

I Chat, Therefore I Learn

Text chat has been around for quite some time, but recently there has been rapid growth in the area of audio and video synchronous communication technologies. These technologies are called synchronous because they allow people to communicate with each other at the same time rather than asynchronous tools such as email, listservers, and discussion boards which include gaps between exchanges. These applications attract a lot of attention since they provide radical new ways for people in distant places to communicate. In fact, they are often considered precursors of the future of telecommunications as a whole. The number of audio and video chat or conference tools continues to increase as steadily as the learning curve, expense, and reliability become more appealing. Like most of the features in this column, these technologies are not intentionally created for the ESL community or even the education community, but they can be easily and effectively integrated to meet our needs. They can, in fact, offer us a wide range of new instructional possibilities. Many of these possibilities have been around for years, but they were limited to a small sector of the population at a very high price. While many commercial video conferencing solutions cost thousands (or even hundreds of thousands) of dollars, there is rapid growth in the area of free software for video and audio conferencing. In addition, the hardware necessary to participate is becoming increasingly affordable.

What Do I Need to Get Started?

Unlike expensive video conferencing solutions, this new generation of software allows users to participate with a typical desktop computer. Video chat will require a chat-capable camera. This may include a dedicated webcam, digital video camera and even some digital still cameras. Each piece of chat software has different requirements for cameras so it is important to check these out in the technical specifications of the software that you are using. Any audio chat program will require a microphone either built-in or connected to your computer. These can vary a great deal and it may be worthwhile to locate additional microphones to compare performance. Using a headset is also a good idea. Although it is possible to participate in these conferences with external or built-in speakers, they can often result in an echo effect for one or more participants. Once you have the hardware in place you need to decide which kind of software you will use.

Sorting out the Software

The most complicated aspect of audio and videoconferencing may be trying to figure out which software is best for you. For the best quality audio video experience Apple's iChat is what you want to use. However, this software only works on the Apple Macintosh OS X operating system. Since this description only applies to a limited number of readers, we need to survey the other options available as well. Yahoo Messenger is probably the most frequently used platform today. It works on Mac, Windows and Linux and provides a very thorough set of support documents for those who may require troubleshooting. Skype, most commonly touted for allowing people to communicate from computers to

telephones, has recently introduced a video conferencing tool. Marratech, a company that has created some of the higher end solutions for businesses has also begun offering a free service called Marratech free. This service offers very high quality, but requires that users have a static IP address. An IP address is a number that represents your “location” on the internet. Most internet providers give us dynamic IP addresses which means that they may change each time that we connect. Typically, static IP addresses are not available to users unless they have some special circumstances (and responsibilities).

All of these programs can only be used with people who are using the same software. Thus, you can’t use iChat to communicate with someone who is using Yahoo Messenger. This may result in experimenting with a number of these to see which best meet your needs and the needs of those with whom you intend to communicate.

Here is a table providing an overview of free audio and video conferencing software available today:

	Yahoo Messenger	Skype	iChat	Marratech Free
Text	X	X	X	X
Video	X	X	X	X
Audio	X	X	X	X
Mac	X	X	X	X
Windows	X	X		X
Linux	X	X		X
Minimum Internet Connection	56k	56k	56k	T-1
Website	http://messenger.yahoo.com/	http://www.skype.com/	http://www.apple.com/macosx/features/ichat/	http://www.marratechfree.com/

What Can I Do?

Once you get set up there are many different ways that these conferencing tools can be used to serve the needs of the ESL population. You may want to create an ongoing exchange of ideas with another class or school across the globe. You may want to invite a distant “expert” to discuss some topic of burning interest with your students. You may find that students will work together in groups in new or more meaningful ways if they are able to do so at times and locations that are convenient for them. There are a number of potential uses within the language classroom for these technologies. You are only limited by your imagination (and perhaps the speed of your internet connection).