DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

ONLINE CHAT IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL EFL CLASS

The effects and implications of including pair/peer chat tasks in the English class

Eszenyi Réka Zsuzsanna

2006

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem

Bölcsészettudományi Kar

DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ

Eszenyi Réka Zsuzsanna

Online chat in the secondary school EFL class

The effects and implications of including pair/peer online chat tasks in the English class

Neveléstudományi Doktori Iskola

Nyelvpedagógia Alprogram

Témavezetők:

Dr. Holló Dorottya

Dr. Per van der Wijst

Budapest, 2006

Table of Contents

References
184

Appendices

List of Abbreviations

BHS – Buda High School

C1 – control group 1

C2 – control group 2

CALL – compute-assisted language leaning

ChG – chat group

CMC – computer-mediated communication

EFL – English as a foreign language

EPI – End-project Interview

ESL – English as a second language

GPT – general proficiency test

IRC – Internet Relay Chat

IT – Information Technology

JP – joint project

LAN – local area network

LTJ – Language Teacher's Journal

NC – network-based communication

NNS – non-native speaker

NS – native-speaker

QA – Questionnaire on Attitudes

QB– Questionnaire on Background

SILL – Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

SLA – second language acquisition

T1 – track 1

T2 – track 2

TELC – Trinity English Language Certificate

TEQ – Task Evaluation Questionnaire

TL – target language

List of Tables

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Nanda Poulisse and Theo Bongaerts for helping me find such an intriguing research topic, and assisting me in drawing up a research plan during my stay in Nijmegen in 2002.

My thanks also go out to Dorka Holló, for supervising my dissertation, devoting all that time to my project, and showing enthusiasm about my study and encouraging me all the way.

I would like to thank Per van der Wijst from the University of Tilburg for helping me find a way to analyse the chat logs, giving me Clark's *Using language* to read, and being a source of strength and support throughout my project. I am also very grateful for the peaceful weeks I could spend in Tilburg on studying and writing.

This work would not have been possible without the cooperation of the members of the chat group and the control groups at Buda High School, and the help of the English teachers at the school. I am also grateful to my friend Dóczi Brigi for helping me administer the tests and analyse my data, I hope to return this favour soon!

And last, but not least, my deepest thanks go out to my family, especially my parents for showing such an interest in my work, supporting and encouraging me, and giving me wise advice in difficult times, and Tomi for being so patient. You've only known me as a PhD student so far, I hope you'll like the new me as well :-)

Abstract

The present dissertation describes how the inclusion of online chat tasks influenced the language learning process of a group of secondary school learners of English as a foreign language. The group had eight 17-year-old members, who were in the fifth class in a secondary school in Budapest. The learners performed online chat tasks in pairs or small groups with their peers in their English classes on 23 occasions. The investigation was carried out in the framework of a case study, which involved the study of the various aspects of classroom chat for the period of one school year. The aspects investigated were the effect of the inclusion of chat on the English classes, the participants' proficiency in English, the strategies they used in language learning, their motivation for learning English, and attitudes towards the inclusion of chat, and the language the learners used in chat. A mixed methodology approach was employed in the study, involving both qualitative and quantitative research methods. I had two roles in the study, those of the researcher and the language teacher.

The effect of the inclusion of chat in the English classes was approached qualitatively and a detailed, thick description is given of the 23 chat classes of the project. The description of the classes shows how the inclusion of chat tasks was fine-tuned in the course of the project, focusing on the tasks, the composition of the chat pairs, the medium of communication and the classroom environment.

The participants' proficiency in English and use of language learning strategies were investigated quantitatively, in a pre- and post-test design. The results of the group were compared to a control group. The results show that the effect of chat tasks is comparable to the effect of the oral communicative tasks the control group was engaged in. Both groups made significant progress in proficiency. The difference between the two groups was that the chat group made more progress in writing skills, while the control group improved more in speaking. In language learning strategies, the use of mental strategies in language learning also increased in both groups. The frequency of strategies aimed at reducing the learner's anxiety decreased in the chat group, suggesting that one of the merits of the chat medium is that it provides a stress-free medium of practicing and learning the target language.

Motivation for learning English in the chat group was investigated qualitatively, by describing the group members' state of motivation before, during and after the chat project. The changes in the learners' motivation for learning English were positive in five of the cases, while in the case of three learners, the chat project had no effect on the language learning process of the participants. The attitudes towards chat tasks in the chat group were compared to the attitudes of a control group who performed chat tasks in the English class on two occasions. The results show that both groups find chat tasks an autonomous, relaxed and enjoyable way to learn, but the chat group found chat tasks significantly more useful than the control group.

The analysis of the language use in chat logs was based on Clark's grounding theory (1996). The longitudinal analysis of the frequency of grounding strategies revealed that the learners used less techniques aimed at grounding the linguistic form of their messages, and at managing the task and expressing emotions. The frequency of techniques aimed at grounding the content of the messages and acknowledging understanding each other remained constant, suggesting that these areas of language use are not affected by the learners' increased experience with the chat medium or the task.

1 Introduction

1.1 The research problem

Computer-mediated communication and computer-assisted language learning have become widespread in the course of the past decade. *Computer-mediated communication* (CMC) is a form of communication between two or more people using computers which are connected through the Internet or with a network connection. The most widespread forms of CMC are *e-mail*, which entails electronic correspondence, *online forums*, where participants can post messages to an electronic bulletin board for others to read on certain topics, and *online chat*, which is a written form of interactive 'dialogue that takes place between spatially distant interlocutors' (Werry, 1996, p. 47).

Teachers and researchers have sought ways to complement the array of 'traditional' language learning tools with tasks that can be performed using computers. *Computer-assisted language learning* (CALL) is defined as 'the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning' (Levy, 1997, p. 1, cited in Chapelle, 2000). The project described in the present dissertation is an example of *network-based language teaching*, 'a new and different side of CALL, where human-to-human interaction is the focus' (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, p. 2), and where CMC takes place. The present study will focus on the use of online chat within the field of network-based language learning and teaching.

Online chat programs make synchronous communication between two or more computer users possible if their computers are connected to a central computer or to the Internet. In online chat, the message is typed on a computer keyboard and it appears immediately on the screen. In some chat programs, the chatting partner can see the message appearing at once, while in others, the sender of the message just has to click on the 'send' button, and the message will appear soon on his or her chat partner's screen.

Even though communicating in online chat requires some technical knowledge, it is especially popular with the younger generation: primary as well as secondary school pupils. They can easily learn how to do it and enjoy online chatting not only with their friends but also with people they do not know and are not likely to meet.

Online chatting as a mode of communication is somewhere between speaking and producing a written text; it does not require the linguistic depth of a written text, yet one has more time to formulate the message than in the case of speaking. If the chatting partners are of a similar age, at a similar level of proficiency and share some interests, regular online chatting in a foreign language can not only be useful but enjoyable as well, and lead to an increase in motivation to learn the foreign language and an actual improvement in language proficiency.

Can these characteristics be exploited in foreign language teaching? Can online chatting become a regular activity in classrooms of English as a foreign language (EFL)? What kind of theoretical considerations justify the use of online chat in language teaching? These are the questions the present study focuses on in the Hungarian context and investigates how

secondary school learners react to the inclusion of regular online chat activities into their language classes.

1.2 The significance of the study

When the present study started, in the year 2003, numerous empirical studies devoted to online chat tasks in language learning could be found. The studies by Beauvois (1992, 1995), Blake (2000), Kelm (1992), Kern (1995), Lee (2002), Nilakanta (2002), Pellettieri (2000), Toorenaar (2002), and Warschauer (1996) all aimed to describe how online chat tasks could be used in the second and foreign language classroom.

Out of these studies, only Beauvois' case study from 1992 was conducted in a secondary school setting; the rest of the investigations involved participants from university or language school courses.

The topic of CALL had scarcely been researched in the Hungarian context. My quest for such investigations yielded only two studies: Blasszauer (2000) on computer-supported collaborative learning in secondary schools, and Bujdosó (2001) on the use of chat rooms in learning Esperanto.

The present study builds on the foundations of previous studies on the topic of CALL. The main issues explored in the literature on chat were the following:
- opportunities for improving one's proficiency in chat,
- the motivating potential of chat activities in language learning,
- chat as a stress free medium of language learning,
- the utility of different task types in chat, and
- the characteristics of language use in chat.

The present study explored these areas of research in a secondary school EFL class in the Hungarian context with a longitudinal perspective. In the paragraphs to follow, the main findings of the study will be summarized.

1.3 Summary of the main findings

In the framework of the study, the steps the language teacher should take to integrate the chat activities were worked out. The inclusion of chat entailed that learners performed communicative tasks in pairs or small groups with their classmates in their EFL classes at school on a weekly basis for the period of one school year.

Beside letting the learners carry out the chat task, involving the learners in planning the task, and evaluating chat logs with the learners are also steps that language teachers are strongly advised to take if they want to make classroom chat activities a meaningful part of the learners' language learning process.

The study also showed that the usefulness of chat activities for the learners' language proficiency and language learning strategies is comparable to that of regular activities learners do in an EFL class. As chat is a written medium, the inclusion of regular chat tasks in the English class had an impact on the learners' writing skills and knowledge of language elements in the first place.

As far as the motivating potential of chat is concerned, factors such as the type of chat task and the chat partner considerably affected the participants' level of involvement in chat tasks.

The learners' understanding of the goals of the chat task deepened as they became more experienced chatters, and this also brought about increased motivation.

In the participants' view, the relaxed atmosphere of chat classes, the autonomous work they could do in chat, and the fact they are doing 'something different' than regular classroom tasks were the merits of including chat tasks in the EFL classes.

The learners performed chat tasks over an extended period of time, so the longitudinal changes in language use in chat could be investigated. The changes suggest that communication in the new classroom medium became less problematic on the level of form as the learners became more experienced chatters. The amount of attention they had to devote to understanding the content of their partners' messages remained constant over time.

All in all, the study revealed that including chat in secondary school language learning provides the learners with a useful and motivating way to learn. The usefulness of language learning tasks performed in the chat medium is comparable to classroom speaking or writing tasks. The added values of a chat task are its novelty, authenticity and the autonomous nature of the language activity the chatters are involved in, and last but not least, the visual record of the conversation the chat medium provides.

1.4 The organisation of the thesis

The chapters and appendices in this dissertation are organized in the following way. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on models of second language acquisition, task types used in language teaching and empirical research in the area of CALL. Chapter 3 gives an overview of approaches to research methodology in this field. Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology used in the present study.

Chapters 5 to 8 contain the results of the study. Chapter 5 focuses on the effect of the inclusion of chat on the chat group's language learning process. Chapter 6 examines the effect of the inclusion of chat on the language proficiency and the language learning strategy repertoire of the participants. Chapter 7 discusses how the participants' motivation for learning English and attitudes toward chat tasks changed as a result of and in the course of the project. Chapter 8 examines the participants' language use in the chat logs and discusses the longitudinal changes that characterize the participants' language use in chat. The changes are also placed into the context of the findings of the previous chapters.

In chapter 9, the conclusions and implications of the study are discussed and suggestions are given for future research. The Appendices include sample chat logs from the three stages of the study, the questionnaires used in the study, the narrative account of the third stage of the study in the Language Teacher's Journal, the full text of the End-project Interview and the protocol of the Member Check Interview.

2 Background to the study

In the present chapter, the literature that served as a background to the study will be reviewed. Section 2.1 describes the models of second language acquisition (SLA) which influenced a considerable part of the research in the field of online chat in language learning. In section 2.2, the task types employed in the study will be defined and the various task types will be compared from the viewpoint of SLA. Section 2.3 examines what role CMC has played in language learning and teaching to date. In section 2.4, the issues empirical studies on online chat have investigated are reviewed and evaluated. In the last section, I will address the rationale for conducting a chat study in the Hungarian context.

2.1 Models of second language acquisition

In SLA theory, the notions of input, output and interaction have an essential function. Input refers to the language the learner is exposed to in reading and listening, output refers to the utterances produced by the language learner, either in written or in spoken form. Interaction refers to the way in which participants use language to keep up communication. When communication problems arise in interactional situations, negotiation of meaning takes place: the participants work together to resolve non-understanding. This is particularly important in oral interaction, where response is immediate and trouble has to be spotted and clarified in order for the conversation to proceed.

Krashen (1981) claimed that comprehensible input has a key role in SLA. The learner can understand the meaning of this input, although it might contain some new elements and thus be somewhat beyond the learner's linguistic competence. Comprehensible input should be at the i+1 level, just one step beyond the learner's level of competence. He or she can work the meaning out with the help of 'linguistic, paralinguistic, or situational clues, or world knowledge backup' (Swain, 1985: 245).

Problems in communication may lead to *negotiation of meaning* between the speakers, which can have a beneficial effect on language acquisition. Long (1983) and Varonis & Gass (1985) argue that it is 'the input that occurs in interaction where meaning is negotiated' (cited in Swain, 1985:246) which plays a crucial role in SLA. In conversations, the speaker might receive feedback from his or her partner which signals that some part of the message has not been understood. Negotiation is

the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility. As they negotiate, they work linguistically to achieve the needed comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways. (Pica, 1994, p. 494)

Varonis and Gass' (1985) model of negotiation of meaning consists of a *trigger*, which is an utterance or a part of it, which has not been understood by the hearer. The hearer can then indicate non-understanding; so the trigger is followed by an *indicator*. The speaker might respond to the indicator (*response*) and try to clarify the non-understanding. The response can optionally be followed by a *reaction to response* from the hearer's side. A sequence of negotiation is a shift away from the main line of the conversation but it might help the interlocutors to (more precisely) understand each other's message and then continue the conversation. Many researchers (among others, Gass, 1997, Long, 1996, Pica, 1994, and Varonis & Gass, 1985) claim that negotiated interaction is beneficial for SLA because it helps the learner notice gaps in his or her knowledge. In the course of negotiated interaction, the learner has the opportunity to fill these gaps by self-correction or asking for clarification and help from the interlocutor.

2.1.1 The importance of output

Swain (1985) claims that although input and interaction are necessary conditions for acquisition, they are not sufficient. The key facilitator of acquisition is output, which gives the learner an opportunity to use his or her knowledge in a meaningful way, and to test out hypotheses about the target language (TL). The learner can analyse the input semantically, and generally understand the message, without paying attention to its form. In order to produce output, however, 'some sort of (at least) rudimentary knowledge of syntax is necessary' (Gass, 1997, p. 7). Output moves the learner from mere semantic analysis to syntactic analysis of the language as well. Interactions in which communication breakdown occurs can be particularly useful for learners, as this situation can bring about *pushed output*, when they are forced to deliver the message in a formally more precise, coherent and appropriate way (Swain, 1985).

In Gass' (1997) model of SLA the input an L2 learner receives is converted into output in five stages. The first stage is *apperceived input*, or noticing 'that there is something to be learned, that is, there is a gap between what the learner already knows and what is there to know (p. 4).' This stage can be followed by *comprehended input*. Comprehension has different levels from understanding the meaning of the message (semantic analysis) to understanding its component parts (structural analysis). Comprehension makes the third stage, *intake*, possible, during which the comprehended material is assimilated.

In the *integration stage*, intake can either result in the development of the learner's second language grammar, or storage. In the case of development, a hypothesis created earlier by the learner is either confirmed or rejected on the basis of the intake received. In the case of confirmation, integration occurs, in the case of rejection, the modified hypothesis 'awaits further confirmation from the input (p.6).' Development may also take place if the input contains information that is already included in the learner's knowledge base. This information can still have a role in rule strengthening or hypothesis reconfirmation. These processes can make the information more easily available to the language learner and thus increase his fluency. A third way to integrate input is storage. If some level of understanding of the input has taken place, but it is not clear how it can be integrated into the learner's grammar, integration can happen with delay, after a period of storage.

The last stage is *output*. Producing output is a form of hypothesis testing for the learner. 'Once learners have created a particular hypothesis about a second language form and use that form in production (orally or in written format), they may receive feedback and as a result modify the original hypothesis (p. 7)'. This leads to input again, with the possibility of apperception by the learner, and so forth. Output is also a form of practising language use and therefore fosters the development of automaticity in interlanguage production.

Both Swain (1985) and Gass (1997) emphasize the importance of producing the TL, and receiving feedback on one's output. The oral practice language learners get is thus essential for their language development because of the opportunities it gives for receiving input, producing output and engaging in negotiation of meaning. In face-to-face conversations, learners can test their hypotheses about the TL and get immediate feedback on it. If the learner's message proves to be unsuccessful in the conversation, he or she is pushed to modify the message and try to produce comprehensible output. However, the time devoted to oral practice in classrooms is fairly limited and many learners do not have the opportunity to practise outside the classroom. Language teachers frequently include pair or group work activities in the language class to maximise student speaking time.

2.1.2 Non-native dyads and opportunities for acquisition

A considerable part of oral communication takes place between dyads. This is also true for a good part of language classrooms. Conversations between instructor and learner or two learners are frequently used forms to practise the TL. The learners of a foreign language in (secondary) schools usually have more opportunities to practise their knowledge with other non-native speakers (NNS) than with native speakers (NS) of the language. One might argue that the potential for learning is greater when one of the parties in a conversation is fully competent in the language used. What kind of advantages do NNS-NNS dyads have over NNS-NS dyads from the point of view of SLA?

Varonis & Gass (1985) compared the amount of negotiation in NS-NNS and NNS-NNS dyads, and found that negotiation of meaning is more frequent in the discourse of two non-native speakers. Their results show that the inequality of status between a native and a non-native speaker discourages negotiation, while non-native speakers, being not yet competent in the domain of the TL, would thus also be more likely to respond to other-repair without embarrassment. Because the 'fault' of non-understanding may reside with either the speaker or the hearer or both, the interlocutors have 'shared incompetence' (p. 71).

