International Journal of Arts and Sciences
3(14): 467 - 473 (2010)
CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934
© InternationalJournal.org

Chat Room Management and Guidance in Online EFL

Maria Traum, Johannes Kepler University, Austria

Abstract: This contribution focuses on the challenges and demands of using English as a foreign language (EFL) in chat sessions. It presents instructor experiences, lessons learned and recommendations for educators who may be considering the application of chat sessions as a part of blended learning for their courses. Synchronous chat sessions (SCS) can provide powerful online learning experiences by sharing experiences and knowledge. In this paper synchronous refers to spoken communication taking place at the same time using communication platforms such as Adobe Connect. At university level, on-line gatherings are often heterogeneous with participants of different ages, nationalities and language levels. The potential of this fascinating gathering space can facilitate the acquisition of foreign language skills because the intensity of communication during chat sessions is in most cases much higher than in the traditional classroom. The chat with its changing location, group size and intensity marks a new era for language learning and with it, new challenges and new demands. What factors account for the success of the meetings? How can the discussion remain coherent and possibly produce valuable ideas or even new ideas?

Keywords: EFL, Chat sessions, Synchronous communication, Speaking skills

Discussion

Strengthening online discussions and processes are essential in keeping student involvement and interaction high. All activities that increase language use and fluency are a welcome input to developing communicative abilities and language skills, but SCS have the potential to intensify spoken language far more by increasing the number and the length of statements. The intensity plays a role in the quality of the interaction. Tailoring topics and communication time to the needs of the learners provides the balance to develop online speaking skills and the ability to edit and repair statements during the SCS for participants. The chat room as a new concept of classroom allows learners to encounter communication and language use in a setting that reflects the kind of interaction that takes place today via a global network of computers.

The instructor's primary role is therefore one of a moderator (rather than a questioner). Careful planning of synchronous chats is essential and if the sessions go well they may be exceptionally beneficial because they come close to the pace of a natural conversation with the challenge that spontaneity creates. The intensity of chat sessions refers to the amount of time each student actually speaks and if the number of learners is kept small (3 or 4 per session) then the average time of interaction is clearly higher than in the traditional classroom environment. Chat room management and reformulating form two important strategies instructors need to consider for success.

A plethora of information describing the advantages as well as the limitations of chat sessions has recently emerged pointing at major challenges for the instructor that lie in planning guidance and support. New technology can facilitate active learning but this starts with providing a motivating environment that includes scheduling the session, staying focused on

International Journal of Arts and Sciences
3(14): 467 - 473 (2010)
CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934
© InternationalJournal.org

only a few points, keeping the group size small and avoiding chaotic communication. Chat room management also includes strengthening activities that draw on experiences, which can make participation attractive. Expending intellectual energy when using English as a foreign language necessitates a motivating environment and this means creating concrete achievable goals that help form a good positive attitude reinforced by experiencing success.
Scheduling regular chat sessions often means working around the students' schedules and not necessarily when students' feel like attending. A significant advantage of chats is the finite time requirements for a chat session. As already mentioned before limiting the number of students is essential for this guarantees that each student can have enough speaking time and is a prerequisite for intense interaction. Chaotic communication with statements overlapping each other should be avoided because this makes following and participating in an online conversation or discussion difficult or even lead to misunderstandings. Laying down strategies for turn taking and late-comers is also essential. In addition summarizing the thread can help all participants to stay focused and is an important way of keeping the discussion on track, but requires following the discussion closely.

