

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

**THESES**

**Online chat in the secondary school EFL class**

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

Eszenyi Réka Zsuzsanna

Language Pedagogy PhD Program  
Eötvös University

Budapest, 2006

## **1 The topic and the objectives of the study**

The dissertation describes the effect of the inclusion of online chat tasks in the secondary school EFL classes on the learners' language learning processes in the framework of a case study. The topic of the study belongs to the area of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and within this field, to the studies which concern human-to-human, computer-mediated communication (CMC). The different forms of CMC include e-mail, online forums and online chat. The present dissertation investigated online chat.

*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. The software used in the present study was Internet Relay Chat (IRC). In IRC, the sender of the message writes the message, clicks on the 'send' button, and the message will appear soon on their chat partner's screen.

The aim of the study is to show how the inclusion of online chat tasks changes the secondary school EFL classes, and to explore what steps the language teacher should take if they want to make online chat a regular part of language learning. The study investigates the following aspects of the inclusion of chat:

- the integration of chat tasks in the traditional class activities,
- the effect of chat on the proficiency and language learning strategy repertoire of the learners,

- the effect of chat on the learners' motivation for learning English and their attitudes towards classroom chat,
- and the learners' language use in the chat conversations.

## **2 The structure of the dissertation**

Chapter 1 presents the background of the study, computer-mediated communication, and the field of research that concerns CMC in language learning: computer-assisted language learning. The chapter shortly discusses the significance of the study, the main findings and gives an overview of the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 explores the theoretical background of the study by presenting the models of second language acquisition the present study was based on, discusses the differences between communicating face-to-face and in online chat, and shortly describes the empirical studies that had an important influence on the study. The last section in the chapter gives the rationale for conducting a chat study in the Hungarian context.

Chapter 3 reviews the approaches to research methodology applied in the study. The aim of the chapter is to present how the two methodological approaches, the qualitative and quantitative methodology approach the research problem, and how the combination of the two methodologies can help the researcher explore the different facets of the research problem. Chapter 4 contains two parts. The first part describes the two pilot studies that preceded the main study, the *Buda High School Chat Project*. The second part of the chapter describes the research methodology applied in the main study.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 present the findings of the study. Chapter 5 contains the detailed, thick description of the chat sessions, which shows the different aspects of the inclusion of chat in the English classes, and gives a picture of the changes in the sessions. These changes concerned the choice of the chat task and the chat partner, the technical conditions of chat, and the classroom environment of the chat sessions. Chapter 6 presents the changes that occurred in the English proficiency and the strategy repertoire of the participants. Chapter 7 describes the changes in the participants' motivation for learning English and their attitudes towards classroom chat. Chapter 8 investigates the participants' language use in the chat conversations by investigating the grounding techniques (Clark, 1996) used in the chat logs.

Chapter 9 summarizes the findings of the study, and describes how the different aspects of the inclusion of chat investigated relate to each other, and what the implications of the findings are for foreign language learning and teaching. The chapter also gives suggestions for future research, and finally, summarizes the significance of the study.

### **3 Theoretical background**

The study investigates the process of language learning from the viewpoint of the interaction between the participants in the conversation. In second language acquisition 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 engaging in communication in the target language, the learner may not understand

everything their partner says, or their partner may signal that they do not understand what the learner said. These situations, in which the learner is forced to *negotiate meaning* are potentially beneficial for their language development. In such situations, the learner can notice the gaps in their target language proficiency and has the opportunity to improve. The question in what situations learners are most likely to engage in meaning negotiation was given considerable attention in literature on second language acquisition (Swain, 1985, Long, 1983, Varonis & Gass, 1985, Pica et al., 1993, Gass, 1997). These studies show that non-native – non-native dyads are often forced to negotiate meaning as both parties have deficiencies in their knowledge of the target language. When communicating with native speakers, the learner is often impeded by the difference in status between them, and is thus reluctant to engage in meaning negotiation. The opportunities to improve also depend on the type of conversation the learner is involved in, or in case of learning in the classroom, the type of task used. Research has shown that goal-oriented tasks that have only one possible outcome provide more opportunities for meaning negotiation than open-ended tasks.

