Computer Chat in the Language Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

The Need

There are many applications for the use of computer technology in the field of foreign (or second) language instruction. The focus of this article is on the use of computer chat technology in the classroom for enhancing the acquisition of language skills. The specific question being addressed is how this unique communication tool can enhance the development of oral communication skills in a way that other methods cannot. Although the communication with chat is not done through spoken words, it is believed that the use of this technology can greatly enhance the language acquisition process, specifically for spoken communication.

In the Freshman English (FE) classroom at Asia University (AU), many teachers use pair and group activities for students to practice using spoken English. But the tendency among many (if not most) Japanese students in FE classes is to quickly revert to their common L1 (Japanese, for most students). In a primarily monolingual class, the open use of the common first language, even by a few students, can be disruptive to the entire class. A frequent problem discussed among English teachers at AU is the question of how we can keep students communicating with each other in English for a longer period of time, to increase the effectiveness of communication activities.

Additionally, even when groups are successful in carrying out an activity, there is often a hierarchy that develops (Freiermuth, 1998), leaving those individuals who tend to be less aggressive out of the conversation or discussion. Some students are more confident and dominant than others, and participate disproportionately to their less social, or less fluent, classmates. On the other end of the scale are the silent students, who refuse to participate, even in pair activities, leaving their partners and their teacher with some level of frustration.

This article presents one alternative tool for the English classroom -- one that is effective and powerful for facilitating the personal use of English among all students for real communication. It is especially helpful with the challenge of teaching homogenous learners (students having a common L1). The use of computer chat in the foreign language classroom holds great potential for enhancing the acquisition of language.

Computer Chat

Computer chat is a means of communicating instantaneously through computers that are linked electronically by either the Internet; or a local area network (LAN) of an institution or organization (e.g. the AU server). In spite of some differences, these two methods have many characteristics in common. When chatting, all participants are able to type and send, as well as receive, messages between members of a group simultaneously. In most cases, the typed messages are transmitted and displayed on the screens of all members of the group instantaneously, by a single click or keystroke. Chats can either be kept private, in which access to the group is restricted, or can be

more public and open, such as with online chat rooms. Chats can be held between two individuals, or groups of various sizes.

Within the field of computer assisted language learning (CALL), chatting falls within the category of computer-mediated communication (CMC). CMC includes synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous communication, such as electronic mail. Chatting is one type of synchronous communication.

Other types of CMC referred to in this article are e-mail (electronic mail) and MOOing (Multiple-user-domain Object Oriented). E-mail is a type of asynchronous communication, because it generally involves some lag time in message delivery, or requires the recipient to check an electronic in-box for new messages. There are distinct advantages to this type of communication, such as the freedom to send messages at one's own convenience, without the need to coordinate schedules with the recipient(s). MOOing is a type of task-based online communication, which includes elements of both synchronous and asynchronous communication.

There are many different online (Internet-based) chat rooms and software packages for LANs that can be utilized. The software most accessible to students at Asia University is Microsoft NetMeeting, which allows for chatting by connecting individuals through the Internet or through a LAN. Other software packages for LANs include FirstClass, ChatNet (shareware from ELS, Inc.) and InterChange (from The Daedalus Group, Inc.).

There are a number of online chat rooms that are specifically designed for non-native speakers of English, such as Dave Sperling's ESL Café Chat Central. However,

the use of online chat rooms is much less reliable than using networked computers, and the more controlled setting (in which the teacher can determine the specific participants) appears to be more beneficial for the English language class to use. Although there are distinctions between online and LAN-based chatting, their common traits make them worth considering together for their pedagogical advantages.

How I Started

My introduction to using chat in the classroom came while I was teaching a grammar and writing course at the English Program for Internationals (EPI) on the campus of the University of South Carolina in 1998. Each week, the class was scheduled to hold one session in the computer lab. Although the time was most often used for word processing and other writing-related activities and training, I occasionally had my students do computer chat in pairs for the communicative aspect of the course goals. The software used was FirstClass, which provided for synchronous or asynchronous communication through the LAN of the institution. The enthusiasm of students and the laughter and joy generated in that small room were far beyond my expectations.