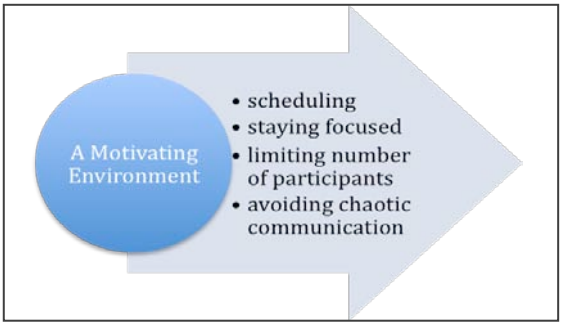


Figure 1: A Motivating Environment

The challenges associated with staying focused are a result of the time constraints and the stress to respond appropriately and immediately. Deciding on the amount of chat room time depends on the number of participants. Intense spoken interaction during the chat sessions should be the aim. Opting for fewer attendees and a shorter session (ideally about an hour and a quarter for 4 students) is preferable. Speaking without using non-verbal communication to emphasize and stress segments of thoughts increases the stress of replying. Encouraging clarification and explanation can help decrease the tension that immediacy creates. Clarification and explanation by reformulating statements without the help of non-verbal communication adds to the challenge but with the help of careful management it may lead to improved English usage. In general the time factor makes spoken interaction an arduous task. In particular silence can be uncomfortable. Other participants may use this time to initiate reformulating.

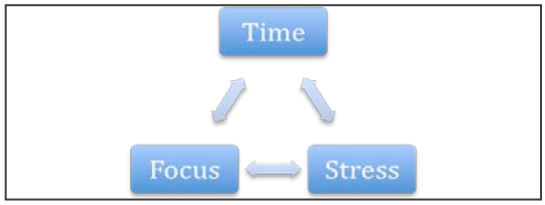


Figure 2: Major Challenges

International Journal of Arts and Sciences
3(14): 467 - 473 (2010)
CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934
© InternationalJournal.org

On the other hand having time to correct and edit what one has said can decrease tension during interaction. Debating what the intended meaning of a statement is among participants with different experiences establishes a good foundation to talk over a topic. This comes quite close to discussions carried out face to face. To explain the point, it may be useful to start with the etymology of the term "*discourse*. In *Whose Discourse?* Stahl looks at the roots of the word:

> "The Latin root of the term is the verb *discurrere*, which means literally "to run apart", from *currere*, "to run". *Diskursus* thus means "to run to and fro" (cf. Encarta 1999, 538), which has developed into the idea of an exchange of ideas." (Stahl 2004)

According to the *Etymology dictionary online* the word „*discussion*" developed to mean taking a closer look at an issue or topic by debating it and examining it:

> „mid-14c., from O.Fr. discussion, from L.L. discussionem "examination, discussion," in classical L., "a shaking," from discussus, pp. of discutere "strike asunder, break up," from dis- "apart" + quatere "to shake." Originally "examination, investigation, judicial trial;" meaning of "talk over, debate" first recorded mid-15c. Sense evolution in Latin appears to have been from "smash apart" to "scatter, disperse," then in post-classical times (via the mental process involved) to "investigate, examine," then to "debate."

The mental picture of *first* running back and forth and *then* examining a point comes close to how chat sessions can be experienced. This means verbalizing the thought in English as a foreign language as well as understanding, responding and explaining abstract concepts. Planning and implementing language takes place immediately with little time to think and find appropriate language or consider possible replies. Some of the language produced during these sessions may be described as using formulas and patterns such as when greeting among others. However it is the challenge of going beyond this stage to make formulating new ideas possible, which is even harder work. And so achieving this is not as easy as it sounds. Producing clear statements that are coherent means thinking and speaking (almost) at the same time. Sensing coherence during a discussion – while talking over something – is a part of establishing continuity. As the *Etymology dictionary* entry suggests both smashing apart and debating facilitate the mental process involved. Taking information and structuring it mentally comes quite close to the ideas that are a part of understanding or comprehension. According to the definition of "understanding" found in the *Merriam Webster Online dictionary* it shows that "mentally grasping" something is "the capacity to apprend general relations of particulars" and suggests "the power to make experience intelligible by applying concepts and categories".

Thus by getting as close as possible to natural communication with opportunities to state, add, correct or edit and adjust thoughts and ideas, the chat session becomes an interesting tool especially with respect to knowledge sharing as well as knowledge construction. Activating and elaborating during SCS are important in the process of developing "understanding". In *English Discourse Markers of Reformulation* Rubio describes self-correction as "… typical of impromptu spoken English where execution and planning takes place simultaneously" and reformulation "… based on linguistic knowledge" as the following example shows: "You should have consulted an ophthalmologist, that is (to say) an eye doctor." (Rubio 2007)

International Journal of Arts and Sciences
3(14): 467 - 473 (2010)
CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934
© InternationalJournal.org

