

# The Internet Essay Contest: Proposal of Internet Use for English Education

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## 1. Introduction: Proposal of Internet Use

As people start reconsidering the cramming system of education in Japan, many are demanding an alternative education where a student's individuality, creativity, and originality are valued. But it is very difficult to conduct such an education. Although today's English education in Japan attaches great importance to communicating with others, students are still being forced to memorize a great number of English words and expressions to pass examinations in order to proceed to higher education and a range of jobs. In such an exam-oriented English class, some students reluctantly continue to study English and others fly to an English-speaking country to utilize what they know. Not all students, however, can afford to do so.

In order to find a way to help solve these problems, I introduced an essay contest on the Internet.<sup>1</sup> If English learners are given an opportunity to express themselves in English on the Internet, where people with various backgrounds actively exchange their opinions, they might find a definite purpose in learning the lingua franca. They will also have an opportunity to demonstrate the potential capacities they are strongly expected to have. Moreover, they will not need to spend a huge amount of money to live in a foreign country.

Three classes in Dokkyo University in Saitama prefecture and one class in Chuo University in Tokyo entered an Internet essay contest held from August 10th to October 31st in 2000. The entrants were mainly sophomores. For the contest, I asked them to submit an essay of 300 words by email by the end of the first term. I then made the essays into an accessible file on the Internet. The contestants read the file and chose the five best essays. No one else was allowed to submit an essay. But anyone was allowed to be a judge (voter) in this contest.

There were six purposes in conducting the Internet essay contest. The first was to improve their English by giving them an opportunity to use English. The second was to encourage them to voluntarily learn English. The third was to prompt them to pay attention to various social problems. The fourth was to improve their presentation. The fifth was to give them an opportunity

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1 URL: <http://essaycontest.virtualave.net/>

to contact many other people to get their various opinions on a certain subject. The sixth was to show that the use of the Internet could be effective in English education in Japan.

## **2. Preparation for Essay Contest**

There were three things that had to be prepared before conducting the Internet essay contest. The first was to offer teaching material to help the students choose a theme for the essay. The second was to encourage them to practice writing in English. The third was to construct the website for the contest.

### **2.1. Use of Video Teaching Material**

In this class, I selected the video teaching material entitled *Japan This Week 2*,<sup>2</sup> which is a collection of reports concerning social problems in Japan and interviews with people in various careers. I thought that its diverse topics would help the students to take notice of social problems.

There are three reasons I chose video teaching material. First, I thought that listening practice might be disregarded in the class for the essay contest. Secondly, video attracts more student interest than an ordinary textbook with the cassette tape. Apparently, today's students, who are more familiar with images than words, prefer watching a video to reading a textbook. In my experience, most students yawn while listening to any cassette tape but, on the other hand, they are willing to watch any video. Thirdly, it saves the time spent to get students to translate English into Japanese during the class. The images will help them understand the content up to a point, even if they do not read the transcript. Nevertheless, unless students comprehend a program, they will attempt, as usual, to translate for content confirmation. In order to prevent this, I myself dared to translate some passages word for word, neglecting Japanese syntax. In so doing, I allowed the imperfect sentences to explain a certain amount of the content. Such a method will not just help lighten the load of students, but also enable them to understand English word order.

### **2.2. The Practice of Writing in English**

Using English means composing sentences in English. When we speak English, we compose English sentences. Therefore, we need to attach importance to writing in learning English. It is obvious that we cannot improve our English by reading, translating, and listening only. We need

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2 Yamazaki, Tatsuro, and Stella M. Yamazaki, eds. *Japan This Week 2: NHK BS English News Stories*. Kinseido, 2000.

to try to express our ideas in English.

Fortunately, three points of view about each program are given in *Japan This Week 2*. I required the students to write a very short essay of 50 words about one of the three points of view and to hand it in by the following week. The limitation of 50 words will help them to learn how to express their ideas effectively using a limited number of words. The words and expressions that they acquire in this way will definitely be different from those they reluctantly memorized in order to answer a test question. A textbook now becomes a resource to express one's opinions; it will no longer exist simply to be translated into another language.