In the case of NNS-NNS dyads, they have an opportunity to practice their language knowledge in a non-threatening environment, receive input and produce output, which has been made comprehensible through negotiation.

2.2 The effect of task type on SLA

In addition to the number of participants and their language proficiency level, the type of task performed also influences the amount of negotiation of meaning in interaction. Pica et al. (1993) taxonomize communication task types along the following dimensions: *Interactant relationship* between the participants, which identifies the holder, requester and the supplier of the information in the activity, and the information requester-supplier relationship. The second dimension is *interaction requirement*, in which interaction between the participants can either be required or not required. *Goal orientation* means that tasks can be convergent, requiring the reaching of a common goal from the participants, or not convergent. *Outcome options*, the last dimension, shows how many possible outcomes the task type can have, ranging from none to one or more than one. The task types differentiated along these

dimensions are *jigsaw*, *information gap*, *problem-solving*, *decision-making* and *opinion exchange* tasks. In the case of the first three types of tasks, there is only one possible outcome and the interactants have convergent goals. These properties 'generate opportunities for interactants to work toward comprehension, feedback, and interlanguage modification processes related to successful SLA' (Pica et al, 1993, p. 22). In other words, when performing these types of tasks, learners have more opportunities to negotiate meaning than in the case of decision-making and information exchange tasks.

2.2.1 Studies on the relationship of task types and negotiation of meaning

Deen (1995) compares the amount of negotiation of meaning in NS-NNS face-to-face interaction in a formal and an informal setting. In the formal setting the NS, a housing officer, interviews the NNS in order to get certain information and fills in a form about the NNS, so the conversation has an obvious aim. In the informal setting, the participants of the conversation speak about certain topics. The outcome of the conversation is not fixed. Deen concludes that the informal conversation results in more negotiation of meaning, and in more opportunities for the NNS to acquire language. There are three reasons for this difference. One reason is that in the formal setting, the script of the conversation, and part of the vocabulary to be used is given to the participants in advance, which makes the topics more predictable. Another reason is that the asymmetry in the status of the participants inhibits negotiation. The NNS might be too inhibited by the superior linguistic status of the NS to ask for help. The parties often decide to act politely and avoid signalling misunderstandings. A third reason is that in the formal setting, a certain goal has to be reached at the end of the conversation and this imposes time pressure on the participants; there is hardly any room for learning and creative language use.

However, other research has shown evidence of the beneficial effect of goal-oriented tasks on SLA. Several studies investigating the role of task type in SLA (Pica et al., 1993, Doughty & Pica, 1986) claim that goal-oriented tasks, especially jigsaw and two-way information gap tasks bring about more negotiation of meaning and thus also more opportunities for language acquisition than open-ended chat activities, in which learners 'can choose the degree to which they would like to interact. In such instances, there is not much opportunity for interaction, leading to a decrease in language production' (Nilakanta, 2002, p.5).

Cloutier (2000) compared information-gap, jigsaw, decision-making, problem solving and opinion-exchange tasks, and found that although the opportunities to negotiate meaning are higher in the first two types of tasks, more open-ended task types like opinion exchange result in a higher number of words per turns, and are more related to ways in which learners use language outside the classroom. (These types of tasks are also advocated by Nunan, 1993). Cloutier concludes that both goal-oriented and open-ended tasks are conducive to SLA; they complement each other and help learners in achieving different types of conversational proficiency.

2.3 Producing language in online chat

The issues of the importance of output, learning by interaction, the opportunities for learning in non-native dyads and the choice of task have relevance to speaking skills in the first place. A number of studies on online chat in language learning have also concentrated on these issues, although the medium of communication is different. In the following sections, the qualities of online chat as a channel of communication will be described and related to SLA.

If we describe online chat from the viewpoint of a speech production model, in this case, Levelt's model (1989, cited in Poulisse, 2002), production takes place in the following steps:

the chatter plans the content of their message (conceptualization). Then they plan the form of the message (formulation), finding the grammatical structures, vocabulary and phonetic information that fit the message. The phonetic information is transformed into graphemes, since online chat is a written form of communication. The third phase of the production is typing: the muscles in the chatter's hand are commanded to hit the right letters on the keyboard of the computer. In the case of speech production, the third phase is speaking, uttering the message.

Both in speaking and in chat, the speaking or chat partner receives the message immediately or within a few seconds. After understanding and processing it, the process of answering, producing speech or a chat utterance can begin. The partner will conceptualise and formulate the new message. Since the two forms of communication, speaking and online chat, share these features, models of SLA devised to explain the role of speech in second language learning can also be relevant to the study of online chat as a communication tool in language classes.

2.3.1 Comparing online chatting with face-to-face interaction

Several factors of face-to-face conversations can also be found in online chatting: turn taking is relatively fast, which results in short utterances with simpler syntax, and less time is given to formulation and correction than in the case of writing. The incomprehensibility of a message can be signalled almost immediately and the sender has the opportunity to try to improve it on the spot.

Poulisse (2002) notes that there are two salient differences between face-to-face conversations and online chatting: the first difference is that in chat, phonetic information about words is transformed into graphemes, thus spelling plays an important role. The second is that the chatter can monitor his or her message before sending it, so there is more time for reflection and correction than in the case of speaking. A third difference between the two modes of communication is mentioned by Toorenaar (2002): when two learners are involved in online chatting, they have to be more explicit in their language use than in the case of a face-to-face conversation, since there is no visual context to complement the verbal part of communication. If the learner's chat partner indicates that the message has not been understood, he or she has to revise it, and is forced to negotiate meaning and produce more comprehensible output in order to communicate successfully.

Owing to these three differences: spelling, monitoring and explicitness, in the case of online chatting learners can gain more insight into their own language use and learning process than when speaking, but can still utilise what they have learnt in a lifelike way, Poulisse concludes (2002). Poulisse's claims are corroborated by Pellettieri's (2000) findings which imply that negotiation of meaning in online chatting leads to improved language proficiency:

In NC [network-based communication] chats, the learners have the added advantage of the visual saliency of the model form, whether delivered explicitly or implicitly, which can allow for greater opportunities for a cognitive comparison of the new form against the speaker's original utterance, which is also visible on the screen. It is therefore possible that extra processing time and resources allow learners to better discriminate between target and non-target-like forms. (p.31)

In online chatting, all utterances are recorded on the screen, which makes monitoring easier for the learner. Revision too is facilitated, not only during the chat session, but afterwards when learners can read their texts. Also, their instructors can help with correction. Because

these conversations can easily be recorded, employing chat tasks also holds an extra appeal for SLA research.

2.3.2 The effect of online chatting on accuracy: enhancing or detrimental?

Lee (2002) believes that online chatting is beneficial for SLA for the following three reasons: Firstly, it 'provides for more equal participation than face-to-face interaction. ... [Chatting] is special, for example, in that it allows shy and less-well motivated learners to interact with others' (p. 17). At this point, it should be noted that many learners are reluctant to talk in the TL because they are insecure about pronunciation. Chatting gives them an opportunity to practise without having to worry about pronunciation (also mentioned by Poulisse, 2002). Secondly, when chatting, the learner has the opportunity to define the pace at which he or she can, and wants, to process input, as well as monitor and edit output. In most of the conversations learners of a foreign language get involved in this is not at all the case. Thirdly, Lee states that online chatting increases language production and complexity. Learners get more turns than in the traditional classroom setting and 'engage more frequently, with greater confidence, and with greater enthusiasm than in the communicative process than is characteristic for similar students in oral classrooms' (Swaffar, 1998, cited in Lee, 2002). Besides being beneficial for SLA, chatting can also have a positive effect on motivation for and attitudes toward learning the TL (reported by Beauvois, 1992, Lee, 2002, and Toorenaar, 2002). Some researchers, however, find that the language production in online chatting is of a low formal quality and is potentially detrimental for the grammatical accuracy of learners.

Chat texts produced by native speakers of a language are characterized by ellipsis, abbreviations, which make 'the conversation in writing' faster, and emoticons, which express feelings and attitudes, substituting gesture and mimicry in face-to-face conversations (on the linguistic features of online chat see Werry, 1996). While these linguistic features are natural and practical in online chatting, the aim of most learners is to improve their speaking and writing skills and become more fluent and accurate in the language they are learning. Using the TL in online chat may not be conducive to all of these goals. Furthermore, O'Connor and Ross (2004) in their study on the effect of CMC on learning environment found that students retain and are able to apply knowledge better in a face-to-face than in a computer-mediated setting.

Kern (1995) draws the following conclusions in his study on classroom interaction (whole-class discussion) with networked computers: 'Formal accuracy, stylistic improvement, global coherence, consensus, and reinforcement of canonical discourse are goals not well served by *InterChange (p. 470)* [1].' He also notes that while participation in network-based discussions is more democratic than in face-to-face ones, it can 'verge on the anarchistic (p. 470)'. Beauvois (1992) mentions that when using online chat for communication, students can become 'indifferent to the appropriate usage of the target language (p. 460)' in the context of chatting. In the concrete case she describes in her study the teacher remedied the problem of carelessness by printing out and reviewing the students' chat texts. I share Beauvois' opinion, and also believe that using well-planned pedagogical tasks in online chat can direct learners' attention to the importance of accurate language use. By giving the chat tasks to dyads instead of groups, virtual anarchy can be avoided as well.

2.4 Empirical studies on chat in language learning

[1] I*nterChange* is a kind of software which allows students to take part in collaborative, synchronous written discussion on a topic. It is comparable to Internet Relay Chat in its possibilities, but it operates in a Local Area Network (LAN), not on the Internet.

In the paragraphs above, the focus was on the qualities of online chat that make it a potentially useful medium of communication in language learning, and the specifications of how chat can be included in language learning. In the paragraphs to follow, the key issues of using chat tasks in the language class will be dealt with on the basis of the most influential empirical studies on online chat in language learning.

2.4.1 Meaningful use of the target language (Beauvois, 1992)

In Beauvois' case study (1992), the case of a Texan high school student, Alex is described. Alex was going to fail French in Beauvois' class. 'He had had many extra help sessions with a private tutor and with his classroom teacher, all to no avail. He did not seem to be able to retain the grammar or vocabulary presented' (p. 461). Beauvois organized four chat sessions with Alex and one of his classmates at the end of the term. Although four sessions are comparatively few, the researcher-teacher claims that they had a decisive effect on Alex's attitude towards French and he passed in summer school. During the first chat session, Alex produced 21 messages (28 sentences) in French, answered 23 questions, and asked 4 questions himself, which was much more than he had ever produced in several traditional French classes. Beauvois attributed the success of the chat sessions (the amount of language produced by Alex and the fact that he finally passed) to the novelty of the medium and the fact that it gives the language learner a high degree of autonomy; he has more time to formulate his message than in an oral task. Chatting in French also made Alex realize that the foreign language can be used for lifelike purposes. Beauvois interprets Alex's change of attitude this way: 'I think that to some extent, in writing messages to his classmate, Alex experienced the use of French as a 'natural' occurrence, perhaps for the first time' (p. 462).

Beauvois' study was one of the first investigations into using chat in language learning and described the case of just one learner, relying on participant observation in the chat sessions with the learner and the chat logs produced in these sessions. The studies in the field of online chat in language learning in the following years broadened in scope and used a variety of research methods to reveal more about the nature of the new medium.

2.4.2 Increased participation and more complex language in chat (Warschauer, 1996)

Warschauer compared the language of face-to-face and electronic discussions. Four groups of four adult learners of English of Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese nationalities participated in the experiment. The face-to-face discussions performed by two of the groups were tape-recorded and transcribed, the electronic discussions of the other two groups were saved[2], so the two types of texts could be compared. Warschauer claims that the language used in the electronic discussions was lexically and syntactically more formal and complex, and that the 'findings showed a tendency toward more equal participation in computer mode and revealed some factors which correlated with increased student participation in that mode (p. 7)'. His findings imply that electronic discussions provide a good practice opportunity for learners who are too anxious to speak in class or group discussions.

The features of language use investigated in Warschauer's study provide a static view of learning through communication and do not consider the interaction that is a key element in the process of language learning. The following three studies investigate what opportunities chat provides for learners to expand their language proficiency through interaction. The studies also shed light on how chat should be included in language learning programs in order to maximize the beneficial effect of the medium on language learning.

2.4.3 Improving grammatical competence with goal-oriented tasks (Pellettieri, 2000)

[2] Warschauer used the software Daedalus InterChange, which makes synchronous electronic communication possible.

The participants in Pellettieri's experiment were university students of Spanish in the United States. The experiment lasted for five weeks, and the participants carried out five chat tasks in pairs. The tasks varied in type: in two of them only one outcome was possible, while three of them were open-ended and allowed for multiple outcomes. Pellettieri investigated the chat logs from the point of view of possibilities for the development of grammatical competence. There are instances in the text where the chatters have difficulty understanding each other, and are forced to modify or correct their original message in order for the conversation to proceed. Pellettieri claims that these modifications, or in other words, instances of negotiation of meaning, give the chatters opportunity to improve their grammatical competence. The type of tasks which have only one possible outcome (the so-called goal-oriented tasks) compel the chatters to clarify the messages which are not clear for their chat partner more often than open-ended tasks.

Pellettieri concludes that when performing a chat task, the learners 'have more time to process and monitor their interlanguage' (2000, p.33), so 'chatting can play a significant role in the development of grammatical competence among classroom language learners' (p. 34). The frequency of opportunities for meaning negotiation can thus be intensified by choosing goal-oriented tasks. However, beside the potential of a task to elicit negotiation of meaning, the language teacher should also consider factors such as social and cultural relevance and the appropriacy of the electronic medium for the task (mentioned by Warschauer, 2000). These factors might have influenced teacher-researchers to use open-ended discussion tasks in online chat, like in the following two studies.

2.4.4 Autonomy and motivation in classroom chat (Lee, 2002)

Lee involved third year college students of Spanish from Texas in her experiment. The participants chatted in small groups about topics from their language classes. The teacher-researcher prepared open-ended questions about each topic to help the group discussions. The main aim of the chat-sessions was to practise and revise what the students had learnt in class. The researcher saved the chat logs, commented and wrote feedback on them, and gave them back to the groups. The chat logs suggest that student-student interaction creates more opportunities for negotiation than interactions where the instructor is also present. The members of the groups were encouraged to discuss corrections with each other. The texts were collected in the students' portfolios for the final evaluation. Lee finds that the revision of chat logs is necessary in order for the chat tasks to have a beneficial effect on the chatters' language proficiency. Lee does not give an in-depth analysis of negotiation patterns in the chat logs like Pellettieri. Nevertheless, her study gives language pedagogical insight into the classroom application of chat by showing how chat can be integrated into a language course, and advocating the revision of chat logs with the learners.

The four studies introduced above all have in common that they involved participants from the same institution, so the situation of 'meeting online' in chat was simulated, and in three of the four studies, the first language of the chat partners was identical. A truly authentic situation for chat between language learners is when they are far from each other geographically, and their only lingua franca is the target language, as was the case in the following study.

2.4.5 Intercultural encounters and learning from peers in chat (Toorenaar, 2002)

Two groups of students of Dutch as a second language, enrolled on courses in two Dutch cities, Purmerend and Zaandam, participated in Toorenaar's experiment. The participants had different language backgrounds. They took part in chat-sessions every Friday for one term.

They chatted in pairs, each learner form Purmerend had a partner from Zaandam. The pairs did not know each other. The topics of the chat were based on the textbook both groups were using. Toorenaar's main research question was: What is the added value of online chatting for language learners? Having investigated the chat logs of the tasks, she mentions the following points:
1) Since the chatters do not see each other, they have to be more precise in their language use to make sure their partner understands them.
2) While performing a chat task, the chatters are often forced to modify their own or their partner's utterances, and this is potentially beneficial for their language development.
3) In chatting, one has more time to modify one's message than in face-to-face conversations.
4) The chatters produce the chat log collaboratively, and the text appearing on the monitor helps them do this.
5) When two learners chat with each other, they have the opportunity to get to know each other and become friends. They can learn about each other's culture.
These phenomena can have a motivating effect on the language learners. Toorenaar, like Lee (2002), also advocates the revision of chat-texts with the learners. The merit of Toorenaar's study is that the linguistic factors of explicitness and modifications in chat appear, and the medium's potential to lower learner anxiety and increase motivation to produce the target language in an authentic situation are shown.

In the five studies described above all had in common that they found evidence for chat being a beneficial medium in second and foreign language learning. This implies that chat can also be employed successfully in the Hungarian context.

2.5 Rationale for studying chat in the Hungarian context

The use of computers and the Internet has become widespread in Hungarian schools in the past decade. Although a great number of schools have computers and the Internet at their disposal, the use of computers in teaching subjects other than Information Technology (IT) cannot be called self-evident. The reasons for this situation are probably the following: Firstly, teachers of foreign languages, History or Physics, just to mention some of the subjects taught in Hungarian schools, are neither trained nor encouraged in the course of their education to include computer-assisted activities in their teaching. Secondly, the number and quality of computers, and the Internet connection at most schools would make computer- and internet-based projects cumbersome to carry out. Thirdly, most computer-based activities require the learners to work alone or relying on their peers, which makes it difficult for the teacher to control what is happening during the activity and what the outcome will be.

