student works effectively with others.
6. The student organizes personal resources, plans for the future, and shows commitment to lifelong learning.

All of these HLOs seem to be relevant, to some extent, to the e-mail project.

### **University ESL Class (RW 95)**

The goals for the university class were more flexible. Though Goal 1 (below) applied to all "remedial" students in the university composition classes, the others were devised by the teacher based upon student need.

*1. To satisfy the writing competency requirement*

The most pressing goal was for students to pass the final 2-hour competency examination. For although they might produce very good, revised papers for the class, the students could not be deemed competent unless they received a holistic score of 8 (4 + 4 by two scorers) on the final test.<sup>9</sup> The examination scoring is based upon a standard rubric, which includes, among other criteria, use of sources and careful editing.

*2. To become adept at, and interested in, using e-mail*

Of the 16 (later 14) students, only 5 had utilized e-mail before taking this class, though some were comfortable with using computers in other ways, such as word processing or producing spread sheets.

*3. To gain self-confidence and prestige by developing a mentoring relationship with high school student partners*

Since the university students in RW 95 were considered “remedial,”<sup>10</sup> and there is considerable discussion in the state university system about not allowing students to enroll until they demonstrate writing competency, it was important that they be able to show their considerable achievements to the younger students. We also hoped that the RW 95 students would encourage those at Hoover to enter postsecondary institutions.<sup>11</sup>

*4. To develop abilities to summarize and discuss sources in their own words*

This goal was essential for the final examination and important to the e-mail project.

*5. To improve their understanding and use of English grammar*

Since most of the students had been placed in the class because they continued to make grammatical and mechanical errors in their writing, improving their ability to edit was central to their success.

*6. To expand student vocabulary*

Many ESL students believe that language learning is, for the most part, the learning of vocabulary, and certainly, limitations in vocabulary knowledge inhibit students in their attempts to read certain texts and to express themselves.

### *7. To encourage writing to a variety of audiences<sup>12</sup>*

The secondary school students provided an alternative, and interesting, audience for the RW 95 students, one with whom they could discuss their concerns and ideas more freely than with their teachers.

### *8. To increase fluency and enjoyment when writing in English*

A number of the RW 95 students had had rather unpleasant experiences with writing English—and with writing classes. Those who had taken the WCT had experienced a sense of failure. We hoped that the e-mail project would counteract some of these negative feelings.

## **Constraints**

### **At the Secondary School**

Several problems had to be faced during the term by the high school instructor, difficulties that are undoubtedly common to a number of schools, particularly those in poverty areas:

#### *1. Small labs and an insufficient number of networked computers*

At Hoover High, ESL classes are usually scheduled into a computer lab for a total of 6 to 8 hours during a 6-week grading period; however, this lab is not networked. In order learn to use e-mail and to communicate with their university partners regularly, the class needed to use computers with network capabilities at least once a week. To accomplish this, the instructor made arrangements with other teachers to borrow or trade for unscheduled hours in one of the few networked labs. She also asked the lab technician to alert her when a class in a networked lab did not arrive for its assigned computer time; then, she would rush into the lab with her students to continue the e-mail project.

When the students did get into a wired lab, there were 15 computers for use, so only half the class could send messages to their partners at one time. These problems with access and a dearth of computers in the lab were daunting, to say the least.

#### *2. Lack of teacher e-mail experience and ponderous methods for getting on line*

Because the teacher was not an expert and there were only a few CMC experts in the Hoover class, most students had to learn individually how to access the Net and sign up for individual e-mail addresses through HotMail, a free network service. This was a long, time-consuming process. When all of the students had their addresses and were scheduled for a networked lab and the first e-mail correspondence, almost half had forgotten

their passwords and had to begin the process again. After the students had written their messages, they sometimes forgot to send or save them correctly. Then, the experts in the class and the single technician in the lab had to work overtime.

### *3. Response failures*

Because the high school class was twice the size of the university class, each of the university students was assigned two e-mail partners. This proved to be a good idea because some of the very low proficient students in the high school class were never able to use e-mail with success, and so they never responded to their university partners.

Because of the transience among the high school students and class attrition among the RW 95 students, partners had to be shuffled, which bothered the students who had just begun to form e-mail relationships. (See Warshauer, 1995, pp. 49-52 for suggestions on combatting response failure and partner loss.)