I allowed the students to revise and enlarge one of their previous assignments and submit it for the essay contest.

### 2.3. Creating the Website

In order to build a website for the Internet essay contest, I obtained the loan of the space for the website from the "Virtual Avenue."<sup>3</sup> On the front page, I briefly explained the purpose and procedure of the contest to let the students and those accessing the website understand them. After registering the URL of the website in a lot of search engines, I announced this contest on some bulletin boards where English learners or teachers were gathering in order to have the essays read by as many as people as possible. Moreover, in order for a robot-type search engine to pick up the website as soon as possible, I did not forget to insert in the front page the keyword meta-tag using many relevant keywords.

Next, I prepared four free web-based email addresses on such websites as "Hotmail"<sup>4</sup> to make it easy to sort the essays that would be sent by email. After receiving the essays, I put them together into four zipped files to download. I also prepared non-zipped ones to be read online.

In these files, I attempted to preserve the anonymity of the contestants to keep them safe from Internet criminals. Yet, I could not help but make public their email addresses because one of the aims of this contest was to enable them to communicate with other English learners or speakers all over the world. Therefore, I advised the students to obtain a web-based email address to enter the contest. But some students used the email address given by the college, which could offer enough information to identify the writer.

Next, I built four web pages from which the voters could cast their votes for the five best essays among the essays of each class. In order to make online-voting possible, I used a CGI program named "vote.cgi" which "Kent Web"<sup>5</sup> provided for free. It enables the vote result to be

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3 URL: <http://www.virtualave.net/>

4 URL: [http://lc2.law5.hotmail.passport.com/cgi-bin/login?\\_lang=JA](http://lc2.law5.hotmail.passport.com/cgi-bin/login?_lang=JA)

5 URL: <http://www.kent-web.com/>

seen in real time.

On the front page of the website, I installed an access counter that “TheCounter.com”<sup>6</sup> offered. Interestingly, in addition to the total number of hits, it gives us the domain from where the website was accessed.

I also prepared four bulletin boards where the voters could give us a reason for their choice. This was to prevent contestants from buying other’s votes to unjustly increase the number of votes obtained. To get the students to explain their choice, I reminded the students that if they failed to make a comment they would receive a failing grade for this class. And I told them that I would evaluate their capability to choose a good essay. I also set the CGI program to prohibit a double vote from the same Internet Protocol address.

### 3. Difficulties Before the Contest

Some problems arose before the contest began. To begin with, there were more students unfamiliar with a computer than I had expected. All the students of Dokkyo University do have an email address given by the college. Moreover, a number of computer rooms are readily available in the college. Therefore, I assumed that they were accustomed to a computer to some extent. But, in fact, several students did not even know that they had been given an email address. There were some students I was not able to contact since they had made a mistake in the email address for the reply or they had used a friend’s computer to submit an essay. Some appended a large Microsoft Word document without realizing that I would be receiving a great amount of email. What most embarrassed me was that I received some email messages that were full of garbage characters. Due to these problems, the contest began after a ten-day delay.

Sadly, a small number of students were unable to enter this contest. Some of them made excuses for their failure to enter the contest by saying that they had not remembered my email address nor the URL of the website. Probably, they were not interested in the contest because it is unbelievable that they did not have the brains to ask their classmates for it.

These problems had to be solved before the essay contest began and the students needed to be given adequate guidance in how to use a computer. However, it was quite impossible to solve all of these problems for a part-time teacher (like me) who is asked to teach only English within the limited instruction time.

Moreover, there was a horrible accident. My laptop computer was stolen about two weeks before the contest started. Part of the data was completely lost and some essays had to be sent

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6 URL: <http://www.TheCounter.com/>

to me again. I realized that it was absolutely necessary to back up any data and that a sole administrator would face many difficulties in conducting this kind of contest.

## 4. Good Points and Bad Points

### 4.1. Improving Presentation

The essay contest will enable students to improve their presentation. All of the essays will not be read in their entirety on the computer screen in particular. Most of the students, who seem unable to read English rapidly, will probably skip over them. But it does not matter. One can still find a good essay while skimming through them. In such a situation, writers have to puzzle their brains to find a good title for their essay or an interesting topic to absorb readers from the beginning.