Online chat, the communication channel investigated in the study is a written form of communication. However, due to the interactive nature of chat, it is also similar to speaking. Several characteristics of face-to-face conversations can 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. Based on these similarities, empirical research on online chat in language learning was designed using the lessons learnt about task types and partners in studies on oral communication.

Studies on online chat in language learning mention the following merits of this new tool:

- 1) As online chat is an authentic, frequently used channel of communication, including chat in the language classes can have a motivating effect, especially in the case of the younger generation (Beauvois, 1992, Poulisse, 2002, Toorenaar, 2002).
- 2) When chatting in the target language, the learner can produce a large amount of output and practice various language functions (Beauvois, 1995, Negretti, 1999).
- 3) During the chat conversation, the language learner has the opportunity to negotiate meaning, which is potentially beneficial for their language development (Kern, 1996, Pellettieri, 2000).
- 4) In chat dialogues, the conversation takes place in real time, which implies spontaneous language use, but chatters have more time to formulate their messages and process the messages received than in speaking (Pellettieri, 2000, Poulisse, 2002).
- 5) In online chat, the chatters do not see and hear their partners. In order to compensate for the lack of visual and auditive cues, they have to be more precise in their language use (Toorenaar, 2002).
- 6) Pronunciation has no role in chat dialogues, so learners who are too shy to speak also get a chance (Poulisse, 2002).
- 7) When chatting in pairs or small groups, the learners' participation is more equal than in face-to-face dialogues (Warschauer, 1996).
- 8) The logs of the chat dialogues can be saved and printed, so the learners can revise the language they produced with the help of the instructor (Toorenaar, 2002, Lee, 2002).
- 9) When chatting, the learners have more time to produce their message than in speaking, so the learners' language use is more varied and complex in this medium (Warschauer, 1996).

#### **4 Research methodology**

The Buda High School Chat Project investigates the case of one English group. The aim of the case study is to describe the changes in the language learning processes in the group for one school year. The *chat group* investigated in the present study had 8 members, the learners were 17 years old and in the 5th year of secondary school when the project started. The author of the dissertation was the English teacher of the group. The group's level of English was B1 in the Common European Framework (2001).

The study combined qualitative and quantitative methods (combined methodology, Creswell, 1994). The added value of combined methodology is that it makes it possible for the researcher to explore the various aspects of the research problem. The qualitative description of the processes that characterize the phenomenon investigated can be complemented by the quantitative results. Qualitative methods are characterized by a heuristic, explorative approach, and can be applied in areas that have not been researched before, like the inclusion of chat tasks in the EFL class in the Hungarian context. The evolution of the chat cycles, and the changes in the learners' motivation were investigated by qualitative methods: classroom observations, keeping a language teacher's journal, and conducting interviews.

When applying quantitative methods, the researcher chooses the research instruments before the commencement of the study. The research instruments are employed to measure the variables selected in the study. The participants' proficiency in English, language learning

strategy repertoire, their attitudes towards chat tasks and the frequency of grounding techniques in the chat logs were investigated by quantitative methods.

The aim of the study was 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?

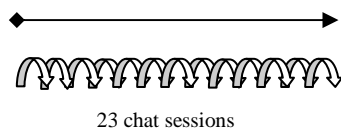
The following table outlines the research questions and the corresponding types of data collected in the chat group. For each data type, the type of analysis conducted is given. All of the data listed below was collected in the school year 2003-2004.



<b>Research question</b>	<b>Data type</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
1 How can the chat tasks be integrated into the EFL classes at school? (Chapter 5)	questionnaire on background	<i>qualitative analysis</i>
	chat logs	<i>qualitative analysis</i>
	journal	<i>qualitative analysis</i>
	interview	<i>qualitative analysis</i>
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	<i>qualitative analysis</i>
	questionnaire on attitudes	quantitative analysis
4 What impact does the inclusion of chat have on the participants' <i>language use</i> ? (Chapter 8)	chat logs	quantitative analysis

The following figures show the main aspects of the study. The arrows depict the duration of the study.

