Virtual Office Visits Online in the Language Learning Classroom

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Abstract
Internet chat was used as a discussion tool by students who needed to give an academic presentation to their peers in the classroom. After the teacher had modeled a presentation, students were divided into groups of four to five students to discuss their own presentations during three online chat sessions. By using Internet chat students were able to get a variety of opinions from their peers, and they stayed on task. Additionally, the teacher was able to guide students who were misinformed. The Internet chat sessions turned into a virtual office visit but with a difference. The teacher did not dominate the interaction but simply commented on students' output. The result was that students were better informed about their presentations and not only selected more appropriate topics to present, but presented these topics in a more academic style.

Introduction
Communication between teachers and students, as well as between students and other students, is vital for a successful classroom. In the language learning classroom, misunderstandings caused by miscommunication not only have the power to derail assignments and tasks, but can act as demotivating forces as well, negatively affecting language learning.

In this classroom research, Internet chat was used as a tool to help improve communication between the teacher and the students and also between classmates. In particular, Internet chat allowed the teacher and students to discuss students' academic presentations online. This resulted in students that were better informed about what constituted an academic presentation, which in turn resulted in presentations that followed a more academic pattern and revealed a deeper understanding of the primary objectives of presenting.

CMC
Computer-mediated communication has become an integral part of classroom communication in many parts of the world. In the language learning classroom, Internet chat has been *in play* since the early 1990s (Kelm, 1992; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996; Freiermuth, 1998). Chat software, however, has become more sophisticated and much, much easier to use. This has provided teachers and students with more stable environments in which to interact with one another, and allowed teachers the opportunity to spend more class time observing students and less class time running around trying to resolve technical issues (Freiermuth, 2002).

