

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH ONLINE CHATTING

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ABSTRACT

Making the best use of technology has now become a challenge for language teachers. Most language teachers know how difficult it is to get students to use language in class, even more so in a meaningful way, especially at the oral level. Using online chatting can provide learners with opportunities for language interaction since it is within the context that negotiation of meaning and interlanguage development are most likely to occur. Second language acquisition research indicates that negotiation promotes interlanguage development and that learners are most likely to negotiate if opportunities for language interaction are provided. When used strategically with careful planning and focused discussions, chat can be a powerful learning tool which can engage the students with meaningful learning process. Through one-on-one conversations with the instructor, small group work, pairs, individual study of transcripts, and interviews, chat can accommodate difference learning styles. It can be a valuable option to language class, facilitating learning and enhancing communications. Thus, it is essential that language courses use online chat which can bring students to extend the learning process well beyond the traditional classroom approach, since it leads to effective communication tool that fosters a fascinating, authentic and enriching learning experience. The paper is elaborating how to set up online chatting activities in the learning of English as a foreign language. It also describes the strengths of this approach from a pedagogical point of view.

Key-words: communication skills, chatting, interlanguage development, ESP

Many language students, particularly those in foreign language situations, do not have the opportunity to use English extensively outside of the classroom. Students may think that they learn English in order to take a test. In fact, English teaching is criticized for not able to teach students real English. It is thought to be old-fashioned, boring and incomplete. Teachers use text books written in artificial styles and the book consists of no sense and do not focus on enhancing language proficiency. Teachers use authentic materials lacking varieties and sound boring to students. Nowadays, language teachers are challenged with technological

breakthroughs which can accommodate the learning and provide the learning variation.

State Polytechnic of Malang is a vocational higher education institution in which foreign languages are taught to the students. At the institution, English is the first foreign language taught for specific purposes (ESP) by emphasizing on oral communication. ESP refers to the role of English in a language course or a program of instruction in which the content and the aims of the course are fixed by the specific needs of a particular group of learners (Richards, et al 1996). In the Accounting department of State Polytechnic of Malang, the general

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objective of teaching ESP is that the students will be able to communicate in English orally and in written form, to express ideas, opinions and/or feelings related to business and accounting. English is taught for 6 hours (3 times a week) which is discreetly taught in three language skills (Reading, Writing, and Speaking), while listening is integrated with speaking; and one language component (grammar). English is given for three meetings a week; however, it still gives lack opportunity for the students to use the language in the real context. The extracurricular program of debate and English club are not giving them the equal chances to interact since only those who are already having ability to speak are confident to join the programs.

In handling the teaching and learning activity, it is important to offer a medium which is efficient for learning language, especially English, which seems to be difficult and not easy for students who basically take non-English as their major. Thus, chatting is regarded as one of useful one. Generally, most language teachers know how difficult it is to get students to use language in class, even more so in a meaningful way, especially at the oral level. Using online chatting can provide learners with opportunities for language interaction since it is within the context that negotiation of meaning and interlanguage development are most likely to occur.

Yet many instructors hesitate to use synchronous chat and think it is difficult to manage and adds little or no educational value to their students' learning. In fact, chat often has a negative reputation because of its potential to become disordered since students communicating simultaneously can obscure the message and make following a conversation difficult. These issues are especially of concern to language instructors since clear communication in the target language (L2) is already a difficult task in the traditional classroom. Nevertheless, with careful planning, synchronous chat can benefit language learners and allow instructors to assess their students' learning.

METHODS

The paper is describing how to use online chatting in teaching English as a foreign language. Furthermore, it reviews the strengths of this approach from a pedagogical point of view and the way to make the learning sustainable.

This paper is a report teaching using online chat activities conducted in two classes of semester 1 and 2, at Accounting department, State Polytechnic of Malang who took general English courses. Some Topics Presented in General English are: Introduction, everyday activities, telling simple stories, telling future plans, opening and closing conversation, telling time and saying dates, asking and giving directions, giving advice, describing appearances, and interviewing.

