The role of on-line chatting 
in the development of competence in oral interaction

Vincenza Tudini (University of South Australia)

Abstract

Drawing on research into second language acquisition and conversation analysis, this paper considers differences and similarities between face-to-face oral interaction and ‘chatting’ via computer, with a view to assessing the place of synchronous text-based communication tools in language programmes. A review of previous studies, dealing mainly with chatting between learners, focuses on the conversational features observed and pedagogical advantages claimed. The paper then identifies key aspects of oral interaction that have not previously been discussed in the context of chatting. The chat discourse of a small group of intermediate-level learners of Italian is analysed, with a focus on selected indicators of spoken discourse: repairs and incorporation of target forms, variety of speech acts, discourse markers and feedback tokens. Further qualitative research is required to ascertain whether any interlanguage development is short-term or long-term and whether it transfers to spoken language.

1 Introduction

Recent studies in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) suggest that on-line chatting can assist learners to gain competence in some aspects of oral interaction (Chun 1994; Kern 1995; Negretti 1999; Pellettieri 2000; Sotillo 2000; Warschauer 1996). Chat sessions also provide SLA researchers with insights into language learners’ interlanguage development (Blake 2000:121), by providing instantly available data for analysis.

The term ‘chatting’, in the computing context, refers to the use of synchronous or real-time text-based communication tools such as freely available chatlines or commercial chatting softwares. MUDs, MOOs and MUSHes, such as the Little Italy site at the University of Milan, also allow for chatting.

Text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been labelled ‘chatting’, as if people were actually talking via the computer. A number of researchers in the field have uncovered similarities between text-based interactions via computer and face-to-face interactions (Chun 1994; Kern 1995; Negretti 1999; Pellettieri 2000; Sotillo 2000). Language teachers can only ask how this is so, given that many obvious aspects of oral interaction are missing from chatting activities. For example, learners do not actually have to use their mouths to ‘chat’, they therefore do not integrate the various physical aspects of talking with other aspects of oral interaction. Non-verbal components of communication such as facial expression, context, and pragmatics of oral interaction are also important issues. A recent paper by Kramsch and Andersen drew attention to the significance of a real context to real interaction:

From a discourse or anthropological perspective, linguistic structures, as they are used in communicative situations, are embedded in the whole social and historical context of culture ... they are but one system of signs among many that people use to give meaning to their environment. Others include not only gestures, facial expressions, body movements, verbal and non-verbal sounds, and proxemics, but also cultural artifacts such
as traffic noise and folk music, pictures and billboards, and landscapes and city maps ...  

As Kramsch and Andersen make clear, oral interaction in the real world is a multidimensional activity, imbued with a multiplicity of elements that provide meaning. Text-based chatting appears to be missing the non-verbal, contextual elements (although it might be argued that this is also true of the average language classroom, even when teachers go to great lengths to create a microcosm of the target culture through props, posters, music, role-plays and community-based tasks, and by inviting native speakers to participate in classroom activities). It is therefore surprising that, despite the apparent lack of contextual support in text-based communication, research suggests it is a worthwhile and motivating activity for interlanguage development, especially as a bridge to oral interaction.

So what exactly is it about chatting that resembles oral interaction, apart from real-time communication, and is it likely to assist learners to gain competence in oral interaction? Those of us who have tried chatting are familiar with the conversational flavour of chatlines which gives them their name. Chatting may technically be a writing activity, but this does not necessarily mean it is written in genre.

My methodology in the study reported on below draws on conversation-analysis and SLA research and is centred on the identification of key elements of oral interaction. I analyse some of these elements in the chat session of a small group of intermediate-level learners of Italian, with a view to identifying elements which may be considered typically ‘oral’. The learners’ evaluations of the chatting experience also provide some insights into the effectiveness of chatting as a tool for speaking practice in the target language.