After arriving at Asia University in 1999, I did not consider the use of chat in the classroom initially. But then I discovered how difficult it was for many students to use their knowledge of English to sustain even a brief conversation in the classroom. At first, I looked to the Language Lab (LL) as a potential tool for intensive pair work. I had previously taught English at Allen Tanki Daigaku in Iwate, Japan, and used a

language lab in which students could be paired and monitored very effectively. But the lab at Asia University does not have the "pair practice" capability, so I looked to the computer labs for similar opportunities. There, I found the MS NetMeeting software to be available for connecting various computers through the university's LAN.

Drawing from my own experience of teaching ESL and EFL, and the research and observations of others, I have found many potential benefits, as well as some limitations, to using chat in the language classroom.

ADVANTAGES TO USING CHAT IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Universal Participation

One of the greatest advantages of using computer chat in the language class is the full participation that it stimulates, throughout the entire class. In regular oral classroom discussions, some individuals have a tendency to dominate the discussion, and some students refrain from participating at all. On the other hand, while using chat, it is difficult for anyone to dominate due to the nature of the communication process in which messages are sent in discreet units rather than in a continual flow of language (Herbert, 1999; Kern, 1995; Kelm, 1992). Freiermuth (1998) finds that this translates into greater "group equity."

In my experience with facilitating pair work for conversation, the advantage of universal participation during chatting has been startling. As others have observed

(Herbert, 1999; Rankin, 1997; Kern, 1995), even shy students who are virtually silent in the regular classroom will participate enthusiastically in chat sessions.

Lowering the Affective Filter, Increasing Confidence

One reason for the full participation of students when using chat for discussions or dialogues is that they are more at ease communicating in this format (Kitao, 1998-99; Rankin, 1997; Kern, 1995). The affective filter hypothesis, attributed to Krashen, asserts that students' ability to acquire a second language is directly related to their motivation, self-confidence, and lowered anxiety (Krashen, 1982). The distance and anonymity involved with chatting serve to reduce the anxiety often associated with face-to-face communication, due to pronunciation problems, fear of errors, and the urgency to make immediate responses.

Beauvois (1992) reported an improvement in both attitude and linguistic competence with a student who had been "at-risk" of failing her high school French class. After using computer chat for conversational communication, her student eventually succeeded in passing the class. Chun (1994, cited in Shield, Weininger, & Davies, 1999) stated that language learners who alternated computer chat sessions with oral (face-to-face) communication experiences increased their confidence in speaking the language.

Students often feel much freer to express themselves during chat sessions, and focus more on communication than on the language itself. In Kelm's study (1992, p.446),

there was a high degree of "candidness and honesty" among his students in chat discussions.

Increased Production of Original Language

The increased participation and lowered affective filter of students while using computer chat leads to an increase in the production of authentic language for real communication (Markley and Herbert, 1999). Freiermuth (1998) states that language production during group chats is especially improved among students who are normally more reticent in classroom group discussions. I would add that the same is true when using computer chat for pair practice (see Appendix). Some students in my classes who normally have trouble with even the simplest oral utterances were able to participate in text-based chats more actively.

I was struck with the implications of this increased student production for Freshman English at Asia University when I first sifted through the stacks of printed, English conversations my students had been participating in for the full class period, without any arm-twisting or carrot-offering. Participation in that first chat session (and subsequent sessions) was so enthusiastic that if there was anything I had to persuade students to do, it was to type "good-bye" to their partners and quit chatting, so the next class could begin. Only one of the 90-plus students in my four classes switched into Japanese, and he was reprimanded by his partner for doing so.

In a study at the University of California at Berkeley (1995), Richard G. Kern compared networked discussions using the software InterChange with oral discussions

in the classroom of his second semester, "four-skills" French course. The class met five times a week for 50 minutes each. Fourteen to 18 students participated in the discussions studied.