### *4. Requirements for the schoolwide portfolio*

The e-mail project consumed more class time than did other writing tasks in this class. Some of the e-mail projects could be included in the required senior portfolio, particularly under "technology" and "works with others" (See the HLO list, above.) However, other mandated portfolio projects had to be produced as well, so some e-mail tasks were assigned as after school projects in one of the few wired labs. Unfortunately, many of the students could not stay after school because of work and family responsibilities, and those who could often devoted their time to completing other tasks for their portfolios.

The seniors were particularly concerned with writing more conventional papers and practicing for their oral portfolio defense. As one Hoover student noted in his evaluation of the project, "They had better do [the e-mail project] in the first semester because all the seniors work on portfolios in the second semester, so the seniors can't pay too much attention."

## **At the University**

There was one major constraint under which the RW 95 class was functioning: the pressure to be judged as competent in writing. None of the e-mail assignments were directly connected to satisfying this requirement, though success in the project may have contributed to student confidence and increased fluency.

At the university, students had more access to a variety of computer labs, and several of the students had their own computers. Nonetheless, it was more than two weeks into the semester by the time all of the students had e-mail addresses and were online.<sup>13</sup>

### Shared Assignments and Collection of Data

Before the beginning of the term, the two instructors created some of the ground rules for the project, and though a few of these had to be revised as the semester advanced, we were able to assign, and follow through on, most of the requirements. These were

#### 1. *Correspond with your e-mail partner(s) regularly.*<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes the e-mail assignments were scripted, particularly at the beginning, when the high school students were asked to introduce themselves (“Tell about your background, interests, responsibilities, and goals”) or when they were asked to pose questions to the RW 95 students before their visit to the university. The university students were also specifically required to discuss university life in order to encourage the high school students to consider higher education. However, about half of the assignments throughout the term were open (e.g., “Keep talking to your partner”).

#### 2. *Teach and respond to your partner.*

In keeping with the goals of the RW 95 class, university students were assigned to teach vocabulary from *Newsweek* (eight words during the semester, assigned during specific weeks) and grammar points (two) to their partners over e-mail. The secondary students were asked to respond to these lessons, perhaps by making their own sentences using the item(s) taught.

#### 3. *Cooperate, both on e-mail and in person, in peer reviewing each other's work.*

The first of the two shared papers, based on the *Challenges* (Brown, Cohen, & O'Day, 1991) textbook required in RW 95, concerned family structure in various parts of the world. For this assignment, the papers were produced in draft form as hard copies on the computer, exchanged by the teachers, and discussed, more informally, via e-mail by the students. Most of the students' e-mail discussion centered around what the teacher wants in the paper, a common topic in many classes. In addition, the high school students asked their RW 95 partners to clarify misunderstandings about the readings or explain vocabulary.



A second shared writing project was based upon the following Jesse Jackson quote (as excerpted in Hakkim, 1993):

America is not like a blanket—  
one piece of unbroken cloth,  
the same size, the same color, the same texture.  
America is more like a quilt—  
many pieces, many sizes, all woven and held  
together by a common thread.

The students discussed this quote by e-mail, and the RW 95 group, anxious to practice for their own final competency examination, wrote short papers on the topic. For the Hoover students, the quilt project was their culminating experience, resulting in a school exhibition.<sup>15</sup> Each student made a quilt patch representing his or her life and culture, and, after discussing the Jackson quote and the patch in writing, the students made oral presentations to an invited audience, including the RW 95 students, at the high school.

Throughout the semester, both groups of students were asked to send copies of their e-mail messages to their instructors<sup>16</sup> and to reflect in writing upon their experiences with the project. All of this data was collected by the students' instructors for the ongoing study of the project. In addition, two pairs of partners, presented below, were studied more thoroughly through interviews, e-mail messages, and assigned paper analysis.

### **Student Meetings**

Because our institutions are geographically close, the students met twice, once at SDSU at midsemester and once at Hoover for the quilt exhibition at the end of the 15-week semester. These visits were the most gratifying elements of the project, for they brought together the two groups of students, introduced the Hoover students to the university campus, and in the second session, afforded opportunities for the Hoover students to present their quilt and share food from their home cultures.