Let me examine some essays from one of the classes in Dokkyo University.

| Ranking | Title  | Votes | Percentage |
|---------|--|-------|------------|
| 1       | A campus life (e9133129@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)  | 8     | 10.1%      |
| 2       | Japanese Employment Problems (FOZAWA@aol.com)  | 7     | 8.9%       |
| 3       | THE RIGHT IN THE SMOKE (k1y0@locos.ne.jp)  | 6     | 7.6%       |
| 3       | When you think that you want to become a university student... (e9133103@for.dokkyo.ac.jp) | 6     | 7.6%       |
| 5       | The Crisis of UNIVERSITY (kehpie@hotmail.com)  | 5     | 6.3%       |
| 6       | Educating Adult (e8135076@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)  | 4     | 5.1%       |
| 7       | Bhutanese Refugees (ricakuri@hotmail.com)  | 3     | 3.8%       |
| 7       | LOVE (e8139010@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)   | 3     | 3.8%       |
| 7       | ORIGAMI (e9138121@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)  | 3     | 3.8%       |
| 7       | The problem of language (bluemarin86922@yahoo.co.jp)                                       | 3     | 3.8%       |
| 7       | "Hanabi" is an art (bigchocobos@hotmail.com)   | 3     | 3.8%       |
| 7       | The City is Living (e9138102@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)   | 3     | 3.8%       |
| 7       | True Friends (keroppi2@lycos.ne.jp)  | 3     | 3.8%       |
| 14      | Creativity (e9134026@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)   | 2     | 2.5%       |
| 14      | The refugees and their problems (cheshire-cat@lycos.ne.jp)                                 | 2     | 2.5%       |
| 14      | What we can do for refugees? (e9136136@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)                                   | 2     | 2.5%       |
| 14      | Fireworks (e9136028@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)  | 2     | 2.5%       |
| 14      | The Hope to Space (e9138023@for.dokkyo.ac.jp)  | 2     | 2.5%       |

The chart above shows that most of the students chose topics examined in the textbook. Seven out of thirty-five persons chose themes related to college or education. Perhaps they thought that a familiar topic would more strongly elicit their classmates' empathy.

Four people chose to write about refugees. A program concerning Cambodian refugees living in Japan, which we watched during the class, might have shocked them. One of them wrote "Bhutanese Refugees," which gained three votes and won the seventh place, although there are

seven essays that won the seventh place.

The writer makes few grammatical mistakes and the essay is fairly readable. But it bores me because approximately eighty percent of the essay is occupied by the data regarding Bhutanese refugees and the writer's opinion is not told until the last few lines. A female student who cast one of her votes for this essay told us on the bulletin board that she was overwhelmed by the data. This is a typical way of writing often found in Japanese compositions. The Japanese prefer to present information in an inductive manner; they tend to give all the justifications and background before their opinion. I think this way of writing might have to be avoided because so many people seem to be impatient on the Internet. In this Internet essay contest, the judges need to look over the essays and choose the top five in a short period of time. In this situation, this type of essay might be skipped over. That is why it gained only three votes. This essay happened to be put at the beginning of the file and so it might have impressed the three persons who voted for it.

"When you think that you want to become a university student..." won the third place, gaining six votes. The voters seem to have been impressed right from the beginning. Certainly, the writer's confession in the third sentence was very shocking: "I think suddenly why I entered this university." One of the voters for this essay told us that the beginning of the first paragraph made her feel like reading it. Another told us that the title was very interesting. As a matter of fact, I gave it the title after the opening sentence because the writer forgot to do so. Anyway, for these reasons this writer succeeded in impressing the six judges within the first several lines.