Kern compared the number of messages sent per student in chat discussions with the number of turns taken per student in oral discussions, and found that about 2 to 3 times as many text messages were sent in the lab than turns taken in the classroom. There would most certainly be an even greater increase for pair practice, since oral pair practice so often breaks down after a short time.

He also compared the number of sentences typed per student in chat discussions with the number of "T-units" (comparable to sentences) produced in oral discussion and again found approximately a 2 to 3 times increase when using chat. The number of words increased by 1.5 to 2 times.

Although some difference could be attributed to the fact that the computer chat sessions preceded the classroom discussions, and it is difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions from averages, there does appear to be a distinct increase in language production by a wider range of students, when using chat.

Input and Interaction

Comprehensible input is an essential element of language acquisition, according to Krashen (1982, cited in Kitao, 1998). It seems logical that the amount of comprehensible input received by each participating student should normally increase in proportion to the increased production of the group (or pair) using chat.

In addition to comprehensible input, Ellis (1985, cited in Kitao, 1998) includes interaction as another condition for rapid language acquisition. Chatting facilitates a high degree of interaction, depending on the type of task and the focus of the assigned activity.

Oral-Type Discourse

Another finding of Kern's study was that the framework of the communication during chat discussions seems to "resemble that of oral communication, even though the medium is written" (1995, p. 460). Some of the aspects of oral discourse that Kern found in computer chat included "a light, familiar style, direct interpersonal address, rapid topic shifts, and frequent digressions" (p. 460). He compared the discourse in chat to that of passing notes to classmates across a room.

Helm (1992) also cites an oral-type flow of discourse when chat was used in his Brazilian Portuguese class at the University of Texas in Austin. There was spontaneity in chat not normally found in oral classroom conversations.

In surveying 48 language learners about their use of synchronous communication (MOOing and chatting), S. Kathleen Kitao (1998) found that several felt they had improved their vocabulary, especially slang and conversational vocabulary. Negretti (1999) went so far as to attribute a marked improvement in oral proficiency among his eight intermediate EFL students in Italy to their use of chat for two months.

Morphosyntactic Features and Discourse Functions, such as Opinion-Giving

Kern (1995) reported that in the chat discussions, students produced a wider variety of verb forms and clause types (morphosyntactic features), as well as a wider variety of discourse functions. One discourse function that was greatly increased was the requesting of opinions. Kelm (1992) reported an increased willingness to also express opinions during chat sessions.

Ease of Monitoring

In a regular classroom, it can be difficult for a teacher to monitor the output of various students in a discussion, and even more so when more than one discussion is taking place, or pairs of students are conversing. But in a computer lab, the teacher is able to see all the language being used by each of the students in a discussion, on his own screen, and to either "silently" observe, or participate and comment, as desired. With some types of software, the teacher can log on concurrently to all the channels being used by different groups, and quickly switch between discussions or conversations with the click of a mouse. This allows the teacher to efficiently monitor each group or pair from one location (Herbert, 1999; Freiermuth, 1998). While monitoring the communication, the teacher can jump in to the conversation to make a comment or help with a breakdown of communication, or just observe and be cognizant of progress and problems.

Tracking of Syntactic Structures Used by Students

When teachers monitor students' conversations, they can easily track the syntactic structures used, and chart the most common errors. Thus they can design classroom instruction to fit student needs more efficiently (Rankin, 1997). This is made possible, not only by the real-time monitoring of language being used, but by printing the text of each conversation for later review (Freiermuth, 1998). It should be noted that with some chat software, printing the text is very simple, while with others the text must be pasted into a different software application in order to print.

If this seems like a daunting task for a large class, it should be noted that it is not necessary to correct all the language used by each student, but only to review the printed records (each containing the work of more than one student) for common or significant errors. If individual correction is desired, it can largely be done through self-editing and/or peer editing of the recorded texts.