For this classroom-based research, we used the very cleverly designed LECS software as the chatting tool. LECS [http://home.kanto-gakuin.ac.jp/~taoka/lecs/] is a free, web-based program developed by Taoka Harada and Tomohiro Yasuda specifically for language teachers. This is a webshot of the front page:
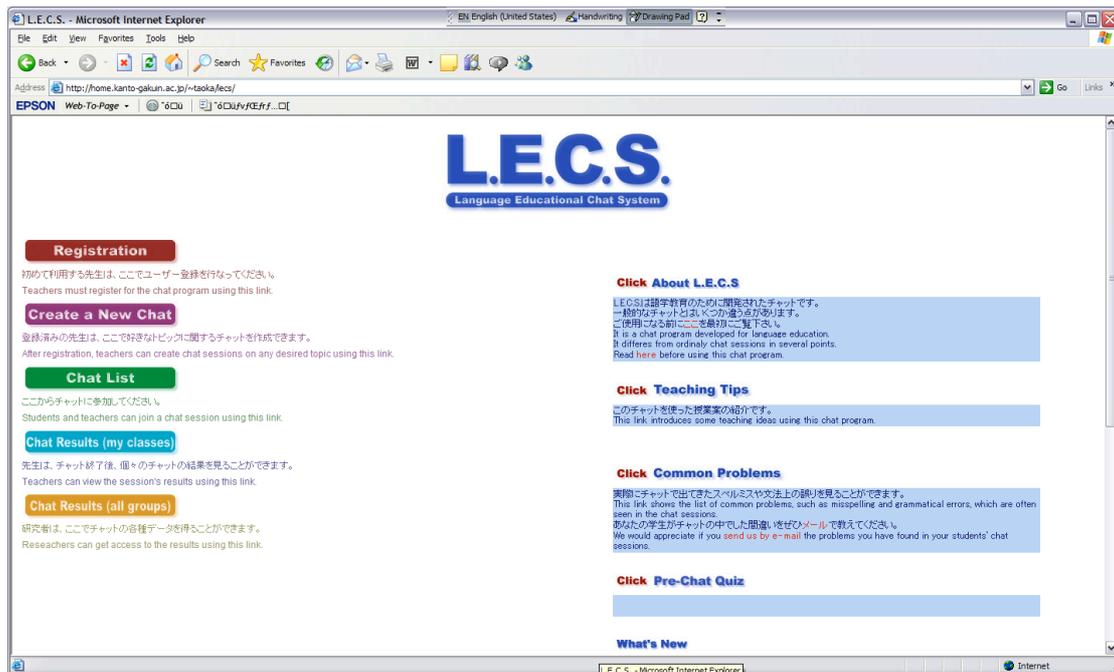
Its intuitive design allows teachers to form chat groups within particular classrooms. Below is a webshot of what teachers and students see before they enter a designated chat room:
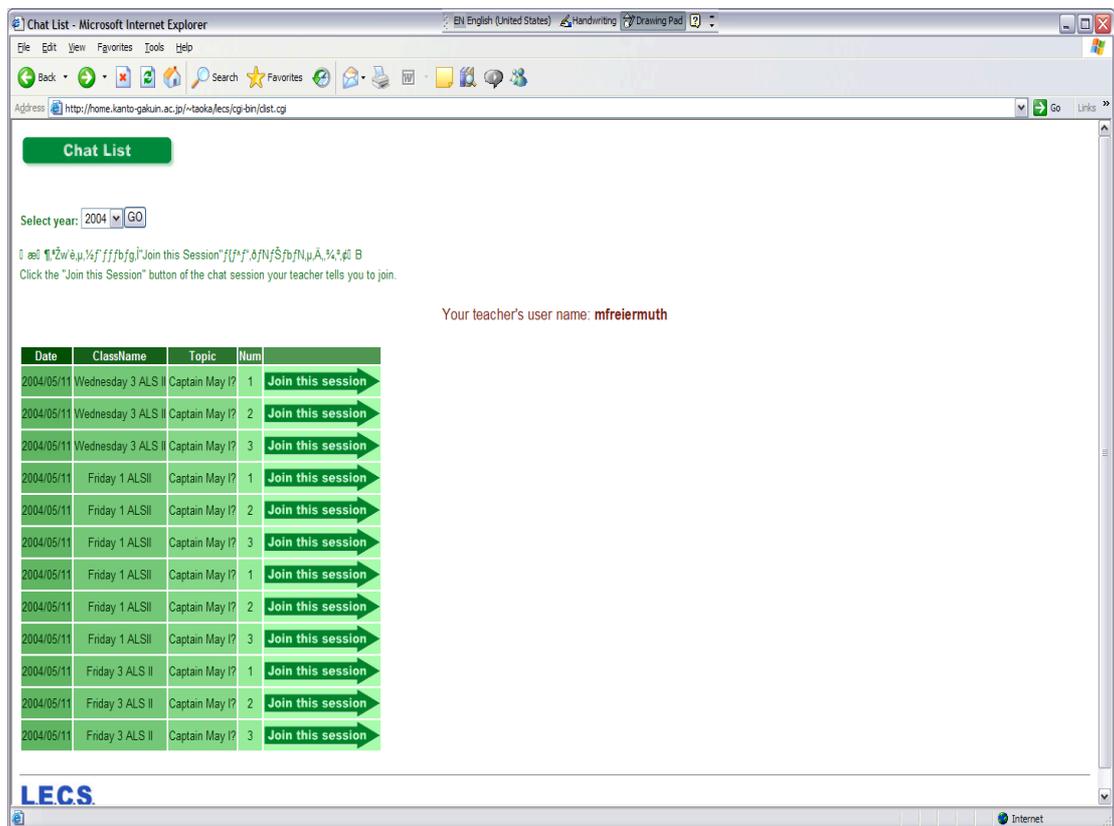
The teacher can easily keep track of classes and times, as well as what topic is being discussed in the chat room. Upon entering a chat room, teachers and students see a screen identical (except for the text of course) to the one shown in this webshot:
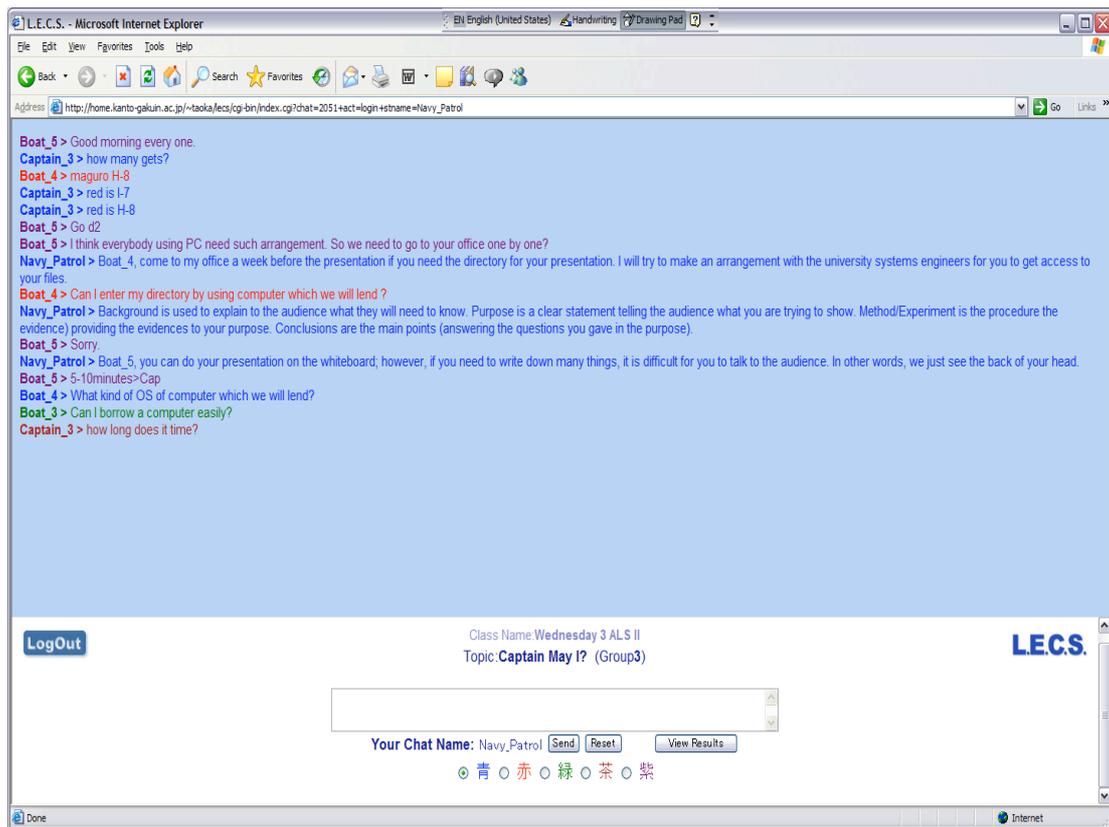
Students can select their own chat name and the text color of their choice. In the above example, the teacher selected the chat names for students for the purposes of an ongoing study, but part of the enjoyment of using chat is that students can choose a chat name that has a personal meaning.

