

**TEACHING AND LEARNING THROUGH CHAT:  
A TAXONOMY OF EDUCATIONAL CHAT FOR EFL/ESL**

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**Abstract**

Chat are synchronic communicative spaces which are incorporated into online activities, especially in EFL/ESL courses, due to the possibilities to interact with native and non-native speakers of the L2 they offer participants. Teachers interested in using chat for educational purposes should know the characteristics of different chat tasks according to the objective, role of moderator, and structure of the interaction to be generated, in order to plan their activities accordingly. This paper introduces a taxonomy for educational chat which was designed based on the author's experience using chat with language learners and in-service teachers.

**Introduction**

*"hmm It is very hard to chat useing English to chat for me, but it is fun!"* (original spelling)

A comment made by a Japanese student after using a chat for the first time, April 22

Synchronous communication in online learning is by all means an important element of language teaching nowadays. More and more, language teachers around the world are incorporating online components to their face-to-face classes to offer students the opportunity to communicate with speakers of the language, whether native or non-native. This exposure to the languages of the world through synchronous modes of communication has also other positive sides. On the one hand, it provides the opportunity to interact and learn with and from people from different cultures and different native languages. On the other hand, while using these means of communication, students get prepared for the use of web tools, which is an added value for their future as professionals in any area.

However, to be able to take this challenge, language teachers need to be computer literate, or e-literate, and should learn to make the most of web tools available and apply this knowledge to their educational contexts, which has not been an easy task. Some teachers are afraid of technology either because they have not been offered training or do not feel ready to shift their traditional educational paradigms to more collaborative and student-centered

paradigms needed in e-learning. Another obstacle is that most institutions do not have the required infrastructure to carry out online projects.

I have always been interested in learning and applying new methods and technologies to enhance my pedagogical practices, but it was not until I joined Webheads in Action (WIA) that I had the chance to learn to use CMC tools and applied them in my teaching.

Once I started participating in chat with Webheads, designing and implementing online units and courses, I began to realize the importance of chat in e-learning. One of the main criticisms towards e-learning is the lack of human contact, the isolation of the students in cyberspace. However, chat brings us the live, real time contact and interaction with and among colleagues and students, which, in turn, enhances discussion, interaction and collaboration. According to Kimura (Kimura, 2003), “human interaction, discussion and collaboration is still the foremost in leading to new knowledge and enabling us to overcome the challenges that face us in the classrooms”.

My university students and in-service teachers have also mentioned in their evaluation of online units and courses that group work in chat have been the most useful component for them in terms of learning gains and reflecting about their learning process.

All this, and my own experience of participating in chat for web tools exploration, as well as presenting or attending presentations and online conferences, led me to reflect in all the different ways in which chat can be used for learning and teaching, and the implications it has for the e-moderator and the audience.

### **Synchronous Communication – Chat**

Synchronous communication refers to real time communication, interaction with live audiences. Almeida d'Eça (2002) has defined chat as "a two-way synchronous form of computer mediated communication (CMC), a dialogue in real time as we keyboard or speak our words, an online conversation between two or more people by means of a computer" (Almeida d'Eca, 2002). This definition contains all the elements that describe the nature and characteristics of chat which, in turn, make them a great tool for language learning, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

### **Nature of Chat – Characteristics**

The word "chat" means informal conversation, as defined in Merriam-Webster: “to talk in an informal or familiar manner”, and that is what makes chat a natural space for communication to take place. The language in chat is usually composed of short phrases and a

special lingo, “chat language”, which makes communication closer to a face-to-face (f2f) conversation. That is why, in my view, chat should not be used for teaching or correcting lexical items or syntax and they cannot be taken as a product to be evaluated in terms of grammar and spelling. In f2f conversations people make mistakes, restart their sentences, self-repair, etc. In this sense, conversations in chat are very similar to f2f conversations for the following reasons:

- Greetings are part of the “meeting” rituals.
- People talk without respecting turns, not always, but it is very frequent that people start answering without waiting for the person who has the floor to finish.
- People introduce new topics without finishing previous ones.
- Turn taking is not usually well distributed. Some people tend to hold the floor or participate more than others.
- Some people only listen to the dialogues taking place.
- Different threads may be going on at the same time: two or 3 people are talking about something while others are pursuing some other topic (even if they are not next to each other).
- People attend to the thread that is of their interest, and may change their attention after a while, while some may participate in two or more different threads at the same time, which only depends on their ability to concentrate.