Increased Appreciation for Practice with other Non-Native Speakers

Although this has not yet been investigated, it is possible that the enthusiasm for chatting with classmates could very likely translate into a greater appreciation among students for the value of practicing a foreign language with other learners of the language. Some students, while being otherwise enthusiastic language learners, are convinced that only conversation with native speakers is beneficial to their acquisition of the language, and tend to remain reticent when given the opportunity for individual

practice with classmates. It is hoped that the positive experience of chatting could favorably influence such students.

Improved Reading of Longer Messages

Orlando R. Kelm used computer chat for group discussions among learners of Portuguese, in which students produced longer utterances than would be found in a simple dialogue. In his study (Kelm, 1992), he found that students improved their capacity to read for meaning, rather than getting bogged down by unknown vocabulary. They were able to read "large chunks of language" for the main idea. This, of course, is for a discussion with a large number of participants producing comments, sometimes almost simultaneously.

Breakdown of Social Barriers Between Students

The problem of a social hierarchy mentioned above is largely eliminated in many cases. Kelm (1992) points to a case of two students reversing their normal roles of superiority-inferiority in using the language, and conversing spontaneously, something he had never observed between the two students in the classroom. I have noticed in my classes that even students who are very shy in the regular classroom communicate freely when matched with partners anonymously.

DRAWBACKS AND LIMITATIONS OF USING CHAT

Although there are numerous advantages to adding chat to a language curriculum, there are most certainly some drawbacks and limitations as well.

No Speaking Involved

First, if chatting can be viewed as a means of enhancing acquisition of oral language skills, it must be noted that chat sessions alone involve no actual spoken conversation (Freiermuth, 1998). There is no pronunciation or listening involved in the activity itself, aside from an occasional shout across the room. This could be considered a limitation; however, as stated above, this is often one of the very reasons that students feel at ease (have a lower affective filter), and produce language so much more freely (Freiermuth, 1998). But if chat is being used for the development of oral language skills, then it must be seen as only one step in the process, not an end in itself.

Disappointing Results (in Writing Classes)

When chatting was first implemented for networked (LAN-based) communication in writing classes, there was great hope that it could be a powerful tool for improvement of writing skills. Students did tend to write more through the process of chatting in the classroom than with other types of activities. But the evidence from research does not support the hope that writing skills would actually be improved more quickly through the use of synchronous communication. Braine and Yorozu (1998) assert that it is likely

that LAN discussions provide no real benefit to ESL/EFL writing classes or lessons, beyond what can be done in traditional classes. The benefits of chat for oral skill development could potentially be overestimated, as well.

Dangers of Open Chat Rooms

One danger mentioned by Kelm (1992) is that of experiencing <u>flaming</u>, or receiving crude or offensive comments from others, especially in open, online chat rooms. While this was not a problem with students in Kelm's study, some of the expressions used by students in chats came across as more "abrupt and blunt" than intended (p. 448). Kitao (1998) reported that there has been some obscene language and sexual harassment with participants in Dave's ESL Café Chat Central, although in the single instance she experienced personally, the user was rebuked by others and signed off. She reports that flaming has not been an overall problem in the many hours she has used various ESL chat sites (S.K. Kitao, personal correspondence, November 13, 2000).

There is also a distinct chat etiquette and jargon that could be intimidating at first, and take time to acquire. These potential problems might point toward the use of LAN-based chatting software for interaction between students, if they need to be protected from disturbing experiences, and make the most of their lab time for language learning.

Technical Problems

There are occasional problems with the reliability of software, and our memory of how to operate it (Freiermuth, 1998). Printing of the chat transcript may present a challenge, depending on the program being used. These problems can be exacerbated when using software in a different language than the teacher's L1, such as the Japanese software at Asia University. But becoming familiar personally with the software, having additional computers available, and keeping a back-up plan to make use of limited lab-time can help alleviate these problems, especially when the advantages of using chat are considered to be worth the effort.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE USE OF CHAT

In the future, the availability of the technology needed for computer chatting is likely to increase, both institutionally and privately (home computers). Not only is chatting a useful, new tool for the language classroom, but it is also becoming a more common form of regular, authentic communication between individuals in both personal and professional settings. The use of computer chat by language students is helpful for both the acquisition of the target language and for general communication in the modern world.