For the learner who does not know what an ophthalmologist is, reformulating can be like opening a closed box – you are not really sure what is inside. Reformulating is like getting closer to almost seeing the object – seeing it in your mind. Asking, formulating and reformulating ideas in order to gain as much information as necessary to understand or to reduce ambiguity can provide the coherence necessary during chat sessions to share experiences, share knowledge and lay the foundation to construct new knowledge. Sticking to the example of the ophthalmologist, this can include exchanging the names of specialists but may be the starting point of a variety of topics such as instruments doctors use, types of eye examinations, reasons for poor eyesight, etc. In the article *Computer Support for Collaborative Learning* the authors Meier and Spada suggest that "Groups can build valuable new knowledge by drawing inferences from their members' complementary knowledge". The authors go on to state that often „groups tend to focus on information known to all members from the start ("shared") and neglect members' unique ("unshared") knowledge". In this case instructional support is of great importance. Active learning approaches means not only implementing new technology; it means employing pedagogy in order to facilitate learning. So after opening the box labeled "ophthalmologist" the EFL learner may know the type of instruments used, reasons for poor eyesight and corrective lenses and build new knowledge. It is the process of getting closer to finally reaching understanding that necessitates developing language strategies to elicit information.

Rubio describes forms of reformulation such as expansion, compression, modification and reassessment. Strategies of these kinds strengthen language skills and help develop rhetoric competence. As described by Okabe in the essay O*n the Concept of Rhetorical Competence and Sensitivity Revisited* rhetoric competence refers to how the rhetorical competence or sensitivity construct of a culture influence the way arguments are framed and organized. This especially interesting and important aspect of encounters during SCSs. Multicultural attendees can add flavor when showing different ways of approaching an issue. Ultimately understanding another way of seeing something can be approached by stating and re-stating to secure knowledge. For this purpose re-formulators are essential. The following examples were taken from a compilation by Rubio:

- Expansion – in other words, by that I mean, if I understand you correctly,
- Compression – summarizing, in conclusion, in a word,
- Modification – on second thought, or rather, or more precisely,
- Reassessment – or even better, or even more important, worse yet. (Rubio p 98)

Re-formulators help to reinterpret a segment rather than adding new information. They help to secure meaning by the ongoing process of assessment and adjustment. These enhance communication inasmuch as they are used to prevent, signal or solve misunderstandings.
The following examples illustrate how reformulating was triggered in the course business English:

A. About advertising and facebook

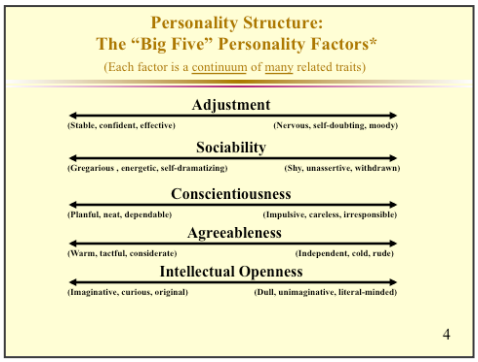
International Journal of Arts and Sciences
3(14): 467 - 473 (2010)
CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934
© InternationalJournal.org

- what about stealing intellectual property
- what's that
- or would you say
- can you say: reaching your target group is of utmost importance

B. About recruitment and the selection process

- I think
- It means
- Important?
- I thought
- That's different.

Triggering re-formulation will help to find other expressions or use synonyms and antonyms. "Important?" introduces voice quality as another way of eliciting other or more information. Self-repair such as repeating the same information or word and giving more or different information are also strategies used by learners to develop coherent discussions.



An especially interesting feature of SCS is viewing and actively working on information presented using PowerPoint slides (PPT). All attendees can see the slide, which is intended to trigger a discussion. The advantage is clear - preparation of the content, visualization that also serves as the central focus. A maximum of two or three slides could get the discussion going and help to stay focused at the same time. The figure shows one of the slides used to discuss the topic of recruitment and some of the major personality factors that are considered vital for success. Agreeing or disagreeing with the collection of the so-called "Big Five Personality Factors" served as the starting point of the discussion. The debate moved beyond these, but when tying the strings together again, served as the focal point and adjustments made, were based on these particular factors. Abstract ideas about how a person should be for a particular position were then made concrete through examples. This slide was downloaded from *oz.plymouth.edu/~davidl/bu342/Chapter2.PPT*.

