# Chapter 12
# Real Time Internet–Based English as a Foreign Language Learning

**Ruth Reynard**
*Educational Consultant, USA*

## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this case was to explore the potential for using simple real time technology to connect native language speakers of English and foreign language learners of English. The intended design of the study was to explore the successes and challenges of language and cultural exchange within a real time technology-mediated class. Of particular interest was the effectiveness of connecting authentic language speakers as teachers and foreign language learners as students. The authors' query was to evaluate how effective this methodology is in increasing the understanding of meaning and appropriate language use.*

## INTRODUCTION

This case study provided an English language teaching and learning opportunity for 40 grade 8 students in Hunan Province, S. China and five pre-service teachers studying in a Masters of Teaching course at a university in Tennessee, USA. The purpose of the study was to explore the possibilities of providing language learning from "authentic" speakers directly to in-class foreign language students using new real-time technology. Most English teaching with authentic English speakers in China is costly and involves teachers who have relocated there for that specific purpose. We were trying to find a more cost effective but efficient way to provide the same opportunity for students of English in China to be taught the language by mother-tongue speakers in the USA using new technology and through the local school system. Specifically, we were interested in finding out if the cultural and language exchange could take place at a distance and if the students understood appropriate language use as a result.

## SETTING THE STAGE

The major theories of second language learning focus on various aspects of the learning process. Krashen (1981) distinguishes between what he sees as the process of acquisition and the more complex processes of learning, where the learner not only becomes familiar with language parts and structures, but also becomes proficient in authentic use and application of the language learned. This distinction is similar to a previous distinction made by Chomsky (1965) between linguistic competence and performance, or input and output as later promoted and developed by Canale & Swain (1979). Other theorists have identified the complexities of attaining and evaluating communicative competence (Hymes, 1971; Canale & Swain, 1980) as it is seen in terms of ability to perform in a language, while Widdowson (1978) distinguishes between use and usage, emphasizing the difference between using language within set and familiar parameters and using the language authentically and creatively.

In terms of learning distinctives, Canale and Swain (1980) identified grammar, sociolinguistics, discourse and strategic competence as four main ability areas that relate to language knowledge. That is, an ability to learn a language accurately through an understanding of the grammar of the language, as well as an authentic use of the language within sociolinguistic conventions is crucial to the language acquisition process. In addition, Canale and Swain (1980) emphasized a distinction between language discourse and the strategic use of the language, or the communicative complexities of conversation and other intentional uses of the language to persuade, influence and inform. Krashen's (1985) simplified the acquisition process to a theory of comprehensible input theory, which suggests that, as a result of comprehending input, learners can acquire morphological language features in a natural order. In other words, if the input is comprehensible to the learner, the acquisition of the target language

becomes a natural learning process. Swain (1985), however, promoted the notion that comprehensible output, or 'pushed output' is necessary for effective language acquisition. Learners, according to this theory require opportunities for demanding output in order to learn appropriate language use. Additionally, in a chapter by Fanny Meunier in Granger, Hung and Petch-Tyson (Eds.) (2002), discusses the benefit of frequent use of authentic language in identifying specific grammar uses and language parts uses such a vocabulary and syntax; "grammatical patterns", p. 121., and more specifically, "Grammatical signatures", p. 122.

*English grammar is…no longer seen as a monolithic entity (i.e. basically the grammar of written educated English) but rather as being comprised of several specific grammars: the grammar of written, spoken, narrative, argumentative texts, types etc. Many grammatical features are found in a wide range of text types but the main difference lies in their frequency of occurrence (p. 122)*

Other theorists have built on notions of authentic use in the context of social construction and community. Wenger (1998) discusses the notion that a focus on identity through language helps to situate and include learners rather than exclude and distance them. This idea also increases the likelihood that individual students will participate in the learning collective by being empowered in the process. A chapter by Joybrato Mukherjee in Granger and Petch-Tyson (Eds.) (2003) discusses the notion of "talk" and "tone" units derived from various speech corpora and argue that while spoken and written language patterns differ, sometimes greatly, listeners and participants can learn those patterns even when letters and word endings are missing because the context of use dictates the pattern. What is interesting about this is the dynamic nature in which language communicates meaning as well as use.

Also of interest in this context is the discussion of situated practice in language learning proposed

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