Many of the oral elements identified in this pilot research are likely to be expressed in different ways in the CMC context from those of a face-to-face situation, due to the constraints imposed by the medium. This is indicated by the results of an analysis by Clark and Brennan (1991:141-142) of the ways in which discourse varies across media, and by Negretti’s (1999) discussion of differences between chatting and conversation. The nature of the task (Blake 2000) is also likely to influence the degree of negotiation and hence ‘orality’ of learners’ discourse.

2 Current research on CMC

Recent studies of text-based CMC, in the context of the teaching and learning of languages, have explored some issues in relation to the differences between chatting and face-to-face interaction. Chun (1994) examined the language production of on-campus learners of German who had regular 15-20 minute chats over two semesters, and found that computer-assisted class discussions appeared to facilitate the acquisition of interactive competence, since learners tended to engage in many types of discourse initiation. The electronic discussion nonetheless tended to be similar to written language in terms of linguistic complexity. Chun also emphasised that the displacement of the instructor from a central role made a difference in these discussions, since it gave the learners a greater role in managing the discourse. She suggests that text-based CMC is therefore a useful bridge between written and spoken skills for learners (1994:28-29).
Kern (1995) investigated the advantages of a chatting tool, *Daedalus Interchange*, which was used to discuss various topics in French on the computer before proceeding to oral discussion in the classroom. An extensive analysis of transcripts from the chat sessions indicated that the quantity of learners’ discourse was greater, and the quality better, in the computer-based discussions. The direction of learners’ discourse was also radically different, with much more student-student exchange occurring in the computer session than in the teacher-centred face-to-face session (1995:467). Kern claimed that such improvements came at the expense of grammatical accuracy, yet this was not an issue for the oral discussions, in keeping with the greater emphasis on *what* is said rather than *how* it is said in oral interaction. The analysis did, however, indicate that sentences were usually simpler and shorter in the computer sessions, since such sentences tended to elicit more responses than long, complex ones (1995:468). One possible shortcoming of this study, pointed out by the author, is that students may have been ‘talked out’ by the time they came to discuss the topic in the classroom, after dealing with it in the chat sessions.

An experimental study by Warschauer (1996) compared face-to-face and electronic discussion and appeared to contradict Kern’s findings on the lack of complexity in language produced in the electronic forum. Warschauer’s study indicated that a group of sixteen students of English as a second language (ESL) used language that was lexically and syntactically more formal and complex in electronic discussions than in face-to-face ones. He also found a higher degree of participation in the electronic discussions and a more even distribution among the participants (1996:21-22).

Although not concerned specifically with differences between electronic and face-to-face discussions, Pellettieri (2000) went a step further than previous studies and took on the issue of grammatical competence, in a study of chatting as a tool for the negotiation of meaning. Her analysis was based on a model for non-native speaker negotiation established by Varonis and Gass (1985). Tasks which promote collaborative learning and which rely on correct usage of the target language were a crucial element in the success of Pellettieri’s one-to-one sessions, compared with the group sessions in Chun’s and Kern’s work. The chatting tool used in Pellettieri’s study, *Y-talk*, permitted learners to view other participants’ preparation of messages as they were being written. The transcripts indicated that 70% of explicit feedback and 75% of implicit feedback led to incorporation of target forms in subsequent discussion, in cases where such feedback was conducive to conversation. There was also a great deal of self-monitoring, as indicated by the cases of backspacing and repairing of errors in typography, spelling and morphological agreement. Pellettieri suggested that these results might be attributable to the availability of a visual display and time to think about form that the chatting tool allows (2000:80-81).

Sotillo compared synchronous and asynchronous communication and identified a much stronger resemblance to spoken language in the former. As in Pellettieri’s study, Sotillo found that synchronous communication presented discourse functions “similar to the types of interactional modifications found in face-to-face conversations that are deemed necessary for second language acquisition” (2000:82).

