Chapter LXVII
Chat Rooms for Language Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an overview of synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) platforms and identifies their hardware requirements. SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool, is featured as an example of how access to international communities of language teachers can be tapped to appraise the merits of chat tools for teaching and learning. Their review finds that Messengers are most widely used and popular because of their usefulness and friendly interface. Since most students are now using chat rooms, teachers must develop a better understanding of how to best utilize these systems in language teaching. Pedagogical methods are uncovered in order to ensure that best practices in the use of SCMC for language acquisition prevail. Trends in using online chat for teaching and learning are highlighted as advances in intelligent computer-assisted language learning (ICALL) contributes to what is becoming ICMC (intelligent computer mediated communication).

INTRODUCTION

The current state of the art in synchronous computer mediated communication (SCMC) offers a wide range of venues enhanced by increases in computer processing speed and Internet bandwidth. Although broadening the sophistication of communication tools cost hardware and broadband width, a wide range of software options are available online to give all users the ability to communicate easily with other individuals. Chat service providers are increasing on the Internet, and many are offering free online tools, software, and chat rooms to the public. In the U.S., the popularity of chat rooms is evident. A survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project identifies 42% of Internet users—more than 53 million American adults—using instant messaging (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). Sooner or later, instant messaging will surpass e-mail as the primary online communication tool. Since SCMC are freely accessible, teachers must be well versed in the hardware requirements and software capabilities so as to make the best use of these venues in their teaching.

This chapter focuses on free chat platforms including: (1) Pure text chat facilities, (2) Web chat rooms, (3) Messengers, (4) E-conferencing platforms, and, (5) other chat software. These chat tools are synchronous collaboration tools for teachers and students to share conversation and learn a language together. These chat rooms allow speakers from all parts of the world to easily interact in online classroom environments with a wide range of features. As the use of chat systems by young generations prevail, language teachers must understand and utilize these communication tools in their educational activities from an early start. Since each chat room has different features and limitations, it is important for language teachers to understand and employ them productively and creatively. Hence, this chapter provides practical information leading to the use of these tools swiftly and effectively.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAT ROOMS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Chat rooms allow text and audio communication conducive to both formal and informal language teaching and learning activities. The live interactive nature of communication in intelligent computer mediated language learning offers access to speakers of the target language in most settings. The advent, prevalence, and consideration of SCMC (chat) as a significant means for second and foreign language (L2) teaching and learning is acknowledged by Thorne and Payne's (2005) examination of its evolution. The emergence of these "intelligent environments" evolves as the interactive nature of communication allows second language students immediate access to native speakers of the target language. Although barriers to reaching a new target language are reduced with SCMC, differences in learning to write and speak a new language remain. Likewise difference in the L2 competence according to the

venue's capacity for interaction utilizing text or audio (Cziko & Park, 2003) are documented in the literature. For instance, evidence is mounting that text chat serves to increase writing skills and has a potential to help improve oral and listening skills (Liu, Moore, Graham, & Lee, 2003). Gains in communicative competence (linguistic and pragmatic) experienced by foreign language students by CMC (Chen, 2005) are also maintained and enhanced by access to the target language through synchronous means. However, these online SCMC venues present new challenges to linguistics in understanding the role of both text and speech in language acquisition. SCMC for language teaching and learning is a productive medium for the generation of language, and specifically text as speech. This chapter reviews text, audio and video chat platforms and addresses how these modes can be used to amplify and diversify the language teaching and learning process according to the medium used, while making online activities more comprehensive, motivating and authentic than ever before.

The impact of online tools on language teaching is recognized in several studies that have used the Internet to link second language learners with native speakers or other learners by Web or IRC text chat (Blake, 2000; Blake & Zyzik; Coniam & Wong, 2004; Ho, 2004; Negretti, 1999; Skinner & Austin, 1999; Smith, 2003, 2004; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002 ; Tudini, 2003), and by MOO text chat (Peterson, 2001; Schwienhorst, 2004; Weininger & Shield, 2003). Other studies investigate the text chat logs by discourse analysis or from the perspective of Interaction Hypothesis (Blake, 2000) and negation of meaning, while yet others focus on learners' motivations or participation. No matter what target languages are studied, most studies address text chat rooms positively for language learning, and confirm that chat rooms are accessible environments for language practice, especially for learners who do not live in target language–speaking areas (Blake, 2000). Indeed, "CMC in the L2 classroom may

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