

Free Online Voice Chat Programs Revisited

Vicki Starfire
Kyoto Sangyo University
Kyoto, Japan
<starfire@cc.kyoto-su.ac.jp>

Three years ago I wrote an [article](#) for the TESL-EJ September 2003 issue on the topic of using computer voice chat programs for speaking practice. In the time since that article appeared, a number of advances have occurred. Computers' sound capacity and the availability of media, such as streaming video clips and reporters' interviews, have greatly increased. Likewise, programs supporting voice chat have been improved.

Why use voice chat in the classroom? Certainly, it is possible to use videos, audiotapes and the teacher's voice to improve students' aural and spoken language abilities. However, textbook dialogs and grammar exercises may be unnatural or lack examples of current English usage. As Lightbown (1992) states:

In being exposed to comprehensible samples of the language, the learner (whether in the classroom or elsewhere) inevitably forms some idea of what the patterns of the language are. If the language to which the learner is exposed is not the real target language but a distorted and incomplete sample of sentences from it (inevitably the case in strictly audio-lingual or grammar-translation approaches), the learners' developing knowledge of the language will reflect the inadequacy of the input. If learners are to develop knowledge of the target language that accurately reflects the realities of that language, they must have opportunities to be exposed to the language in its authentic form. (p. 87)

One way to "expose" learners to authentic language is to have them talk to a variety of speakers. It seems especially important to have them hear English being spoken with its many accents, especially for anyone who will travel abroad.

This article is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all voice chat programs. A recent Google search for "ESL voice chat" returned 456,000 entries. While this is not

to say that there are that many individual programs, this number does give some idea of the vast amount of information available about this type of program. Therefore, this article, like the first one, is intended to provide educators with a review of some of the most widely used programs and some tips about using voice capacity in online or actual classrooms. In this article, I will cover 1) dealing with administrative obstacles to setting up an online chat program, 2) setting up and using your own voice chat, 3) provide an update on some user-friendly (student-proof) chat programs, and 4) some suggested applications for voice chat in the classroom. At the end of the article, an annotated bibliography provides references and suggestions for further reading.

Overcoming Administrative Obstacles to Voice Chat

If you decide to try using voice chat programs, it is not unusual to encounter the problem of convincing educational administrators to allow voice chat. While text chat has quickly become a standard practice in most online education today, voice chat is sometimes seen as 1) too difficult to set up technically, 2) competing with on-campus courses, 3) a waste of student time, 4) dangerous to have on system computers, 5) dangerous for students who may be communicating with would-be criminals, or 6) too expensive.

While another entire article could be written on this topic, suffice it to say briefly that there are now programs that work easily with firewalls and virus protection on both PC and Mac computers. Just as videos and DVDs have never replaced movies theaters, online voice chat will not duplicate the experience of face-to-face learning in real classrooms. The programs I discuss in this article are free and require minimal equipment. And with some structure from the teacher, they are far from a waste of time. Since everyone must be invited to join, there is security from outside interference. In addition, there are usually ways to block unwanted participants from the sites.

Vance Stevens comments in an [editorial](#) on online chat, "I believe that chat will emerge as an accepted component to other forms of interaction online, such as educational games or simulations with online participants from remote locations" (2003). Some suggestions for overcoming administrative obstacles include 1) printing out examples of voice chat programs with technical specifications, 2) contacting other teachers using voice chat and 3) documenting some of the many advantages described in this article and other references (see References and Further Reading below).

Setting Up and Using Your Own Online Voice Chat

Computers have continued to be improved at a rapid pace over the last ten years. With most new computers, it is no longer necessary to replace the sound card in order to hear good voice quality. The sound quality is also much better due to improvements in the voice chat programs, some of which are able to self-adjust the reception during conversation. Having to press the control key or an icon on the desktop in order to talk will soon most likely be history too with the growing presence of synchronous voice reception.

Here is a revised list of equipment needed:

- A java plug-in (a free download at <http://www.java.com/en/>)
- A headset with attached earphones and microphone (US\$20 or less) While an external microphone and the computer speaker will work, they cause sound feedback (a voice echo) for the person speaking.
- Netscape Navigator 4.0 or higher or Internet Explorer 3.1 or higher
- A computer with a minimum of 16 MB RAM can be used for a voice chat project, although more memory is very desirable

After you have your equipment and computer set up, you need to decide which program to use. My suggestion is to choose the program that you think will be easiest for your students to navigate. However, the ease with which online technical support can be contacted is also an important consideration when introducing voice chat to inexperienced users.

