

NOSY NEIGHBORS: A COLLABORATIVE CHATROOM ACTIVITY

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Introduction

Participating in online chatrooms has increasingly become part of the experience of our computer-literate students. Such synchronous electronic discussions have been advocated for foreign language instruction because they have affective, linguistic, and cognitive advantages (Beauvois, 1997). The various benefits they can provide for foreign language learners were summarized by Kern (1995) as: more frequent opportunity for students to express their ideas than in oral discussions, greater amount of target language production, more time to develop and refine comments - possibly leading to greater precision and sophistication of expression, encouragement of a collaborative spirit, enhanced motivation for language practice, reduction of anxiety in communicating orally in a foreign language, and positive effects on student's writing ability.

On the other hand, there have been some adverse effects of chatroom discussions reported. These include decentering the authority of the teacher's power, lesser attention to grammatical accuracy, less clear coherence and continuity of discussions (Kern, 1995). Other drawbacks are that the text under discussion is not explored in the same way as teacher-driven discussions, and some students experience frustration at having to communicate through a computer, a keyboard, and a screen (Beauvois, 1997). Even though chatrooms allow for the possibility of interaction, the students who cannot type as fast as the rest of the teammates and the ones who are shy and less confident do not necessarily increase their participation. To address this difficulty, teachers can design collaborative activities with clear objectives, unambiguous instructions, and a task that cannot be accomplished without everyone's participation.

This information-gap exercise is such an activity. It places the students in the role of nosy residents of an apartment building. A very quiet young woman named Ms. Taylor recently moved in and the neighbors get together to gossip about her. Each neighbor knows something about her routines and shares his or her observations with the other members of the class.

Level: intermediate or higher

Time: 2 hours

Materials: networked computers with access to online chatrooms.

Preparation

Prepare the lesson by becoming familiar with the chatroom software available at your institution. If necessary, create groups or chatrooms using the chatting software and assign students to a particular group. Decide how many students to assign to a chatroom and assemble enough cards for each member of the class. While seven roles are proposed below, I recommend placing only four or five students in a chatting group. Make arrangements to hold class in a language or computer lab with computers.

Procedure

1. Distribute role-play cards to each member of the class making sure that no two people in a team share the same card. It would be preferable if members of the same team were not seated next to each other. Each card should contain the instructions (figure 1) and the role (selected from figure 2) that they have been assigned.
2. Go over vocabulary words that may be new to the students of the class or culture-specific knowledge that students may not have such as what a grocery bagger and an owner of a coffee stand does.
3. Review the instructions with the class making sure that students understand the make-believe scenario that they are in and the two tasks (i.e. chatroom discussion and letter-writing) that they will have.
4. Ask the students to create three questions that they could ask their classmates to find out more about Ms. Taylor. If necessary, offer example questions such as “What does she do in the afternoons?” and “Does anyone know where she works?”
5. Circulate around the classroom as the students are silently chatting. Make sure that everyone can access the chatroom he or she has been assigned to.
6. Stop the chatroom discussions after approximately 45 minutes.
7. Review the form and the uses of modal auxiliaries with the entire class.
8. Briefly discuss the format of an informal letter. Suggest appropriate salutations and closings and allow students to write.

9. At the end of class or in the following class, ask students to share their letters with a partner and orally discuss the differences in their letters and their interpretations of who Ms. Taylor is and what she does.
10. To reinforce the grammar point and promote self-awareness and error-correction, ask students to print the transcript of their chatroom discussions and review it checking for errors that were made while they were chatting.

Instructions: All of the students in your group live in an apartment building in New York City. You recently noticed a new neighbor in your building. She moved in a month ago but she remains a mystery woman because no one knows who she is, where she comes from and what she does for a living. You are all very curious about her background, personality and habits. You have seen her at different times doing different things. In other words, you all have pieces of information about her. In the chatroom, you are going to have 45 minutes to ask each other questions. Try to find out what your classmates/neighbors know about Ms. Taylor and share information that you know. Ask and answer questions, but do NOT type the sentences exactly as they appear on your card. With what you find out, write a letter to your sister Ann describing Ms. Taylor to her. You can reach your own conclusions and even make up some details, but for the most part, your description needs to be based on information that you and your classmates were given. Use expressions with *could*, *should*, *must*, *may*, *might*, and *probably*.

Figure 1. Instructions

Postman

You are the local postman. You have been delivering mail in this neighborhood for almost fifteen years. You know that Ms. Taylor doesn't get too much mail. Last week, you delivered five letters, a bill and two magazines. Three of the letters came from the same sender. They were from a B. Taylor in California. Of the other two letters, one came from Helsinki and one from Chicago. The bill was from a company that provides Internet services. The magazines that Ms. Taylor got were *PC World* and *Women's Fitness*.

Businessman living on floor above

You are a businessman living on the floor above Ms. Taylor's apartment. She has one habit you like and one that annoys you

terribly. On weekends, she makes coffee and eggs for breakfast. You can smell them from your apartment. You enjoy sleeping in on weekends but since Ms. Taylor moved in, you are awakened by loud noises. On Sunday mornings, she listens to heavy metal music while running the vacuum cleaner.

Single mother living next door

You are a single mother living next door to Ms. Taylor. You are a waitress at a café nearby. One afternoon, a young lady knocked on your door by mistake looking for Ms. Taylor. She said that she was Ms. Taylor's sister, Belinda. Later that evening, you saw the two of them having a light dinner at the café where you work.

Young mother living down the hall

You take your baby out to Riverside Park for a walk every afternoon. Two or three times a week, you see Ms. Taylor doing stretching exercises and running in the park. You wanted to talk to her but she always wears headphones. She seems to love animals because she stops and pats every dog that she comes across.

Owner of coffee stand

You see Ms. Taylor every morning. She always buys a copy of *The New York Times* and a cup of coffee with two spoonfuls of sugar from you. She always brings exact change. Sometimes she even brings her own brown paper bag. You have noticed that she has beautiful hands but does not wear a wedding ring.

Teenage boy

You are 15 years old and very rebellious. You dye your hair blue and wear a nose ring. You always see Ms. Taylor at the bus stop in the morning. The two of you once talked briefly about computers and heavy metal music. You were quite surprised that she seemed to know a lot about these topics, so you asked her why she knew so much about them. She told you that she works with middle and high school students.

Grocery bagger

You work at the grocery store where Ms. Taylor shops. She usually comes to the store on Monday and Thursday evenings. Since your job is to put groceries in a bag, you always know what people buy. You have noticed Ms. Taylor because she never buys meat or fish. She drinks soy bean milk and eats all kinds of fruits and vegetables.

Figure 2. Roles to Play in the Chatroom

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this lesson, the students would have completed a chatroom discussion that engaged every member of the group. They exchanged information and interacted online by asking and answering questions in writing. The discussion acted as a springboard for a review of modal auxiliaries, a lesson on letter formatting and oral practice.

References

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