However, communicating with and through computers have become everyday activities for people of all ages, especially the generation growing up at the beginning of the 21st century. The traditional notion of literacy is now complemented by the concept of electronic literacy, which stands for the ability to communicate with and through computers (Warschauer, 2000). By developing the learners' electronic literacy, and giving them tasks to perform on the computer, the learners are practising in an authentic medium that is likely to be a part of their life in the world of work a well. If we consider the growing importance of computers in everyday life, at work and in people's homes, the increased inclusion of computers in teaching at school should also be beneficial for the learners. This claim is especially valid for the case of foreign language teaching, as the Internet opens a gate for its users to an excess of materials, speakers and native speakers of various languages.

In order to make computer tasks meaningful, classroom research on the inclusion of such tasks and the development of materials are essential. An interesting example of textbooks for using the Internet in English language teaching is Varga's *Virtual Visits* (2004). As

mentioned above, people can communicate with, and through the computer. The latter form of communication is often referred to as computer-mediated communication, or CMC in short, as it was introduced in chapter 1. CMC includes e-mail, forums and chat. In all three cases, humans communicate with humans. Poór (2001) in his book on technology in language pedagogy describes these three forms of communication as tools for fostering learner autonomy in language learning.

There is a sharp contrast between the ubiquity of computers and the scarcity of empirical studies on how language learners can benefit from these new forms of communication in the Hungarian context. One of the few examples is Blasszauer's study (2000), which investigated how secondary school EFL learners participated in collaborative e-mail projects by using participant observation and an attitude survey. He claims that his project had positive results, as the participants 'reported high levels of satisfaction over developing technical, language and collaborational skills' (p. 1). Concerning research methodology, Blasszauer followed an ethnographic and process approach. His description of the project serves as a useful source of ideas. However, in Blasszauer's study, no measurement of the language skills of the participants is included, and no linguistic analysis is given of the learners' e-mails.

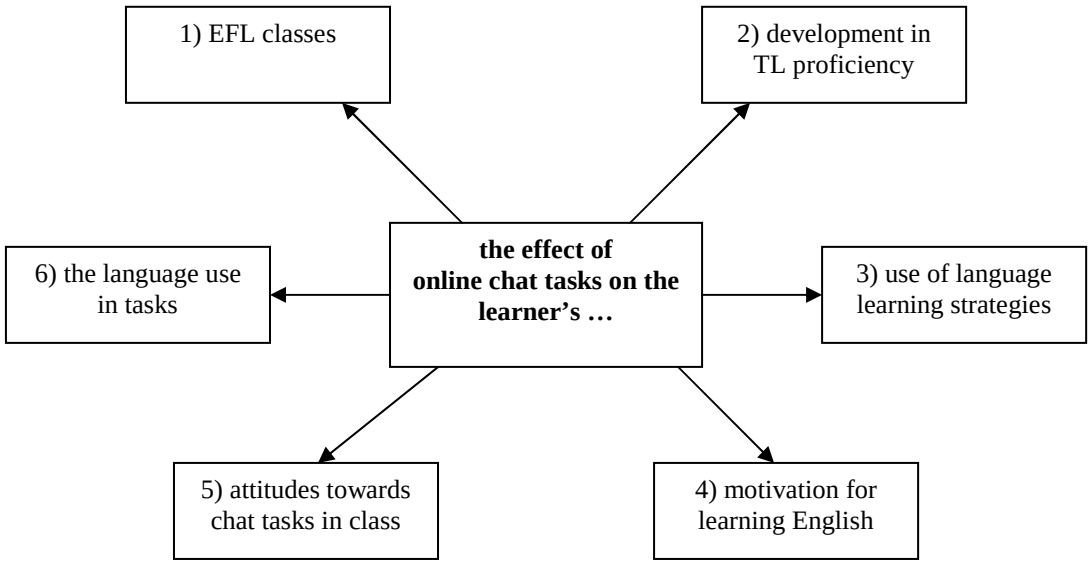
Bujdosó (2001) explored how secondary school learners of Esperanto profit from practising the target language at an Internet Relay Chat channel created for learners of Esperanto. He mentions that in chat, learners
- could start writing even at very low levels
- were willing to learn hundreds of words in order to be able to chat in the target language
- could later meet their chat-pals at a youth camp
- were able to pass an advanced level exam just after one semester of learning

These results could probably not fully be applied in foreign language classes in other Hungarian secondary schools. However, Bujdosó's findings, just like Blasszauer's (2000), indicate that CMC in language learning yielded promising results in the Hungarian context as well.

More research is needed that explores the various aspects of integrating CMC in language learning (also advocated by Ortega, 1997, in the international context), with a focus on secondary schools, including how to set up a CMC project, the learners' attitudes and motivation, and the investigation of language use in CMC.

The present dissertation describes a year-long chat project conducted at a secondary school in Budapest. The study will be referred to as the Buda High School (BHS) chat project. The aim of the study was to explore *the effects of including chat tasks in an EFL group*. As was shown in the previous sections, language learning in online chat has multiple aspects. The BHS chat project intended to investigate the aspects shown in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 ***The aspects of online chat investigated in the BHS chat project***



The divergent aspects of the research topic called for a research design that is suitable for encompassing a topic of such a broad scope. In the following chapter, a brief review of research methods will be given, with the intention of giving the rationale for the combined methodology approach employed in the study.

3 An overview of the research approaches used in the Buda High School Chat Project

The aim of the present chapter is to review the literature on research methodologies used in SLA and to provide an overview of the assumptions underlying the research methodology employed in the present study, the Buda High School (BHS) chat project (see 4.3), and the pilot studies preceding it (see 4.2).

In section 3.1, the assumptions underlying the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms will be discussed. By reviewing both the qualitative and the quantitative paradigm, I intend to justify the employment of the *mixed methodology* approach in the study. The merits of combining the two approaches are discussed in section 3.2. In section 3.3, the issues of trustworthiness, validity and reliability are investigated, and the steps taken in the present study to ensure that these are fully addressed are described. Section 3.4 will summarize the issues discussed in this chapter.

3.1 Assumptions of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies

The differences between the two research paradigms will be illustrated along the following dimensions: the *focus* of the investigation, the research *objectives*, the *procedures* of research, the *researcher's role* in the study and the *style of writing* used in reporting the study. The comparison of the two research methodologies is based on three seminal works on research methodology, Seliger & Shohamy (1989), Creswell (1994), and Holliday (2002). Table 3.1 summarizes the key characteristics of the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Table 3.1 ***The main characteristics of the two research approaches***

type of approach	***qualitative approach***	***quantitative approach***
focus of investigation	process	product
research objectives	hypothesis-generating	hypothesis-testing
research activities	fieldwork	measurement
researcher's role	'filter' interpreting reality	no impact on results
style of reporting	narrative, subjective tone	objective account

3.1.1 The research focus and objectives

The qualitative approach to research is primarily concerned with *interpreting* social reality and describing the *processes* behind it. Another term used in place of qualitative is *interpretative,* which also emphasizes that *meaning* is the primary point of interest for the researcher in this paradigm. In the course of qualitative research, *hypotheses* about the research problem can be *generated*.

In quantitative research, the underlying assumption is that the behaviour of a chosen *population* can be understood by investigating a *sample* from that population (Ferguson, 1981). In order to ensure that the results of the investigation are generalizable, which means they hold true for the population, the sample should be representative of the population.

In quantitative studies, the researcher has concrete ideas about what is salient to look for when commencing the research. The 'segment' of reality investigated is defined in terms of *variables* in quantitative research. The changes in the variables are measured by research *instruments* The researcher makes predictions, *hypotheses* about how the variables will

change as a result of the *treatment*, the intervention planned by the researcher. In the course of the quantitative investigation, the hypotheses are *tested* by the means of statistical procedures. The changes (or lack of changes) in the variables reveal something about the research problem.

3.1.2 Research procedures

In the present section, the research activities, the size of the population investigated, and the interpretation of research rigour in the two paradigms are addressed.

The following steps are taken in quantitative research: the researcher defines the research focus, then they devise the research instrument, and after these two steps, the *subject* of research is approached. The focus of the research, the variables to be studied, and the instruments, e.g. questionnaires and tests, are chosen in advance. The researcher also predicts what kind of answers might be found to the research questions in the form of hypotheses, which can be supported or contradicted by the research results. This approach to research, in which the researcher begins the investigation with preconceived notions and expectations about the outcome of the investigation, is called *deductive* or *hypothesis testing* research.

In qualitative research, the first step is to define a research topic or subject, and then the researcher takes the initial steps towards exploring the topic. Research activities are *emergent*: no a priori decisions are taken on themes, focuses in the research, or the research instruments to be used, as the researcher shall intend to allow these to emerge during the course of their investigation.

Qualitative research entails *fieldwork*, which means that the researcher is present at the site of research for an extended period. During fieldwork, the researcher observes the participants and setting, conducts interviews and collects documents and other data which might help them to better understand the specific features of the setting.

Data collection in a qualitative project begins at the moment of entering the setting, and it is further shaped by the themes and focuses the researcher judges to be relevant, based on experience accumulated prior to, and during the study. This experience, together with other factors that might influence the researcher, are stated explicitly in the research report.

The emergent nature of qualitative research means that the researcher believes that the themes and focuses important to the research topic chosen will emerge during the data collection. The researcher also believes they have the ability ‘to devise research procedures to fit the situation and the nature of the people in it, as they are revealed’ (Holliday, 2002, p. 6), and she is able to interpret results arising from them.

If we compare the *size of the population investigated* in qualitative and quantitative studies, we can conclude the following: as qualitative studies aim to probe deeply into the chosen topic and setting, they normally do not span a large population, in contrast to quantitative studies, which generally do. Qualitative studies, especially case studies, focus on smaller groups of people, or in many cases, individuals. The reason for this is that the in-depth investigation of a given phenomenon, and the intention to provide a holistic picture of that phenomenon, compel the researcher to limit the scope of the investigation.

Rigour in quantitative research entails that the researcher applies established rules to statistics, experiment and survey design. Quantitative research is characterised by a high degree of control. Being fully informed of the conventions of quantitative methodology, and following them, is a prerequisite for carrying out quality research.

The emergent nature of qualitative research, and the fact that the researcher's subjective view of the problem play a significant role in qualitative studies,, do not mean that qualitative studies are conducted in an ad hoc manner. Rigour in qualitative studies means finding research strategies that fit the setting and participants being studied, and also that the researcher continuously endeavours to keep track of events, find the best way to record them and instigate the next step in the inquiry. The qualitative researcher leaves an *audit trail* in their study, which outlines the decisions they have taken in the course of the study.

3.1.3 The researcher's role and the language used in reporting

As far as the style of writing is concerned, the quantitative research report is characterized by an objective, impersonal style. The researcher stays in the background, and the use of the passive, the word 'researcher' and the third person singular are encouraged. The researcher should not have an effect on the data collected or the results of the research, as objectivity is a key prerequisite for quality quantitative research. The people participating in the research are usually referred to as *subjects* or *participants.*

The role qualitative researchers play in their studies is quite the opposite of the role of the quantitative researcher. In the qualitative paradigm, the researcher is the main instrument of research, and all of the data and the results are filtered through her interpretation. Subjectivity is thus present in the investigation, and the researcher's experience, biases and opinions are explicitly stated. For an example of a description of the researcher's personal role see Cherney (1999).

The qualitative study is characterised by a narrative style. The text describes the participants, the setting and the events taking place in the presence of the researcher. As the researcher is present at the site of research the description is given from her point of view. It is customary to use the first person singular in these descriptions. The people participating in the research are usually referred to as *informants* or *participants.*

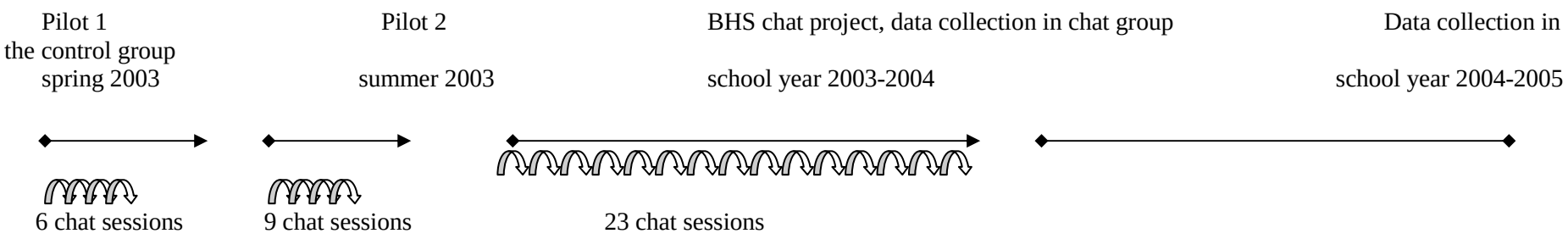
3.2 Combining qualitative and quantitative methods

As shown in the paragraphs above, quantitative and qualitative research methodologies have opposing assumptions and objectives. The results obtained by the two types of investigation are also of an entirely different nature. In spite of the sharp distinctions between the two research traditions, it is possible to combine the two methodologies in one study. Numerical results and descriptions concerning the same research problem can shed light on different facets of the same topic, and provide a more refined answer to the research question. Using combined methods also increases the validity of a study (Jick, 1979, Creswell, 1996). By using two different methodologies and collecting and analysing two or more data sources to answer the same research question, the researcher *triangulates* their findings, and the results drawn from one source may be confirmed by the results from a second one. For example, the researcher's observations at the site of research can be confirmed (or contradicted) by the results of a questionnaire given to the informants at the site. (The concept of *triangulation* will be dealt with in detail in 3.3.1.)

The main study, the BHS chat project, was preceded by two pilot studies. In these studies, the problem of inclusion was approached *heuristically*. The use of this approach meant that my aim was to find the dominant themes, and the patterns of student behaviour in an EFL class where chat tasks are included in the syllabus.

In the present dissertation, which describes the BHS chat project, a combined qualitative and quantitative research approach was employed. The reason for this combined approach is that the phenomenon investigated, that is the effect of the inclusion of chat tasks on a group of secondary school EFL learners, had not been the topic of empirical research in Hungary at the time of this project's commencement. Due to the novelty of the subject of the study, I considered it important to present a detailed picture and description of the chat project, and to describe the English classes and chat sessions that took place within the framework of the project. At the same time, previous studies on chat in the language classroom suggested some themes worth investigating. Consequently, I was able to define a number of steps to be taken before beginning the research. The variables *proficiency in English*, and *the frequency of language learning strategies* were investigated using quantitative methods. In figure 3.1 the different stages of the study are shown. The third and most important stage of the study, the BHS chat project, can be seen in the middle Under the time line of the project, the quantitative and qualitative elements of the project are shown. The qualitative element is the case study of a group that had regular chat sessions in its EFL classes for one school year. The quantitative element included in the study is the
chat experiment.

Figure 3.1 ***Data collection in the BHS chat project***



Since the qualitative and quantitative methods played an equally important part in the study, the methodological approach of the BHS chat project constitutes an example of 'mixed methodology'. Green et al. (1989) claim that by relying on both paradigms in a study, different facets of a phenomenon may emerge. The possibility for exploring different facets of the inclusion of chat in the EFL classes was the asset of mixed methodology that I wished to exploit in the BHS chat project.

From the qualitative angle, the pilot projects and the BHS chat project are examples of case studies (Stake, 2000, Yin, 2003). Within the framework of the case study, I intended to explore the themes relevant to the group's language learning process. From the quantitative angle, the effect of chat was investigated using a quasi-experimental design, which involved three intact school groups. The inclusion of chat in the language classes was the treatment, the effect of which was measured by the use of various instruments. The changes in the variables are compared with the results in the control groups.

The aim of the present study therefore, is to test and generate hypotheses concurrently, and to show how the various components of a chat project function, and what added value a chat project can bring to language learning.

3.3 Concern for the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the study

In quantitative research, the concepts of validity and reliability play crucial roles in defining how useful the findings of a study are for its readers and 'consumers', the people and institutions who may apply the findings. Similarly, a key concept in qualitative research is *trustworthiness*, which shows how far the readers of a study can trust the findings described in a qualitative report. Guba (1981) lists four components of trustworthiness in a qualitative study: *credibility, transferability, dependability*, and *confirmability*. In the following paragraphs, these concepts will be explained. It will also be shown how the four concepts relate to notions used in respect of similar concerns in quantitative studies: internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. Table 3.2 summarizes the four qualitative concepts and their equivalents in the quantitative paradigm.

Table 3.2 ***The components of the concept 'trustworthiness'***

Component	***corresponding concept in the quantitative paradigm***
Credibility	internal validity
Transferability	external validity/generalizability
Dependability	reliability
Confirmability	objectivity

3.3.1 Credibility

The *credibility* of research refers to how far the findings can be confirmed by the sources of the data. In qualitative research, the researcher can check the credibility of their findings by doing *member checks*, which means asking the participants of the research what they think of the findings and conclusions. Another method of checking credibility is the analysis of several sources of data, for example checking if the observation notes, and the interview conducted with the participants both lead to the same conclusions. The technique of using two or more data sources to show that the findings of research converge is called *triangulation* (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, Creswell, 1994, Holliday, 2002). Triangulation is a basic technique used to ensure confirmability. Both member checks and triangulation were used in the present study to ensure the credibility of the findings. Member checking was done by conducting post-project interviews with two of the participants and the English teacher of the control group about the findings of the study. Triangulation was achieved by collecting and analysing data from different sources for each research question.

The concept of credibility in qualitative research is comparable to that of internal validity in quantitative research, which is the measure of how far the results of research were affected by the manner in which the research was conceived (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989).