Negretti’s (1999) analysis of non-native speakers’ chat sessions in English addressed differences between chatting and face-to-face interaction by adopting a conversation-analysis perspective. She described structures and patterns which were peculiar to interlanguage produced in a CMC context, even though they were based on conversational strategies. Her analysis thus focused on the distinctiveness of typically
oral structures and patterns produced in the CMC context with respect to those of face-to-face interaction. The main aspects of interaction analysed by Negretti in chat sessions were:

- overall structure of interaction and sequence organisation
- turn-taking organisation (especially openings and closings)
- turn design
- expression of paralinguistic features, and
- some pragmatic variables.

Her results showed that sequencing and timing were dealt with very differently in the chat sessions compared with conversational settings. These observations were based on chats carried out in a group setting, with group postings and one-to-one postings intermingling, as the Webchat software used in the study permitted. Such a difference might have been less marked in a chat restricted to two participants, as in Pellettieri’s study. This was also the case for turns, which were constantly disrupted or overlapping in the Webchat setting described by Negretti. In fact, all the conversational features analysed were handled quite differently in the Webchat session (1999:82).

While oral proficiency was not the object of Negretti’s study, and despite the identified differences, she nonetheless claimed to have observed improvements in the oral proficiency of her participants after two months of chat activities (1999:78). Such a study warrants repetition in a series of one-to-one sessions, as in Pellettieri’s (2000) work, to ascertain whether the various conversational features present in the group Webchat sessions are handled by pairs in a manner which more closely resembles oral interaction, as described by conversation analysts. However, the various conversational features Negretti set out to identify were at least present in her group sessions, albeit in a modified form with respect to face-to-face conversation.

Blake tested the Interaction Hypothesis in a CMC context with learners of Spanish working in pairs, and found that most of the negotiations between students were triggered by lexical confusion rather than morphological or syntactical concerns. He also ascertained the importance of task design in eliciting negotiations, with jigsaw-type tasks generating the greatest number of them (2000:128).

3 Summary of CMC research and its implications

In summary, the research cited above indicates that synchronous text-based CMC has the following features:

- there is a strong resemblance to spoken language: the types of interactional modifications in CMC are similar to those found in face-to-face conversations;
- feedback (both implicit and explicit) leads to incorporation of target forms: language improves both lexically and grammatically with the assistance of the teacher’s and other students’ direct corrections or examples of target forms;
- there is evidence of self-monitoring (repairing of errors).

Moreover, in chatting, when compared with classroom face-to-face discussions:
• the direction of learners’ discourse is different: student-student exchanges dominate rather than teacher-student exchanges;
• the instructor’s role is not central and learners have a greater role in managing the discourse;
• there are many types of discourse initiation, which could facilitate development of interactive competence;
• learners’ discourse is greater in quantity and better in quality.

These findings suggest that chatting may well be beneficial in developing learners’ oral competence. However, it should be noted that there were contradictory reports regarding the length and complexity of language produced in CMC sessions compared with that of face-to-face situations. As discussed above, Kern (1995) observed the use of simpler and shorter sentences whereas Warschauer (1996) reported the use of more formal and complex language.

Another implication of the studies is that, if language teachers are to include chatting as a regular activity for both internal and external students, task design will be an important issue in ensuring that learners engage in the type of negotiation that occurs in authentic conversation and that chatting does not become an end in itself. Some researchers stress the importance of setting the students an appropriate and engaging task in order for collaborative learning and negotiation of meaning to occur (Pellettieri 2000:71; Blake 2000:138). Dyads are the preferred arrangement for learners’ CMC sessions in these more recent studies.

4 Methodological framework for the current study: indicators of orality

4.1 Paralinguistic features

Kinesic and prosodic features are the obvious elements of speaking which are missing from CMC. Kinesic features include the various aspects of visual communication and space sharing such as gesture, posture, stance, facial expression, eye contact, gaze, haptics and proxemics. Prosodic elements of oral interaction include accent, intonation and rhythm. Furthermore, conversation analysts would note the relative absence of pauses and sound stretches in the conventional sense, although they are present in a somewhat diminished quantity. While paralinguistic elements are generally missing in script-based chats, it is worth noting that learners attempt to fill this gap by abundant use of uppercase letters and exclamation and question marks. Kern (1995:459) documented learners’ use of icons to represent smiles, frowns or winks, while Negretti also identified paralinguistic features present in her subjects’ chat sessions (1999:85-86).