Conclusion

For the instructor laying the foundation of satisfying chat sessions means careful management which includes the timeframe (date, starting and ending time), number of participants (3 – 4), set rules for communication (turn-taking and late comers) and communicating the goal in order to stay focused. In addition the EFL chat necessitates guidance to encourage and secure participation. This may include posing questions that all attendees have to reply to, by asking direct questions or providing visuals. Maintaining participation means moderating and managing to keep involvement and interaction high. On the part of the student producing clear statements that are coherent this means thinking and speaking (almost) at the same time. Giving and getting an immediate response requires grasping the content in real time. Asking, formulating and reformulating ideas so that ambiguity is reduced and the message is received as the speaker intended. Satisfying chat sessions lend themselves well to capture a rich and detailed description of participants' experiences and establish a foundation upon which sharing experiences lead to sharing knowledge. Gaining or constructing new knowledge was touched upon but is certainly a topic for further study. Why some knowledge remains "unshared" and how this can be excavated and used, requires skills developed for SCSs.

International Journal of Arts and Sciences
3(14): 467 - 473 (2010)
CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934
© InternationalJournal.org

References

Chomsky. N.. 1977. *Deep Structure, Surface Structural and Semantic interpretation*. *In:* Steinberg, D. & Jakobovits, L., eds.

Clker.com website retrieved on Mar 1, 2010 from http://www.clker.com/clipart-16344.html

Etymology dictionary visited on Mar 2, 2010 http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=discussion

Haefner, Joel. *The Importance of Being Synchronous.* Retrieved Feb 28, 2010 from http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/teaching/haefner2000.htm

Hurford. J. R.. 1983. *Semantics: A Coursebook.* Cambridge University Press.

Kempson, R.M.. 1975. *Presupposition and the Delimitation of Semantics.* Cambridge University Press.

Lieberman, Jennifer and Weber, Lisa. *Strategies for Effective Use of Chat: When, Why, and How to Make It Work.* Retrieved Mar 2, 2010 from http://168.144.129.112/rtf

Meier, Anne. Spada, Hans. *Constructing New Knowledge in Collaboration: Instructional Support Improving Information Pooling and Processing in Groups.* Retrieved Mar 20, 2010 from http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1599600.1599722

Merriam-webster online dictionary visited on Mar 1, 2010 http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/understanding

Milagros Del Saz Rubio, Maria. 2007. *English Discourse Markers of Reformulation.* Bern: Peter Lang.

Novak, Joseph D.. *Using Concept Maps to Facilitate Classroom and Distance Learning.* Retrieved Mar 30, 2010 from http://wwwcsi.unian.it/educa/mappeconc/jdn_an2.html

Oberlechner,Thomas, Slunecko,Thomas , Kronberger, Nicole. *Surfing the money tides: Understanding the foreign exchange market through metaphors.* IN: British Journal of Social Psychology (2004), 43, 133–156. Retrieved Feb 28, 2010 from www.bps.org.uk

Palmer. R.M.. 1976. *Semantics: A New Outline*. Cambridge University Press.

Stahl, Bernd. *Whose Discourse? A Comparison of the Foucauldian and Habermasian Concepts of Discourse in Critical IS Research*. Retrieved Feb 28, 2010 from http://scholar.google.at/scholar?q=Whose+Discourse%3F+A+Comparison+of+the+Foucauldian+and+Habermasian+Concepts+of+Discourse+in+Critical+IS+Research+Bernd+Carsten+St

International Journal of Arts and Sciences
3(14): 467 - 473 (2010)
CD-ROM. ISSN: 1944-6934
© InternationalJournal.org

ahl&hl=de&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholart

Val, Alvaro de1. 1994. *On the Relation between the Coherence and Foundations Theories of Belief Revision* retrieved Feb 28, 2010 from http://www.aaai.org/Papers/AAAI/1994/AAAI94-139.pdf