3.3.2 Transferability

The second component of trustworthiness is *transferability*. The concept of transferability concerns the degree to which the findings of research can be transferred to a context similar to that of the research. The detailed, *thick description* of the context of the research can assist readers in estimating how other contexts compare to that described in the research. Thick description in qualitative research is the technique of reporting an event or describing a phenomenon by presenting its different facets and showing its complexity. In the case of a classroom project, its different facets can be shown by; presenting the participants' opinions, the investigation of the written product of the class, the teacher's experience, and the observation of the participants' behaviour. The transferability of research should also be ensured in qualitative studies by leaving an *audit trail,* a record of the steps and decisions taken in the course of research. This record enables the reader to transfer the results to another setting. In the present study, transferability was ensured by presenting thick descriptions, and giving an account of the important decisions taken in the course of the research, as outlined in Chapters 5 and 7, which approached the topic of chat in the EFL class qualitatively.

In quantitative studies, generalizability is a key concept. Generalizability means that the findings of research are applicable to the whole population the sample was part of. The findings of qualitative studies cannot be generalized to larger populations However, by choosing the setting in which an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon researched is possible, the qualitative researcher can provide a description that helps their readers 'vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions' (Stake, 2000, p. 439). Consequently, the investigation will be transferable, and the reader can compare the motives and patterns described to other cases and settings.

3.3.3 Dependability

The third concept of trustworthiness is *dependability*. The quantitative counterpart of dependability is reliability, which refers to how accurate and consistent the data collection was. Dependability also concerns the stability of the research instruments However, as humans are used as instruments in qualitative research (Guba, 1981), shifts in the instruments are not interpreted as errors, as they are in quantitative research. Changes in the 'instruments' are attributed to the emergent nature of quantitative inquiry. As the researcher progresses in their inquiries, they have 'evolving insights and sensitivities' (Guba, 1981, p. 81). In this process, *trackability* takes on the main role, instead of consistency. Trackability means that the decisions the researcher makes in the course of research are precisely documented in the research report. Dependability in qualitative research thus consists of both consistency and trackability. In the present study the two chapters concerning qualitative research, chapter 5 about the evolution of the inclusion of chat tasks in the EFL classes, and chapter 7 about changes in motivation and attitudes towards chat, provide an account of the decisions I made in the course of the project.

3.3.4 Confirmability

The fourth and last concept included in trustworthiness is *confirmability.* Confirmability concerns the neutrality of the data produced. While conducting the study, the qualitative researcher collects data from different sources so that the findings can be triangulated. The qualitative researcher should also record the events in the study, reflect upon them, and keep track of the decisions they made during the study. After the study has been conducted, and the researcher reports on the research, it should be extensively documented, so that the data is available to the readers. The presentation of all the products of research, including the data, is called *confirmability audit* (Guba, 1981). The word 'audit' here refers to the fact that the researcher makes it possible for her readers to examine all the documents of her research. In order to achieve confirmability, the qualitative data were included in the appendix of the study (see Chapter 4).

The quantitative counterpart of confirmability is objectivity. Objectivity is achieved by removing the investigator from the inquiry. While in qualitative research, the main instrument is the researcher themselves, in quantitative research, the researcher employs objective research instruments to make sure that their personal bias and subjectivity do not interfere with the findings of research. In qualitative research, the researcher explicitly states the personal biases that influence data collection and interpretation. In the present study, the personal factors that influenced the course of research were recorded in the Language Teacher's Journal (see description in 4.3.7.8 and the document in Appendix 3). As a result, the reader is aware of the factors that had an impact on the course of the research.

3.4 Summary

In the preceding paragraphs, the assumptions underlying the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms were discussed. The comparison of the two research approaches, the rationale for using combined methodology in a study, and the description of how the two differing approaches ensure the credibility of the findings of research were provided as a theoretical background to the complex and unusual methodology used in the present study.

In the following chapter, the methodology employed in the BHS chat study, and the two pilot studies preceding the chat project, are elaborated on.

4.1 The research problem

The main question the present study focuses on is *what influence the inclusion of chat tasks has on the language learning process of Hungarian EFL learners.* Language learning process encompassed issues related both to the language learners and the language classes. The inclusion of chat tasks in the English classes was investigated in three stages. Each stage comprised a chat project. The first two of the three

successive chat projects were pilot studies. The findings of the pilot studies helped me to narrow the focus of research and determine the design of the BHS project.

4.2 Pilot studies preceding the BHS chat project

In the following sections, the two pilot studies preceding the BHS chat project are described, and the rationale for the main study is outlined. The first project (Pilot 1) took place at a Hungarian secondary school near Budapest, in the spring semester of 2003. I held a number of chat sessions with an English teacher colleague's group at the school. The second project (Pilot 2) was carried out at an English language camp for secondary school learners in the summer of 2003, where I was working as an English teacher and had daily chat sessions with the learners in my group. The final, and largest in scale of the three projects, the main study, was conducted at Buda High School, a secondary school in Budapest, from September 2003 to June 2004. Figure 4.1 shows the three consecutive chat projects.

Figure 4.1 ***The three stages of the chat study***

4.2.1 The first pilot study

In the spring of 2003, I organized chat sessions for secondary school learners of English in order to explore *how chat tasks worked in a language classroom*, and *what attitudes the learners had towards online chat*.

4.2.1.1 Setup

I was not teaching at a secondary school at that time. An English teacher acquaintance at a secondary school near Budapest offered me one 45-minute lesson a week with a lower-intermediate group she was teaching. The group consisted of twelve 16-year old students.

There were six chat sessions altogether. The site www.trefort.net was used for chatting, because it could be used without altering anything in the computers of the school, it was possible to save the chat log there and several of the participants were already familiar with it. The first session was spent learning to log in and use the chat site. In the following sessions, the participants performed various chat tasks in pairs. The tasks were selected from a collection of communicative activities for pre-intermediate learners of English (Kay, 1999). At the end of the chat-project, I asked the participants' opinion about online chatting in the language classroom in a questionnaire (see Appendix 4).

4.2.1.2 Findings

The project described in the preceding section resulted in the following findings. The first finding concerned the composition of chat pairs. Although the participants were enthusiastic about chatting, they were not all present on every occasion, so there were no set pairs. This had a negative effect on the participants' performance: some pairs did not like working together at all.

The second finding was related to how a chat task can fit into a secondary school English class: a 45-minute-lesson was not enough for logging in to www.trefort.net, which sometimes took 5-10 minutes, and completing the task. The chat sessions were immediately followed by another class in the computer room, so most of the time the chatters could not finish the task and left the chat session disappointed.

The third lesson learnt in the project was about choosing tasks for the chat class: I did not know the participants very well, and had no opportunity to observe their English classes regularly, so I could not

really tailor the chat tasks to their proficiency level and needs. This became apparent from the chat texts the learners produced. If a task was too difficult for the learners, they could not complete it successfully. (For a sample chat log saved from one of the sessions see Appendix 1.)

4.2.1.3 Preparing the second pilot study

Using the findings of the first investigation, I decided to carry out a second, improved project. Three important factors needed to be modified in the new project. Firstly, I concluded that the chat tasks should be designed for a group I myself teach and know. Secondly, double (i.e. 90-minute) lessons were needed in the computer room. Thirdly, the chat site used for chatting was not ideal for learning purposes: sometimes it took very long to log in and students kept forgetting their passwords. I had to find a chat site or software that was easier to work with.

4.2.2 The second pilot study

This investigation was intended to find answers to the following questions:
1) What steps should the English teacher take to include and integrate chat tasks into her lessons?
2) How useful is the inclusion of chat for the learners' proficiency in English?
3) What is the learners' attitude to the inclusion of chat in EFL classes?

4.2.2.1 Set-up

The second, improved chat project took place in a summer camp in Hungary in July 2003, where I was teaching a group of 10 intermediate students for 9 days. The age of the participants ranged between 15 and 18 years.

Every day there were six 45-minute English lessons. A double lesson was spent in the computer room. The participants carried out nine different types of chat tasks, and I chose them so that they were connected to the topics of the other lessons. The tasks were taken from Kay (1996) and Greenall (1996). The site www.chat.hu was used for performing the chat tasks, because it was easy to reach and work with, and one did not have to register and use a password to log in. Most of the time the participants chatted in pairs. There was one whole-group online chat discussion in the programme. The chat texts produced by the participants were saved.

Six of the nine tasks were goal-oriented, as illustrated by the three examples below:
1) Jigsaw reading: student A and B read different texts on the same topic, and they asked questions to find out what the other text was about.
2) Taboo: student A got a list of words. Student B had to find out these words with the help of A's definitions. Under each word, there were four words closely associated with the words to be guessed, for example if the word 'bank' was to be guessed, the associated words could be 'building, money, save, account'. Student A was not allowed to use these words in the definition. This made defining and guessing much more difficult.
3) Picture dictation: Student A and B got different pictures with a lot of small details. Student A 'dictated' her picture to student B, who tried to draw the picture. Then they exchanged roles. The student who was drawing could ask questions about the picture to make the drawing as precise as possible. Three of the tasks were open-ended tasks, such as the following activities:
4) Discussing musical tastes in pairs.
5) Group discussion about a film watched in the previous lesson.

At the end of the project the participants were asked about the whole chat-project in the form of a questionnaire (see Appendix 5). The participants were asked to rate the chat tasks according to how

interesting and useful they found them. The members of the group also wrote an essay in English on what they thought about chat tasks in language learning.

4.2.2.2 Findings

During the second chat project, I was able to determine the composition of chat pairs, the material used in the non-chat English classes, and observe the students' behaviour in the classes. I could also review the chat texts produced after each chat class. As I had more control over the teaching process, and could integrate the chat tasks better in it, the findings of the study provided a more accurate picture of the influence of chat tasks on EFL learning than the first pilot study. Three factors emerged as decisive from the viewpoint of the success of the chat session: the choice of chat task, the quality of language the participants produced in chat and the stability of the site used for chatting.

As far as the *choice of tasks* is concerned, the comments the students made in the chat classes, the analysis of the chat texts, and the student questionnaires revealed that the participants enjoyed play-oriented tasks the most, where creativity was required. The most useful and enjoyable task turned out to be Taboo.

When investigating *language use* in the chat texts, I found that the learners did not necessarily make an attempt to write correct English in online chat. They had to be encouraged to do so. Revising and correcting the texts (by teacher and chatter) are indeed important steps if chat tasks are to be used for language learning purposes.

The participants found performing chat tasks very useful for improving their English. However, since they were all Hungarians, they had the same L1 and cultural background, and communication was easier for them than it would have been with a partner with whom the only shared language would have been English. The problem of using L1 in the chat sessions could be controlled by revising and checking the texts.

The results of the project evaluation questionnaire, and the essays the participants wrote about chat in language learning revealed that the group found the chat tasks to be an interesting and useful part of the English course.

The *site used for chatting*, www.chat.hu was technically very good, but still not perfect for the purposes of a chat project. Since the site is public, the chatters were sometimes disturbed by 'strangers' looking for chat partners on the site. The ideal chat room in a project should be protected from strangers.

4.2.2.3 Implications for the Buda High School chat project

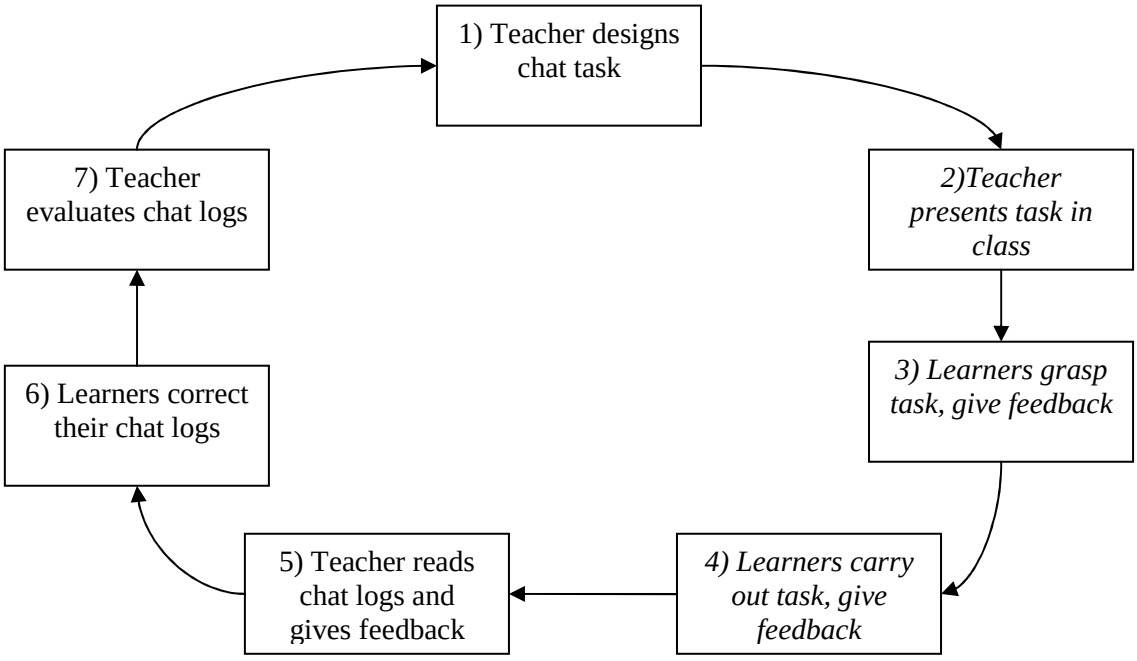
After having conducted two chat projects, and having reviewed the literature on using chat tasks in language learning, the assumption that online chatting can be a useful tool in language learning for secondary school students seemed well-founded. I intended to learn more about how it can be included within the framework of a secondary school English syllabus, and what effects its inclusion would have on the language learning process of the participants. The following paragraphs will list the lessons learnt from the pilot studies that assisted me in designing a larger-scale study, the BHS chat project.

The students' reactions to the questionnaires showed that chat tasks can offer an enjoyable means of learning, and the inclusion of chat in the language class can be a source of motivation and generate positive learner attitudes towards learning English. The motivating nature of chat tasks in language learning, and the usefulness of revising the chat logs afterwards are also mentioned by Beauvois (1992, 1995), Lee (2002), Toorenaar (2002) and Warschauer (1996).

As far as the *method of including chat* is concerned, I regularly read the participants' chat texts, and realized it should be made clear to the participants at the beginning of the chat-project that, besides performing the task, correct spelling and grammar are very important.

During the course, the learners often made evaluative comments and came up with ideas about what they would like to do in a task. This behaviour was a sign of the learners' involvement, and made me realize that the chatters' involvement can be increased by building their feedback into the chat tasks to follow. I devised a model of the steps that should be taken to incorporate chat into the EFL classes. Figure 4.2 shows the seven steps of the *chat inclusion cycle*, which consists of the preparation of the session, designing the task, the chat session, and its aftermath. Then the cycle begins again with the design of the task.

Figure 4.2 ***The chat inclusion cycle***



To remedy the problem of chat instability on the internet, IRC (Internet Relay Chat) software can be used. When using IRC, the participants are protected from strangers, and no Internet is needed for classroom chat. This is a great advantage considering how slow Internet connection is in most secondary schools in Hungary.

Using the experience gained from the pilot studies, I set out to conduct a year-long experiment at a Hungarian secondary school, in order to explore how the inclusion of chat influences the EFL classes. Section 4.3 is devoted to the description of the methods used in the BHS chat project.

4.3 The Buda High School chat project

In the following sections, the research methods used in the chat project are described. Section 4.3.1 outlines the research questions guiding the investigation. Section 4.3.2 gives a description of the setting. Section 4.3.3 is about the participants involved in the project, the chat group and the control groups. In Section 4.3.4, the chat tasks used in the study are dealt with. In Section 4.3.5, the software used for chat is introduced. In Section 4.3.6, the types of data collected are listed. Section 4.3.7 briefly summarizes what has been said in chapter 4 about the methodology of the BHS chat project, and provides a preview of the chapters on data analysis.

4.3.1 Research questions

The aim of the present study is to *describe the effect of the inclusion of chat tasks in secondary school EFL classes on the participants' language learning process.* The effect of the inclusion was investigated, focussing on the following research questions:

1 How can the chat tasks be *integrated into the EFL classes* at school?
2 How does the inclusion of chat influence the participants' *EFL proficiency* and *language learning strategies*?
3 How does the chat inclusion cycle influence the participants' *attitudes to chat tasks* and *motivation for learning English*?
4 What impact does the inclusion of chat have on the participants' *language use*?

Table 4.1 outlines the research questions and the corresponding types of data collected in the chat group. For each data type, the type of analysis conducted is given. All of the data listed below was collected in the school year 2003-2004.

Table 4.1 ***Research questions, data types, and analysis***

Research question	**Data type**	**Analysis**
1 How can the chat tasks be integrated into the EFL classes at school? (Chapter 5)	questionnaire on background	*qualitative analysis*
	chat logs	*qualitative analysis*
	journal	*qualitative analysis*
	interview	*qualitative analysis*
2 How does the inclusion of chat influence the participants' EFL proficiency and language learning strategies? (Chapter 6)	pre- & post-test papers of proficiency in English	quantitative analysis
	pre- & post-test strategy inventory questionnaire	quantitative analysis
3 How does the chat inclusion cycle influence the participants' attitudes to chat tasks and motivation for learning English? (Chapter 7)	journal background questionnaire chat logs	*qualitative analysis*
	questionnaire on attitudes	quantitative analysis
4 What impact does the inclusion of chat have on the participants' *language use*? (Chapter 8)	chat logs	quantitative analysis

4.3.2 Setting

The chat project took place at a secondary school in Budapest in the school year 2003-2004. Whilst looking for a secondary school where I could conduct the study, I was offered a group at Buda High School, with the assistance of a colleague at university. In June 2003, I visited the school to discuss the practicalities of the project with the headmaster, the head English teacher and the I.T. teacher at the school. The group and the setting seemed optimal for conducting the study I had planned. For details on the first visit, see the first entry in the *Language Teacher's Journal* in Appendix 3.