Many of these are indicators of orality that audiovisual networking tools would be able to provide. However, certain norms of interaction based on physical contact, such as handshakes – a very common form of greeting among young and old in Italy – cannot realistically be catered for, nor can the contextual environmental aspects of communication that immersion in a real-life context provides.

4.2 Pragmatic and interactional norms
Pragmatic knowledge also needs to be considered in the chatline context. According to Crozet:

Pragmatic knowledge refers to the rules (pragmatic norms) which regulate the relationship between utterances and the socio-cultural context in which they are used (1998:72).

Sociocultural context is somewhat neutralised in chatline communication, as chatlines tend to level relationships to an informal plane. Politeness is unlikely to be an important issue, especially among students. It is therefore not surprising that colloquial language tends to be the norm in the chatline context. Moreover, it is not possible to cut a speaker off, as occurs in ‘real’ conversations. So, in cases where this is culturally significant, chatting has the drawback of not allowing learners to engage with it, since everyone has a chance to complete their sentences without interruption.

Conversation analysts also register overlapping speech. While it is not possible for speech to overlap in chatting in the conventional sense, the multi-threaded discourse of chatting is a prime, though distinctive, example of an overlapping discourse, especially in a group session, where participants do not need to wait for their interlocutors to finish making their point before typing their own.

Other interactional elements of the discourse of chatlines that are worth examining include turn-taking organisation and sequencing. Although expressed differently in this context, these elements would simulate a face-to-face situation. For example, participants would probably end chats with appropriate leave-taking utterances. As described earlier, Negretti’s study sheds some light on how this element of oral interaction is expressed within a group chat context (1999:81-82).

Speech acts or functions need to be a central part of the analysis. For example, many instances of greeting, thanking, complimenting, joking and, particularly, requests for clarification might be identified, although these can also be found in informal writing. Discourse markers should also be evident, such as (in Italian) the expression a proposito (by the way) which allows the speaker to shift topic, or cioè (that is to say) which signals persisting in a certain topic. Again, these are also present in informal writing. Feedback tokens and repairs, of both self and others, need to be a regular feature of chat sessions if chatting is to be of pedagogical use. Such linguistic behaviour, which is typical of oral interaction and negotiation of meaning, is present in chat sessions analysed by Pellettieri (2000) and Chun (1994). Organisation or framing of topics is also an important interactional ability that is put into practice in chatlines, according to research so far.

4.3 The grammar and lexicon of oral interaction

A particular feature of oral interaction is its different grammar and lexicon. Although this has yet to be demonstrated, it may be that students can learn something about spoken grammar and the colloquial lexicon by ‘listening in’ on native speakers chatting before they proceed to chat themselves, whether via computer or face-to-face.

4.4 Other oral features identified by researchers

Kern’s examination of transcripts shows that participants in his study exhibited “a light, familiar style, direct interpersonal address, rapid topic shifts, and frequent digressions” (1995:460). He notes that these characteristics give the impression of a discussion lacking in coherence and continuity but that this is typical of InterChange (software) sessions –
which contain multiple threads of discussion by the various participants – even when conducted by native speakers. Such multiple threads, rapid topic shifts and frequent digressions characterise both face-to-face and computer-based communication, depending on the context. Kern concludes that students “may operate largely within a framework that resembles that of oral communication, even though the medium is written” (1995:460).

5 Method

5.1 Description of task and conditions

As part of the intermediate-level Italian 3B course at the University of South Australia, I asked the students to use a chat session to evaluate and discuss the texts and films that make up the social and cultural component of the course. Since some of them seemed to have had difficulty with the language of one of the literary texts, I chose to probe their opinions on set texts and films in the chatline forum, so that their suggestions could be documented and, if the findings of previous CMC researchers were borne out, the normally quiet students would have a chance to speak up. I also thought that a chat session would provide more exhaustive feedback on the course than existing evaluation tools, such as questionnaires.

