Skype Voice Chat
A Tool for Teaching Oral Communication

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Advantages of Learner-centered Approach to Learning English

The shift from the teacher-centered approach to learner-centered approach in English language learning saw in the twentieth century the growing importance of using e-tools in the language classrooms.

E-learning has become a blessing to the self- motivated learners of English language for whom English as a subject is not offered in the curriculum, and for those who do not find time to learn in a classroom environment. It enables the learners to make decisions on where, when and how of learning. Moreover learning becomes enjoyable when it is learnt at a place and time of convenience using a tool the learner is much fascinated with. Youngsters these days enjoy spending long, even late hours using social networking sites, and these sites add fascination, excitement and enrichment to the learning process when they start functioning as a mode of instruction.

Social Networking Websites

Social networking sites are very attractive environments for young learners. Though the primary objective of such sites is to present opportunities for self-expression and friendship building, it can be used to develop the spoken skills as well as the life skills that will be a foundation for career success in the 21st century.

The Focus of This Paper

This paper attempts to explore the use of online communication chat, with special reference to voice chat in Skype for teaching oral communication.

Skype

Skype is a one-to-one or one-to-more web-based telephony network, which can be used to contact people from all over the world. It offers computer-to-computer connections, computer to-home and/or mobile phone calls, and voice-mail messages. The computer-to- computer connection is free of cost whereas a fee is applied for the rest of the connections.

Skype enables the user to write text chat, make voice chat and make conference calls.
In order to use Skype, the user should

- download and install Skype in his/her computer by accessing the url: www.Skype.com
- Create a Skype account
- Add contact to Skype list.
- Possess a microphone or head set in case of using voice chat and conference calls options.

This popular public chat platform can be used for educational purposes. Its voice modes, whether one-to-one or many-to-many in a conference (a group of people who get together in a single virtual space and Skype allows up to 9 people to gather online simultaneously), make it the ideal tool for language learning and personality development.

Use of Chat in Language Learning

Speaking about the use of 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."

The use of voice represents a very special element in the learning process as it adds more realism and life to the interaction. They add excitement and motivation to the learning process.

The voice chat enables the students to enhance their speaking skills, in particular, which in turn enables them to meet the professional demands. However, it does require good preparation on the teacher's part for monitoring and conducting online voice chat.

Interaction in Skype

Interactions in Skype can take place at different levels: student-to-student, student-to-teacher and student-to-expert. The main purpose of using this chat is to practice the target language, and therefore the students must be given ample opportunity to use the language.

Building a Conversation

The teacher shall plan an activity where one student plays the robe of a salesman and tries to market a product to another student/teacher who plays the role of a customer. The student and the teacher shall meet in Skype voice chat and negotiate over the product – its cost, quality, use, freebies, advantages, disadvantages, etc., The student/teacher in the shoes of a customer shall find the defects in the product and raise questions about the product. The student in the shoes of a salesman tries to convince and succeed in marketing the product. This enables the learner to **build the conversation** in the target language.

Improving the Accent and Pronunciation

The voice chat in Skype can be used to improve the **pronunciation** of a word. The student and the teacher shall meet online and practice pronouncing a difficult word. With the help of web cam the teacher shall show and monitor the position of tongue, hard palate and soft

palate while pronouncing a word. Thus Skype helps to improve the pronunciation of the students in target language.

Academic Presentations

Skype conference calls can be used for training students on academic **presentations**. The teacher shall host a conference call and ask one student to make a presentation on a topic, a program, a methodology, results of a research etc., where the speaker only presents information and the rest of the students ask questions. This conference call option can be used to train the students on how to perform in a group **discussion**. The teacher acts as a moderator, gives a topic for discussion and emphasizes on WOT (World of teams) and leadership qualities. Each participant brings points to be discussed and exhibits their leadership quality and also proves their ability to work in teams. Their body language is followed and monitored with the use of web cam.

Telephone Interviews

With the increase in call centers and other-telephone based businesses, more and more companies are using **telephone interviews** to check the telephone manner and skills of the candidate. The recent research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that this method is used by 30 percent of organizations and 45 percent of private sector services.

Interviewing the Expert

The teachers, through 'Skype call' option, may conduct a mock telephonic interview which enables the learner to gain experience and knowledge on how to handle a telephonic interview. An outside expert, another instructor, may be invited as a guest and the students may be asked to come prepared to ask the guest questions. This activity **- interviewing the expert** - provides the students with information about real world experiences concerning the topic discussed.

We Enrich the Learning Process Through Skype Chat

The learning process is enriched when these speaking activities are introduced through new tool like Skype voice chat. The advantages of using Skype voice chat for language learning particularly speaking that

- the geographical barriers are eliminated, opening up broader education options. An expert from any part of the world can be invited as a guest to contribute in the teaching – learning process.
- Immediate feedback from interlocutors
- Opportunity for negotiation of meaning
- Collaborative learning towards knowledge construction
- Promotes learner autonomy (González, D. (2003))

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.

 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.

Do Not Neglect Skype!

In spite of all these advantages chat has 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 multimedia language labs. It is advisable to teach chat etiquette and net etiquette to the students. The teacher shall publish a list of protocols or rules for your students to follow. This will help maintain order in the discussion and facilitate clear communication.

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To conclude, 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 the responsibility of teachers to learn to use this environment to ensure optimal conditions for the students' performance.

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