

Chapter 14

Language Learning and Social Communication Using Chat Rooms

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have become an inevitable part of adolescents' daily life and have caused macro and micro changes that are shaping the societies in which adolescents of the future will live. As a two-way real time communication tool, chat rooms are one of the most popular forms of ICT in adolescents' daily life. Adolescents use ICT for meaningful communication and social interaction with their peers and relatives. Following are some of the purposes for interacting through chat rooms: staying current in what matters to them, shopping, entertainment, creating personal web pages, and, yes, completing homework assignments. These activities can promote opportunities for purposeful communication that leads to increased language production and social interaction as well as promotes higher order thinking skills. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight issues on chat rooms as a two-way real time communication tools frequently used by adolescents with an emphasis on the effects of chat rooms on adolescents' second language development with a comprehensive review of literature.

INTRODUCTION

Uses of the Internet and the web for second language acquisition and second language instruction have been gaining ground since the early 1990s. A plethora of technologies such as different forms of

chat, distant learning opportunities, and various software packages have since been adopted for the purpose of language learning (Hamatr, 2008).

Today, the Internet is an important part of adolescents' leisure lives and therefore increasingly a vital part of their culture. Pacheco (2005) states that the Internet offers diverse sources of information for students to explore. Synchronous computer-

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mediated communication is one of these effective resources that take place in real-time networking communication. In other words, messages are received and sent instantly, as if individuals were having a telephone conversation. This interaction occurs on-line, and can be either written down in text form or can occur through audio and video. Such communication is also called chatting, and can happen in a one-to-one basis or many-to-many, as in the Internet-based chat rooms. (Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2002). Given the wide application of chat rooms in online communication, there is an imminent need to understand their social and educational roles as well as the implications for language development and higher order thinking skills. The current chapter therefore focuses on the use of chat rooms in language education by examining various technological functionalities of chat rooms associated with ESL/EFL language learning.

TYPES OF CHAT ROOMS FOR ESL/ EFL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The most popular form of ICT among adolescents is chat rooms. Chat is “a two-way 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” (Almeida d’Eça, 2002). Following are the most widely used chat room formats that teachers of English language learners can use for designing collaborative online activities that are based on chat room technologies.

Voice Chats

Payne and Ross (2005) conducted an experiment using voice chat with the participants consisted of 24 volunteers, 2 males and 22 females ranging in age from 18-26. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers concluded that the chat may provide a unique form of support to certain

types of learners in L2 oral proficiency. Jepson (2005) states that voice chats are superior for the purpose of meaning negotiation than text chats, giving an edge for the use of voice chats in certain situations. From a constructivist point of view, the study suggests that voice chats are just as effective for language development as text-based chat environments since voice chats provide opportunities where learners are more likely to negotiate for meaning with increased language production (Jepson, 2005). Voice chats in this study initiated higher instances of negotiation of meaning in comparison to those in text chat. The negotiations involved pronunciation repair moves where the goal of the speakers was to attend to pronunciation breakdowns.

White Board

Another form of synchronous communication is the web whiteboard, which allows users to communicate and share ideas in graphical forms over the web in real time. Hampel and Hauck (2004) describe the use of such a tool which forms a part of a system called Lyceum that was used at the United Kingdom (UK) Open University and carried out online with a cohort of 15 volunteers. The authors called the system an ‘audio-graphic’ conferencing tool as it allows users to conduct voice chats while working on the web whiteboard. They also reported that the use of the system helps learning in the sense that, “Student feedback suggests that participating in intense interactions with fellow learners as well as collaborative tasks is the most exciting aspect of learning and practicing a language in a virtual learning environment (VLE) like Lyceum.”(p.76)

Multi-User Dungeon

Warner (2004) presents an interesting although rare form of synchronous communication, the multi-user dungeon (MUD), with all the participants between the ages of 18 and 25 having a

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