FROM CHATTING TO ORAL FLUENCY:

USING CHAT TO IMPROVE SELF-CONFIDENCE AND INCREASE WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE

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Abstract

Computer-mediated communication such as synchronous chat can be utilized to promote speaking practice. This paper describes a synchronous chat freeware and how it can be used to increase learners' self-confidence so they will be willing to communicate orally in a language class. Benefits and challenges of using this freeware are identified to guide practitioners in their decision-making.

Introduction

Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) have shown that using CMC can help to improve student participation of minority groups (Cummins and Sayers, 1990) and women (Selfe, 1990; Flores, 1990), develop writing skills through increased practice (DiMatteo, 1990, 1991), collaboration (Schultz, 2000) and peer editing (Boiarsky, 1990; Moran, 1991; Mabrito, 1992), facilitate social learning (Barker and Kemp, 1990) and enhance student motivation (Warschauer, 1996). In the field of second language acquisition, CMC has been found to be helpful in inducing a great deal of negotiation of meaning between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs), which in turns facilitates learning when learners modify and restructure their messages through repetitions, confirmations, comprehension checks and so on (Long, 1996; Blake, 2000), and improves grammatical competence (Pellettieri, 2000). There is also an assumption from some studies that synchronous CMC, particularly chatting, is likely to improve one's speaking ability due to the strong resemblance between chatting and speaking. Chun (1994) hopes that the strong resemblance between the sentences in a text chat and utterances in a spoken conversation could promote the transfer of "the written competence gained from CACD "[Computer-Assisted Classroom Discourse]…to the students' speaking competence." (p. 29)

Similarly, Pellettieri (2000: 59) says that,

because synchronous NBC [Network-based Communication], such as chatting, bears a striking resemblance to oral interaction, it seems logical to assume that the language practice through NBC will reap some of the benefits for second language development as practice through oral interaction.

Unfortunately, as Lee (1999) points out, "little has been discussed specifically concerning why and how text-based CMC can be used to help language learners improve spoken fluency and how CMC technology needs to be shaped and adapted to meet the goal of communicative language learning."

This paper describes the use of a synchronous chat freeware and how it can be used to facilitate oral practice in an ESL classroom. A sample lesson plan is provided to illustrate the incorporation of this chat freeware in a speaking lesson. Benefits and challenges of using chat freeware are identified to guide practitioners in their decision-making.

Using ICQ to Improve Spoken Fluency

Software

ICQ, a synchronous chat software was selected for this study because it is a freeware and is easily available. This freeware can be downloaded from http://web.icq.com/ for both PC and Mac computers as well as handheld and wireless platforms. The latest version for PCs, ICQ Pro 2003a beta build 3800 is about 3.79MB in size. In addition, users can now download the software in various languages such as Arabic, Swedish, Dutch, French, Chinese and Spanish. Unlike other synchronous chat freeware such as MSN Messenger (http://messenger.msn.com/) or Yahoo Instant Messenger (http://messenger.yahoo.com/) which only allow users to view the final version of their partners' composed utterances, ICQ presents the user with a split screen where they view their own messages in the top box as each letter is typed as well as each letter in their partners' composed utterances in the bottom box as they are typed. Therefore, turn-taking is not restricted by the mode of communication and speakers can choose to co-construct the discourse, resulting in a closer resemblance to oral conversation. ICQ also allows more than two speakers to chat at the same time. Each speaker in the chat session will have their own box and their user name at the top of the box. Figure 1 shows the chat screens for two chat partners.

Figure 1. Chat screen for two users. (http://www.public.iastate.edu/~nkerli/chat.html)

A sample lesson plan for an ESL classroom

The minimum requirements needed to carry out a lesson with ICQ involve access to computers with Internet access (preferably one computer per student), approximately 4MB of disc space

and a text editor such as Notepad. The ICQ software should be pre-installed and the teacher should set up accounts for each student prior to the class activity in order to save class time. Once these accounts and passwords have been set up, the teacher can give the students the user names and passwords so they can log-on during any session without the teacher's assistance. In addition, it is necessary to pair up the students' accounts so each student has at least a chat partner listed in the ICQ chat list. Before a chat session, the teacher also needs to provide students with a task so they have a purpose to chat (see Appendix 1 for an example). Once students have understood their task, they set off on the chat session for 20 minutes. Upon completion of their chat task, they can save the chat session which can be printed out in Notepad for future reference or self-analysis. Till this point, ICQ has only been helping students with the brainstorming and organization of their discussion points. Thus, in order to help students with their speaking skills, the teacher should follow-up with a report session where students either take turns to report their discussion points or an open session where students are given opportunities to share what they shared with their chat partners.

