

Using Computer Chat in the Class

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Creating and using “student computer chat rooms” can motivate students to communicate in English through the use of computers as they gain success reading and writing conversationally in “real time”. This paper will focus on what computer chat is, how to set it up and its applications in the EFL/ESL classroom.

「学生のためのコンピューターチャットルーム」の設置と利用によって、英語によるコミュニケーションは大幅に促進される。それはコンピューターの画面上で「リアルタイム」の会話に参加し、学生が達成感を得るからである。本稿では、コンピューターチャットの定義、その設置法、そしてEFL/ESLクラスの応用に焦点をあてて論じていく。

Use of the Internet, which has become increasingly widespread over the last decade, is influencing language education and classes in all of the four skills areas: reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Newfield, 1997). As educational institutions become more connected through technology, the use of computers and the Internet in language programs will

be integral. Teachers and students today have a virtual world of communication tools at their fingertips with e-mail, homepages, and “computer chat”. Computer chat rooms provide an opportunity for students to converse silently and immediately with their peers in English. When using computer chat, students communicate through writing in “real-time” simulating a spoken conversation. This paper will familiarize its readers with computer chat, explain how to set up student computer chat rooms, outline some activities using computer chat and explore some of the successes and challenges encountered when using computer chat in EFL classrooms at the Tokyo Jogakkan Junior College (TJK).

What is Computer Chat?

Computer chat is communicating instantly with other people who are using computers. It allows students to have live, “real-time” conversations with other users. Students use their keyboard to type messages. As they type, their words instantly appear on another’s screen. That person can immediately read and respond by doing the same thing.

Setting Up Student Chat Rooms

There are many kinds of chat software available but they cost money. The cheapest way to set up computer chat is to use a web-based chat service such as *Yahoo! Club Chat*. (<http://clubs.yahoo.com>) One can setup an account

with *Yahoo!* and download the software for free. The following is an explanation of how the TJK student chat rooms were set up using *Yahoo! Club Chat*.

Step One

Go to *Yahoo!* (<http://www.yahoo.com>) to create the *Yahoo!* student accounts that students will use. Select a consistent name and a consecutive number such as TJKSTUDENT1, TJKSTUDENT2, TJKSTUDENT3, and so on for the accounts. This kind of name will be easy to remember later and will allow you to use the same account for multiple classes. During the sign up *Yahoo!* will ask for you to create a password for each account. It is a good idea to use the same passwords for all of the accounts. Set up enough accounts for each student in your largest class to have one. For example, if you have 23 people in your largest class, set up 23 accounts. This part of the sign up process takes about 5 minutes per account.

Step Two

Go to *Yahoo! Club Chat* (<http://clubs.yahoo.com>) to create student chat rooms. Once again, create a consistent club chat name with consecutive numbers such as TJKchattingclub1, TJKchattingclub2, TJKchattingclub3 and so on. Set up one chat room for every two students. In the class of 23 students, set up 11 chat rooms.

Step Three

While still in *Yahoo! Club Chat*, assign individual *Yahoo!* accounts to the student chat rooms (see Appendix 1: Chat Room Set-up diagram). Two is the ideal number for chatting because the students can focus on their conversation without getting lost in simultaneous conversations and disconnected late responses. Inevitably, when pairing up for computer chat there will occasionally be an odd number of students. In this case, the odd-numbered person can join a pair to form a threesome. With having up to three students in one chat room, students can usually follow the conversation without confusion. If you have more than three students in one chat room, the dialogue seems to get muddled and hard to follow.

Step Four

Create a teacher *Yahoo!* account and make sure it has access to all of the student chat rooms. Use Step 3 to set this up. This will allow the teacher to visit all of the rooms and “interact with” the students or monitor what they are doing.

The set up process is time consuming but it is a good investment. Students can be coached through setting up their own *Yahoo!* accounts, but that can be very complicated and frustrating, so it is often more efficient for the teacher to do all of the set up. Once accounts and chat rooms have been established, they may be used

indefinitely by multiple classes.

Activities Using Student Chat Rooms

There are a variety of ways to integrate the classroom language focus into the computer chat experience. Some of the following activities have accuracy and fluency objectives while others are simply meant to set the students at ease in front of the computers.

Guess who?