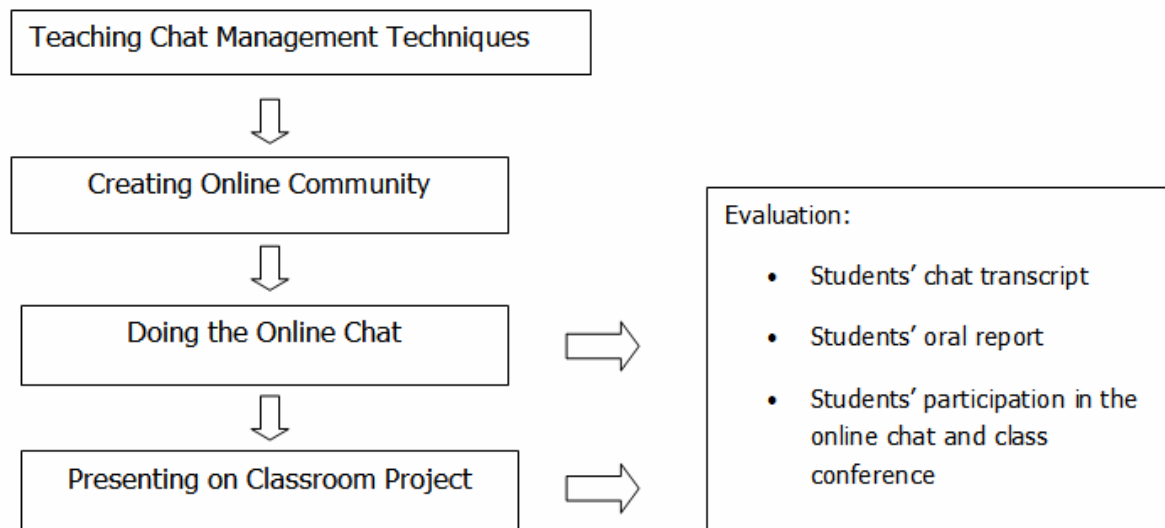
The design of the program comprises some procedures in which discuss the steps to conduct the program as well as some feasible activities to be done.

PROCEDURES

Chat can be used either among students in the same class or between students in the class (either as individuals or in pairs or groups) and outsiders from other parts of the world. The followings are the important points to hinder in using online chatting for students. The following is the figure of teaching procedures of using online chatting. See figure 1 on the next page.

Step 1. Teaching Chat Management Techniques

Since doing online chatting is different from doing classroom activity, students need to know 'chatting etiquette' (See Appendix). Online chatting may not be the first experience for the student yet in doing online chatting in English, the students need to be equipped with what to do and what not to do. It is recommended to start the discussion the language of chat in class before the students come to the real activity. Likewise, giving helps to the students related to how to use online dictionary and how to use some useful expression. The following section is hint for pre-online chat activities both for the students and the facilitator:



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Figure 1. Procedures of Online teaching (adapted from Weber & Leberman, 2000)

1. Students make a good preparation and structure which is critical to the success of the students chat session.
2. Students make themselves familiar with technology. Familiarising students with the technology early on in the course can help them to use chat effectively. Teacher can introduce students to the process by scheduling a practice chat session during the orientation period or during the first week of the course. It is important for students to know what the teacher expects them to accomplish in their chat sessions and the teacher needs to give them feedback after each session either on a class level or individually especially for lower level students or first-time chatters.
3. **Teacher's Role.** Teacher should make a clear role whether she/ he is going to be an active participant or facilitator. She should determine what role she wants to assume as moderator and inform the students so they know what to expect in this program. It is important that teacher's facilitating style will depend on the level of competency, class personality, the dynamics of the chat group and the activity at hand.
4. **Evaluate Students' Skills and Abilities.** Teacher needs to prepare a questionnaire at the beginning (also at the end) of the course and ask your students to self-evaluate their technical skills (keyboarding, computer literacy, chat room experience, etc.), and for language experience also ask students about their linguistic abilities in the target language (such as reading, writing, listening, etc.). This information can be used to form chat groups or partners. Ideally, students with similar language and computer skills should work together to avoid one of the group members dominating or intimidating the others.

Step 2. Creating Online Community

The next step is creating online community in which the teachers and students involve in this stage. In this case, students are independently searching some native speakers and non native speaker pals to chat. They can organise a chat room by visiting some website which establishes language partner exchanges via internet for the individual, even for the whole class with native speaker The teacher's role is to facilitate them how to create it through some discussion and explanation.