4.3.3 Participants

In the BHS chat project, three groups were involved in different stages of the data collection. The investigation focussed on the case of the chat group (ChG) and further involved two control groups, control group 1 (C1) and control group 2 (C2).

The chat group

The chat group consisted of eight 17-year-old students, six males and two females. The group was taking five English lessons a week. English was the students' second foreign language. The English proficiency of the learners was approximately at level B1. The general proficiency test (GPT) results of the participants at the beginning of the project are shown in table 4.2. The learners in the chat group came from two different classes and did not form a group in any other classes. When they started their first year at BHS, they all knew some English already. According to the students' own, and their class teacher's judgement, they stood between levels B1 and B2 (Common European Framework, 2001) in German, which was their first foreign language. They were fairly experienced language learners. In September 2003, when the project started, they were in the third year of secondary school. I was their third English teacher at BHS. Both of their previous teachers told me the group was difficult to handle.

In table 4.2, the background of the members of the chat group is given. The information was gathered by means of a background questionnaire (see 4.3.7.1) at the beginning of the project, in September 2003. For the sake of confidentiality, the names of the students have been changed. I gave them new, English names which resemble their Hungarian names. The following names are used in the study thus: Mitch, Ben, Footie, Piper, Dot, Tom, Seth, and Martin. Piper and Dot are girls, the rest of the students in the group are boys. On a number of occasions, an American exchange student also participated in the classes. She will be referred to as Lara.

The second column in Table 4.2 shows the participants' results on the pre-test General Proficiency Test (see section 4.3.7.5). The names of the participants are aligned according to how high their total score was on the test. Only one of the group members, Ben, had a score above 80%, the level above which candidates at The European Language Certificate language exam (see www.telc.hu) can receive an intermediate-level exam certificate. (This type of exam was used to measure English proficiency at BHS.) Six participants were between 60% and 80%, which is at B1 level. Only one participant, Mitch, was lower than 60%, thus not yet at level B1.

The third column in Table 4.2 shows the score each participant gave themselves on a self-assessment scale about proficiency in English. The fourth column shows how often they used the computer. There was a computer in all of the participants' homes, and they all had access to the internet. They had all tried chat before.

The fifth column of the table shows how each student felt about language learning at the beginning of the project, in September 2003. The sixth column shows how they felt about speaking English. Mitch and Dot, who were the least proficient in English as the test scores showed, were not positive about learning English, though Dot thought that language learning was interesting sometimes, so

she had a partly positive attitude towards learning English. Three members of the group only marked negative adjectives about how they felt when speaking English. Footie and Piper had mixed feelings about speaking English: they felt it was exciting and they felt embarrassed at the same time.

Table 4.2 ***Background information about the members of the chat group***

name	gender	GPT max: 100%	max: 35	frequency of computer use	language learning is ...	when I speak English, I feel ...
Ben	male	83	28	1-2 hours a day	interesting	it is an exciting challenge
Footie	male	73	28	every day	interesting, easy	it is an exciting challenge, embarrassed
Mart	male	71	21	not very often	-	it is an exciting challenge
Tom	male	70	23	several times a week	interesting, entertaining, easy	confident
Piper	female	69	31	2-3 times a week	interesting, easy	it is an exciting challenge embarrassed
Seth	male	66	25	every day	interesting, entertaining	anxious
Dot	female	64	20	every second day	interesting (sometimes), difficult	anxious, silly
Mitch	male	43	23	every day	boring, nerve-racking	embarrassed

Control group 1

In order to answer research question 2, the proficiency skills and the language learning strategies of the chat group were compared to those of control group 1 in a quasi-experiment. The types of data collected in this group and the time of collection are shown in Table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3 ***Data collection in control group 1***

Research question	Data collected in C2	Time of data collection
Influence of chat on proficiency and learning strategies	Pre- & post-testing of proficiency Pre- & post-testing of learning strategies	October - April 2004

The members of control group 1 were in the third year of secondary school in 2004-2005, just like the chat group a year earlier. The language groups in the third year at BHS were formed on the basis of which foreign language the learners had been taking at school, from either German or English. In each year there was one group which took English as the first, and one group which took English as a second foreign language. This meant that it was not possible to compare the chat

group's performance to that of another group in the same year. Hence, the control group was observed in the school year 2004-2005.

The group had 17 members, and they all came from the same class, unlike the members of the chat group. Another difference between the two groups was that the control group was made up of real beginners at the start of the first year at secondary school. This meant that the members of the group learnt the items they knew together, in a group. They also had two years of continuous instruction suited to their own level. The control group had the same teacher for the first two years. From their third year at secondary school, their form teacher took over as their English teacher. The control group's first teacher, and their form teacher also, stated that it was a good group, and the students were fairly easy to work with.

As the description above reveals, there were a number of basic differences between the chat group and the control group. Firstly, the control group was more than twice the size of the chat group. Secondly, the level of their English differed when they started learning English at BHS. Thirdly, the control group was a community in which the group dynamics worked quite well, and the group members had positive experiences of learning English together. According to their previous teachers, this was not the case in the chat group.

In spite of these differences, which are obvious threats to the validity of the results of the study, the similarities between the groups, the fact that they had been learning at the same school and were both in their third year, and that both groups received instruction suited to their level for the school year studied, made the comparison worthwhile.

Control Group 2

During the BHS chat project, in the school year 2003-2004, a fourth-year English group was asked to participate in two chat sessions. This group had 14 members. The purpose of the chat sessions in control group 2 was to collect chat data in an English group at BHS where there was no *regular* inclusion of chat tasks and no reviewing and correction of the chat texts. Table 4.4 below shows the type of data collected in this group and the time of collection.

Table 4.4 ***Data collection in control group 2***

Research question	Data collected in C2	Time of data collection
1 The effect of inclusion cycles	Two chat sessions	March, May 2004
3 Attitudes to chat tasks	Questionnaire on attitudes and motivation	May 2004

It was considered advisable to collect chat data from a group in the same year as the chat sessions in the chat group were taking place, because at that time it was possible to use the computer room for chat, and I had daily contact with the English teachers at BHS, so the sessions were relatively easy to organise in another class. The members of the group were also asked to fill in a questionnaire about attitudes towards chat tasks in the class.

4.3.4 The treatment: the tasks used in the chat project

The BHS chat project included 23 chat sessions within the framework of the English lessons of the chat group. Appendix 14 contains the complete list of tasks used in the project, and the type and source of the tasks. There were seven task types introduced in the chat sessions:
1) jigsaw
2) information gap
3) opinion exchange
4) story-telling

5) interview
6) role-play
7) vocabulary and grammar practice

These types of tasks are frequently used in the free production phase of language classes (Scrivener, 1996), in which learners are supposed to produce target language freely and creatively. The choice of the tasks was motivated by three sources: the task types suggested in the literature on chat in language learning (see Chapter 2), the lessons learnt from the two pilot studies (see section 4.2) and my experience gained in the course of the BHS chat project. (For a thick description of the latter, see Chapter 5.)

4.3.5 The software used for chat: Internet Relay Chat

The software the participants used when carrying out the chat tasks was Internet Relay Chat (IRC). IRC is a synchronous form of computer-mediated communication. This means that two or more people, who are sitting in front of their computer at the same time, can communicate with each other with the help of their computers. The computers communicating with each other must be connected by the Internet or an intranet.

The software used in the project was text-only, so the parties engaged in chat only had to express what they wanted to say to their partners by using the characters on their keyboard. There was no sound or picture in the software.

When using IRC, the chatters see two windows on their computer screen. In the lower window, the message can be typed and edited. By clicking on the 'send' button, the chatter can send their message to the other party or parties, who can in turn send a reply to the message in a similar fashion. There is also a larger window on the computer screen, where messages sent by participants in the chat conversation appear. This window thus shows the dialogue to which all parties can contribute. The text of the chat dialogue, which is called a chat log, can be saved on the computer.

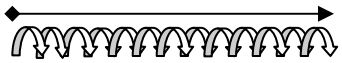
Chatting in IRC takes place in chat rooms or channels that can be created by the chatters, or the chatters can log on to existing channels. A room or a channel is a virtual space where the chatters can meet and 'talk' to each other.

4.3.6 Data collection procedures

Within the framework of the study, the following types of data were collected:
1) Questionnaire on Background (QB)
2) Questionnaire on Attitudes (QA)
3) End-Project Interview (EPI)
4) Task Evaluation Questionnaire (TEQ)
5) General Proficiency Test (GPT)
6) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)
7) Chat logs from the chat group and control group
8) Language Teacher's Journal (LTJ)
9) Member checks (interviews)

Figure 4.3 below shows when the different data in the chat group were collected in the course of the school year, between September 2003 (beginning of the project) and November 2005.

Figure 4.3 ***The data collected during the BHS chat project***

ChG, C1 Sept 2003 March,May 2004  23 chat tasks ChG LTJournal QB pre GPT,SILL post-GPT,SILL QA, EPI chat tasks C2 TEQ TEQ	C2 Oct 2004 April 2005 QB pre-GPT,SILL post-GPT,SILL	ChG, C2 Sept 2005 Nov 2005 member check 1 (teacher) member check 2 (students)

In the following paragraphs, the data collection procedures are described.

4.3.7.1 Questionnaire on Background

A questionnaire on the background of the participants in the chat group and control group 2 was administered at the beginning of the 2003 school year. The questionnaire was administered to control group 1 a year later, at the beginning of the 2004 school year.

The questionnaire was compiled based on the model questionnaire provided in Gedeon et al. (1993). Questions about the participants' language learning experience and computer skills were added. The questionnaire included questions about the following topics:
1) reasons for learning English,
2) self-assessment of different areas of language proficiency,
3) computer access at home,
4) internet access at home,
5) frequency of computer use,
6) type of activity conducted on the computer,
7) self-assessment of typing skills,
8) attitude to learning English,
9) feelings about speaking English.

The chat group's answers helped me to form the dyads the students worked in when performing the chat tasks. At the beginning of the chat project, I put students with similar computer literacy levels, proficiency levels and interests into the same pair or small group. (See the complete questionnaire in Appendix 6.)

4.3.7.2 Questionnaire on Attitudes

The questionnaire on attitudes was based on the sample questionnaire in Gedeon et al. (1993), Beauvois' questionnaire on attitudes towards CMC (1995) and my observations about the chat inclusions. The language of the questionnaire was Hungarian. (See the complete questionnaire in Appendix 7.)

The participants in the chat group and the control groups were asked to fill in the questionnaire at the end of the school year. The questionnaire contained 7 questions, covering the following points:
1) reasons for learning English,
2) attitudes towards learning English,
3) classroom activity preferences,
4) emotions related to speaking English in class,
5) attitudes towards chat in the EFL classroom, including questions addressing the following sub-topics:
a) The inclusion of chat tasks makes language learning more interesting.
b) Chatting is a useful tool for language learning.
c) When doing a chat task with a fellow group member, I can work autonomously, without the teacher's control.
d) When doing a chat task, I can learn English in a stress-free environment.
6) self-assessment of language skills developed by chat,
7) overall evaluation of the inclusion of chat in the EFL classes.

The questionnaire consisted of open-ended items, items where students were asked to mark on a Likert-scale, between 1 and 5, how true an item was for them, and items where students could choose one or more from a number of answers.

The questionnaire was validated by two types of methods. The first method was expert-rating, in which two experts in the field of applied linguistics were asked to give their opinion, both about the questionnaire as a whole and its items. The method of expert-rating is advocated in Brown (2001). Using the feedback given by the two experts, the questionnaire was modified, and the corrected version was given to two students, a girl and a boy, who were not participants in the chat project. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire and vocalise their thoughts while filling it in. This method is called the *think aloud procedure*, and it is used to explore the mental processes taking place in the head of informants while filling in a questionnaire, taking a test, or doing some other activity involving important cognitive processes. I took notes of the students' questions and ideas, and modified the questionnaire to make sure the questions posed in it were clear and suitable for the purpose intended.

4.3.7.3 End-project Interview

At the end of the BHS chat project, I interviewed each participant in the chat group to learn about how they evaluated the project and the group's progress. The interviews were conducted in the last week of May 2004, one week before the project and instruction finished. I conducted the interviews myself. I had asked a colleague to assist me in the interviews and take notes of what the students said. The language of the interviews was Hungarian. Six of the eight participants let me record the interview with a Dictaphone. Two students did not want to be recorded, so both of us took notes of what they said. The questions and the full text of the interviews are included in Appendix 8.

At the beginning of the interview the interviewees were told that we were planning to launch a new chat project at another school, and this is why we wanted to know how the interviewee evaluated the project. The interviews took between 10 and 15 minutes.

The interview was standardized and open-ended. During the interview, the same eleven questions were put to all of the participants. The questions were open-ended. This type of interview ensures consistency across the interviews, makes comparison of answers possible, and minimises the variation among the interviewees (Patton, 2002). The format of the interview was focussed on the issues raised by the questions, so time was used efficiently, which was very important considering the school setting. However, I remained open to other issues related to the evaluation of the chat project, and a number of times asked some follow-up questions to the participants and encouraged

them to elaborate on the topics the participants brought up in their answers. When compiling the questions for the interview, my aim was to gain as much information as possible about the participants' experience of the inclusion of chat tasks in the EFL class. I expected that the participants would touch upon the positive and the problematic aspects of the chat project as well, and talk about how they thought the medium, the tasks, the correction of the texts, the chat partner, and the group influenced their learning in the chat project.

4.3.7.4 Task Evaluation Questionnaire

At the end of the first semester, in February 2004, and at the end of the second semester, in June 2004, the members of the chat group were asked to evaluate the chat tasks they had completed according to how useful and interesting they had found them. The participants were asked to give grades to these tasks, between 1 (useless/boring) and 5 (useful/interesting). In the first semester, the participants were also asked to write down the names of the three group members they enjoyed working with the most, and to explain this choice. In the second semester, the participants were asked to write down who they had worked with, and to evaluate their common work. The question about partners was Question 2 in both questionnaires. In both questionnaires, in Question 3, there was room for the participants' further comments or requests.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gain information about each participants' evaluation of the chat tasks, and to find out how they felt about their chat partners and what made them feel their partners were good or unpleasant to work with.

4.3.7.5 General Proficiency Tests

To answer research question 2, pre- and a post-test proficiency tests (that show fine changes in the learners' proficiency level,) were administered to the members of the chat group and control group 1. The pre-test was administered to the chat group in September 2003. The post-test was administered in March 2004. Control group 1 took the pre-test in October 2004, the post-test in April 2005. Consequently, there was a time interval of five months between the pre- and the post-test in both groups.

Both of the tests were standardised general proficiency tests of English. The pre-test was the International Certificate Conference Examination in English. The post-test was the Mock Examination for level B1 of The European Language Certificates. The reason for choosing these tests was that the school administers them every year to the third-year students who have English as their first foreign language, so I could obtain two compete sets of proficiency tests. Both tests were for intermediate-level learners of English. Achieving 60% on the test was the threshold for reaching level B1. Achieving 80% or more in these tests meant that the candidate had reached level B2, and could obtain an intermediate-level English Language Certificate from the Hungarian Institute of Foreign Language Studies (ITK).

The proficiency test had five sub-sections:
- Reading Comprehension,
- Listening Comprehension,
- Language Elements,
- Letter Writing, and
- Oral Examination.

An overview of the items in the five parts is given in Appendix 11. The first three sections of the test were corrected using the answer keys for the tests. The writing and oral parts of the test were assessed by myself and another examiner, an English teacher colleague from BHS. Each score was

calculated by taking both of the individual scores we had given into consideration, and an agreement was reached.

4.3.7.6 Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

The language learning strategy repertoire of the participants in the chat group and control group 2 was investigated with the help of Oxford's SILL, Version 7.0 (ESL/EFL) (1990, pp. 293-300). The SILL is a self-report survey of language learning strategies. Oxford claims that the SILL was 'extensively field-tested, demonstrated to be highly valid and reliable, and used for both research and classroom practice' (p. 199). Janssen-van Dieten (1992) also claims that self-report can serve as a valid and reliable tool in assessing the learners' skills.

The pre-test questionnaire was administered to the chat group in September 2003. The post-test questionnaire was administered in March 2004. Control group 2 took the pre-test questionnaire in October 2004, and the post-test in April 2005. Consequently, there was a time interval of five months between the pre- and the post-test in both groups.

The inventory is a list of 50 statements divided into 6 sections. The sections contain statements about the following strategy types:
A. Remembering more effectively
B. Using all your mental processes
C. Compensating for missing knowledge
D. Organizing and evaluating your learning
E. Managing your emotions
F. Learning with others

When filling in the inventory, the students were supposed to mark the statements according to how true they were for them, on a scale between 1 and 5. A profile of the student's language learning strategy repertoire could be compiled with the help of the inventory, which included the average of scores given for the different sections, and an overall average of how often they employ language learning strategies.

I assumed that the results of the self-report would provide a realistic picture of the learners' activities. To ensure that learners would not worry about giving low grades to the statements, I reminded them before filling in the questionnaire that there were no right and wrong answers.

The SILL was translated into Hungarian. Two third-year students, a boy and a girl, who were not members of the chat group, were asked to fill in the questionnaire using the think-aloud method (Cohen, 1987, Elekes, 2000). While filling in the questionnaire, they were vocalising their thoughts. I made notes of the students' ideas and questions, and modified the translation of the questionnaire accordingly. This enabled me to ensure that the ideas expressed in the original version of the SILL were translated accurately into Hungarian (see translation in Appendix 10).