In order to make these decisions, I suggest going to the programs' homepages and downloading and registering the programs yourself. Be sure to write down the steps for registering in detail and plan to spend an entire class helping students go through this process. In my experience, the maximum number of students with which voice chat can work effectively is fifteen, so if you have a bigger class, you may want to divide them into smaller groups working online at different times. Of course, having a good technician available to assist you with installation or other technical issues will be very helpful.

Next, you need to set up an orientation for the students including cautions about what not to do with chat partners. For example, if students will be chatting with strangers, they should be advised not to meet strangers in private places or give out credit card numbers or other personal information. Rules for chatting online (such as turn-taking, keeping comments positive, allowable language, and allowing the participation of all members) should also be discussed. You will want to include the time schedule and how much time you expect each student to be online. If you are teaching only online, you may want to schedule some trouble-shooting sessions at first to deal with technical problems.

User-Friendly Chat Programs

In my previous article, I covered a number of audio technology programs -- Groove, iVisit, Talking Communities, PalTalk, LiVVe, ICQ and Yahoo! Messenger. While these programs still exist, I would like to focus on a few that seem to be the best for EFL/ESL student use. Many of the programs today are directed towards business use and are not necessarily useful in EFL/ESL classrooms. It is also unfortunate that two widely used educational interfaces, Blackboard and Moodle, do not have voice capacity yet. Many others that began as free programs are no longer free.

Website	URL	Voice?	File/music/picture sharing?	Video playback?
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iVisit	http://www.ivisit.com PC and Mac	Only one-to-one voice chat is free	Yes, plus whiteboard, remote presentation	Yes, plus recording of video and voice chat
PalTalk	http://www.paltalk.com PC and Mac	Yes--existing or new chat rooms	File transfer, web camera, pictures, instant messages	Yes--can playback multiple videos simultaneously
Yahoo! Messenger	http://messenger.yahoo.com PC and Mac	Best quality, unlimited number for conferences, worldwide sites and languages	Yes - easy drag and drop transfer, instant reception	Play video games in the Yahoo window and multiple webcam images with high-speed connections

The [iVisit](http://www.ivisit.com) website boasts of "over 3 million installations and 2 billion user minutes served," and promises "the best videoconferencing software." This program is designed for students, and families as well as businesses, and it works well directly with both PC and Macs and in network sharing situations.

[PalTalk](http://www.paltalk.com) is a popular program with teenagers and young adults. With more than 4000 existing chat groups, it is a happening place. The website advertises such abilities as "send and view free video in more than one chat room at a time. Instant message everyone on MSN, AOL, ICQ and Yahoo." The chats in which I have participated often have over 30 participants, and following the disjointed conversation is difficult. However, if you wish to create your own custom room, you can limit the members to only your students. A word of caution--I had trouble deleting this program from my computer. A pop-up message kept asking me to please reconsider until I rooted out the last PalTalk program files. It is also possible for the other PalTalk chat rooms to become a great distraction from your classroom activities.

From the description in the table above it may be obvious that I have a bias towards [Yahoo! Messenger](http://messenger.yahoo.com). Having used it with students in many places worldwide, it has stood the test of poor computer connections and old equipment with the best voice quality and consistent connections that do not cut out. The technical support (once you find them at <http://help.yahoo.com>) is very quick to reply, and the program helpfully supplies links for add-ons like Macromedia Flash Player and Windows Media Player. Recently Yahoo! Messenger has upgraded to version 7.0, advertising "free worldwide PC to PC calls" and instant messaging to cell phones for low prices. There are also versions for Mac and UNIX users. Free voice mail and text mail messages can be left for people who are currently offline.

Please notice that I have not included MSN Messenger in the table although it was described in my previous article. I have students in Europe and the U.S. who like the

features offered by MSN. However, the voice quality is still not good with slow internet connections, and we often end up switching to Yahoo! Messenger in order to finish our conversations. If anyone can locate the online technical support for MSN Messenger, please let me know.

An additional voice chat program is Skype. While this program brings us closer to merging the telephone, computer and answering machine (with pictures of callers from webcams), it is not as easy to navigate or as complete as some of the other programs. For example, while the voice quality is excellent, file sharing is not supported. At present, text and voice chats are not recorded, but can you leave messages for people who are presently offline (like an answering machine). Also, the necessary 129 MB RAM, 15 MB of free disc space on the hard drive and access to broadband may make it difficult to obtain for some students or schools. However, with over 4 million users, this program will be worth watching.