Step 3. Doing the Online Chat

On this stage, students do the online chat on the topic given (in one-on-one conversations

with the instructor, small group, pairs, individual). Before doing the online chat, the students need to prepare everything such as: getting their partner ready for the chat, preparing the things that might help them during the chat e.g. useful expression and language of chat. The topics are presented in the following table.

Table 1. The Topics Presented for Online Chatting

No	Topics	Methods
1	Interview the instructor on everyday activity	Individual work
2	Gather information about something and compare with a friend	Pairwork
3	Interview a person/ friend about her/ his experience	Pairwork
4	Interview a guest from another country of free topic	Individual work
5	Interview a man/ woman from another country who have family about his/ her future plan	Group work

It is crucial for the students to keep the documents of their online chat. They need to save and print the results of their chat for data purposes and the students can track their language use and development.

Step 4. Presenting on Classroom Discussion

The follow-up activity after one task is completed is that students present the transcripts of the dialog to a class conference and complete other tasks: writing summary or a short report. Having the discussion of the chat logs allows students to review the discussions. This activity can create greater interest in the course, which may lead to more active participation and a greater sense of community among learners. On this session, the students have already been given a model how to do classroom conference. Students do the oral report which can be working in a pair, small group and classroom discussion depending on the method they are completing the task. If the

students need to do the task individually, they will make an individual report. The presentation and discussion in which they have made during the conference, other students are allowed to interrupt and ask questions. After the conference session is made, the students need to hand both their chat logs and summary to the teacher.

Evaluation

Since this activity involves students’ active participation during inside and outside the class, the evaluation focuses on these following considerations: the chat transcripts of each session, students’ classroom presentation projects (conference) and students’ participation in the online chat and in classroom conference. The two activities focusing on the communication skills of the students should pay attention to these following criteria: fluency (ability to keep the conversation flowing), richness of vocabulary, use of correct grammar and idiomatic use of language.

DISCUSSION

Online Chat and Learning Improvement

Online chat, one of the forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), takes place in a real time interaction in which during the activities learners are exposed to input, output, attention to feedback and linguistic forms (Gass, 1997; Krashen,1985; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain, 1985).

Second language (L2) learners tend to differ in terms of culture, knowledge, ability, etc. therefore multimedia must strive to create learning environment that accommodate a variety of learning styles. SLA researches emphasized that literacy development can improve by providing multiple opportunities for learners to interact in communicative setting with authentic materials relevant to students own needs (Krashen, 1982). He also stated that comprehensible input was both necessary and a sufficient condition for the acquisition of language. In making the interaction, learners use the target language to negotiate both meaning and form. They will negotiate meanings while producing output in a social context which is

crucial for their language development (Swain, 1995).

Studies point three benefits of CMC. First, CMC provides more equal participation than face-to-face interaction (Chun, 1994; Lee, 2002). The special thing from CMC is that it allows shy and less-motivated learners to interact with others (Kelm, 1992). Second, CMC allows the learners process input, monitor and edit output through a self-paced learning environment (Lee, 2002); at the same time the learner pays attention to certain aspects of discourse (Warschauer, 1997). Learners are more aware with the language they produce. This situation may benefit learners in an attempt to overcome incorrect target language features (Lee, 2002; Pica, 1996). Finally, CMC increases language production (Chun, 1994). The reduction of teacher talk is in favor of learner language production (Lee, 2002).

As what studies of CMC pinpoint, the use of online chat can provide opportunities, yet related, activities for practicing the different skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as for enhancing communicative and pragmatics competence. By having opportunities to exchange information with others in different modes and to investigate and process the authentic information, learners are challenged beyond grammatical and syntactic competence to demonstrate discourse competence and pragmatic competence.

Chat for educational purpose can be divided into five categories including Gonzalez (2003): free topic chat, collaborative task-oriented chat, academic seminar or presentation chat, practice chat and evaluation chat. The topics presented in the course may involve: free talk with classmates, self introduction, class discussion, questions and answers in groups, panels or debates, interview someone/ guests/ teachers, guest speaker, collaborative groups working on projects, tutoring/mentoring/ online course, oral presentation, and giving exams in an online chat room.