Background
The backdrop for this classroom-based study was a Japanese university where students only major in computer science, choosing between software and hardware. English courses are a requirement, and, as is often the case in EFL environments, the students' English capabilities varied greatly within each class. All of the students involved in this study were second year students (sophomores).

The particular course in which this study took place was Academic Listening and Speaking II. The course was originally simply an extension of Academic Listening and Speaking I, a conversion course for all intents and purposes. The course was altered because the president of the university had noticed that students were not performing particularly well during their required graduation presentations, and so wanted students to be taught how to give academic presentations. Academic Listening and Speaking II became the course where students were to practice giving academic presentations—a worthy goal, but difficult to pull-off.

The Problems
The idea of these Japanese computer science students giving presentation in English sounds like a very noble and worthwhile notion; however, there were a number of roadblocks to success that had to be addressed. Here, we will discuss a few of the problems.

In our case, the students had virtually no experience giving presentations in any manner. For the most part, Japanese high school students are provided instructions from the teacher. They remain in their desks working on various tasks; there is minimal interaction with other students, and almost no opportunities to speak in front of their peers—neither in English nor Japanese (Liu, 2001). Hence, the students tended to lack confidence in their overall ability to make a presentation to their classmates.

These feelings of inadequacy can be addressed if students are willing to approach the teacher or other students who have a better handle on the task in question; however, it is not necessarily an easy hurdle to jump over when students feel that is appropriate manner to keep a relative distance between themselves and their teachers (Nunan, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Barnlund, 1989; Liu, 2001). And, in our setting students seemed reluctant to approach other students who might know more or who might be more proficient speakers of English than themselves. In essence, students opted for harmony at the expense of performance and understanding.

To address this problem, groupwork is a possible solution. However, success is often dependent on how focused the students are and what level of understanding they possess. From our experiences, we found that students had difficulty remaining on task for even relatively short face-to-face discussions, especially when the content area is unfamiliar. Additionally, it is very difficult for the teacher to try to address a particular group's problem at the moment it occurs (Freiermuth, 2001). There are also intergroup problems that tend to derail the discussion process. And, in large classes (the norm in Japan), there is also the problem of monitoring the groups adequately when problems or questions arise (Freiermuth, 2002).

Another problem, highly related to the aforementioned troubles is that students had very little knowledge of what constituted an academic presentation. Their computer knowledge was limited to the classes they had taken, and their basic academic knowledge consisted primarily of book knowledge. Put another way, they were capable of regurgitating information, but they had difficulties understanding deeper academic concepts such as a *primary objective* and the means to address such an objective. To address this problem, a simple experiment was done in the classroom, which was followed by a presentation from the teacher. In this way, it was hoped that students would discuss the presentation with each other and develop their own topics along similar lines of logic. (The experiment was an attempt to demonstrate the effect that carbon dioxide has on fire. Some candles were put into a small jar that had baking soda in the bottom. The candles were lit and a small amount of vinegar was poured into the jar producing carbon dioxide as the vinegar reacted to the baking soda. The candles were extinguished as the heavier carbon dioxide displaced the oxygen that was in the jar.)