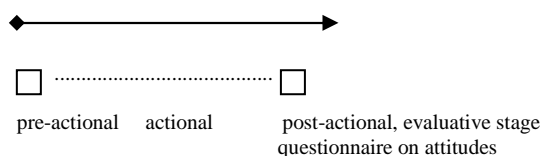
**Chapter 5:** The chapter contains the thick description of the chat project (including the 23 chat sessions), focussing on the changes in the chat tasks, the composition of the pairs, the technical conditions and the classroom environment.



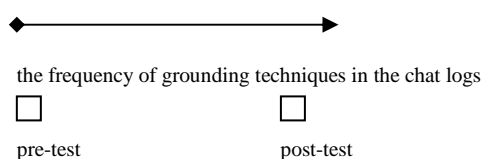
**Chapter 6:** The chapter describes the changes in the participants' *proficiency* and *language learning strategies*.



**Chapter 7:** The chapter describes the changes in the participants' motivation for learning English and attitudes towards chat tasks in the English class.



**Chapter 8:** The chapter describes the participants' language use in chat.

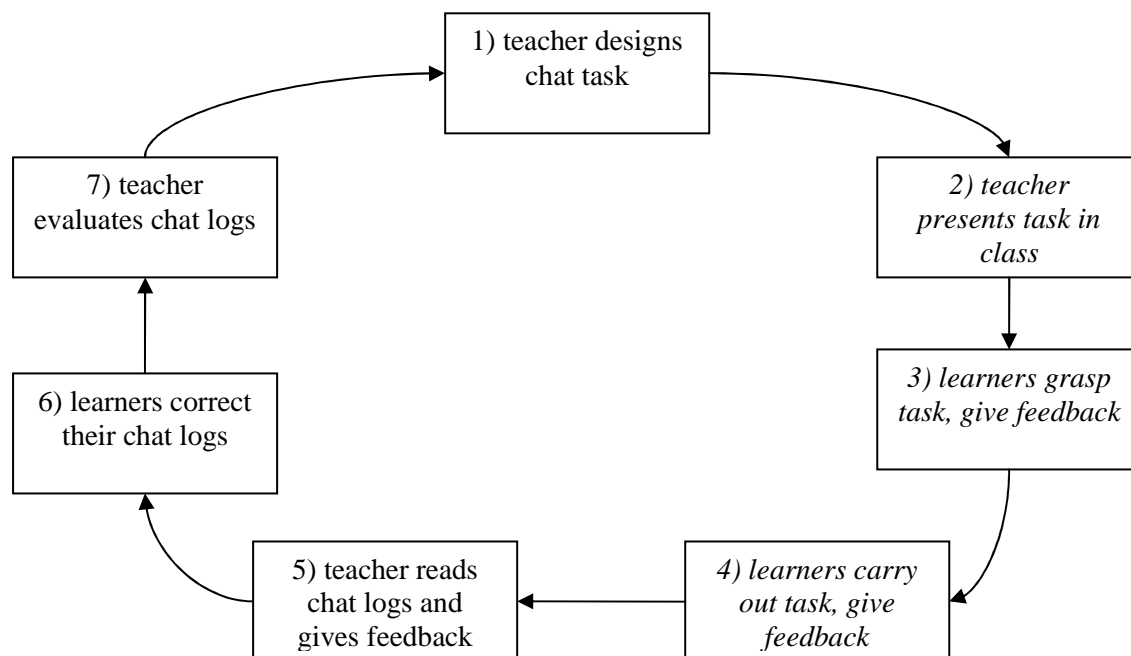


## 5 Overview of the results

### 5.1 The inclusion of chat tasks in the English classes

The following figure depicts the seven steps of integrating chat tasks in the English class.