For some teachers, the technology involved in using computer chat may be intimidating, but it is becoming easier and more user-friendly all the time (Freiermuth, 1998). There may be occasional in-class problems, however, when dealing with technology, so thorough planning and preparation should be done before trying new

tools such as computer chat. Teachers should be familiar with the software and hardware involved, and prepare students in the classroom (for both the communication and the technical aspects), as much as possible. Also, if technical help is available during the computer session, it should be thoroughly utilized.

The usefulness of chat in the language classroom is limited, but when used for specific purposes (e.g. increasing participation, building confidence, pinpointing and addressing oral-type errors, or developing original language and dialogues), it can be advantageous. Taking the printed text of discourse created in a chat session by students back into the classroom for subsequent follow-up work can bridge the gap between the written form and the oral. This can provide for the speaking, pronunciation, and listening that are absent during the actual chat sessions. The advantage of first doing the chat session over just a traditional class is that the language taken away from the chat session has been developed by the students themselves through the process of authentic communication, not through writing a "script" for their dialogue.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Computer chat has distinct features that can be termed oral-type language and does indeed tend to increase student motivation for real communication when used as a supplement to other classroom activities. After Kern's study, U.C. Berkeley began including one chat session every two weeks in all their second-semester French classes (Kern, 1995).

More research is needed in order to show more clearly whether chatting can actually enhance oral language acquisition, and which type of language goals can best be addressed by the addition of chatting to the curriculum. It would also be beneficial to develop, test, and categorize various types of activities for their appropriateness. The use of chat for pair practice and for developing extended dialogues is one area that could be of great interest for further research.

A variety of different software packages and online chat rooms are available that can be used, depending on the availability at any particular institution. It would be helpful to have a comparison of the different means of chatting, with their varied features that are applicable to the language classroom.

Online communication is actually changing the very categories of types of language, beyond the oral and written categories. Since the prevalence of computer-mediated communication in everyday life is only likely to increase in the immediate future, it would be beneficial to define the categories and how they relate to each other.

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Appendix

EXCERPTS FROM COMPUTER CHAT SESSIONS

The following excerpts are from the first computer chat session of the year, in the spring of 2000. The students used pseudonyms. Spelling errors were left uncorrected.

Dialogue 1:
9-52 8-8-9:	Hello Nice to meet you. How are you today?
sato Liz:	Good morning! How are you?
9-52 8-8-9:	I am fin thank you and you?
sato Liz:	I'm sleepy.
9-52 8-8-9:	Why are you sleepy?
sato Liz:	What are you doing this weekend?
sato Liz:	I didn't sleep well.
9-52 8-8-9:	I am going to part time job
sato Liz:	What kind of job?
9-52 8-8-9:	I do at Wtami which is a Izakaya Do you know it?
9-52 8-8-9:	I make mistakes
9-52 8-8-9:	which is an Isakaya
sato Liz:	I don't know.
9-52 8-8-9:	I do from 11:00 pm to 5:00 am on Saturday and from 5:00 pm to 11:00am on Sunday
sato Liz:	It's hard work isn't it? (the conversation continued)

Dialogue 2:
Yamamoto Ayako:	Hi!
Yamamoto Ayako:	How are you?
takahashi saburo:	I'm fine.
takahashi saburo:	What are you gonna do weekend?
Yamamoto Ayako:	I'm going to Higasinihonbasi.
Yamamoto Ayako:	I'm
Yamamoto Ayako:	I'm going to a part-time job personal interview.
Yamamoto Ayako:	How about you?
takahashi saburo:	I
Yamamoto Ayako:	Don't touch enter key!!!
takahashi saburo:	Sorry. I have no plan this weekend.
Yamamoto Ayako:	Are you going to spent relaxing?
takahashi saburo:	Yes. Maybe I will sleep this weekend.
Yamamoto Ayako:	I'm very enviable.
takahashi saburo:	Thank you! (continued)