The sample presentation consisted of an initial greeting, an overview, the background, a goal, results, and a conclusion. However, even though students had an example to work from (and a handout to go with it), they had difficulty applying the knowledge to their own presentations. This resulted in presentations that lacked a primary goal. The presentations tended to be little more than glorified book reports. What was needed was a more in-depth discussion about the tenets of an academic presentation.

This lack of knowledge of academic presentations became most apparent when students were required to give their senior graduation thesis presentations, which resulted in the university president's directive that this issue be addressed. Nevertheless, to achieve that end, students and teachers needed to bridge the

communication gaps that existed in the classroom; without this, deeper discussion of academic presentations could not be realized.

Internet Chat
To address the problem of communication regarding presentations in the classroom, Internet chat was used as a means of facilitating discussions about the presentations. Students in each Academic Listening and Speaking II class were divided into separate chat groups in a computer classroom. Each group consisted of four or five members. The teacher also joined all of the chat groups simultaneously, and monitored all of the group interactions from his own computer. The groups discussed their presentations for approximately 90 minutes spread out over three weeks in the computer lab. The interaction was saved in MS Word.

Descriptive Results
The Internet chat discussions provided optimum ground for fruitful interaction. Students were able to ask questions to one another as well as to the teacher. When one student became unclear about what was to be done, it was often another student who chimed in with the appropriate advice, as this example shows:

> Boat_4   I cannot understand what I should presentation.
> Captain_1   What do we do now?
> Boat_5   We should talk about the presentation.

In regular class discussion, who knows how long it would have taken before this question was addressed, or if it would even have been asked. Here is another example of students clarifying what should be done during the presentations:

> Boat_4   I think it is needed because people understand the
> contents of the presentation easily.>Boat_3
> Captain_1   It is very easy for you, but not for me. Do you think that
> everyone have same idea? > Boat 1
> Boat_3   But it depend on the theme of presentation.>Boat_4

Students also discussed their themes with one another as can be seen in this example:

> Boat_3   Do you decide the theme of presentation?
> Boat_2   No, how about you?
> Boat_3   I don`t.
> Boat_5   No, I don't.
> Boat_1   Sorry, I don`t
> Boat_4   I don`t still think what I do. How about you, Boat_2?

Although they haven't clearly identified their topics, at least they are discussing the topics and are on task. Additionally, the teacher can easily follow the progression of each group and toss in a comment when appropriate.

When students drifted from the task, other students were often responsible for bringing them back on topic as can be seen from this example:

> Boat_1   It is very fine day, and I`m very sleepy now.
> Boat_4   would you please tell me what will you presentation?
> Boat_3   What will you do in your the presentation?
> Boat_3   I`m green.
> Boat_5   This is a class, not free time!

Although this kind of interaction may occur during face-to-face interaction, it seems less likely due to the need to maintain face within a group (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The anonymity of Internet chat makes such statements less threatening, and in this case has the positive effect of getting students back on topic. Nevertheless, because the teacher was able to monitor all of the groups simultaneously, he could also suggest to certain group members to discuss the task at hand, as this example shows (in all descriptive samples, the chatter "Navy Patrol" was the teacher).

```
Boat_3        HAHAHAHA-(><)
Boat_3        My favorite KAO-MOJI ->(o^ ^o)
Captain_2     Haha...(˚    ˚ )
TA            What do you mean?
Boat_3        I'm hungry because I didn't eat breakfast. What did
everyone eat?
Navy_Patrol   Boat 3 talk about presentations
Navy_Patrol   Boat 3 talk about presentations
Boat_4        I eat curry. (*・ ・)
TA            What do you mean?
Navy_Patrol   Okay Boat 4 presentations
Boat_4        What do you mean?
Navy_Patrol   What was the main point of the CO2 experiment?
Boat_3        I think the main point is how to make co2 at home.
Boat_4        I think so, too.
Boat_3        Every one! Did you decide the kind of presentation? For
example, chemical.
```

As can be seen from this sample, a word or two from the teacher got both students who had drifted right back on topic.