The SDSU meeting provided the student partners with their first opportunities to meet each other after having communicated by e-mail for more than a month. Before coming, the Hoover students developed a "Twenty Questions" game for the RW 95 students, designed to determine who their partners were. By process of elimination, and after some misunderstandings,<sup>17</sup> the high school students identified their partners through the game. Once they became acquainted, the students were greeted by the university president and associate dean of the college. The remaining time

was devoted to RW 95 students' peer reviews of the Hoover student draft papers on the Jesse Jackson quote. After the university students had departed for their next classes, the Hoover students toured the campus and were provided with lunch by the university.

The second meeting, at Hoover High School, was attended by the assistant to the SDSU president and the RW 95 students and their teacher. At that time, the secondary students told their stories as represented by their quilt patches, and they discussed and shared their food with the gathered audience.

### **Two Student Pairs**

In order to measure the effects of e-mail upon the students' writing and their attitudes towards English, other cultures, and the class, we chose two pairs of e-mail partners to study throughout the semester, based upon their initial interest in the e-mail project. In addition to collecting the written data from the corpus for all students, we conducted informal interviews and requested additional written evaluations of the project from the two student pairs at the end of the semester.

### **The Student Pairs**

#### ***Pair 1: Rachel and Suzy***

Rachel was a 16-year-old junior at Hoover who emigrated from Ethiopia in 1996, two years before this project started. She came from a well-educated family and had been able to study some spoken English and other subjects at a boarding school before arriving in the United States to live with her father and complete her high school education. Her family recognized that she had talent and ambition, and they had set a number of goals for her, including completion of a BA degree with an architecture major. Though she found it difficult to be separated from her mother and other women relatives, she valued her parents' goals and was eager to continue her education.

When the project took place, Rachel still had limited English vocabulary, grammar, and control of mechanics. Nonetheless, she was determined to do well. She wrote more than was required for her assignments, using her dictionary and thesaurus as much as possible, and she showed keen interest during the grammar minilessons in her ESL class.

Suzy, Rachel's SDSU RW 95 partner, was a Vietnamese-speaking community college transfer. She had come to the U.S. in 1993, five years before the project began, when her father, a former South Vietnamese soldier, was brought here with his family under an amnesty program. She was

a junior nursing major, but she could not enroll in her major courses until she had met the writing competency requirement, which she was finding very difficult. Suzy's essays for the class were very much like her e-mail messages (see below). Most were much longer than the other students' (8-10 pages), and they were, for the most part, unplanned and unedited. At every individual conference, her instructor asked her to make a plan and write shorter essays, but the advice had little effect until the last few weeks of the term.

From the very beginning, Suzy was open and conversational, and all of her messages were longer than required. Here, for example, is her first message to her partners:

Hello ...!!!! Nice to meet you !!!! How are you doing today? My name is Suzy. I am Vietnamese, I came to the US about 5 years and a half. What about you? What is your nationality? My major is Nursing and Engineering. I am still waiting list of the Nursing. I am not get the major yet. I feel so bad and so disappoint myself a lot. How about you? How your school? [and several more questions] Oh, if you can. Could you give me your phone number or page number? Here is mine. [Her number] Whenever you want to talk to me or just do something, just call me. OK. See you again. Take care.

Rachel's response was equally warm, though not quite as long. Here is a representative section:

Hi Suzy! How are you. My name is Rachel. I am a junior in Hoover High School. I feel happy and excited when I got your message because this is my first time using e-mail with a person. Let me tell you about my background. [About 60 words followed.] I dream every day to be a musician and architecture. I hope English language becoming improving by writing with you. Suzy, please write about your future hope and about your education too. Good bless you!