The fact that there are different threads does not mean that at the end each person has not taken anything out of the conversation, especially when they have met with a purpose. This also happens in a chat, with the advantage that at the end of the conversation, we can read the log and learn about all the topics treated even by those we were not paying attention to.

Of course, there are traits of f2f conversation that are missing in chat, namely body language and voice suprasegmental levels. The use of videos (webcams) and voice may help to overcome these obstacles; however, voice applications and webcams are still far from substituting the physical presence of the interlocutor, even though emoticons do help to express some feelings in text chat.

Chat have been neglected in the classrooms mainly due to the bad reputation of public chat rooms, and most educational institutions do not allow chat applications in their computer labs. In spite of the fact that research is needed regarding its benefits for language acquisition, the practice with students and colleagues has revealed many ways in which chat can be used

to offer practice in a second or foreign language. Warschauer (1998) narrates his own experience as a language learner of Hawaiian and how CMC was useful for him:

During oral class discussion, it is not infrequent that I become lost, and thus receive no benefit. However, during computer-mediated discussion, no matter how complex, I can always reread the sentences, take out my dictionary, ask questions of the person next to me-in other words find some way to make the input comprehensible and thus benefit from it (Warschauer, 1998: 5).

This reflection reveals that CMC can reduce the level of anxiety of a language student.

Affectivity has been considered by many educators, in the past, as an influencing factor in the learning process (Dewey, Montesory, Vygotsky). More recently, Rogers (1969) emphasized that the affective domain needed to be considered if global education was to be achieved. In the field of second language acquisition, Krashen & Terrell's Natural Approach (1983) proposed activities which are especially designed to minimize stress, following one of Krashen's five hypotheses for language acquisition: the affective filter hypothesis. In this sense, the social nature of chat contributes to lowering the affective filter by offering a relaxing atmosphere for learning to take place.

### **Chat in Language Learning**

Poole, Axmann, Calongne & Cox (2003) claim that "given the right conditions, the synchronous environment of the chat room can be a successful medium for learning". Let us look at several characteristics of chat which may be taken advantage of to enhance language learning:

- Interaction with real audiences (those who listen in order to get the message and not its form).
- Receive input and produce output
- Immediate feedback from interlocutors.
- No restrictions regarding location.
- Opportunity for negotiation of meaning.
- Collaborative learning towards knowledge construction.
- Opportunity for intake (what the language learner retains from the input received) through "language noticing" (A hypothesis of second language acquisition which states that for language to take place, students should be aware of what they learn, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.).
- Chatlogs (written transcription of chat) allowing for further analysis of conversation and adding coherence to the different threads of the conversation.

- Promotion of learner autonomy.

Most of these aspects have been considered by different hypotheses of second language acquisition: the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985); the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1993); the interactionist hypothesis (Long, 1985); the intake hypothesis (Schmidt; 1990), among others. The negotiation of meaning through interaction and modification of input has also been mentioned as a factor facilitating language learning (Long, 1985, 1996). More recently, Egbert, Chao & Hanson-Smith (1999) have discussed eight conditions for optimal language learning environments, most of which can be fostered in chat: opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning, interaction with authentic audiences in the target language, students' involvement in authentic tasks, exposure to and encouragement to produce varied and creative language, feedback, metacognitive guidance, and an ideal anxiety or stress level.

