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**TAXONOMY OF EDUCATIONAL CHATS  
FOR EFL LEARNERS**

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At present more and more language teachers around the world are introducing online components into their face-to-face classes to offer students

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the opportunity to communicate with speakers of the language, whether native or non-native. This exposure to the languages of the world through synchronous modes of communication evidently has numerous positive sides. On the one hand, it provides the opportunity to interact and learn with and from people from different cultures and different native languages. On the other hand, while using these means of communication, students get prepared for the use of web tools, which is an added value for their future as professionals in any area. However, to be able to take this challenge, language teachers need to be computer literate, or e-literate, should learn to make the most of web tools available and apply this knowledge to their educational contexts, which is not an easy task. Some teachers are afraid of technology either because they have not been offered training or do not feel ready to shift their traditional educational paradigms to more collaborative and student-centered paradigms needed in e-learning. We hope this article will familiarize language teachers with such e-terms as *CMC*, *chat*, *chat line*, *chat room*, *chat show*, *face-to-face (f2f) conversation*, etc. and will urge teachers of English to use modern technologies in their class.

It seems natural that teachers, who are motivated and interested in using on-line communication for educational purposes and willing to plan their activities more exactly, should know the characteristics and particularities of different chat tasks according to the objective they pursue, to the role of moderator as well as to the structure of the interaction to be generated. That's why we have considered it appropriate to offer in this paper a taxonomy for educational chats. While synchronous communication refers to real time communication, interaction with live audience, chats are traditionally viewed as synchronic communicative spaces widely incorporated into on-line activities, especially in EFL classes, which is explained by the possibilities chats offer participants to interact with native and non-native speakers of the L2.

Almeida d'Eça (2002) defines the 'chat' as "*a two-way synchronous form of computer mediated communication (CMC), a dialogue in real time as we keyboard or speak our words, an online conversation between two or more people by means of a computer*" (Almeida d'Eca, 2002). This definition contains all the elements that describe the nature and characteristics of chat which, in turn, make them a great tool for foreign language learning, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Basically the word "chat" means informal conversation, as defined in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2000:198); while to chat means "*to talk in a friendly informal way to somebody*", and that is what makes chats a natural space for communication to take place.

As a rule the language in chat is composed of short phrases and a special lingo, “chat language”, which makes communication closer to a face-to-face conversation. That is one of the reasons why chats should not be used for teaching or correcting lexical items or syntax and cannot be taken as a product to be evaluated in terms of grammar and spelling. In face-to-face conversations people make mistakes, restart their sentences, self-repair, etc. In this sense, conversations in chats are very similar to face-to-face conversations for the following reasons:

- Greetings are part of the “meeting” rituals.
- People talk without respecting turns, as it is very frequent that people start answering without waiting for the person who has the floor to finish.
- People introduce new topics without finishing previous ones.
- Turn taking is not usually well distributed. Some people tend to hold the floor or participate more than others.
- Some people only listen to the dialogues taking place.
- Different threads may be going on at the same time: two or three people are talking about something while others are pursuing some other topic.
- People attend to the thread that is of their interest, and may change their attention after a while, while some may participate in two or more different threads at the same time, which only depends on their ability to concentrate.

The fact that there are different threads does not mean that at the end each person has not taken anything out of the conversation, especially when they have met with a purpose. This also happens in a chat, with the advantage that at the end of the conversation, we can read the log and learn about all the topics treated even by those we were not paying attention to.

Of course, there are traits of face-to-face conversation that are missing in chats, namely body language and voice suprasegmental levels. The use of videos (webcams) and voice may help to overcome these obstacles; however, voice applications and webcams are still far from substituting the physical presence of the interlocutor, even though modern technology helps to express some feelings in text chat. Chats have been neglected in the classrooms mainly due to the bad reputation of public chat rooms, and in spite of the fact that research is needed regarding its benefits for language acquisition, practice with students and colleagues has revealed many ways in which chat can be used to offer practice in a second or foreign language. Warschauer (1998) narrates his own experience as a language learner of Hawaiian and how CMC was useful for him. He states that

during oral class discussion, it was not infrequent that he become lost, and thus received no benefit. However, during computer-mediated discussion, no matter how complex, he was always able to reread the sentences, consult the dictionary, ask questions of the person next to him-in other words he found some way to make the input comprehensible and thus benefited from it (Warschauer, 1998: 5).

This reflection reveals that CMC can reduce the level of anxiety of a language student enhancing simultaneously the affectivity of language communication which has been considered by such educators as Dewey, Montesory, Vygotsky, Rogers as an influencing factor in the learning process, emphasizing that the affective domain needed to be considered if global education was to be achieved. In the field of second language acquisition, Krashen & Terrell's Natural Approach (1983) proposed activities which are especially designed to minimize stress, following one of Krashen's five hypotheses for language acquisition: the affective filter hypothesis. In this sense, the social nature of chat contributes to lowering the affective filter by offering a relaxing atmosphere for learning to take place.