Despite a heavy schedule, Suzy wrote to her partners on an average of twice a week, doubling the number of messages required by the class. Here, for example, is part of a 192-word message which was not one of the assignments:

Hello, How you today? So long we didn't talk, I missed you. How your school. My school so far so good and I am so busy. How about your Spring Break vacation? My vacation, I just go to work whole weeks.<sup>18</sup> I am really tired and so terrible. You have wonderful your vacation, isn't it? ...Anyway, how your parents? Do they take you go somewhere? Or you have to stay home do your homework? Just e-mail with me your break. OK. I love to share your information...Love,

As time passed, Suzy's other Hoover partner stopped responding. However, Rachel continued to send messages as often as she could get to the lab. In response, Suzy became more friendly and continued to send her frequent messages before, and after, meeting Rachel on campus. Here is one:

Now it is morning but I still working my work and do all assignment, so email for you. It's late and I am so tired and I want to go to sleep now. I think that you are already sleep and get a good dream. Isn't it? Have a good night and good dream, and then let me know what you dream. OK? (278 words, including a summary of a shared reading) Love 4 ever,

One characteristic of this relationship was Suzy's personal mentoring, as this example shows:

Now I am old, I can have a boyfriend but you are still young don't get a boyfriend yet. No good. That's my opinion...I just advice you, don't get mad at me. All right.

When Suzy was asked by her instructor to discuss college life with her partners, she created an even longer message devoted principally to the problems she was facing. Here is one section:

I go to university right now, everything more boring than at [community] college because everybody doesn't care you anymore. Depend for yourself...I have some class, my professor doesn't care me about I understand the lecture or not. The professor just get in the class, take role, and go to lecture...Nobody help you or me when you go to college or university.

Throughout the semester, this relationship between Rachel and Suzy was warm and personal. When Suzy went to Hoover for the final quilt demonstration, she and Rachel sat together and ignored the rest of the group. They were sorry to leave each other, and they promised to continue their e-mail relationship.

### ***Pair 2: Viet, Luc and Maria***

Viet was a 26-year-old SDSU junior, majoring in international business, who decided to enroll in a writing class to meet the transfer requirement rather than take the WCT. He had come to the U.S. with his father, who had been in the South Vietnamese army (RVN) and then in a Vietnamese prison for 13 years. He had had no American high school education and had devoted 6 years to completing the necessary units in community college. During the period of the project, Viet was enrolled in nine semester units and worked at his uncle's convenience store 25 hours a week. His class attendance was excellent, and he was quite critical of those students in the class who didn't work hard and appreciate their American education.

In his interview and on his data sheet, he talked about how important it was for him to learn to "write as a native speaker does," in order to achieve success. Every week, he read all of *Newsweek* (not just what was assigned) as well as the local paper, and he was very interested in learning new vocabulary. His first essay for the class demonstrated that he was a very good academic writer;<sup>19</sup> however, when he was encouraged to take the WCT in order to clear competency and leave the class, he said, "No, I want of learn as much as I can, so I'll stay here."

In contrast to Suzy, Viet initially used e-mail as an extension of the class, a requirement that he had to fulfill.

He dutifully obtained an e-mail address, and throughout the semester, he acted as more of a mentor than a friend to his e-mail partners. As time went on, he began addressing not only his partners but the teachers in these messages. Here, for example, is an e-mail to his RW 95 teacher about an assignment:

How're you, Dr. Johns. By the way, can I divide the body part of the upcoming essay into four paragraphs. The first two will discuss...the second two will...Or should I just have two body paragraphs only? Please let me know. And how's your study on me going? I'd love to hear about it. Any additional information you want to know about me, it's my pleasure to respond. Have a nice day!

When the Hoover teacher asked the SDSU students whether her students had met some of the requirements, Viet was one of the few to reply:

Hi, Ms.<sup>20</sup> El-Wardi! I just want to let you know that my two partners have already finished the four assignments that you gave them. Included are the self-introduction, grammar, and vocabulary responses, and opinions on the reading. As a result, you can give them full credit! Thank you for your time. I'm looking forward to seeing you and my partners on the 24th.

*Pair 2: Luc and Maria (and Viet's mentoring)*

By chance, Viet's most consistent partner was also a Vietnamese speaker, a junior at Hoover. Luc's message in response to Viet's introduction was a bit more personal than Viet's:

Hi! My name is Luc...I'm from Vietnam. Right now I am a junior student at Hoover High School. I'm very nervous to meet you because this is my first time to meet an SDSU student on e-mail. Beside nervous, I'm also excited, because I have a new partner from college student. ...I have a great new year, how about you? I look forward to hearing from you. Happy New Year!<sup>21</sup>

Viet's second partner, Maria, was from Cuba. From the start, Viet was concerned about the quality of her writing, particularly her spelling. Here's what he wrote in one mentoring message to her:

Have you played with the Internet lately? You can find out many subjects and stories which are very helpful in your research papers. By the way, you can get free e-mail from the Yahoo Web Page. What's special about this e-mail is that you can easily check your spellings...Keep in mind that proofreading is very important. It tells readers how careful and responsible you are.