We used UniSANet for the chat session, which is a user-friendly, password-protected teaching and learning environment set up by the university’s Flexible Learning Centre (http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/unisanet/). The students tackled two questions:

1. If you had the opportunity, which of the novels you read this semester would you keep and which would you discard?
2. If you were in charge, what would you do with the culture and society side of the course?

In their discussion, well known Italian novels, and films based on them, were put on trial: Fontamara by Ignazio Silone, A ciascuno il suo by Leonardo Sciascia and I Malavoglia by Giovanni Verga. The second question was intended to invite the students to provide constructive suggestions on alternatives, and they seemed to welcome the opportunity to contribute their opinions. This task appeared to engage them, by offering them the opportunity for a debate on a matter of interest to them.

The task therefore had various purposes. It not only provided an evaluation of the course and the opportunity for computer-mediated debate in Italian, but also constituted an introduction to chatting for the purpose of evaluation and paved the way for the possible use of the chat tool as part of assessment in both internal and external courses.

I was not directly involved in the chat, but available to provide help with technical problems. The students therefore had complete control of the discussion. It is clear from both anecdotal and scientific evidence that teachers tend to dominate discussions in class, so I expected they would be more relaxed and honest if my voice was absent.

I did, however, stress that the chat should be in Italian. The students knew that the chat log would register all their remarks so they could not hide any use of English, as can occur in group or pair discussions in class.
5.2 Methodological limitations and focus of this study

Given the small size of the group (ten students) and the short duration of the chat session (thirty minutes), this analysis is qualitative rather than statistically oriented, although I do note some patterns. These are specific to this particular chat session and task type (debate on the topic of course evaluation), and cannot be generalised.

In the analysis I took special note of repairs, with consequent incorporation of target forms, since these are deemed important indicators of negotiation of meaning by SLA researchers. I also considered discourse markers, feedback tokens and the prevalence of speech acts which are typical of spoken discourse.

6 Analysis and discussion

6.1 Quantity of language produced

Thirty minutes of computer-based chatting yielded a greater quantity of language than usually occurs in the same amount of time during a face-to-face class discussion, where most learners are quiet while awaiting their turn to talk. This may have been because everyone was busy interacting – either writing or reading their messages – at the same time, so there were multiple threads of conversation happening simultaneously. Although some time was used up in turn-taking and typing messages, everyone seemed to be busy expressing his or her views, perhaps more so than occurs in face-to-face discussion where learners are divided into groups. This needs to be tested, however. A total of 263 turns were recorded during the session. The language contained in the logs does not include the constant, mainly metalinguistic, comments exchanged between the participants face-to-face, which were largely to do with vocabulary. These would be worth recording in a long-term study.

6.2 Repairs and incorporation of target forms

The few obvious instances of attention to form within the chatline discourse were mainly to do with vocabulary and spelling. This may be because, at the commencement of the chat session, I invited the students to focus on their ideas and not on how they were expressing them. The discourse is full of non-target forms, but there are some examples of implicit feedback and self-repair, which can be tracked in the chat logs in Appendix 1. For example, the verb piacere was initially used in a variety of non-target forms, when students needed to express whether they had liked a particular novel or other resources chosen by the Italian department to support their reading. Student 4 started out using various non-standard forms of mi è piaciuto (I liked), such as è piacuto and ha piacuto (both lacking the pronoun mi and with piaciuto spelt incorrectly) and mi ho piacuto (with avere as the auxiliary verb where essere is required, and the auxiliary conjugated in the first instead of the third person) (see log 6). However, she later incorporated the almost-target form mi è piacuto into her discourse (with both the pronoun and the correct auxiliary verb), after one of the better performing students joined the conversation in log 11 and used the verb correctly (turn 76). The same near-target form, mi è piacuto, was imitated soon afterwards in turn 82, log 11, by student 1:

Si però spero che la vita non è così triste per ogni persona, ..mi è piacuto il libro e penso che è un buono libro per questo livello di italiano, anche se io l’ho trovato molto difficile.
(Yes but I hope life is not so sad for everyone. . . I liked the book and think it’s a good book for this level of Italian, even though I found it very difficult).