This is primarily a warm-up activity. As the students sit down at their computer they are assigned a student account name such as TJKSTUDENT1, TJKSTUDENT2, TJKSTUDENT3, etc. so when they enter the chat room they are not identifiable by name. The students are then told that they have to ask questions to figure out the identity of the people in their chat room. The questions can be about what the other is wearing, their hobbies, their part-time job, what they did that weekend, who they are friends with and so on. The object is to remain anonymous for a given amount of time. Depending on the level of the students and the language focus of the classroom, there is opportunity here to work on accuracy in areas such as question formation and agree/disagree language (see Appendix 2: Guess Who? Transcript).

Using guided questions to talk about a topic that was covered in class

If the course being taught is content-driven, computer chat provides another opportunity for students to personalize and solidify their opinions on the topic. In this case, the teacher can assign the questions that students will be discussing on the computers prior to the computer class. The teacher may also ask to prepare answers for each question prior to class. Again, depending on where the students are in their learning, the teacher can ask the students to hand in their prepared answers before the computer chat so that they are engaged in chatting and not summarizing or copying what they wrote for homework. (See Appendix 2: Guided Questions)

Recycling grammar point from class

Grammar points that are being explicitly studied in the class can easily be brought into the computer room by working together to create questions and answers that use the form accurately. The students can then use the language they created to have “real” conversations with more focus on fluency than accuracy.

Printing out their chat dialogue and doing peer/ error correction.

Using student’s chat transcripts for accuracy work is a useful way to address student’s needs at their level.

Transcripts from their chat can be used to review their use of a language point already studied or to introduce a new one. Transcripts also provide an opportunity for both the teachers and the students to look at the student’s production outside the classroom. This allows for more reflection than is possible during computer chat where it is more natural to maintain a fluency focus.

Setting up computer chat with classes at another university.

There are several resources available on the Internet to help find classes that are interested in collaborating on computer chatting and general e-mail exchanges. The following site sponsored by the United States Department of Education provides information and contacts for various programs that have been in existence for two years or longer. <http://www.ed.gov/Technology/guide/international/postsecondary.html>. Logistically, Japanese classrooms may have limited opportunities for live chatting due to time zone and school calendar differences.

Benefits and Challenges in Using Student Chat Rooms

Benefits

“I think computer chatting is interesting and fun. If you want, you can communicate all over the world.

Maybe, it's good practice on one's reading and writing. We can see more clear what one's mistakes (grammar, spelling)...” Yoshiko

There are several advantages to using computers to support student's chatting abilities. Generally, when students participate in chatting, they are engaged in using their listening and speaking skills. Firstly, computer chat affords students the opportunity to extend this practice to reading and writing, thus incorporating all of the four skills. Since there can be a tendency among Japanese students to be stronger in reading and writing, the computer chatting also appeals to less vocal students and allows them to practice conversation skills (reacting, echoing, follow-up questions) in a skill group (reading and writing) where they feel more comfortable. Ideally, they would then be encouraged to recycle these skills into their speaking where their affective filters may be lower as a result of success with computer chatting. Secondly, the novelty of using computers in this way contributes to student's heightened interest and motivation in both chatting and the use of computers. Thirdly, computer chat also permits students a degree of freedom and playfulness with reading and writing, which is often lacking in their other experiences with those skills. King and Wood (1996) assert that, “this focus on communication reduces the interference from ESL student's affective filters, promotes the risk taking required for learning

a second language, and heightens their resourcefulness in making themselves understood in English.” Lastly, one final advantage is the use of the chat transcripts. The transcripts derived from the computer chatting lend themselves easily to a variety of accuracy building activities. On a separate note regarding computer skills, this higher level of interest and motivation across a semester also translates into improved typing skills.

Challenges

“I enjoyed computers but when I asked a question to my partner, it took a long time to answer. I thought my question was not good. Also, when I asked question, I got different answer. I was confused.” Yuko

“I think computer chatting is interesting. I can relax when I do computer chatting. But I cannot type fast and I don't know how to spell. What should I do?” Kazuna

While we consider our work with computer chatting to have been successful, we have had challenges during its implementation. Firstly, one of the obstacles was related to technology. For the most part *Yahoo! Club Chat* was a good choice as it allowed us necessary control over the chat rooms, however, because it was Internet based, we found ourselves at the mercy of our Internet connection. It was a good idea to have a back up option for computer time ready to go in case of