Thus we may deduce that e-learning has both positive and negative sides, one of the main criticisms towards e-learning being the lack of human contact, the isolation of the students in cyberspace. However, chats bring us the live, real time contact and interaction with and among colleagues and students, which, in turn, enhances discussion, interaction and collaboration. According to Kimura human interaction, discussion and collaboration is still the foremost in leading to new knowledge and enabling us to overcome the challenges that face us in the classrooms. (Kimura, 2003). Most language teachers have always been interested in learning and applying new methods and technologies to enhance their pedagogical practices. A lot of university students and teachers have mentioned that group work in chat has been the most useful component for them in terms of learning gains and reflecting about their learning process.

Poole, Axmann, Calongne & Cox (2003) also claim that given the right conditions, the synchronous environment of the chat room can be a successful medium for learning.(Poole, B.J et ell:2003). These are several characteristics of chat which may be taken advantage of to enhance language learning:

- Interaction with real audiences (those who listen in order to get the message and not its form).
- Receive input and produce output
- Immediate feedback from interlocutors.
- No restrictions regarding location.

- Opportunity for negotiation of meaning.
- Collaborative learning towards knowledge construction.
- Opportunity for intake (what the language learner retains from the input received) through “language noticing” (A hypothesis of second language acquisition which states that for language to take place, students should be aware of what they learn, e.g. vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.).
- Chatlogs (written transcription of chat) allowing for further analysis of conversation and adding coherence to the different threads of the conversation.
- Promotion of learner autonomy.

Most of these aspects have been considered by different hypotheses of second language acquisition: the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985); the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1993); the interactionist hypothesis (Long, 1985); the intake hypothesis (Schmidt; 1990), among others. The negotiation of meaning through interaction and modification of input has also been mentioned as a factor facilitating language learning (Long, 1985, 1996). More recently, Egbert, Chao & Hanson-Smith (1999) have discussed several conditions for optimal language learning environments, most of which can be fostered in a chat:

- opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning,
- interaction with authentic audiences in the target language,
- students' involvement in authentic tasks,
- exposure to and encouragement to produce varied and creative language,
- feedback,
- metacognitive guidance,
- an ideal anxiety or stress level.

Not many studies have investigated the use of chat in language learning, but the ones carried out reveal some interesting aspects. Pelletieri (2000) found that some of the patterns of computer mediated interaction are similar to those encountered in face-to-face interaction: all aspects of the discourse serve as triggers for negotiations, task types influence the kind and amount of negotiation (difficult tasks promote more negotiation than easy ones), self-repair, corrective feedback, negotiation within negotiations. This seems to indicate that students make efforts to ensure their understanding of the messages. Chun (1994) also found that chatting seems to improve students' interactive competence, as the instructor takes relatively fewer turns and the students direct most of their comments to each other rather than to the teacher. In addition the turns are more equally

distributed among the students; shy students participate more. And a small number of assertive students dominate less often than in face-to-face conversation. Language students, however, may find some difficulties in chat. Mynard (2002) points out some of them:

- If students' keyboarding skills are slow, they may miss part of the conversation taking place.
- Slow readers may find difficult to follow the sometimes fast scrolling screen.
- Chat lingo may result incomprehensible for newbies (people new to the use of web tools or Internet).
- Culturally-specific issues may result in misunderstandings arising, etc.

However, the positive aspects of chats tend to outnumber the possible difficulties, which can be minimized with a good lesson plan and preparation on part of the teacher.

Furthermore, most language teachers would agree that chats can be used to improve different aspects of our teaching development and practice. As teachers usually lack time to attend meetings, or to collaboratively plan activities, chats provide a great alternative to meet with colleagues from all over the world to write lesson plans, to prepare events, and to design joint projects. Collaboration and sharing are key words in professional development. The Internet gives the opportunity to share teachers' experience, work and findings in online synchronous events that take place at different chat platforms. Methods, evaluation, activities, course design, are just some of the topics that may be found in various on-line chatlogs. Computer experienced language teachers mainly use text chat, however, voice, webcams, web pages and Power Point are also frequently used to enhance the presentations. E-learning and online components for courses are the main issues behind our sharing and collaboration efforts, but teachers who do not teach online could benefit from online activities to enhance their face-to-face practice. It also provides practice in e-moderation with students. Moderating online is a rather difficult and responsible task because it is not the same as teaching face-to-face and the only way to learn is with practice. Tutoring a student in chat is quite different from working with groups of students or whole classes in this environment. Internet offers the possibility to get in touch with students from all over the world (Yeh, 2003) who are eager to practice their English with native or non-native speakers of the target language. Teachers may also start practicing with their own students in the classroom, setting group tasks to be completed through chat. Teachers are also given the possibility to explore various web tools, which is a never-ending activity for online educators as

these tools sometimes seem difficult and above our understanding, chats give us the opportunity to explore and evaluate them with the collaboration and scaffolding (the help given by experts to non-experts) of one or more colleagues, who may have experience with them, or more technological knowledge to guide us in the process. CMC gives language teachers a chance to participate in online conferences both as audience and as participants: participants have the opportunity to attend presentations given by people who can be in another continent, ask questions as if face to face without leaving their homes and presenters have the chance to discuss their work with a wider and diverse audience which makes his/her work more relevant.