By the end of the semester, Viet began to think of e-mail as more than just an assignment in his RW 95 class, and he appeared to be quite positive about the project. When asked about the advantages, he wrote:

It was really great. I've never know anything about e-mail until facing the Hoover project. It takes a short period of time to get out e-mail, and it's a lot of fun and easy. Now, I can contact with my friends in Vietnam. Also, I can place my comments on policy

WebPages, etc. Above all, my two Hoover partners become my new pen pals. Furthermore, I learn about their exotic cultures.

When asked about what we could improve, he made the following remarks:

We can make it a lot more fun by adding outdoor activities such as beach barbecues or camping. There should be more chances for the two sides to meet each other rather than just two basic back-and-forth visits. It would also be great if the two sides exchange puzzles or academic questions with rewards. Above, all, Hoover students should have more access to computers, so we can all talk to each other more often.

## **Results and Conclusions**

### **Development of a Technology/CMC Comfort Level**

In their final reflections, all of the students commented on how important it was for them to learn to use e-mail and to employ it in real communication with an audience with whom they became comfortable. Rachel said,

I feel great when I was exchanging information with my partner at the first time because I never do or use technology like this...I never think the value of exchanging information by e-mail. Now, I think it is important to me.

In terms of demonstrating the value of e-mail, and in making the students comfortable with this CMC, the project was a resounding success.

### **Enhancement of Student Voice and Sense of Audience**

As the in-depth discussions of the two student pairs show, voice and audience were influenced by the students' own sense of themselves and of their relationships with their e-mail partners. As soon as Suzy and Rachel had an opportunity, they began talking quite intimately about their personal lives which, as Sternglass (1997) points out, cannot, and should not, be separated from their academic achievement. On the other hand, Viet set the tone with Luc and Maria, which, though quite cordial, established a mentor/mentee relationship.

These paired partners demonstrated differences in register within the e-mail messages, features that carried over to their academic papers, as well.

Though Viet's messages included openings and closings and exclamation points that appeared to be conversational, he still incorporated much of what is required in academic prose, such as complete sentences and formal conjunctions. On the other hand, Suzy was much more conversational, as her short phrases and creative punctuation, spelling, and grammar demonstrate. Santoro (1998) notes that "[CMC] incorporates aspects of written as well as spoken communication...it shows a form that is uniquely shaped by the medium, yet unquestionably human in nature" (p. 35). Variation among writers of e-mail messages may, in fact, be very human—dependent upon student personality, understanding of the genre of e-mail messages, relationships with their audience, and other factors.

### **Effects upon Writing**

Attempts were made by the high school teacher to have the students edit their e-mail messages, and she modeled some of the initial discourses for the students. The university teacher, believing that fluency was the basic goal of the e-mail project, made no such effort. Despite different approaches, the student e-mail texts on both campuses were more error ridden than their hard copy texts (see also Kern, 1995). Thus, for those who believe that continuing to produce errors reinforces these errors, use of e-mail could be considered deleterious. In an important article about the problems of the perpetual LEP student in the California schools, Scarcella (1996) argues that most immigrant and English emergent students who enter universities continue to make major errors in their academic writing, and she attributes this problem to encouraging fluency and a lack of editing. E-mail could be another contributing factor to error persistence (see Kern, 1995).

Other experts, particularly those advocating whole language and fluency approaches (see especially, MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1996) would argue that students should be encouraged to be fluent and motivated writers, and that over time, they will learn to correct their errors when necessary.

### **Effects upon Reading**

One of the unplanned, but important, advantages of the students' shared tasks was that they were all required to read, discuss, and analyze the same passages from the *Challenges* (Brown, Cohen, & O'Day, 1991) textbook. The Stanford 9 Examination, administered to students in the California schools during spring 1998, indicated that reading scores dropped in high school precipitously from scores in middle school (Smith, 1998). One cause for this complex phenomenon might be that many high school students read very little outside of class, and they are seldom tested on their reading within classes, as they were in elementary school. Because



the e-mail project required the high school students to understand the texts and discuss them with their SDSU partners, they did read, summarize, and learn vocabulary.