The participants in the two groups were asked to fill in the SILL both at the beginning of the school year, and at the end of it as well. I intended to find out if any changes in the participants' repertoire had occurred in the space of a year, and whether the chat project had had an effect on any such changes.

4.3.7.7 Chat logs in the chat group

During the BHS chat project, the chat group took part in 23 chat sessions. In the chat sessions, 23 different chat tasks were completed. An important step in completing the chat task was saving the text onto a floppy disc. The chat logs were saved as Microsoft Word documents. The texts were printed so that I and the participants could review the texts afterwards. I wrote my comments about

the chat logs on the printouts following each chat session and gave the printouts to the students in the class following the chat session. The students' task was to correct their chat texts with the help of the comments. The students wrote the corrections on the printouts. The printouts were collected in a file (for a sample of chat logs from the different task types, see Appendix 9).

4.3.7.7 Chat logs in the control group

During the BHS chat project, on two occasions the members of control group 1 were asked to participate in a chat session. The texts of the two sessions were saved. The purpose of these two chat sessions was to be able to compare the chat group's attitude towards chat tasks with that of a group which did not have chat included in their English course at school.

4.3.7.8 Language Teacher's Journal

During the whole BHS chat project, I kept a journal of the events that occurred in the classroom and at the school. On the one hand, the purpose of the journal was to record my observations about the project, and to note down the participants' comments, which I intended to use as data in the study. The journal was also meant to serve as a source of data for triangulation. The results gained from other data sources could be verified or falsified by the processes that could be traced in the journal.

On the other hand, the journal was a useful reflective tool for the teacher. Recording the main events in the journal helped me to reflect on my teaching and use my experience in planning the lessons ahead. As the chat project had a partly emerging design (the order of chat tasks was not predetermined, and the choice of tasks depended on my class experience as well), evaluation of previous classes was carried out with the help of observations noted down in the journal. The journal thus constitutes an *audit trail* of the events that took place and decisions that were taken in the course of the research. This record of events and decisions improves the trackability of the research.

When the project ended, the journal, which was hand-written in Hungarian in my notebook, was translated into English and typed into a word document. The notes in the journal were taken during and after the English classes. The present tense is often used in the journal to show that I observed the processes relevant to the workings of the project as a participant. The complete journal can be read in Appendix 3.

4.3.7.9 Member checks

In order to check the credibility of the findings of the research (see 3.5.1) I conducted member check interviews with two members of the chat group, with the assistance of a teacher from BHS. The teacher was the English teacher of control group 1, she will be referred to as H. S. henceforth. The performance of control group 1 and the chat group was compared in a quasi-experiment (see 3.4.1). In order to check if my conclusions converged with those of my colleague, I conducted an interview with H. S. The interview took place in September 2005. I listed the results of the quasi experiment to H. S. and asked her how she could explain the differences. I took notes of what H.S. said. Then I compared H. S.'s explanations to my own. The results are included in Chapter 6.

The second member check interview took place in November 2005. By that time, I had finished analysing the data collected in the BHS chat project. I prepared a brief list of the main findings (see Appendix 12), contacted two of the students who had been members of the chat group, and conducted an interview with both of them. The interviewees got the list of results on a piece of paper, were asked to read the statements one by one, and tell me what they thought of them. The interview was recorded and transcribed afterwards. The results are included in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

4.3.8 Summary

In the above sections, the research methods employed in the BHS chat project were described. After the section devoted to the research questions, the setting and the participants of the project, the chat tasks included in the English classes and the software used for chat were presented. The final section contained the details of the data collection procedures.

In the following chapters, the analysis of the data collected will be provided. Each chapter will focus on one of the five research questions. Chapter 5 explores how the inclusion of chat functioned in the chat group. In Chapter 6, the effect of this inclusion on proficiency and language learning strategy repertoire is outlined. Chapter 7 shows how the participants' motivation for learning English and attitudes towards the inclusion of chat tasks was affected by the project. Chapter 8 gives an account of how the regular inclusion of chat tasks influenced the learners' language use in chat.

5 The effect of the inclusion of chat tasks on the participants' EFL learning process

5.1 The inclusion of chat in the EFL classes

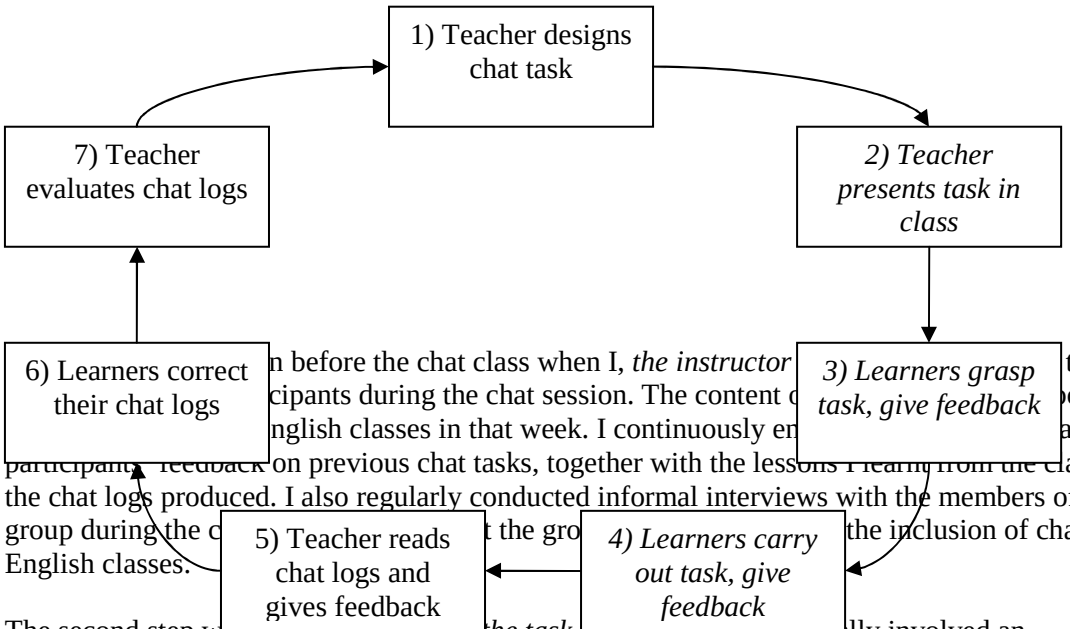
To answer Research Question 1:
How can the chat tasks be integrated into the EFL classes at school?
I relied on qualitative research methodology. In the present chapter, a *thick description* (see 3.3) of the Buda High School chat project is given. The description intends to show the various aspects of the chat project, and is based on the Language Teacher's Journal (Appendix 3) with a focus on the notes about the chat sessions, and the chat logs produced by the members of the chat group. The aspects relevant to the description of the inclusion of chat are the *task*, the *chat partner*, the *technical conditions* and the *classroom environment*. These four motives will form the bases of the analysis in the present chapter.

The basic units analysed in the chat project were the following: the *chat session*, which is the term used for an English class spent on a chat task, and the *chat inclusion cycle*, which is the process of planning a chat task, letting the learners perform it in class in a chat session, and evaluating it with the learners as shown in Figure 5.1 below. During the BHS chat project, the members of the chat group participated in 23 chat sessions.

5.1.1 The seven steps of the inclusion cycle

The inclusion of chat tasks in the English classes involved the seven steps depicted in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 ***The chat inclusion cycle***



n before the chat class when I, *the instructor* to be cipants during the chat session. The content o on the nglish classes in that week. I continuously en ate the participants' feedback on previous chat tasks, together with the lessons I learnt from the classes and the chat logs produced. I also regularly conducted informal interviews with the members of the chat group during the c t the gro the inclusion of chat in the English classes.

The second step was *the presentation of the task* in class. This step usually involved an introductory task, which was used to warm up the participants, and the instructions for the chat task proper. The participants tried to *understand the task*, responded to my instructions, and often asked questions about the task. After the presentation of the task, *the participants carried it out* in pairs, or a number of times in groups of three. There were groups of three on two occasions, when the chat task was designed for trios. Also, a number of times when there was an uneven number of

participants present in class, I formed a group of three so that everyone could take part in the task. Carrying out the task also involved saving the chat log on a floppy disc at the end of the task.

After the class, I printed out the texts in the teacher's room, *read them* and *commented on the language and content* in the chat logs. This step usually took place immediately after the chat sessions. The following day, I gave the students their chat logs and asked them to correct the texts on the paper with the help of the comments written on them. I encouraged them to *correct the texts* either on their own or with the help of their peers. I found it important to let the students correct their own mistakes, because a considerable part of the correcting involved elements of grammar and vocabulary they already knew. When the students did not know what the correct form was, I also helped them find the solution, if they asked for it. Every four to six weeks, *I gave each participant a grade*[3] *for their chat logs and corrections*. This grade contributed to the end-term evaluation I was to give them two times a year, in February and June. The last step in the inclusion of chat tasks was a return to the first one: *I designed a new task*, using the lessons I learnt from the previous series of inclusions. Including chat tasks in the EFL classes was thus a series of cyclic processes.

5.1.2 The chat group's background

Before beginning the chat sessions, in September 2003, I asked the participants to fill in a Background Questionnaire (see 4.3.7.1) in which I asked them how often they used the computer, what for, and how good their typing skills were. Based on their answers, I paired the participants who had similar computer skills. Ben and Tom, Martin and Dot, Mitch and Seth, and Footie and Piper were put in pairs. Gaining background information and pairing the learners was part of the task design phase. Chatiquette (see http://www.englishclub.com/esl-chat/etiquette.htm) holds that the chatters should wait for their partner's answer before posting their new message. For learners with a high level of proficiency it takes less time to produce and process messages than for their less proficient peers. It is thus better to match learners with similar skills, as they are more likely to be tolerant towards a similar partner.

5.1.3 The setting of the chat sessions

The chat sessions took place in the school's computer room. This was the room where I.T. lessons were held. Between two classes, the door of the computer room was locked. The learners in the school had no opportunity to use the computers in the breaks or after school. Neither was it possible to give the learners homework that involved searching on the Internet.

The computers were between 3 to 5 years old, insofar as I could estimate. They worked, but they were very slow. The learners could sit on two sides of the rectangular room. There were seven computers on both sides. When sitting in front of the computers, the learners were facing the wall with their backs turned to each other. However, if two learners sat on the same side, they could easily speak to each other, without having to stand up.

Not all of the computers worked equally well. Some of them were difficult to start up, while on other computers the mouse did not work properly. At first, IRC was installed on six computers on the left side, and three on the right side of the room. This was good enough to carry out chat tasks in pairs. As the project progressed it became obvious that the pairs in chat should sit as far as possible from each other, otherwise it would have been difficult to 'pretend' that they were far

[3] The grades were the following: 5 (excellent), 4 (good), 3 (moderate), 2 (pass), 1 (insufficient). In the majority of cases, the learners got 4s and 5s for their work in chat.

from each other, and needed chat for communication. Later on, the I.T. teacher installed IRC on the rest of the operable computers as well.

The chat group had chat sessions on Tuesdays, in the double English classes, between 9.20 and 10.50 am. We usually held the class without a break.

5.1.4 An overview of the chat tasks

Appendix 14 contains a list of the chat tasks used in the project, the source of the tasks and the type of the tasks according to Pica et al. (1993, see also 2.2), in the case that the task was mentioned in their scheme. The 23 chat tasks formed the basis of the BHS chat project I conducted in the school year 2003/2004. The frequency of the task types is given in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1 ***Frequency of the task types in the BHS chat project***

task type	**Frequency**
role-play	8
Jigsaw	5
information gap	4
interview	3
opinion exchange	2
story-telling	1

Jigsaw and information gap tasks were goal-oriented and required the learners to ask for and supply the information given in the task. In these tasks, the vocabulary and set of language functions to be used was limited. The role-play and interview tasks were open-ended. The roles the learners played and the situation were given. These factors had an impact on the learners' language use. However, they could still produce language in a creative way, unlike in the case of jigsaw and information gap tasks. The learners' imagination had an important role in these tasks. Opinion exchange and story-telling tasks allowed the learners to use their English in a given topic in an open-ended way, without playing a role.

In the following sections, the 23 inclusions of chat in the EFL classes are described.

5.2 The description of the 23 chat sessions of the BHS chat project

Session 1, getting started

The very first chat session took place on 9 September 2003, in the second week of the school year. We used internet-based chat because IRC was not yet installed on the school's computers. This form of chat does not require special software installed on the computers. There are free websites which have chat software. At some of the sites, such as www.epals.com, the chatters need to register first, while at other sites, such as the Hungarian www.chat.hu the chatters only need a username to enter. I used the latter site in the second pilot study (4.2.2) and found that it was easy to log in to the site and save the texts. I explained and showed the participants how they could save the chat log they produced.

Here is the journal entry from the first session, which talks about the problems I faced. The chat task I chose was a jigsaw crossword. In this task, student A gets all the horizontal, and student B all the vertical words from a crossword. They think of definitions for their words, and tell their partner the definitions. The partner tries to guess the words and complete his or her version of the crossword.

LTJ extract, 9 September Tuesday first chat class
The students are going to chat with each other in pairs. We try the chat rooms I created at www.epals.com, but some pairs do not manage to get into it at all. The site www.chat.hu does not

work on the school's computers, either. 2 pairs close the chat window before we can save the text. No texts are saved this time.
The task is a jigsaw crossword, some of them do it in speaking. The task is not much of a success, just as it wasn't in Kőszeg[4]*, although I thought it was a very interesting task. They are filling in the task sheets without a smile on their faces.*

It became obvious during the first session that 6, or even 8 chatters, could not use the same internet chat site simultaneously on the computer network of the school. The only solution seemed to be the software, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which the system administrator promised to install during the following week. IRC makes chat communication possible between computers even if those computers do not have high quality access to the Internet. The internet connection of the computers in the school's computer room was very slow and unreliable.

Two pairs managed to complete the task in chat, but they closed the chat window before saving the chat logs. Steps 5, 6 and 7 from the process of including the chat task in the EFL class were thus not completed. The inclusion cycle was not as useful as it could have been had the steps involving reviewing and correction taken place. I considered it crucial to the success of the chat project that all the steps of the inclusion cycle take place at each inclusion.

Session 2: Facing technical difficulties again

By the time the next chat session took place, IRC had already been installed. The system administrator showed the participants how to log in to and save the chat logs in IRC. Consequently, the opportunity to use the chat medium and to save the chat logs was ensured. However, at the next session, on 30 September, only one pair of the four, Ben and Tom saved the chat. The others either did not succeed in saving the text or forgot about it. After the class, I told the learners again that saving the chat logs was important for our project and I showed them again how to do it.

Session 3: Achieving the complete inclusion cycle

At the next session, on 7 October, the chatters were given a discussion task. The following extract from the journal describes the task and the session.

LTJ extract, 7 October Tuesday
We read the text Customs abroad (Doff and Jones, 1994, p. 30) to prepare discussion about what they know about people from different countries. They match pictures with descriptions of customs, and then discuss the customs in chat. The questions posed in the course book are:
'Which customs surprised you?'
'What would you tell a foreigner about Hungary?'
We concentrate on saving the texts, which results in a lot of stress at the end of the class. The right mouse button does not work on Footie's computer, so he can't copy the text. He is very annoyed.

All the pairs managed to save their chat logs, some of them with their peers' or my help. The cycle could thus be completed and I could use the lessons learnt from the session and the texts when designing the next chat session. I was eager to read the texts, and discussed my impressions with the participants. I asked them how they felt about the previous chat session and the task. The only definite answer was given by Ben.

LTJ extract, 8 October Wednesday
Yesterday's chat texts don't really make sense, I think they misunderstood the task. Ben thinks the task was not very good.

[4] The site of Pilot 2.

When reviewing Ben and Tom's chat log, I found that they made sense, but the task did not trigger much interaction between the two chatters. Topics were often changed, as the extract from the chat log in which they answered the second question, 'What would you tell a foreigner about Hungary?' showed. Ben did not react to any of the topics brought up by Tom. Tom reacts to (2) with posting (5), to (4) with posting (6), and to (7) in (9), but these 11 turns are actually just a list of ideas, no real interaction takes place.

Chat extract, 7 October, Ben & Tom
1 [ben] Suggests for foreigners to Hungaria:
2 [ben] Dont thin that anything is punctual, you can be late
3 <tom> Avoid the skinheads
4 [ben] In restaurants you should give tip.
5 <tom> You can be late but not more than 15 minutes
6 <tom> Yes give tips a lot of tip
7 [ben] Its common to jump the queue, until you meet a stonger person
8 [ben] Than you're in trouble
9 <tom> Yes I am the stronger man
10 [ben] People are happy if you try to talk to themin Hungarian, but its quiet difficult
11 <tom> Sometimes I push the old grammys aside to get the sitting place

I found that the criterion for a good chat was interaction between the learners. I expected them to cooperate and react to each others' postings. In Clark's theory of language use (Clark, 1996, see Chapter 8), interaction between the chatters entails joint projects of presentation and acceptance. A presentation-acceptance sequence usually involves a question-answer, or a statement-reaction pair. When reviewing the learners' texts, I was looking firstly for presentation-acceptance sequences The presence or absence of these sequences proved to be a reliable meter of how good a text was and how involved the learners were. The extract shown above was a text I did not judge to be interactive enough.

The chat logs also contained stretches of playful discourse, which is a typical feature of chat discourse on internet chat sites (Werry, 1996). The quality of the chat logs revealed that the task may not have given the chatters enough ideas to chat about. The extract below is the closing of Martin & Lara's chat log from 7 October.