The topics for online chat course should be carefully set up so that the objectives of the course will finally be embraced as what Poole, Axemann, Calongne & Cox (2003) propose that:

- Topics presented for online chatting should be related with the topics in the syllabus
- Students need to understand how to do the chatting activities
- The chat can be part of continuum of requirements for a course, with pre and post projects and assignments.

Related to the above discussion, Egbert, Chao & Hanson-Smith (1999) have discussed eight conditions for optimal language learning environments, most of which can be fostered in chat: opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning, interaction with authentic audiences in the target language, students' involvement in authentic tasks, exposure to and encouragement to produce varied and creative language, feedback, metacognitive guidance, and an ideal anxiety or stress level.

Seen from the point of view of interaction, chat can promote different types of modes:

- Student-to-student, to generate richer exchanges of experiences, viewpoints, ways of life, cultural tradition and customs, and peer correction.
- Student-to-teacher, to allow for individual or group help and guidance, and to foster peer or self-correction.
- Student-to-expert, to open up contact with outside world, encourage discussion of real-world situations with professionals and to broaden horizons through qualified knowledge.
- Student-to-online-resource, to encourage timely analysis and discussion of materials available online

Through one-on-one conversations with the instructor, small group work, pairs, individual study of transcripts, and interviews, chat can accommodate difference learning styles. This leads students to have autonomous learning which allows them to fit their online discussions around their commitments and responsibilities.

Students' Attitudes

Online chat gave students an impression that they have more opportunities than what they

can get in regular classes. Besides it is more challenging, students think that online chat gave an experience they have not had before. Some said that at the beginning, it was stressful and frustrating but they could get used to it soon. Most of them said that they improve their language and boost their confidence in using the language.

Additional advantages to be obtained from online chat are: it increases computer literacy, the development of communicative skills (carrying on a conversation, interviewing and negotiating meaning). Further, it promotes development of social skills and socialization skills and proper etiquette (greeting others, introducing oneself, leave taking, stating and reinforcing one's own ideas, interacting politely and appropriately, showing respect and being responsible, making choices, helping, coaching, etc).

At last, it can also help them develop other skills essential for them, such as personal skills (independence and autonomy), interpersonal skills (asking, listening, interviewing, discussing, suggesting, negotiating, helping) and organizational skills (setting objectives, time and project management).

Some students feel excited of picking the frequently use of slang and abbreviations. At first, they felt it was stressful since they were unfamiliar but they could catch up after consulting with their dictionaries, list of chat jargon and even asking the native speaker of the meaning of the words and expressions.

Students also mentioned some unpleasant things they encountered during chatting activities. There are some stories of inappropriate behavior which lead the students uneasy to do this activity. Thus, they need to be able to anticipate when the terrible things might appear during the activity. Freiermuth (1998: 85) argues that it is better to have students chat with other students in the same class for a number of reasons, including that native speakers become disinterested in chatting with non-native speakers of low proficiency, that the language used may be too difficult, that there is not topic, and that the non-native speakers may be confronted with harsh language, insults, etc. However, using chat rooms or other sites that are specifically intended for non-native speakers

seems to solve some of these problems. Native speakers who come to such sites are interested in chatting with non-native speakers, and they are likely to be patient with their difficulties in expressing themselves in the target language. In addition, the teacher may give the students certain tasks to fulfill during their time chatting, for example, certain information to ask for.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Language teacher can easily become discouraged by the challenge of using ICT (Information and Communication Technology). They therefore need to focus on students' needs and choose the best tool for the task. Further, it is crucial to explore familiar technology first before taking on a new technology, although this will depend on the pedagogical purpose. When approached strategically, chat sessions can enhance the learning experience providing opportunities for high quality and interesting discussions and creative language fluency activities that appeal to many different learning styles. To conclude, chats do not promote learning on their own. Their effectiveness lies in the way the activities are planned and carried out within the framework of the syllabus of a course. It is the responsibility of teachers to learn to use this environment to ensure optimal conditions for the students' performance. However, for chat to be successful, it must be used for well-planned instructional tasks and not simply for unstructured discussion.

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