Internet problems. Secondly, because the Internet was involved, there were delays, which meant that the flow of the conversation was sometimes difficult for students to follow, it was not always question-answer-question-answer. Thirdly, another issue arose around the students' typing ability. We found that over time students typing skills improved, however there were students who felt frustrated by their inability to type quickly. The desire to communicate using the computer served well as a motivating force to improve typing ability, but for students who were focused more on instant communication, it was also a great source of frustration. Lastly, one final obstacle was that students sometimes reverted to the use of romanized Japanese during their text chats. During regular chatting, students had learned to employ several communication strategies (echoing, reacting, asking follow-up, asking for clarification) for coping with language deficiencies. The students had to be prompted to apply those same strategies to their

computer chat. For information pertaining to further benefits and challenges of computer chat refer to Freirmuth's paper "Small Group Online Chat: The Great Equalizer"

Conclusion

"I think computer chatting is useful. It is comfortable to talk with a person. It is especially good for shy person. I feel a little confident because I can type fast."
Saori

"Computer chatting is very fun for me because I like computers very much. I learned words and how to spell from my partner." Mayumi

Computer chat provides a rich space for mass language production and/or focused practice. Our experience with it has been overwhelmingly positive. We hope that this brief description of our program will encourage you to try computer chat with your students.

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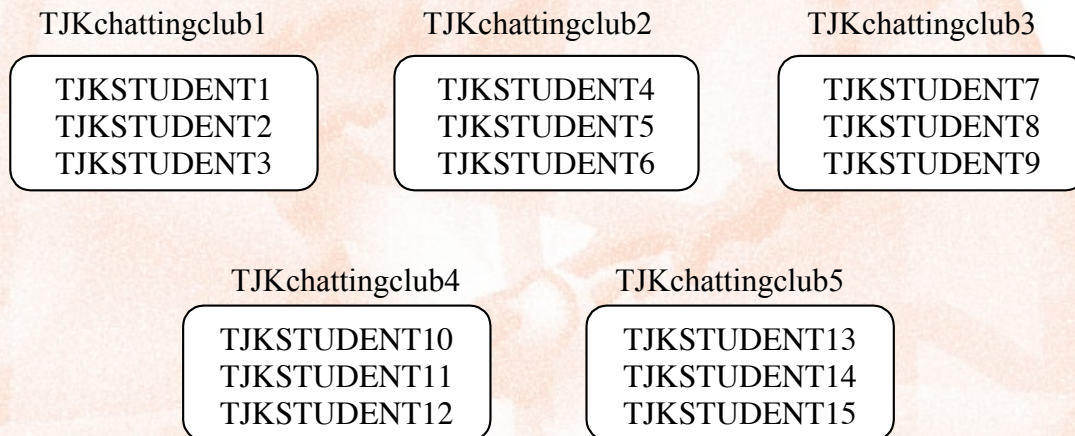
Appendix 1:

Student Computer Chat Room Set-up Diagram

<http://clubs.yahoo.com>

Student chat user accounts: TJKSTUDENT1, TJKSTUDENT2, TJKSTUDENT3, etc.

Student chat rooms: TJKchattingclub1, TJKchattingclub2, TJKchattingclub3, etc.



Appendix 2:

Student Computer Chat Transcripts

Guess Who? Computer Chat Transcript

- A: where do you live?
 B: I live in Ichigao
 A: I live in Machida
 A: What cloth ar you ware?
 B: What color are you wearing today ?
 A: I ware blown jacket:
 B: I am wearing stripe t-shirts
 A: What color stripe t-shirts?
 B: What your hair
 B: Are you saoriv
 A: That's light!:
 A: Are you Maik o?
 B: Yes, that's right
 B: How about your wekend/
 A: I have good weekend How about you?
 B: Iwent to one year memorial service of my grandma

Guided Questions: Music class Computer Chat Transcript

- A: So what kind of music do you like?
 A: I like J Pop.
 B: I like pop music!
 A: What is your favorite musician?
 A: My favorite musician is ???not much

- B: There is Stephanie !
 A: How often do you listen to music?
 A: Yes!! You are Lucky!!
 B: One of my favorite musician is Eric
 B: I liten music everynight
 A: I listen music everyday!!
 B: Where do you usually listen to music?
 B: Yesterday, I lstened toai Kuraki
 B: In my room

Guided Questions: Movies class Computer Chat Transcript

- B: What is your favorit movie?
 B: My favorite movies is *RUSH HOUR*
 A: My favorite movie is "Stuart Little.
 A: Who's in it?
 B: Jacky ChianHe is big chainese act.
 B: What is your favorite character?
 A: I think so too.
 A: My favorite character is Stuart
 B: Why?
 A: How long was the movie?
 A: Stuart is very cute
 B: This movie is about 2 hour.
 B: Is he real mouth?
 B: What is your favorite part?
 A: Yes, Stuart is a mouse.
 A: My favorite part is last part