Chat extract, 7 October, Martin & Lara
1 [martin] That's allû
2 [martin] all
3 [martin] .sjkdfsu8oÁFIOZ
4 <lara> really?
5 [martin] Do you want to know more about the country
6 [martin] ?
7 [martin] ?
8 [martin] ?
9 [martin] ?
10 <lara> well, yes but i dont really know at this moment.
11 <lara> so i think i am done asking questions
12 [martin] Oh, I have a qeustion for you.
13 <lara> okay
14 [martin] Can you chat with your nose?
15 [martin] Look!
16 [martin] gbghj
17 [martin] Haha

Having read the chat logs from 7 October, I figured that although the task fitted well with the topics we were dealing with in the class (customs abroad), it was not a very authentic task. In line 3, Martin just played around with his keyboard and pretended this sequence of letters and figures was a message. A dialogue or an interview on a given topic, the two genres characteristic of real-life chat, seemed to be more authentic and thus possible tasks for future chat sessions. Another task type which was potentially interesting for classroom chat was a game where the lack of shared visual context presented a challenge to the chatters.

Session 4: Reflections on the composition of pairs

For the 14 October session, I planned a chat task with two steps. The course book contained interviews with people whose jobs everyone hates. The answers in the interview were printed in the book. The learners were asked to work out the questions to these answers in pairs, in chat, and then as a follow-up task, to perform an interview role-play in chat. One learner was supposed to be a journalist, the other learner a person whose job everybody hates. I made the following notes in the journal:

LTJ extract, 14 Oct Tuesday
I ask the students to conduct interviews with a person whose job everyone hates. IRC is not working properly, and some of the floppy discs get stuck in the drive. It's all very annoying. I walk around monitoring the students who managed to get into the chat.
The task is to work out the questions for the answers of the interviews in the book (Doff and Jones, 1994, p. 40-41). I see the mistakes they make while writing the questions; we should have discussed these in advance.
Later, I read the texts. Ben and Tom produced a very funny text, while Dot and Martin were obviously bored to death by the task. Piper and Footie did the intro tasks so precisely that they never got to the interview.

Ben and Tom were a good match as far as typing skills and level of English were concerned. They could both grasp the task quickly. However, in each of their chat logs, either Ben, or Tom, or both of them, got to a point when they started to use bad language. Below is an extract from the interview chat. Tom uses *WTF* in line (10) to show he had difficulties understanding what Ben had written. This is an abbreviation of the sentence 'What the fuck'. The sentence is often used in English-language films by certain characters to make their partner repeat what they have said, but it was a style not welcome in classroom chat. Tom was either irritated by Ben's post, or he thought it was cool to use these three letters.

Chat extract, 14 October, Ben & Tom
1 [ben] 5 feladat[5]: Im a BKV ticket controller. Interview me!
2 <tom> Do you like your job?
3 [ben] Hello, I'm Ben, your ticket please!
4 [ben] I think its the most beautyful job in this city.
5 <tom> No I'm an journalist, not a passenger
6 [ben] I like to piss people off.
7 Tom> Beautiful why
8 [ben] I like to piss people off.
9 [ben] I have more than 1000 tickets home
10 <tom> WTF?
11 [ben] and 100 season tickets
12 <tom> And what can you do with it?
13 [ben] I just collect them
14 [ben] Its my hobby

[5] *Feladat* is the Hungarian word for exercise.

15 <tom> And how much money do you earn?
16 [ben] I earn 65800 plus a bonus of 120 forints per fine
17 [ben] If I fine you, I get 120 forints
18 <tom> but I am not a passenger!
19 [ben] If you're inside the metro, then YOU'RE

I was satisfied with the content of Ben and Tom's chat, but at the same time I warned them not to use rude language in chat each time I gave them feedback on their chat log.

Dot and Martin produced a chat log that had little to do with the task. It was more like a chat log one can see at free internet sites. They did not really grasp the task, or did not have the motivation to carry it out properly. Below is a extract from their chat log.

Chat extract, 14 October, Dot & Martin
1 [martin] It's too many informations for me
2 <dot> Can you ask something interresting?
3 [martin] Or much
4 <dot> sorry my little boy
5 <dot> but
6 [martin] but
7 [martin] butt
8 [martin] Heke

Martin also noted in the end-project interview (EPI, Martin, Question 8) that 'they' (he was talking about himself and his chat partner) were not much interested in the chat tasks at the beginning of the chat project. Nevertheless, I decided not to change the pairs at that point, as I hoped that the repeated, improved inclusions would help the participants improve their chats.

Session 5: Booking success

For the following chat session, on 28 October, I planned an interview task again. The participants played roles. One of them was a scientist, the other one a journalist. They had read a text entitled 'The new ice age' as homework. The journalist was asking the scientist questions about the phenomenon of the new ice age. The journal notes show that I was content with the chat class.

28 October Tuesday
In any case, today's chat was really positive - they spent 30-40 minutes fully on task. A good warm-up with a meaningful task (based on Doff and Jones, 1994, p. 43).

In the extract below, Piper plays the role of the scientist who believes that a new ice age is coming. Footie, who is playing the journalist, finds the idea of a new ice age unrealistic, so he posts Piper a smiley to show this in line (5).

Chat extract, 28 October, Footie & Piper
1 <piper> nowadays in hungary is the weather much colder than a few years ago
2 <piper>
3 [footie] in summer with the 40 degrees as well?
4 <piper> yes thats right
5 [footie] :-D

The combination of the chatter being on task and voicing their own opinion was something I considered to be the optimal approach to completing an interview chat task. This combination meant that the learner was involved in the task, and at the same time was using their English to express their own opinion, and thus used the language in an authentic situation, spontaneously.

Session 6: Cheating in chat

The task for the next occasion, 4 November, was Taboo. The learners worked in pairs. Each of them received a list of 10 words. Under each word there were 3 other words which were closely associated with the original word. The learners worked in pairs. Their task was to define their words to their partner without using the three words and the original word. The four words were thus taboo. The partner had to guess the word defined. This task proved to be the most popular among the tasks used in Pilot 2. While the participants in the camp enjoyed the challenge in this game, the members of the chat group at the BHS sought alternative ways to solve the task. The journal entry about the chat session reads as follows:

LTJ extract, 4 November Tuesday
Today's task is Taboo. Some of them are trying to cheat and find their partner's words by walking up to them and asking questions. If the words are too difficult, using a dictionary might help. Some of their comments, and lots of negotiation of meaning are lost, because they do it in speaking. They opt for the easier, more economic way of communication. While monitoring their chat, I encourage them to ask each other questions in chat.
Some pairs are sitting really close to each other. I should be more careful next time. No wonder they can't simulate chatting with someone far away.

It became obvious to me that classroom chat communication had its maxims, just as face-to-face conversation does. The setting of the project made some of the participants feel that it was uneconomical to complete the task by making definitions and guessing words in chat. The following extract revealed how Martin gave up the game after one guess, and asked his neighbour (Seth) for the solution. Martin's partner, Dot, posted the remark *Ejnye-bejnye* [a playful expression of disapproval in Hungarian] in line (7) to show Martin that she noticed how he had managed to find the right word.

Chat extract, 4 November, Dot & Martin
1 [dot] a place
2 [dot] where you can find your grandparents
3 <martin> graveyard
4 [dot] grand-grandparents
5 [dot] other word
6 <martin> cemetery
7 [dot] you aren't allowed to ask Seth...Ejnye-bejnye
8 [dot] yes.
9 [dot] 3.
10 <martin> sorry

This goal-oriented task thus did not necessarily force the learners to be more explicit in their language use, as I had expected. Instead, they found alternatives to making a linguistic effort and found the solution to the task by ignoring the rules.

Session 7: Role-play: a new approach to chat tasks

After having tried a number of different task types in chat, such as a jigsaw crossword, two opinion exchange tasks, two interviews, and a vocabulary game, I decided to give the learners an open-ended chat task. The task was a role-play based on the essays they wrote about their 'new identity'. (The instructions the learners received for writing the essay are included in Appendix 15.)

Although open-ended chat tasks are said to trigger less negotiation of meaning than goal-oriented tasks (Pica, 1994), open-ended tasks allow the learners to use their English in a creative way. This

presupposes that learners use a wider range of vocabulary, and experiment with the language they are learning. On the 11 November session I asked the learners to chat with their partner, and get to know as much as possible about their partner's new identity. Here is the journal entry of 11 November.

LTJ extract, 11 November Tuesday
The students chatted with their new identities. The texts are pretty good - there was quite a lot of interaction, and they asked each other questions.

As I was not entirely content with the chat logs of the first six weeks, I decided to rearrange the pairs in the chat group. Dot and Martin formed a pair, but they could not produce serious chats together. Ben and Tom were a good match, but their chat logs regularly contained rude language, as this text from 11 November shows a dialogue between the two 'new identities'. Tom was a famous sumo fighter, and Ben was a dock-worker in Csepel, a suburb of Budapest.

Chat extract, 11 November, Ben & Tom
1 [ben] Do you earn so much money as a sumos
2 <tom> I'm the yokozuna ,so yes
3 <tom> Like an Amrican buisnissman
4 <tom> Like an Amrican bisnissman
5 [ben] OK
6 [ben] I dont earn that much
7 <tom> You poor peasant!!!!
*8 [ben] YOu f*** fatty ass****

Such exchanges were frequently present in the chats produced by Ben and Tom, as the chat extracts show. In the end-interview Tom mentioned that Ben was not the ideal chat partner for him, because Ben's character was that of a primitive dock-worker, and it was difficult to converse with him (EPI, Tom, Question 10) Although my initial hypothesis was that students at a similar level of proficiency and with similar typing skills would make a good match, I realised that making sure that the partners' personalities were compatible was equally important.

Mitch and Seth were also problematic as a pair. Mitch proved to be a much faster typist than Seth, so I decided to separate them. Piper and Footie were a very good match. They both grasped the tasks quickly and carried them out well together. However, I realized they would be just as good in combination with other group members. I decided to make new pairs for the following session.

Session 8: A boring task

At the following session, on 18 November, the task was goal-oriented again. The class was based on the previous day's class activity. The chat task on 18 November proved to be the least popular in the first half of the project, as the Task Evaluation Questionnaire revealed. The reason for this was probably that the task in the traditional class was not very interesting either. Here are the journal entries about the two classes.

LTJ extract, 17 Nov Monday
We learn expressions with music and then play a guessing game with them (Kay, 1995a, Worksheet 5). There are two teams, and they are hostile with each other. I am not happy with the atmosphere of the class. Is this a meaningless task? Or it does not work because of the way I introduced it? They do not really get enthusiastic about the task. :(

LTJ extract, 18 Nov Tuesday

Chat task with a vocabulary exercise with expressions with music. There is an information gap, but it doesn't seem to make sense to them to work on bridging this gap, I feel. Not a very authentic task.

Although the chat task at this session was relevant to what we had learnt in the English class, the learners did not find it as enjoyable or relevant to their learning.

Session 9: Role-play: back to a task that worked

I intended to use the 'new identities' regularly, so after the 18 November session I decided to return to open-ended tasks. On 25 November, the task was the same as two weeks before: the new identities met each other and asked questions. I rearranged the pairs so that each learner had a new partner: Footie worked with Dot, Tom with Seth, and Ben with Martin. Mitch and Piper were not present. I found that, disregarding the information I gained from the Background Questionnaire, it was worthwhile trying new pairs in chat.

I expected the task would create a gap between the chatters, and this gap could be bridged by asking questions, as often happens on free chat sites between chatters who meet each other for the first time. After the 25 November session, I wrote the following in the journal:

LTJ, 25 Nov Tuesday
They chat with their new identities again, with differing levels of enthusiasm.
I ask Martin what keeps him from asking his partner the words he doesn't understand. It is embarrassing and it appears in the chat text, he says.

Although during the chat class not all the learners were enthusiastic about the role-play task, the chat logs turned out to be interactive, coherent texts. The success of the task was thus evidenced by the chat logs.

Session 10: A shift in evaluation

On the following occasion, on 2 December, only 4 of the learners were present. I asked them to chat with their new identities again. I made the following note in the journal:

LTJ extract, 2 Dec Tuesday
They chat with their new identities again. They don't seem really enthusiastic. Seth says if he had known he would need this so often, he would have written a better one. I tell him to take up any identity he likes. He chooses to be James Bond.
When I ask them to finish chatting, they ask for some more time. They are involved, I figure. Mitch says his text needs to be censored. I think he deleted some lines in the text pad version of the chat text, where the text is copied before the students save it. Why is it so much fun using bad language in chat?
I have the impression that they get better and better at grasping the task. They get deeper into topics, and ask more questions from each other.

The enthusiasm the learners showed when I was presenting the task was a kind of barometer for me of how interesting they found the task. I was influenced to a great degree by how the learners reacted to the chat task when I presented it to them. I found the students' positive attitude crucial to the success of the inclusion. The fact that I placed such an emphasis on the students' enthusiasm was due to two main factors. On the one hand the students had an important role in designing the new chat task. On the other hand I had limited experience of teaching at secondary school, and there were important lessons I had to learn about how far the students' first reactions reflected the usefulness of a classroom task.

As the project progressed, however, I learnt that their first reaction to the task presented was not decisive. Their lack of enthusiasm at the presentation phase did not mean that they would not be involved when carrying out the task. This observation had two consequences for the inclusion cycle: I remained open to the learners' feedback at the presentation and completion phase of the task, but I also realized that the learners' initial lack of enthusiasm could quickly change while carrying out the chat task, and the learners could produce 'good chats' on these occasions, too.

Session 11: Combining role-play with a grammar point

At the following session, on 9 December, I decided to combine the new identities with a task focussed on the grammar point we were dealing with: reported speech. The task came from the course book (Doff and Jones, 1999, p. 79). The learners went to an imaginary party, where they met and talked to two of the guests. Learner A and B talked to different guests. The learners received a picture of the guest they talked to, and a list of the sentences the guests told them. The learners were asked to report what they had 'heard' to their chat pair. Here is a extract from one of the chat logs:

Chat extract, 9 December, Dot & Footie
1 [dot] So, I met a guy
2 [dot] His name is George and he is 35 years old
3 <Footie> are we still the same personalities, as last time?
4 [dot] What you want

In line (4) Footie asked if they were supposed to take up their identities. This showed that the task instructions were probably not entirely clear, or that Footie did not pay attention throughout the task presentation phase. The focus on what the party guest said, having to report it in chat and playing a role, all in one task, might have been too complicated for Footie. This reminded me that task instructions should be kept simple.

During the 9 December session, there was a lot of collaboration between the group members. Here again, classroom chat turned out to have its maxims and some of the chatters completed the task relying on more efficient means of classroom collaboration than those facilitated by IRC. They asked for words from each other and clarified chat posts orally.

LTJ, 9 Dec Tuesday
They asked me about a lot of words and sentences during the chat. Probably because the task was focussed on grammar. They are helping each other, too. If someone needs a word, (s)he asks his/her question aloud, sort of sending it into the middle of the classroom, and another student, who knows the answer, helps him/her.
I feel that this way of using the common discourse space of the classroom is positive. (As opposed to using it to fool around and make funny comments in Hungarian, which often happens in our traditional English classes.)

Although I saw this form of communication as a positive event from the viewpoint of group dynamics, I kept encouraging the chatters to keep quiet during the chat and only use the computer to communicate. On the one hand, using only chat to communicate could ensure that the language of communication was English. On the other hand, I was very much interested in how they solve their communication problems, and when they solved the problem orally, this type of collateral communication could not be recorded. I reminded them that in the situation they were acting out, their partner was far away, and that was why they communicated in chat.

The chat logs showed that the task was successful, as they contained many instances of correct use of reported speech. But the task was not a very interesting one, as the following extract produced by the Ben-Piper-Lara trio shows:

Chat extract, 9 December, Ben & Piper & Lara
1 <ben> Piper, what did the womwn say about the Rockefeller family?
2 [piper] well, she said she had known them for years
3 <ben> OKû
4 [piper] I'll fall asleep
5 <lara> sounds good to me

The reason for this could have been the fixed content of the chat. However, what they wanted to say about how they feel, they said in chat. This was an obvious sign of involvement from the learners' side. I considered getting the learners involved in the task pivotal for the success of the inclusion of chat tasks in the EFL classes.

Session 12: The beginning of the second phase of the project

After the 9 December session, the Christmas holiday came. There was a break of four weeks before the following chat session. I had plenty of time to think about how to improve the chat tasks and the way the tasks were included in the EFL classes. I made the following notes during the first chat class in January:

LTJ extract, 6 January, Tuesday
I decided to try group chat. Having 2 partners at the same time might make chat more interesting and challenging for them. For some of them it is difficult to enter the same chat room, and to use the same server. Seating is not perfect either, groupmates are sitting too close and communicate orally. Their chat paces are different, and there is a lot of talking.

Seating was often a problem in the chat classes, as IRC was only installed on 8 of the computers in the room, six of which were on one side. The learners preferred to work with the same computer every class.

The task for the 6 January session was story-telling, based on a task from the course book. The learners chatted in trios, and gave extended responses to the following questions from the book:
'What's the silliest thing you've ever done?
What's the biggest surprise you've ever had?
What's the luckiest thing that's ever happened to you?' (Doff & Jones, 1999, p. 9)
As the journal entry shows, there were obvious signs of involvement in the chat group.

LTJ extract, 6 January, Tuesday/2
Footie, Tom and Mitch make a good trio, they look very involved. They ask me not to look at the text while they are chatting, only afterwards. Tom says 'Tanárnő díjat fog kapni, hogy ilyen jó szórakozást talált ki nekünk!' [You are going to get a prize for giving us such a funny task.] I suspect they are sharing their 'coolest' adventures.