### **The Influence of Scripted, Focused, Tasks**

Some of the more scripted tasks were successfully completed, such as the student self-introductions and the questions and advising about university life. Vocabulary presentations were useful for both groups; their written reflections on the project indicated the importance of discussing new vocabulary within this informal milieu. The efforts to teach grammar points were not as successful. Students at Hoover complained that the points were not well explained, perhaps because they knew that the RW 95 students were not grammar experts.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has been a discussion of two ESL teachers' attempts to create an effective e-mail partnership among students at two school sites, partnerships that were intended to serve a variety of affective and pedagogical purposes. For a number of reasons common to many schools and ESL classes, the problems in establishing and maintaining the project were major, the most significant of which were the demands upon the students at each site to be concentrating upon other tasks more relevant to their senior portfolios (at Hoover) or their final competency examinations (at SDSU). We do not know whether our project assisted the high school students in making passing portfolio presentations or whether it contributed to the passing scores achieved by both Viet (11/12, the highest of the department ESL final paper scores) or Suzy (7p—a borderline passing score). However, we do know that the students learned about each other and about each other's schools and cultures and became comfortable with CMC through this project. So, despite the effort involved and the inherent problems, we plan to attempt the project again next year.

## Authors

*Rita El-Wardi teaches ESL and Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID) courses at Hoover High School in San Diego. She makes a number of presentations, particularly on academic reading and writing, to AVID teachers throughout the state.*

*Ann M. Johns teaches academic English to ESL and other diverse students at San Diego State University. She recently completed a book for Cambridge University Press entitled Text, Role, and Context: Developing Academic Literacies.*

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In the literature, e-mail falls under the rubric *computer-mediated communication*, a term “given to a large set of functions in which computers are used to support human communication” (Santoro, 1998, p. 32). E-mail is considered to be the most common, and the simplest, of all the CMC possibilities, which also include group conferencing systems, such as list-servs.
- <sup>2</sup> See *California Pathways* (ESL Intersegmental Project, 1996) for a very useful discussion of the variety of second language learners in our schools.
- <sup>3</sup> This is a transient population, so the class size varied from month to month.
- <sup>4</sup> This is a guess. At the time the project took place, there were no statistics on the first languages of the immigrant and bilingual student population.
- <sup>5</sup> Originally, there were 25 students enrolled. However, seven students dropped the class during the first weeks because “there was too much writing required.”
- <sup>6</sup> The students were required to purchase an advanced ESL textbook, *Challenges* (Brown, Cohen, & O’Day, 1991). In addition, they subscribed to *Newsweek*, which they found to be very useful for vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure analysis as well as for discussions of genres and values of the American media.

- <sup>7</sup> The San Diego State Writing Competency Test (WCT), mentioned earlier, is a one-half hour essay test required of all students who transfer from a community college and have not met competency. The prompts vary considerably in difficulty from the almost impossible (Perfection has only one fault: It's boring. Discuss.) to easy ones taken from the TOEFL Test of Written English (Would you rather live in the city or the country? Why?). These RW 95 students had written about the second prompt listed here.
- <sup>8</sup> This is a districtwide requirement. Students compile elaborate portfolios for each of their years in high school, and then present these documents in 20-45-minute individual interviews before a panel consisting of one teacher and two individuals from the community.
- <sup>9</sup> Or, students could also retake the WCT, as mentioned earlier.
- <sup>10</sup> Though CATESOL and other organizations have persuaded some CSU administrators of the differences between remedial and ESL students, those distinctions often go unrecognized on our campuses.
- <sup>11</sup> We were particularly interested in having transfer students communicate with the high school seniors because most students at Hoover cannot afford to enter a CSU immediately. It is important that the younger students understand the process of transferring from a community college to a CSU.
- <sup>12</sup> For a more complete discussion of negotiating with and writing to a variety of audiences, see Johns, 1997.
- <sup>13</sup> One reason for the delay was that some of the students were having difficulty paying their fees, and they couldn't obtain an e-mail address until they had evidence of fee payment.
- <sup>14</sup> We couldn't be more specific about how often, particularly for the secondary school students. See the discussion about constraints.
- <sup>15</sup> The exhibition is another schoolwide requirement.

