

MAKING CHAT WORK IN THE CLASSROOM

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Chat, one of the communication tools offered by the Internet, can be used with great benefit in language learning. Usually our students chat with other people online, in this way improving their language skills and typing skills, at the same time learning how to interact with other members of the English-speaking community. Thus, chat gives additional chance for off-class “speaking” practice (speaking through writing), and provides students with real purpose to use English outside the classroom. Chat can be also used in class, when the teacher and students are engaged in some chat discussion on a given topic. Here the benefit is that students do not speak directly to the teacher, who is often viewed by them as a judge and assessor, and psychological barriers connected with it are removed. What is more, there can be an additional element of suspense and fun added to the classroom if students and the teacher log under different nicknames and no one really knows who is who. Finally, chat can be used in class cooperation, when two classes from different countries or continents collaborate together by writing emails, executing common projects or contributing to a common website. An occasional chat session gives students a better chance to get to know each other and to seek instant answers to the questions they have to their keypals.

The purpose of this text is to present different chat possibilities that a teacher has to choose from, together with their benefits and drawbacks. This is meant as a how-to-do-it guide for teachers who might want to introduce chat in their lessons. I will show different possibilities to implement for less and more computer advanced teachers: portals, discussion groups, ESL sites, dedicated software and website chatrooms.

The simplest way to use chat is go to any major portal, such as www.yahoo.com, www.webcrawler.com, www.lycos.com, www.excite.com, etc. Chat is the usual feature of such portals, and there are usually a number of people chatting in different rooms. Our students can either join an existing room or start a new one. In order to use most portals, it is necessary to register for free, which takes some time to fill in the registration form and either choose the password yourself or wait for it to be sent by email. Once one gets a portal account (e.g., a Yahoo account), he/she may start chatting by logging in (giving Yahoo ID and a password), choosing from a number of chat rooms available, or creating one's own. Yahoo Chat has already the voice chat feature, which means that our students may speak to the microphone instead of typing. However, although portal chatting is free and easy to use, it

does have some drawbacks as well. First of all, portal chats such as Yahoo are quite slow to download, which may matter in places with slower Internet connection. Also, they can be accessed by everyone, and because of that such chatting may not be the safest for our students. Finally, a user is always logged under the same nickname, which makes the element of play under false identity impossible.

Another method of using chat in the classroom is setting up a discussion group, e.g., at <http://groups.yahoo.com>, and adding students to it (for detailed instructions on how to set up and manage a discussion group, see "A Word from a Techie, *Teaching English with Technology*, vol. 1, no. 2, March 2001). Once a group is created and its members register to get Yahoo accounts, they may participate in chat sessions, accessible only for members, and not anyone else. Thus, this method is more suitable for classroom use, as it prevents non-members from participating in a chat session. However, just as was the case in portal chats above, YahooGroups also tend to be slow in downloading, which may be some obstacle for using this device effectively.

In order to give students the opportunity to chat with other learners of English, the chat feature of Dave's ESL Café, www.eslcafe.com, one of the best and most comprehensive EFL/ESL sites on the Web, could be used. After accessing the main site, "Chat" from the menu at the top of the page should be chosen. First time visitors need to register by giving the name, the email address and a chosen password, but it takes only a while. The site sends the confirmation number to the email address specified, and a form must be filled with one's name, password and a confirmation number. This process, though probably irritating, makes sure that it is only those who really want to chat do that, since many chats can be accessed by much quicker entry (e.g., a Polish portal, www.onet.pl, has an option of instantaneous entry under a temporary nickname). The advantage of this site is that, as it is directed specifically to the learners of English, our students are more likely to find there people with similar level of English interested in practising English. However, it may be the case that there are not too many users chatting there (when I tried it, there were only 21 people there).

Another possibility is adopting a software approach, and installing special program allowing students to chat. A good example here could be mIRC, downloadable for free for 30 day-evaluation trial from the Net at <http://www.mirc.co.uk/get.html>. The programme is easy to install and use, and it does not demand loading a website, as it resides in the computer's memory and only connects to the IRC server. Thus, it is recommended especially in places, where the connection is not too fast. Either students can join an existing channel or the teacher may create a new channel for a class discussion, and users may log under different

nicknames, log out and log in again. Also, it allows the teacher to control the users, by for example finding out who is who, kicking a person telling him/her why or not, or banning someone altogether from the chat. The drawback of this approach is that the program needs to be downloaded and installed on every computer in the lab. As sometimes other students make a mess on lab PCs, removing files or shortcuts, it may turn out that when coming for a lesson, some students do not have the program on their workstations. Thus, in order to use effectively this tool, the teacher needs to make sure that all computers have it, and if necessary, install it from a network drive of the Local Area Network.

In order to make a chat room independent of any other computer lab users, and to use it for in-class discussions, a good idea is to create it on a class website. Here there are two possibilities: either download a Java applet and put files on your server, or copy and paste a code to a website, and a chat room will be loaded from the chat provider. The example of the first method is jPilot (to try it out, go to <http://batory.plo.lublin.pl/~jkrajka/chat4.html>), is a very simple tool, downloadable from the Net from www.jpilot.com. This chat room, being a Java applet, is in your computer's memory, and does not have to be downloaded each time a user wants to access it. It is easy to make it function: you just download the file, unzip it, move to the folder with your website, and create a link to a chat4.html file. You can modify the code by changing the channel names and server names (in order to do that, open the chat main file, chat4.htm in a notepad, and replace channel name values and server name values with the ones of your choice). If you want to create an environment accessible only for your students, it is especially important to change channel names. Also, such a chat room may be used in class collaboration, when we alert the partner class to the URL, channel and server to go to. Of course, such a chat room can still be accessed by unwanted visitors if it is accessible from the position of the main site, here <http://batory.plo.lublin.pl/~jkrajka>. However, we may decide not to link the chat room from the main site, and just give our students a specific URL to go to (here, <http://batory.plo.lublin.pl/~jkrajka/chat4.html>), or, if we want them to access it without having to remember the address, we might make a "secret link" (see the right bottom corner of the main page, <http://batory.plo.lublin.pl/~jkrajka> for a hyperlink). You can do such a link by changing the font colour to the colour of the background. Again, this is some measure that can be taken to prevent unwanted visitors from accessing our chat room. In comparison with previous chats, this room, although not very sophisticated, is extremely simple to set up and easy and quick to work with.

If you go to <http://batory.plo.lublin.pl/~jkrajka/chat1.html>, there is another chat room that you can have on your page, and which you can get for free from www.chatspace.com. Again it is a

Java applet, but this time in order to put it on your website you need to copy and paste a code that is given to you to your website. Again this can be linked from the main page or not, but in this applet, in order to start chatting, your computer connects with the server to get the chat room from it. As there is an advertising banner in it, it may take some time, and such a chat room is definitely slower to use than the previous one, which has all the files in our server's memory.

Of course, this short account does not cover all possible ways of organising chatting online. I tried to show the simplest ways of doing that, without discussing arrangements demanding more advanced knowledge of HTML and webdesigning. It is hoped that this practical discussion will encourage teachers to use chat in their classrooms.