The three learners took turns to tell each other about the silliest thing that had ever happened to them. The chat log consisted of three short stories told by the three chatters. The story-tellers posted their stories in several instalments. The postings were sometimes interspersed with the partners' questions and comments, as in the following extract, in which Mitch was the story-teller:

Chat extract, 6 January, Mitch,Tom & Footie
1 <mitch>On the beach was sitting, many german young, and they have drunk.
2 <mitch>And I sad: Earlier we bought a glass of BLACK VELVET.
3 [tom]Good choice
4 <mitch>And we drinking and drinking.
5 [tom]And what happened in the morning?

6 <mitch>A littke bit late, we have tried go home.
7 <mitch>Trying and trying.
8 <mitch>And that is not an easier thing.
9 <mitch>When the peaple is hmmmmm.....
10 <mitch>Then we arrived home...
11 <mitch>In the mourning i woke up and i see:
12 [tom]If you want to keep your honor, please don't tell us more
13 <footie>That's a silly story indeed!

When reading the chat log, I was really content with the degree of interaction between the chatters, and also with the involvement of the chatters.

Session 13: The learners want to relax in chat

A week later, on 13 January, I chose a goal-oriented task again. Here is the journal entry for that day:

LTJ extract, 13 January Tuesday
One of the classes is cancelled because they have to see the school's doctor. They ask if we can just chat in that one class. I approve, because the conditions seem ideal for a good chat.
The task is picture dictation, and they work in pairs. Student A describes a picture in chat, student B has to draw it and may ask questions about it. Then they change roles.

The chatters produced fairly good, coherent texts, but the task was not very interesting for them, as the following extract from Lara & Tom's chat log testifies:

Chat extract, 13 January, Lara & Tom:
1 <tom> I think this is enough for me... yet, and forever. I don't like painting!
2 [lara] ok...that is good with me
3 <tom> compare!

In the following week, I decided to spend the double class with traditional, non-chat activities. I felt that after 12 weeks of chat classes, and having tried so many different types of task, the learners might profit more from traditional activities for developing speaking skills.

Session 14: The first sign of Dot's change of attitude

On the following occasion, on 3 February, the learners chatted in trios again. One of them interviewed the other two about their experience of learning English. Dot asked me a question which made it clear to me that she kept thinking about how to produce a chat log for which she could get a good grade.

LTJ extract, 3 February Tuesday
We get to the chat tasks. Dot asks what grammar structure she is supposed to use in chat. She would like to know what I expect. I like that.

Her question about the tense she was supposed to use showed that Dot had become sensitive to the goals of the tasks and was making an effort to learn from the tasks.

Session 15 & 16: Recording speaking

As part of mapping out how the inclusion of chat affects the participants' learning process, I wanted to explore how performing a classroom chat task differs from performing a speaking task. I designed a task in two versions and recorded the first version in speaking, the second one in chat

with the learners. The class on 10 February was spent on doing these tasks. The task was goal-oriented, with one possible outcome. The learners worked in pairs, and each learner was given different sets of cartoons. Some of the pictures were identical, others were different. The pairs were asked to find out how many identical pictures there were.

When the 15th session took place, only 4 of the 8 members of the chat group were present. In order to have the same chat task performed by all of them, on the 17 February session I asked the learners who had been absent on 10 February to perform the task of the 16th session. The other learners were given a similar task, but instead of cartoons, there received geometrical shapes to compare.

Session 17: Role-play again: repeating a successful type of task

When planning the task for the next session, 24 February, I was trying to find a task which would be interesting for the chatters, and allow them to use their English in a creative way. It was a role-play task in which they could say/write what they meant, but at the same time I included a goal in the task so that the learners would have a topic to chat about. A couple of days before the session I asked them to write a description of their new identity again, because some of them complained that they got bored of the first identities they had written in November. The 24 February session was the first time they chatted with their second 'new identity'. Here are two extracts from the journal entry on 24 February. The description of the task is included in Appendix 15
.

LTJ extract, 24 February Tuesday
Chat in groups of three, with their identities. I invent a situation in which they chat with their identities, and there is a gap between what the personalities want to do, they do not know what their partners' aims are, so that they have enough to chat about.
...
In some of the groups it works. Tom feels he is on the margin and keeps complaining about it while chatting.

I put Tom in one group with Ben and Lara to make sure that the language level of the 3 chatters in the group was similar. A week later, Tom told me how he felt about chatting in threes. The problem was that there was not much interaction between Tom and the other two participants. Here again, it became obvious that the students' personality traits played a more important role in creating good pairs in chat than other factors such as proficiency level or typing skills.

LTJ extract, 2 March Tuesday
Tom broaches the subject of chatting in threes. He tells me it is more fun to do a task like this with students he knows well. (He chatted with Ben and Lara.) I think the point is that his friends make an effort to involve him in the conversation. It is a good point. It did not happen last time: Ben & Lara did not accept his topics.

Session 18: Describing games in chat and speaking

For the 2 March session I selected a task which included 4 identical subtasks. Again, I wanted to learn about the effect of the medium on performing a task. The task included 4 descriptions of so-called parlour games (Hadfield & Hadfield, 1995, Game 1). Each learner was given two of the descriptions. The learners read the descriptions and tried to memorize the main points, so that they could explain the game to their partners. I asked them to explain one game in speaking, and the other one in chat to their partners. Here is the explanation of one of the games, the Adverb game, in chat.

Chat extract, 2 March, Tom & Mitch

1 <mitch> The Adverb game
2 [tom] Can you begin?
3 [tom] Super
4 <mitch> The players sit in a room. The group choose a man who go's out.
5 [tom] OK
6 <mitch> The group stay in the room and think an adverb. for example: angrily, lazily, unhappily
7 [tom] OK
8 <mitch> The person who goes out, come in.
9 [tom] OK
10 <mitch> He has to guess the adverb they have chosen, by asking members of the group tp perform actions in the manner of the adverb.
11 <mitch> to perform
12 [tom] OK
13 <mitch> For example: Rosita, could you look out the window, with the manner oh the adverb?
14 <mitch> of the
15 [tom] OK
16 <mitch> The person asked must then perform the action lazily, unhappily etc
17 [tom] OK
18 [tom] Is it the end?
19 <mitch> And if enough player perform an action,
20 <mitch> the man who goes out, guess the answer
21 <mitch> I think thats all
22 [tom] OK

The learners complained about the games being very complicated. I noticed in the chat logs that the learners tended to copy whole sentences from the original description of the game into their chat explanation, like Mitch did in lines 4 and 6 in the extract above, with inaccuracies. The fact that the learners needed to memorize the instructions of the game in order to be able to describe them, made it difficult for them to concentrate on accuracy in the task. This suggested that tasks leaving more room for selecting the content would make practice more useful.

Session 19 Combining role-play with a reading task

The next session took place a week later, on 9 March. There were two tasks in chat, both of them based on a reading text in the course book. The text was about a man who had committed murder and then disappeared (Doff & Jones, 1997, p. 28). The learners were first asked to choose 4 difficult words from the text and think of definitions for these words. They sent their definitions to their partners in chat. The partners tried to find the words in the text. The second part of the chat task was a role-play in pairs. Both learners were detectives. They got different pieces of information about the man who disappeared. They could only find the man if they managed to cooperate. The chat logs showed a high degree of learner involvement. This suggested that the role-play task should include guidelines on what to chat about.

After the 9 March session a longer period without chat sessions followed. This was because the Easter break came, and also because I needed the double classes to administer the post-test proficiency papers to the group.

Session 20: Practising new vocabulary in chat

The following session took place on 27 April. It was based on the vocabulary we had learnt in the previous class. In the first part of the task, learners defined and guessed words related to cooking in pairs. In the second part they compared two sets of different pictures. The pictures showed different

stages of preparing a dish. Some of the pictures were the same for both learners, others were different. Their task was to find out how many identical pictures they had in common.

Although this was a task with a fixed scenario, and not much creativity was needed to complete either part of it, I found it a useful task because it made the learners practise the particular items of vocabulary we had learnt in the previous class. I could be sure that the learners used those words and expressions again in chat. In the chat logs, I could also see how they used the new words. I also found that the learners used the chat medium to manage the task, as shown in the following extract from Footie and Martin 's chat log:

Chat extract, 27 April, Footie & Martin
1 <footie> do you have this with the SOY sauce?
2 <footie> which is poured on the food?
3 [martin] No
4 <footie> Yes? or No?
5 [martin] Not obn the food, only to a plate
6 <footie> plate with food?
7 <footie> or there's no food on the plate?
8 [martin] There isn't any food on the plate
9 <footie> baaad
10 [martin] Sorry Footie, it's not our day!

Session 21: A relaxing, inspiring task

Two weeks later, for the 4 May session, I designed a chat task based on their new identities again, just as on 24 February. I also decided to include a text from the workbook. The text was about a special drug called burundanga, which makes its users forget who they are and what had happened to them before taking the drug. It was a long and difficult text. The learners were tired and not in the mood to work hard in class.

It seemed to me that they were happy to begin the chat task because then they could be 'alone with the computer' as Ben worded it at the beginning of the project (LTJ, 4 November). After the class I read the chat logs immediately. I was surprised by how good and creative their texts were. Even though it was difficult to convince them to read the text, it became obvious to me from their texts that they enjoyed stepping into the imaginary world of the chat task with their identities. (See the LTJ for instructions for the task.) Here is a extract from Dot and Lara's chat log:

Chat extract, 4 May, Dot & Lara
1 [dot] so, hello my friend?
2 [dot] How are you?
3 <lara> well i am a bit confused. i am in a hospital in colombia and cant remember how i got here
4 [dot] oh...
5 [dot] no
6 [dot] really?
7 [dot] What happened?
8 <lara> i cant remember at all what happenend
9 <lara> i just woke up here

In the chat log produced by Seth and Mitch, the length of the posts evidenced the chatters' involvement:

Chat extract, 4 May, Seth & Mitch

1 <seth> I would like to ask you for help. I dont remember what happened to me and how can it be zhat Im in a hospital?
2 <seth> that)
3 [mitch] I have an Idea.
4 [mitch] The drugs is my speciallity and i think, somebody put something in your drink.
5 [mitch] Maybe burundanga
6 <seth> I cant remember anything. Could you explain it me how did it happened?
7 [mitch] Maybe my friend, maybe.
8 [mitch] If somebody use it, they have hypnosis. and loss his memory.
9 <seth> So what happened? Sombedy put this drug to my food and the moment I eat from it, I lost my memory. I dont rememberwhat I have eaten and drunk, and what happened after that.

The degree of involvement the chat logs showed suggested that we should go on with role-play tasks.

Session 22: playing roles and having a good time

In the last couple of weeks at school, from the beginning of May onwards, the learners were really tired. They had to write tests almost every day and there were recitations in different subjects as well. All these tests made the participants' life fairly stressful in those weeks. I decided to use the last couple of double classes for chat. I laid emphasis on designing enjoyable, and of course, useful tasks for the chat classes. I followed the role-play track as I had experienced that this was the type of task in which the participants were really involved. In role-play tasks they used their English in life-like situations, in a spontaneous way. All of the members of the chat group were planning to take a language exam during the following school year, so I chose 4 role-play tasks (situations) from an intermediate exam preparatory book written for Hungarian learners of English. I asked them to perform two of the tasks orally, and two of them in chat.

In one of the tasks, one learner was the father, the other learner the daughter who would like to go to a party. In the following chat extract, Dot played the daughter. She was trying to persuade her father to let her go to a party. Ben played a strict father who was not willing to let her daughter go to parties. He used block letters, which signifies shouting in chat.

Chat extract, 25 May, Ben & Dot
1 <dot> She has birthday today so all of my friends are going to go to the disco
2 [ben] EXCEPT FOR YOU!!!
3 <dot> to celebrate this big day
4 [ben] YOU STAY HERE!!!
5 <dot> and so... so I want to go as well
6 [ben] NO WAY!!!
7 <dot> He! I am 16 Dad
8 [ben] Thats why I dont let you, you're ONLY 16.
9 <dot> Please Papa it is so important for me

I had the impression that the tasks were optimal for the learners' mental state. I noted the following in the journal:

LTJ extract, 25 May
Some of them ask if we are going to chat. After the chat, to my great surprise, we complete another task on relative clauses. They are soooooooo tired!
Mitch broke his arm, it is in plaster. He tells me at the beginning of the class that he is not able to write, but later he types and writes a little as well.
While the students continuously complained about being exhausted, I was impressed by the degree of involvement they showed in the chat session.

5.2.23 Session 23, the last role-play in the last chat session

Before the very last chat session, on 1 June, I noted the following in the journal:

LTJ extract, 1 June, last chat
I design the last chat task so that it provides some kind of closure for what the students' different identities have been doing in the past few months.

The description of the chat task is included in Appendix 15.

I found the texts really good again. I concluded that the success of the task was due to the fact that the goals were obvious, and they were involved as they chatted with their self-invented 'identities'. Here is a extract from Tom and Mitch's chat, both of whom had related identities:

Chat extract, 1 June, Tom & Mitch
1 [tom] Then let's start with it!!!!!!
2 <mitch> now begin the task, my friend
3 [tom] Now Sanchez I have something to tell you!
4 <mitch> what?
5 [tom] One of my friend, an astrologer said something!
6 <mitch> Its interrestin, last night i dreamt something...
7 <mitch> something very silly
8 [tom] What I want to say thet's silly too!
9 <mitch> Than say it, I am a brave man
10 [tom] I am too! So...
11 [tom] He said that I have to change my lifestyle
12 [tom] Unless something wrong will be happen!
*13 <mitch> I dreamt : the ***japos catch you, and then they kill you!!!*

The 1 June session closed the series of inclusions of chat tasks in the EFL classes. In that week, my project with the chat group also ended.

5.3 Lessons from the inclusion cycles

As the descriptions above of the 23 sessions show, including chat tasks in the EFL classes was a process of continuous analysis of the sessions completed, and a constant fine-tuning of the steps of the inclusion cycle. The success of a session depended on a number of factors, as described below.

The first and most important factor was the *chat task*, which had to be well-described and easy to grasp, and related to the context of the EFL classes, including the subject matter of the previous classes, or the framework of identities the learners had created for themselves. The tasks included in the project emerged as the chat project progressed, so I could continuously improve the tasks and suit them to the objectives of the EFL classes. The most important findings about chat tasks were firstly that the students' own input in the task, such as creating a personality for themselves, can increase the degree of involvement in the chat sessions. Secondly, the instructions for the tasks should be given in written form to the participants, and the instructor should check whether the participants have understood the objectives of the task before beginning the chat. As far as the development of chat task design was concerned, I was satisfied with the outcomes of the project. The fact of improvement in the chat tasks was also confirmed by the participants in the End-project Interview (4.3.7.3) and the Member checks (4.3.7.9).

The second factor in the inclusion was finding *an optimal chat partner* for the participants. As the descriptions in 5.2 showed, I made a considerable effort to find the best matches by talking to the

students, evaluating their chat logs, and administering the Task Evaluation Questionnaire (see 4.3.7.4) to them. In the End-project Interview (see 4.3.7.3 and the results in 7.2.3.1), all of the participants could name at least one person in the group with whom they both enjoyed chat and found it useful at the same time. However, my initial proposition that learners at similar levels of proficiency and typing skills make an optimal pair was only partly justified: while typing skills turned out to play a crucial role in making good pairs, proficiency level was not of primary importance. My efforts to find the chat pairs in the group who can cooperate well had satisfactory results. On several occasions, the composition of pairs had to be handled flexibly, as some of the learners were not present at the class. However, the most important point was that *all* learners found at least one group member they liked chatting with.

Technical conditions, like the computers and the servers IRC was connected to, also had a role in the chat sessions. Technical difficulties could impede the success of the chat session or shorten the time the learners could spend on the task. These were conditions provided by the school setting that I could not alter. As the project progressed, the participants became more skilled with computers, they handled IRC with ease and saving the chat logs became a routine task. This implies that even secondary schools with a fairly old set of computers, like BHS at the time of the chat project, can set up projects involving chat.

The fourth factor that had an impact on the inclusion of chat was *the classroom environment*. The chatters shared the same physical space so I, as the instructor, had to make sure that the situation of the chat tasks was simulated well. This entailed keeping the chatters far from each other, so that they could only communicate in chat. In the first phase of the project, it was also very important to monitor what the participants were doing in the sessions, and to make sure that they were on task during the chat sessions. Putting the chatters in two separate rooms could have made it possible to exclude oral communication in the chat classes. However, at the time of the chat project, it was not possible to separate them as there was only one computer room at BHS. Separating the chatters would also have made monitoring and helping them difficult for the teacher. Furthermore, as time went by, and the participants became accustomed to the chat sessions, they also showed development in sticking to the rules of classroom chat, and refraining from oral communication during the sessions.

The results of the member check interviews confirmed that the four factors above shaped the product of the chat sessions, the chat logs. Interestingly enough, in the interview, both learners completed the description of the project I gave them with the following: they mentioned that the task and their chat partner was decisive from the viewpoint of their own involvement in the task. They also both commented that although they had had the opportunity to say what they thought of the chat tasks, they thought their opinion did not shape the course of the chat project considerably. My view of their involvement, and their evaluation of their own role thus differed considerably. They also mentioned that it was the revision and correction of chat logs that made the inclusion of chat an opportunity for language improvement for them.

After this detailed description of the chat sessions, I would like to show how the inclusion affected the participants' language learning process in terms of proficiency test results, and how their repertoire of learning strategies changed in the course of the school year. These issues will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.