Dafne Gonzalez who teaches in Venezuela, after participating in many chats for different purposes observed differences in terms of the objective of the session, the role of the moderator and the performance expected of the participants which later helped her to develop the taxonomy of chats.

**Free Topic Chats:** The main purpose of these chat is to practice the target language, to learn about and to explore web tools with the social scaffolding of colleagues or peers. There is not a pre-established agenda, and there is free moderation. Different threads are going on at the same time and each one joins the conversational thread of his/her interest. A good example of this kind of chat are on line meetings, where English teachers and students get together to discuss about web tools and the best way to incorporate them into their educational contexts in a friendly atmosphere.

**Collaborative Task-Oriented Chats:** Participants get together in a chat to accomplish a real-life task. The activity should be planned and structured in such a way, the once in the chat, participants know what they are there for, and they are responsible for going through a process to be able to accomplish the objective of the activity, which might be a final product, or only a sub-product to be used as resource for a following activity. In this kind of chat, there is no need for a moderator: the same group establishes the norms and handles the situation to complete the task in the allotted time. Two good examples for this type of chat: some teachers gather in a chat to design a strategic plan for a week they have to moderate for one of the online meetings; and students can work to share their knowledge and come up with the shared issues/characteristics, which are going to be used in further tasks.

**Academic Seminars –Academic Presentation Chats:** These chats aim at presenting material. Usually, the moderator has prepared the material in advance, and the topic for discussion has been previously announced to the audience. It may be in the form of a *workshop*, where the

presenter shows, or explains, how to do something and the participants have to get involved in the “doing”; *a demonstration*, where the presenter shows how to do something and the audience asks questions but is not involved in any other action; *a presentation*, where the speaker only presents information and expects the audience to ask questions (it can be the presentation of a program, a methodology, results of a research, etc.); *a swap shop*, where each participant brings material on a given topic to be shared, discussed and analyzed during the chat; or *a discussion*, where the presenter brings a couple of questions to be discussed or brainstormed. Guest speakers could be an enhancing element for these academic presentation chat.

**Practice Chats:** The objective is that students in the chat practice a given function of the language with other students and the moderator (e.g. role playing an interview, practicing a function of the language, individual or group tutoring). These are very closed-topic chats, and the moderator usually establishes the rules and turn-taking style.

**Evaluation Chats:** As far reaching as it might seem, chats have been used to assess students’ learning (Marta, 2002). Teachers can administer online quizzes while in a chat with students, ask questions to be answered by individual students, prepare debates on a given topic and then use the chatlog to check the participation and contributions of each student. Immediate feedback is an asset of chat as a medium to administer evaluations.

*It is important to point out that some chats may mix some of these categories, whether because the session has different objectives or because there is a need to introduce a new element.*

**Conclusion:** As we have seen through our paper, chat is an unexploited tool for language learning and teacher development. Teachers should especially consider the collaborative construction of knowledge that can take place through chat. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of learning through social interaction and collaboration (von Glaserfeld, 1989), and chat seems to be the ideal space for this kind of learning. In recent research, Margalit & Sabar (2003) found that:

- Most students and teachers believe it is possible to learn using chat.
- They like learning via this medium.
- They believe moderators are important to conduct the sessions.
- Students and teachers believe chats have a positive influence on creativity, thought-generation, social relations, and learning.
- Teachers place great importance on the e-moderation aspect of chats.

Still, it should be noted that chats do not promote learning on their own; their effectiveness lies in the way the activities are planned and carried out within the framework of the syllabus of a course. It is our respon-



sibility as teachers to learn to use this environment to ensure optimal conditions for the students' performance. Some teachers may argue that in Moldovan universities, colleges and high schools we do not always have regular access to Internet, but we are sure that we must use all available resources in order to update our teaching/learning strategies.

It is our hope that this taxonomy of educational chat elaborated by Dafne Gonzalez and reviewed by the authors will help teachers to plan chat activities for their students, and to select the type of chats that suits their syllabus, students' age, level and interests, and at the same time will stimulate teachers to use chats to enhance their own professional development. We strongly believe that in due time, the power of computers and the Internet may help us not only increase our understanding of the on-line classroom communication, but also unlock broader mysteries of the language learning process.

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