"Japanese Employment Problems" got the second place, attaining seven votes. The writer of this essay presents information in a deductive manner. It seems to make it readable. She begins with a generalization and then goes on to discuss particulars. She succeeds in developing a persuasive argument with supporting data before forming a final judgment. That seems to have been shown in the following praises for this essay: "I was impressed by well-structured paragraphs and the effective use of data. I think this writer ably describes Japanese employment system." "This writer organized paragraphs more effectively than the other students. And this essay made me consider my future because the writer's problem was the same for me as well." (My translations)

"A campus life" won the class contest, obtaining as many as eight votes. One of the impressions of this essay was: "A question that the writer raises to the things we are familiar with is very interesting. And I agree with the writer's opinion. This essay made me consider my present way of life and my life in the future." (My translation) Although I could not forecast that this essay would win first place, it is no doubt that the familiar topic that the writer chose won other students' approval.

Judging from the above, it is certain that this contest gave the students a sample of a good

essay that could impress many readers. And this contest told us that they could appropriately tell a good essay from the others. It seems it showed us the possibility that they could improve their skills in presenting their opinions.

## 4.2. Democratic Evaluation

It might be of benefit to note that not only a teacher's but also others' requirements were reflected in this contest. Beforehand, on the front page of the website, I clearly defined a good essay as one that has a clear logic, a convincing argument, originality, and English accuracy and I asked the judges to take these points into consideration. However, on the bulletin board, there were a lot of judges who mentioned such reasons for the vote as "It is easy to understand" and "It is readable." It seems that readability was most valued, and originality and clear logic were disregarded.

Does this mean that the essays were democratically evaluated? I think so. But the poll result might have been quite different if a lot of foreigners had judged. In Japan, logic or originality is barely valued. This characteristic of the Japanese must have been reflected in this poll result.

## 5. Problems

There were some problems in carrying out the Internet essay contest. First, disappointingly, plagiarisms were discovered in a number of essays. The first paragraph of the essay by a student of Dokkyo University was almost the same as that of the essay of a student of Chuo University. However, the style of the second paragraph of the latter is different from that of the first one. Therefore, it is certain that the writer just quoted it. Thus, I judged that the former plagiarized.

I expected the Internet and the assignments in a usual class would prevent such an offense. Through the Internet, we can easily retrieve the desired information from enormous amounts of data. Therefore, it will facilitate discovering plagiarisms. And it is easy to find plagiarisms by careful comparison between the style of the essay and that of the assignments. But these were ineffective. In fact, it seems the students did not consider this to be a punishable offence. I have to partly accept the blame because I failed to explain that plagiarism was a crime.

The second is that the contest was not widely known, in spite of my effort. Even if I announced the contest in many places, the number of hits did not increase as I had expected, and I got no email from overseas. It was disappointing that it was not able to achieve the original target that aimed to have people all over the world reading their essays, and their interactive exchanges with them.

The third is a teacher's burden. It was very hard to work their essays up into one file, dividing paragraphs, correcting full-size characters into half-size ones in a number of essays, to build and maintain the website, and to read all the essays. As for mistakes in the spelling and the grammar, I could not overlook them and I corrected them partly, but I was not able to correct all of them. This might not have been fair.

The fourth is about how the result of the contest should be reflected in their class grades. Although their essays were evaluated democratically, yet it was a one teacher that actually gave a grade. There might have been some gaps between the poll result and the teacher's evaluation. Their attendance and attitudes in class must be evaluated as well. It was very difficult to evaluate all of them fairly.

## 6. Conclusion

Writing an essay will enable students to learn how to think and how to assert their opinions. A contest will give them the competitive spirit, which will transform an inactive classroom into a social space. The system where the number of votes they obtained can be reflected in their grades will give them incentive and will lead to their voluntary study. The Internet will directly connect a classroom with the world and give rise to international exchange. And it will give Japanese students a definite purpose in learning English.

With these optimistic expectations, I conducted the essay contest on the Internet. Although it was not necessarily developed as I had desired, and I cannot confirm whether this contest improved their English, yet I am convinced that I was able to offer the space where students could not only utilize what they knew but also fully demonstrate individuality, creativity, and originality. It is also certain that I succeeded in showing the use of the Internet can be effective in English education. I hope the use of the Internet will be introduced into English language education in Japan.

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