Not many studies have investigated the use of chat in language learning, but the ones carried out reveal some interesting aspects. Pelletieri (2000) found that some of the patterns of computer mediated interaction are similar to those encountered in face-to-face interaction: all aspects of the discourse serve as triggers for negotiations, task types influence the kind and amount of negotiation (difficult tasks promote more negotiation than easy ones), self-repair, corrective feedback, negotiation within negotiations. This seems to indicate that students made efforts to ensure their understanding of the messages. Chun (1994) also found that chatting seems to improve students' interactive competence.

Language students, however, may find some difficulties in chat. Mynard (2002) points out some of them:

- If students' keyboarding skills are slow, they may miss part of the conversation taking place.
- Slow readers may find difficult to follow the sometimes fast scrolling screen.
- Chat lingo may result incomprehensible for newbies (people new to the use of web tools or Internet).
- Culturally-specific issues may result in misunderstandings arising.

However, the assets of chat tend to outnumber the possible difficulties, which can be minimized with a good lesson plan and preparation on part of the teacher.

### **Chat in Teacher Development**

Chat can be used to improve different aspects of our teaching practice:

- **Planning for events.** Teachers are always short of time to attend meetings, or to collaboratively plan activities. In chat we have found a great alternative to meet with colleagues from all over the world to write lesson plans, to prepare events, and to design joint projects.
- **Sharing work done.** Collaboration and sharing are key words in professional development. Some examples of our work in WIA may illustrate this aspect. We share our work and our findings in online synchronous events that take place at different chat platforms. Methods, evaluation, activities, course design, are just some of the topics that may be found in our chatlogs. We mainly use text chat, other times, however, voice, webcams, web pages and Power Point are used to enhance the presentations. E-learning and online components for f2f courses are the main issues behind our sharing and collaboration efforts, but teachers who do not teach online could benefit from online activities to enhance their f2f practice.
- **Practicing e-moderation with students.** Moderating online is not the same as teaching f2f, and the only way to learn is with practice. Tutoring a student in chat is quite different from working with groups of students or whole classes in this environment. Internet offers the possibility to get in touch with students from all over the world (Yeh, 2003) who are eager to practice their English with native or non-native speakers of the target language. Teachers may also start practicing with their own students in the classroom, setting group tasks to be completed through chat.
- **Exploring web tools.** Technology overwhelms us with new tools everyday, thus, exploring web tools is a never-ending activity for online educators. Sometimes these tools seem difficult and above our understanding. Chat give us the opportunity to explore and evaluate these tools with the collaboration and scaffolding (the help given by experts to non-experts) of one or more colleagues, who may have experience with it, or more technological knowledge to guide us in the process. Chatlogs will stay there for those who come behind.
- **Participating in online conferences as audience and as participants.** Participants have the opportunity to attend presentations given by people who can be in another continent, ask questions as if f-2-f without leaving their homes; and presenters have the chance to discuss their work with a wider and diverse audience which makes his/her work more relevant.

## A Taxonomy of Chat

After participating in many chat for different purposes, the differences observed in terms of the objective of the session, the role of the moderator and the performance expected of the participants were the trigger to develop this taxonomy, which, as I have mentioned before, is still a work in progress. I have had the feedback of many colleagues from the WIA Community (Elizabeth Hanson-Smith, Vance Stevens, Teresa Almeida d'Eca, Susanne Nyrop, Rita Zeinstejer, Buth Othman) to get to the categories presented in this paper. The table below has been divided into six columns: category, purpose, characteristics, moderator's role, examples, and subcategories:

### Educational Chat Classification

Category	Purpose	Characteristics	Moderator's role	Examples	Subcategories
<b>Free-topic chat</b>	Practice language, Learn about and explore web tools.	Shared with friends. No pre-established agenda. Different threads are going on at the same time. Each one joins the conversational thread of his/her interest. Free turn taking.	Free moderation. Distributed leadership.	Webheads' Sunday meetings at Tapped In. Students practice English during week-ends.	
<b>Collaborative Task-oriented Chat</b>	Participants get together in a chat to accomplish a real-life task.	Participants share a common goal. There is a need for a product. Learners autonomy.	There is not need for a moderator. The same group establishes the norms, and handles the situation to complete the task in the time they have available.	Discussion after a video viewing lesson. Cooperative Group activities (jig-saw). Students get together online to discuss a final project.	
<b>Presentation or Academic Seminar Chat</b>	Presenting material to an audience: Program to be presented Research results Methodologies The goal is not to inform, but to educate, that is, "draw forth"	The moderator has prepared the material beforehand and the topic to be discussed has been previously announced to the audience. Guest presenters may be invited. The moderator could prepare 3-4 questions to consider and try to keep audience into focus on those	Reflections: Should the moderator keep on track despite side issues that arise, or anticipated questions asked by the audience? Latecomers to the chat do not know the approach set,	Students present final project. Presenting this taxonomy to an audience of teachers.	<b>Workshop</b> Moderator shows how to do something and audience completes the task too.  <b>Demonstration</b> Presentation followed by questions and discussion.

	ideas or explore a specified topic, based on information provided external to the chat.	topics, and change topics periodically throughout the chat time, e.g. 10 min. for discussion of each question. Reflections: -Could one chat be intended within one of the subcategories turn into another through the process in-action?	and being eager to participate, the discussion may take different roads and not get where it was supposed . What should the moderator do? -Establish procedure at the beginning-negotiated with participants? -Inform that the question will be answered later? -Evaluate the importance of keeping on track by reverting to original topic, against the weight of the unexpected query?	<p><b>Swap</b> All or some participants bring topic, questions or materials to share and discuss about.</p> <p><b>Presentation</b> Moderator presents information and audience listens and asks questions.</p> <p><b>Discussion</b> Presenter brings a question or topic to discuss about</p>
<b>Practice Chat</b>	Participants, using the chat, practice a skill or strategy with other participants and the moderator eg. a given function of a language	Very closed-topic chat Individual or group activity.	Moderator usually establishes the rules and turn taking style.	Role playing an interview Practicing reporting genre Individual or group tutoring.
<b>Evaluation Chat</b>	Asses students' learning gains.	Teacher prepares questions to give to student(s).	Moderator / teacher can give immediate feedback.	Written questions or topics to be developed by individual learners. Debates on a given topic with a group of students.

The **category** indicates the kind of chat. So far, we have found free topic chat, collaborative task-oriented chat, academic seminar or presentation chat, practice chat and evaluation chat. The **purpose** column indicates the objective of the chat, the kind of activity for which this chat would be useful.

The **moderator's role** column describes the way the moderator behaves during the session. Depending on his/her performance the chat will be a more or less controlled activity,



with free topic chat being the ones with less control, and evaluation chat the ones with more control. By control, we mean the autonomy of the participants (less control = more autonomy), the structure of the activity (less structure = less control), and the intervention of the moderator in guiding the activity (less intervention = more autonomy of the participants).

In the **examples** column we mention some activities that can be planned to fit in the corresponding category. After the main classification was created, we found that there were some chat that fell into the presentation chat category but that showed some differences in their structure. This led us to design the last column, **subcategories** for this kind of chat, including workshop, demonstration, swap, presentation, and discussion chat.

#### **a. Free Topic Chat**

The main purpose of these chat is to practice the target language, to learn about and to explore web tools with the social scaffolding of colleagues or peers. There is not a pre-established agenda, and there is free moderation. Different threads are going on at the same time and each one joins the conversational thread of his/her interest. A good example of this kind of chat are WIA Sunday meetings at Tapped In, where English teachers and students worldwide get together to discuss about web tools and the best way to incorporate them into their educational contexts in a friendly atmosphere.