- <sup>16</sup> Several of the students, especially Rachel and Suzy, who will be discussed later, became close friends through e-mail. When they decided to *really* discuss their lives and experiences, they didn't copy their instructors on their e-mail correspondence. After all, they had one primary, peer audience.
- <sup>17</sup> Because the students were from different cultures, they often did not recognize the gender of their partners from their names. One Hoover student made this comment: "It was a great experience to meet the students...I was thinking that one of my partner was a male and turn out that both are female. Actually I like it better."
- <sup>18</sup> She worked for 6-8 hours every night at a Japanese restaurant. When she returned home, she would complete her homework and come to her morning RW 95 class without having slept.
- <sup>19</sup> He had a fairly broad writing repertoire which included memos, reports, and essays. However, he also wrote creatively when he had the chance. Here, for example, is the end of his "America Is a Quilt" essay, assigned to both groups of students:

Despite all the differences of cultures, languages, and religions, we all come to America together. Freedom, equality, and opportunity hold and motivate us to build America as the greatest nation on the planet. The old Vietnamese saying is: "Birds settle in a peaceful land." America is really a peaceful land in the heart of every one of us.

- <sup>20</sup> He was the only student to use *Ms.* when referring to this instructor, demonstrating his awareness of politically correct language.
- <sup>21</sup> This was late January, and he was referring to Vietnamese New Year.

## References

- Berge, Z. L., & Collins, M. (Eds.). (1998). *Wired together: The online classroom in K-12* (Vol. 1: Perspectives and instructional design). Cresshill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Brown, H. D., Cohen, D. S., & O'Day, J. (1991). *Challenges: A process approach to academic English*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Clemes, G. H. (May/June, 1998). David Sperling: A man with a virtual passion. *ESL Magazine*, pp. 20-27. (Available at <http://www.eslmag.com>)
- ESL Intersegmental Project. (1996). *California Pathways: The second language student in public high schools, colleges & universities*. Sacramento: Intersegmental Council of Academic Senates in conjunction with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (Available from CATESOL, 1146 N. Central Avenue, #195, Glendale, CA 91202.)
- Hakim, J. (1993). *The history of the U.S.* (Vol. 1). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Johns, A. M. (1997). *Text, role, and context: Developing academic literacies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quality and characteristics of language production. *Modern Language Journal*, 79(4), 457-76.
- MacGowan-Gilhooly, A. (1996). *Achieving fluency in English: A whole language book* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Meloni, C. (1998, January/February). The internet in the classroom. *ESL Magazine*, pp. 10-19. (Available at <http://www.eslmag.com>)
- Newmann, S. , & Fischer, K. (1998, Winter). E-mail assignments bring students together. *The Keystone*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. [Newsletter]. (Available from Wadsworth Publishing Company, 10 Davis Drive, Belmont, CA 94002-3098)

- Santoro, G. (1998). What is the online classroom? In Berge, Z. L., & Collins, M. (Eds.), *Wired together: The online classroom in K-12* (Vol. 1, pp. 29-48). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Scarcella, R. (1996). Secondary education in California and second language research: Instructing ESL students in the 1990s. *The CATESOL Journal*, 9, 129-152.
- Smith, D. (1998, July 19). Culprit for drop in test scores sought: Educators are struggling to explain high school students' weak reading performance. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. B1, B6.
- Sperling, D. (1998). Dave's ESL Cafe. (Available at <http://www.ling.lanccs.ac.uk/staff/visitors/kenji/keypal.htm>)
- Sternglass, M. S. (1997). *Time to know them: A longitudinal study of writing and learning at the college level*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Warschauer, M. (1995). *E-mail for English teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

## Appendix

### **Suggestions for finding e-mail partners** (taken from Meloni, 1998)

#### **Kenji Kitao's Keypals**

<http://ilc.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/online/www/keypal.html>

#### **E-mail Classroom Exchange**

<http://www.iglou.com/xchange/ece/index.html>

#### **E-mail key pal connection**

<http://www.comenius.com/keypal/index.html>

#### **E-mail etiquette**

<http://www.fau.edu./rinalti/net/elec.html>

See also Clemes (1998), Meloni (1998), Newman & Fischer (1998), and Sperling (1998).