Starting a chat session and printing the saved chat session

1. Click on the **Start Menu** at the bottom left corner of the screen and launch the ICQ program.

2. Enter user password.

3. If the user is assigned to send the **Chat Request**, click the left button of the mouse next to the partner's name. The partner will receive a request which he/she must accept in order to begin the chat session.

4. Once the chat boxes appear on the screen, the users may begin the chat session.

5. After the session has been completed, users can click to close the chat box. A pop-up menu then prompts them to save the chat session. Learners do so by clicking "**OK.**"

6. Save the chat session on the desktop or in a folder where it can be easily located later.

7. In order to print the saved file, open a text editor such as Notepad. Then open the saved file from its current location and click "**Print**."

Benefits of using ICQ

In a simple lesson plan as described above, ICQ can help ESL learners, particularly adult learners, improve their oral proficiency in at least two ways. First of all, a study by Compton (2002) found that chatting helped some students, particularly those with lower level of oral proficiency, to feel more prepared to speak up in class. Journal entries by these students show that chatting helped them to develop and organize their ideas and sentence constructions as well

as familiarize themselves with the required vocabulary thereby increasing their perception of their speaking competence and their confidence.

Studies by Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999), Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986), and MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) have found that second language classroom anxiety has a strong speaking anxiety element. It is therefore necessary to help second language (SL) learners to feel more confident so they will be willing to take risks and use the given opportunities to practice speaking in class. Compton (2002) claimed that participants who exchanged constructive input with their partners during the chat session took more turns to speak in an open discussion and produced more words than those who were not on-task during the chat activity. One student reported that he was more willing to communicate because he felt more prepared to speak after chatting. He stated in his journal entry, *"It is an excellent form for us to speak. Because we have already write down the words. We can also easily to speak it out."* (Compton, 2002:64). Therefore, by helping to improve the learners' self-confidence, they are then more willing to take risks to speak in the L2, which in turn will provide the practice they need to improve their speaking skills. As they continue to see improvement in their speaking ability, they will feel more confident and more willing to seek out communication opportunities, thus reinforcing a positive cycle.

In addition, the chat session can be a beneficial aspect to the lesson as learners are able to see their thoughts as well as their partners' thoughts in print before having to speak in front of their classmates. Compton's study (2002) also revealed that there is a significant transfer of language from the written mode (chatting) to the spoken mode (oral report). Her study showed that learners transfer lexical phrases through direct transfer, substitution/ellipsis and paraphrasing. Here, she defines a direct transfer as "identical or almost identical lexical phrases that appear in both chat and oral transcripts" (Compton, 2002: 73) while substitution/ellipsis involves a slight substitution of pronouns, synonyms (nouns, verbs or adjectives), expressions or omission of one or more non-content words. Finally, paraphrasing from chat mode to oral communication maintains ideas but differ in word choice, sentence structure and organization. She pointed out that learners who have lower proficiency depended more on direct transfer and substitution/ellipsis compared to those who have higher proficiency. In addition, she also found out that learners not only transferred their own language, they also transferred their partners' utterances.

Challenges of using ICQ

Essentially, the technology itself will not be the chief driving force in improving the learners' speaking skills. In this case, ICQ is merely the tool which the instructor may utilize to address the affective state of the learners. If applied successfully, the instructor may help to decrease the fear of learners, especially adult learners who perceive themselves to be socially adept individuals in their first language. This will encourage them to take the risk in speaking up in class despite having to grapple with the target language.

In order to ensure successful application, the instructor needs to keep all participants on task. If learners did not receive adequate constructive input from the chat session, they will likely feel unprepared to share their ideas in class. In addition, the instructor needs to provide an authentic need to communicate so learners will see the need to chat. Jig-saw tasks and information-gap tasks in which each learner is given partial information have been shown to promote more negotiation. (Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun, 1993). Finally, learners need to be paired up carefully. If learners do indeed transfer their partners' language, the instructor should consider the following issues:

> - Will pairing a low-ability learner with a high-ability learner be beneficial to both parties or will it be detrimental to the learning of the high-ability learner?

> - How will it impact the learning process if one learner does not participate at the level expected by the instructor?

> - Will pairing students of the same-ability level be better than students with different abilities?