#### **b. Collaborative Task-Oriented Chat**

Participants get together in a chat to accomplish a real-life task. The activity should be planned and structured in such a way, the once in the chat, participants know what they are there for, and they are responsible for going through a process to be able to accomplish the objective of the activity, which might be a final product, or only a sub-product to be used as resource for a following activity. In this kind of chat, there is no need for a moderator: the same group establishes the norms and handles the situation to complete the task in the allotted time. Two good examples for this type of chat: some teachers gathered in a chat to design a strategic plan for a week we had to moderate for one of the TESOL Electronic Village Online 2003; and when my architecture students worked to share the characteristics of the different buildings each student had read about and come up with the shared characteristics, which were going to be used in further tasks.

#### **c. Academic Seminars –Academic Presentation Chat**

These chat have the purpose of presenting material. Usually, the moderator has prepared the material in advance, and the topic for discussion has been previously announced to the audience. It may be in the form of a **workshop**, where the presenter shows, hands-on, how to do something and the participants have to get involved in the “doing”; a

**demonstration**, where the presenter shows how to do something and the audience asks questions but is not involved in any other action; a **presentation**, where the speaker only presents information and expects the audience to ask questions - it can be the presentation of a program, a methodology, results of a research, etc; a **swap shop**, where each participant brings material on a given topic to be shared, discussed and analyzed during the chat; a **discussion**, where the presenter brings a couple of questions to be discussed or brainstormed. Guest speakers could be an enhancing element for these academic presentation chat.

We have added some questions for reflection under some of the columns. Should the moderator keep on track if side issues arise, or if there are anticipated questions asked by the audience? Sometimes latecomers to the chat do not know the approach that has been set, and are eager to participate, and the discussion may take different roads not getting where it was supposed to. What should the moderator do? These are questions to be answered by each practitioner according to his/her own experience and the situation at the moment.

#### **d. Practice Chat**

The objective is that students in the chat practice a given function of the language with other students and the moderator (e.g. role playing an interview, practicing a function of the language, individual or group tutoring). These are very closed-topic chat, and the moderator usually establishes the rules and turn taking style.

#### **e. Evaluation Chat**

As far reaching as it might seem, chat has been used to assess students' learning (Marta, 2002). Teachers can administer online quizzes while in a chat with students, ask questions to be answered by individual students, prepare debates on a given topic and then use the chatlog to check the participation and contributions of each student. Immediate feedback is an asset of chat as a medium to administer evaluations.

It is important to point out that some chat may mix some of these categories, whether because the session has different objectives or because there is a need to introduce a new element.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen through our discussion, chat is an unexploited tool for language learning and teacher development. The collaborative construction of knowledge that can take place through chat should be considered by teachers. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of learning through social interaction and collaboration (von Glaserfeld, 1989), and chat seems to be the ideal space for this kind of learning.

In recent research, Margalit & Sabar (2003) found that:

- Most students and teachers believe it is possible to learn using chat.
- They like learning via this medium.
- They believe moderators are important to conduct the sessions.
- Students and teachers believe chat have a positive influence on creativity, thought-generation, social relations, and learning.
- Teachers place great importance on the e-moderation aspect of chat.

Regarding our own experience, students seem to prefer the synchronicity of chat over the asynchronous modes to interact online. Chats do not promote learning on their own, their effectiveness lies in the way the activities are planned and carried out within the framework of the syllabus of a course. It is our responsibility as teachers to learn to use this environment to ensure optimal conditions for the students' performance.

It is our hope that this taxonomy of educational chat we have presented here, can help teachers to plan chat activities for their students, and to select the type of chat that suits their syllabus, students' age, level and interests, and at the same time, teachers consider using chat for their own professional development.

To end, I would like to present a comment made by a Venezuelan student after her participation in a video-chat unit (Gonzalez, 2003): "it was really a new and innovating learning English class, hope this method would be applied in the future with other students too" (April 30, 2003).

#### Note

Anyone willing to make comments about this article is kindly requested to visit my discussion board at <http://dafnegon.tripod.com/discussionboard.html>.

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