The most valuable aspect that Internet chat had on the discussion occurred as students attempted to define their own presentations. They often received prudent advice from other students.

```
Boat_1        I want to decide the theme from my hobby, but I still don`t
do.
Boat_2        Cooking and movies surely stray from the points.
```

In this case Boat_2 clearly has provided the appropriate advice that cooking and movies are inappropriate as topics for an academic presentation. Sometimes, they simply clarified their topics for other students, as can be seen in this example.

```
Boat_4        My presentation theme is "How to Gnuplot".
Boat_2        What is "Gnuplot" ? >Boat-4
Boat_4        Gnuplot is one of Unix tools to plot out a graph.
```

Perhaps the most important aspect of using Internet chat was that it allowed the teacher to drop in important comments when needed. This often consisted of trying to get students to reflect on the carbon dioxide experiment. Here is one example:

```
Captain_1     I mean that how rate of corbon deoxcide in air need to
put out fire.
Navy_Patrol   What was the main point of the CO2 experiment?
Boat_5        I see, but it is a hard question.>Captain_1
Captain_1     The plesentation's main point is "CO2 is heavyer than
deoxicide".
```

```
Boat_4          What can I do for you, you do not know how to
present?>Boat_4
Boat_5          I think the main point is that CO2 can put out the fire.
Boat_3          Main point is "Oxygen helps something to burn, but CO2
is heavyer than oxygen, so the fire go out because of CO2."
Boat_4          That means Oxicigen is needed for fire, doesn't it?
Navy_Patrol     Excellent....keep discussing
```

With just a little prompting from the teacher, students are able to draw their own conclusions about the purpose of the carbon dioxide experiment. Captain_1 understands part of it; Boat_5 understands part of it, and eventually, Boat_3 puts it all together, which enlightens Boat_4. The teacher's dream is realized!

In this last example, students are discussing their own presentations. The teacher participates in the discussion and can easily identify potential weaknesses in the presentation ideas.

```
Navy_Patrol     Gnuplot and medical expenses from smoking sound interesting.
What is your main point?
Navy_Patrol     Remember, your presentation needs to have a good conclusion.
Think about what your main point will be. What is the question you want to ask the
audience (that`s the purpose)?
Boat_2          Main point of my team is to arge for raising the aduty on cigarettes or
toremoving the controls on cigarettes.
Boat_4          My main point is "Gnuplot is useful for us".
Boat_2          Sorry I made a mistake>Main point of my team is to arge for raising
the aduty on cigarettes, or forremoving the controls on cigarettes.
Navy_Patrol     Bot_2, I think your idea is okay, but Boat_4, you need to be more
specific. Gnuplot is useful is too wide. What specific things can Gnuplot help us
achieve?
Boat_1          I want to know it.>Gnuplot
Boat_3          I will present about the speed of programs. I will choose and talk
about one way.
Boat_2          What is different it from "Mathmatica"? >Boat_4
Boat_1          Speed of programs? >Boat_3
Boat_4          Gnuplop is window system, so we are easier to see graph for using
Gnuplot.
Captain_2        What is your main point? ->Boat-3
Boat_3          About how to shorten the time to calcurate.>Boat_1
```

Initially it is the teacher who asks the probing questions, but as the interaction proceeds, Captain_2 asks Boat_3 her main point. In both cases, the students narrow their ideas to something that seems to be more appropriate. Instead of Gnuplot being *useful*, Boat_4 wants to talk about how Gnuplot *makes it easier to produce a graph than another program*. And, instead of simply talking about the *speed of a program*, Boat_3 wants to talk about *the way the program shortens the calculation*.

Concluding Remarks

The descriptive examples provide written evidence of how the groups discussed thoroughly the example presentation as well as their own presentations. Internet chat allowed the teacher to not only monitor what groups were discussing, but to also effectively enter into the discussion. The interaction represented a virtual office visit. The teacher could see where students were having problems and make the appropriate comments.

As for the students, they stayed focused on the task, and when they did drift, the teacher or other students could gently prod them to bring them back to the

discussion at hand. There was an openness reflected in the online chat interaction that is often lacking in face-to-face discussions due to a number of issues many of which are related to the anonymous nature of Internet chat (Freiermuth, 2001; 2002).

Here, we have shown a few descriptive samples of the Internet chat interaction that occurred in the classroom. The Internet chat sessions served the purpose of getting students to discuss academic presentations more thoroughly. This resulted in more presentations that followed the appropriate pattern that was provided to students. When asked about the Internet chat sessions, the top presenter had this to say, "Of course, the three Internet chat sessions helped me because somebody who joined chatting told me hints about presentation. My ideas took shape thanks to them."

Internet chat is just one way of communicating in the language learning classroom. It certainly is not a substitute for speaking and listening. However, there are situations where Internet chat seems to be a particularly useful tool. When it comes to interacting in the virtual office, it can serve its purpose very well indeed.

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