Equally important to the lesson plan is the opportunity for learners to speak in class. Providing learners the opportunity to chat online alone will not guarantee improvement in spoken proficiency. Learners need to transfer the experience to real oral communication. Despite the assumptions that the strong resemblance between chat and oral communication will transfer from written to spoken, learners still need the opportunities to practice speaking. ICQ will only provide the resource for learners to be more prepared and be less anxious when speaking up in class.

Making the most of ICQ

Since ICQ is an open chat channel, users can receive messages and chat invitations from users who are not on their list. Therefore, it is necessary to advise students to put themselves in the *Invisible Mode* once they have successfully established a chat screen with their partners to avoid any interruption.

Other than that, ICQ can be downloaded in different languages. Instructors of other languages such as Arabic, Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, French, Hebrew, Japanese, Russian and Swedish may consider utilizing ICQ for a similar class activity by downloading to translate the ICQ interface into these languages. (Find out more about Lingoware at http://www.icq.com/download/pro_languages.html)

In addition, ICQ also provides voice, ICQphone and video functions which could enhance the chat session. Instructors who wish to utilize these features should bear in mind that other hardware may be required and learners may find it difficult to concentrate on two different modes at any one time, for instance text chatting and voice chatting within one given task.

Another way of reaping the benefits of ICQ is to have an authentic collaboration with people outside the classroom. Instructors who can plan a chat session with another class of learners may consider the option of having their class of non-native speakers chat with a class of native speakers. As Lee (1999) pointed out, CMC has an advantage over face-to-face verbal interaction as "CMC is an interactive text-based medium" which can "make the texturalization of the linguistic intuition of native speakers available on the screen" allowing learners to notice the structure of the communication and target specific linguistic features. However, in this situation, it is important to keep in mind that the stakes should be similar, i.e. the native speakers should have some authentic need to communicate with the non-native speakers. If the stakes are not similar, the group of students with lower stakes may not take the activity seriously causing the learning exchange to be less constructive for the other group.

Finally, ICQ allows chat sessions to be saved and printed out in text editors such as Notepad. Instructors may consider letting students use these print-outs as references or self-evaluations after the chat session. Learners may then utilize the print-outs for noticing and analyzing the language structures either at the discourse level, or structural level or any other levels for "reinforcement so it [sic] they can be used in later, different linguistic situations" (Lee, 1999).

Conclusion

As Lee (1999) points out, "no single instruction method can ensure the mastery of spoken skills of TL." Online chatting is not a replacement for face-to-face interactions. It is an alternative instructional method that could be used to promote oral proficiency by increasing ESL learners' willingness to take risks through visual preparation, i.e. seeing and organizing their ideas in print and reducing their anxiety level. This paper presents a possible lesson plan and the incorporation of a chat activity to address the affective state of ESL learners in hope that CMC can have a positive impact. Finally, alternative uses of chat activities have been suggested and other pedagogical issues have been raised to highlight the need for more experimentation and empirical researches to fully "harness" the features of CMC for the benefit of language learning.

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APPENDIX

Career Requirement: Experience vs. Paper Qualification
A communicative task using computer-mediated communication

(modified after Compton , 2002:101)

Instructions for Student A

Task Situation

In today's modern society, career is a big part of people's lives. However, in order to secure a good job, one has to fulfill certain requirements. You believe that a person with working experience can build a better career in a shorter amount of time. You need to present **three** arguments for the importance of work experience over paper qualification. On the other hand, your partner will present three arguments for the importance of paper qualification.

Instructions for Student B

Task Situation

In today's modern society, career is a big part of people's lives. However, in order to secure a good job, one has to fulfill certain requirements. You believe that a person with paper qualifications can build a better career in a shorter amount of time. You need to present **three** arguments for the importance of paper qualification over working experience. On the other hand, your partner will present three arguments for the importance of working experience.

What you need to do

1. Click on the **Start Menu** at the bottom left corner of the screen to start the **ICQ** program.
2. Enter your password.
3. If you are assigned as **Student A**, send a **Chat Request** by clicking the left button of the mouse next to your partner's name. If you have been assigned as Student B, you may skip this step.
4. When you are in chat mode, share and discuss the arguments for the importance of work experience.
5. Your partner will present you with three arguments for the importance of paper qualification. Try to persuade him to change his mind.
6. After you and your partner have completed the task, click to end the chat session and a pop-up menu will ask if you want to save the chat. Click "**Save Chat**".
7. Save the chat on the **Desktop** under the file name **Chat**.
8. You have 20 minutes to complete the task.