After the seventh step, the evaluation phase, the cycle begins again: the teacher designs a new chat task. As these steps were repeated every time a chat task was performed in class, the outcomes of the chat cycles were traceable for both the learners and the teacher. The cycle was repeated 23 times during the chat project.



In the repeated cycles, I continuously fine-tuned the steps of the cycle, using my own observations and the participants' comments. The aim of the process was to make the chat cycle a useful part of the participants' language learning process. Four aspects of classroom chat proved to be decisively important for the success of the cycle: the chat task, the composition of the chat pairs, the technical conditions and the classroom environment.

The most important lesson about the *chat tasks* is that although the literature on online chat in language learning advocates the use of goal-oriented tasks, as these elicit more meaning negotiation from the learners than open-ended tasks do, in the chat group's case, open-ended tasks proved to be more relevant and useful in chat. Concerning the composition of the *chat partners*, the participants' feedback turned out to be crucial. While studies on online chat claimed that language proficiency and computer skills should be considered when the teacher makes pairs (Warschauer, 1996, Toorenaar, 2002), in the case of the chat group, mutual acceptance between the partners was of primary importance. As far as the *technical conditions* were concerned, it became obvious that the regular inclusion of chat tasks contributed to the improvement in the participants' computer skills, and the improved skills, in turn, promoted the success of the chat sessions. Ensuring the optimal *classroom environment* was the fourth important aspect of the chat cycle. The chat partners were sitting in the same room during the chat session, however, the only means of communication allowed was chat. So it was crucial to seat the partners as far as possible from each other.

## **5.2 Changes in proficiency and language learning strategy repertoire**

The changes in the chat group's proficiency and language learning strategy repertoire were investigated in a pre- and post-test design, and the results were compared to those in a control group. The results of the proficiency test showed that both groups made significant progress in the *total test score* and the *language elements* sub-part of the test. As far as the productive skills are concerned, the chat group improved significantly in *writing*, while the control group made a significant gain in *speaking*. The results showed that the effect of the inclusion of chat tasks is comparable to traditional communicative tasks. Since in online chat, the learners produce the target language in writing, this skill developed as a result of the inclusion.

Concerning the learning strategies used by the participants, both groups showed a significant increase in the use of *mental strategies*, as these strategies include the activities present in most language learning activities. The participants' memory, compensation, and social strategies, and the strategies aimed at organizing one's learning did not change significantly. In the case of the chat group, there was a significant decrease in the use of strategies for managing one's emotions. This result suggests that the learners can practice the target language in chat in a relaxed, stress-free environment.

### **5.3 Motivation and attitudes towards chat tasks**

The chat group's motivation was investigated in the framework of Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) process-oriented motivation, in three stages:

- 1) at the beginning of the school year, in the *pre-actional stage*,
- 2) during the project, in the *actional stage*,
- 3) and after the project, in the evaluative, *post-actional stage*.

At the beginning of the project, the participants had clear objectives and claimed in the background questionnaire that they were ready to make an effort to improve their English. In the actional phase, the learners' motivation for learning was varied. Understanding the goals of a task, and familiarizing themselves with the steps of the chat cycle were factors that helped the learners make classroom chat an activity that fostered their development in English.

The eight participants reacted to the inclusion of chat in different ways. Some of the learners carried out the tasks in the chat sessions very precisely from the beginning, just as they did in the traditional classes as well. Some of them appreciated the freedom provided by the chat

medium, but did not make an effort to correct the texts.. In the case of two learners, it took several months to understand what the goals of the inclusion were. In the end-project interview, seven out of the eight participants were positive about the inclusion of chat in the English classes. In the evaluation questionnaire, all members of the chat group claimed they had enjoyed participating in the project. The learners' feedback also showed that the modifications of the chat cycles had a positive influence on the participants' motivation for learning English.