Some Suggested Classroom Applications

1. **Language exchanges with other students (pairwork)** -- While student language is not always L1 quality, it can be useful for students to have a "voice pal" (like pen pals or key pals) to talk to. There are bulletin boards and chat rooms set up for teachers where such an exchange can be requested. One popular site is <http://www.tappedin.org/>. Login as a member (registration is free), then click on "whiteboard" and post your request. Perhaps the best site for exchanges is [My Language Exchange](#). Click on "voice chat" in the menu on the left. There are thousands of members in 130 countries. Here you will find tips on how to do language exchanges, lesson plans, and "experts" to help you set it up. This site recommends Skype or Paltalk as good interfaces, but please read my cautions in the previous section regarding these two programs before downloading. This site is also available for French, Spanish, German, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Japanese, and Korean teachers.

Language Exchange has some tips for "breaking the ice" and getting students "talking." There are many activities that students can do cooperatively online, talking as they play in order to both "win." Here is an excellent site http://www.puzzle-online.com/free_cooperative_game.html. This site works by having students set the same IP number, thus allowing them both to change parts of the same window. It is probably better to direct students to this sort of fun, cooperative game and to discourage the use of violent, destructive computer games.

2. **Small international group exchanges** -- If you have only a few students interested in this idea of voice chat, this alternative might work well. It is ideal to have distant partners from several countries. After a few e-mail messages to set a common weekly time (having two times often works better), students log on whenever they have free time. Finding good international partners is not so difficult. It may start with just one other student, or a homestay brother or sister of one of the students, but these things have a way of growing sometimes. [My](#)

[Language Exchange](#) can be a source of students.

I have facilitated one group for going on five years now with members in Sweden, Brazil, Tokyo, Jamaica, and Somalia. Usually I set a topic and find an interesting website as a springboard, keeping in mind the need for plenty of time for free conversation. I cannot tell you how much this group has enriched my life by providing me with current event reports from within these countries, in addition to what we hear and read from the media giants that control our TV and newspaper reports.

3. **Use of voice chat with blended classes** -- Blended classes, which are held partially online and partially in a school classroom, offer many possibilities for the use of voice chat.
 - a. Members of the class and the teacher (groups of 15 students maximum) continue discussion of topics begun in the classroom
 - b. Members of the class discuss their online experiences in the classroom afterwards
 - c. Summer school students practice online voice chat with each other, then continue their studies during the school year from their homes as an "alum group." In this way, they keep in touch with their school friends. Some of their "home friends" could be invited as temporary guests. This provides publicity for the online school and could be a source of future students, not to mention returning students.

Concluding Comments

In general with voice chat, I recommend having a teacher present to focus and direct conversation. It is important to keep the topics relevant to students' lives, educational, and related to classroom topics. I usually have students discuss their own lives before giving them the URL for the website (pre-learning). The presence of a teacher is also necessary for occasional enforcement of online protocol, such as turn taking, respect for others' opinions and allowable language.

Once students open up, relax and start talking online, many of them benefit from the experience greatly. In the previously cited [editorial](#), Vance Stevens mentions one of Suzanne Nyrop's students, Lena, who, initially reluctant to speak at all, spoke for 90 minutes the next day in a voice chat about her literary talents and "was able to express herself in a natural and pleasant manner." Indeed, I have students who log on in the middle of the night (even though they have a designated better time for their area), just to join their online friends in other parts of the world.

References

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Lightbown, P. (1992). Getting quality input in the second and foreign language classroom. In C. Kramsch & S. McConnell-Ginet (Eds.), *Text and context: Cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives on language study* (pp. 187-197). Lexington, MA: Heath.

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Further Reading

Cotton, E.G. (2000). *The online classroom: Teaching with the Internet*. Bloomington, IN: EDINFO Press.

This book is a good start for K-12 teaching and includes a complete section on computer safety.

Sperling, D. (1998). *Dave Sperling's Internet Guide*. New York: Prentice Hall Regents.

This book is now the classic introduction for teachers. Page 40 discusses how to set up global voice conversations using computers.

Sperling, D. (1999). *Internet Activity Workbook*. New York: Prentice Hall Regents.

The sections on KeyPals in this book could easily be modified to become "TalkPals" using one of the voice programs.

Warschauer, M., Shetzer, H., & Meloni, C. (2000). *Internet for English Teaching*. TESOL: Virginia.

Pages 151-176 include appendices regarding useful internet addresses, books for further reading, journals for further reading, and a glossary of terms.

About the author

Vicki Starfire, an instructor at Kyoto Sangyo University.

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