The participants' attitudes towards classroom chat were compared to a control group's attitudes, whose members chatted on two occasions in their English classes. The two groups' opinions were similarly positive about classroom chat: they found it interesting, entertaining, stress-free and an autonomous way to learn. The only difference between the two groups was that the chat group found classroom chat significantly more useful.

#### **5.4 Language use in chat: grounding techniques in the chat logs**

The participants' language use in chat was investigated based on Clark's grounding theory (1996). The chat logs were analysed for postings that do not concern 'the official business' of the conversation, but are meant to support communication itself, and serve to establish *common ground* between the participants. During the analysis of 6 role-play type chat sessions, 17 techniques of grounding were identified. These were divided into 4 groups:

- 1) techniques directed at grounding the *content* of the conversation,
- 2) techniques directed at grounding the *form* of the conversation,
- 3) techniques of acknowledgement,
- 4) and techniques aimed at managing the task and compensating for the text-only medium of chat.

The longitudinal changes in the chat logs were investigated by comparing the chat logs from two occasions at the beginning of the project and two occasions at the end. The number of techniques grounding form and managing the task and the chat medium decreased significantly. This suggests that as a result of the regular chat sessions, the learners' *common ground* had increased in these areas, and thus the learners needed less grounding. The frequency of techniques grounding content and acknowledgements remained constant, which shows that the participants in conversation need to add to their common ground each time they start a new conversation, and they employ grounding techniques in order to be able to communicate successfully.

## **6 Summary of the findings**

The findings of my study show that the inclusion of chat tasks in the secondary school EFL classes has a beneficial effect on the learners' language learning process. In the dissertation a description is given of how chat tasks can be integrated in the EFL classes, and what steps should be taken before and after the classroom chat session. By presenting the case of the chat group, the study explored which aspects of classroom chat the language teacher should attend to and refine in order to make this modern means of communication a useful tool of language learning that fosters the learners' development in the target language.

## **7 References**

- Beauvois, M. H. (1992). Computer-assisted classroom discussion in the foreign language classroom: conversation in slow motion. *Foreign Language Annals*, 25(5), 455-464.
- Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Learning, Teaching, Assessment.* Council of Europe. (2001). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research Design. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*: Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ottó, I. (1998). Motivation in action: a process model of L2 motivation. *Working Papers in Applied Linguistics. Thames Valley University, London.*(4), 43-69.
- Gass, S. (1997). *Input, Interaction and the Second Language Learner*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah.
- Kern, R. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *The Modern Language Journal*, 79(4), 457-476.
- Lee, L. (2002). Enhancing Learners' Communication Skills through Synchronous Electronic Interaction and Task-Based Instruction. *Foreign Language Annals*, 35(1), 16-24.
- Long, M. (1983). Native speaker, non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2), 126-141.
- Negretti, R. (1999). Web-based Activities and SLA: a Conversational Analysis Research Approach. *Language Learning & Technology*, 3(1), 75-87.
- Pellettieri, J. (2000). Negotiation in Cyberspace: The Role of Chatting in the Development of Grammatical Competence. In M. W. R. Kern (Ed.), *Network-Based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice* (pp. 59-86). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pica, T., Kanagy, R., & Falodun, J. (1993). Choosing and using communication tasks for second language instruction. In G. G. Crookes, S.M. (Ed.), *Tasks and language learning*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.
- Poullisse, N. (2002). Chatten in het talenonderwijs. Wat kunnen we leren van de ervaringen? *Levende Talen*(2), 3-13.
- Toorenaar, A. (2002). Chatten in de les. Een onderzoek naar de meerwaarde van het chatten voor het NT2-onderwijs. *Levende Talen*(2), 14-23.
- Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output on its development. In S. G. a. C. Madden (Ed.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235-256). Rowley MA: Newbury House.
- Varonis, E., & Gass, S. (1985). Non-native/non-native conversations: A model for negotiation. *Applied Linguistics*, 6(1), 71-90.
- Warschauer, M. (1996). Comparing face-to-face and electronic communication in the second language Classroom. *CALICO Journal*, 13(1), 7-26.