There was also evidence of monitoring and self-repair in the correction of verb endings; for example, Enza riderò (Enza will laugh) was corrected with i mean riderà (log 29, turns 241 and 244). In total the chat logs indicate that there were four repairs and two clarification requests. Two repairs were a correction of terminology (for example, verga was corrected with verismo, log 6, turns 25 and 27). Only one repair was a result of misunderstanding, due to a learner’s confusion over the use of an interrogative adjective and an interlocutor’s clarification request, so that come questi (like these) was modified to come quali romanzi? (like which novels?) (logs 12-13, turns 87, 90, 94). This is the only case that confirms Pellettieri’s (2000:83) claim that modified or pushed output is an outcome of tasks which involve the negotiation of meaning in the context of chatting. More cases of negotiated meaning might have occurred if the students had been working in dyads or on a different, more collaborative, task.

Further evidence is needed to see whether grammatical competence improves through the use of chatlines, especially when there are learners in the group who are known to be very competent users of the language and serve as models. Research is also needed in order to discover whether this is likely to work better with native speakers who act as models for non-native speakers.

6.3 Variety of speech acts, discourse markers and feedback tokens

According to the various parameters of oral interaction previously described, the chatline discussion was without doubt conversational in style. It was a constant series of speech acts – albeit unspoken – including exclamations, greetings, leave takings and well wishing, from auguri (best wishes) and buona fortuna (good luck) to spero che tutti i vostri sogni vengano veri (I hope all your dreams come true).

Of a total recorded 263 turns, there were 41 questions (15.6%), an indicator which itself brings the session closer to spoken than written discourse. In addition, there were many feedback tokens, for example: davvero! (really!), ah sì!, anch’io! (me too!), ah! and brava; discourse markers such as d’accordo, no? or e tu? at the end of a question to elicit a response; and scusa and scusa volevo dire (sorry, I meant…) to draw attention to a statement, question or opinion; while d’accordo was used copiously to express agreement. There were also instances of discourse markers such as beh! (well!), per rispondere alla tua domanda (to answer your question), vorrei dire di…(I’d like to say…) or volevo dire a tutti (I’d like to tell everyone), used in order to ‘take the floor’ or introduce an opinion. In the total 263 turns, 86 feedback tokens and discourse markers were present. Si and no are included as indicators of feedback to questions and observations, as occurs in conversation.

6.4 Other aspects of the discussion confirming previous research

Short, syntactically simple sentences, which are not uncommon in spoken discourse, dominate this particular session – as was the case in Kern’s (1995) study – except when the discussion proper begins. In fact, the length of one relatively proficient student’s responses was noted and joked about by other participants in the discussion: auguri [name of student] per scivere il primo romanzo italiano!! (probably intended as: congratulations on writing your first Italian novel!) (log 9, turn 60). As I had hoped, the
nature of the task had some impact, as it gave rise to useful discussion, despite the higher incidence of non-target forms than in written test situations.

Another pleasant surprise was that normally reticent students had a strong presence in the discussions. This may be attributable to various factors:

- they did not have to wait for their turn
- they had time to think
- they could read the sessions over and over by scrolling back
- they were confident with the medium
- they were able to focus more on content than on form, having been reassured about this at the start.

The session resembled a teleconference with many participants, although it was not as orderly, especially in the area of turn taking. Group chat sessions have been described as being similar to a cocktail party where multiple threads of conversation are being carried out at the same time (Kern 1995:460). Students frequently called each others’ names to keep their particular discussion thread going, whether working in pairs or groups. As was to be expected from a sociocultural point of view, the discourse was that of a very familiar register, with the use of *tu*, identification numbers to name interlocutors, nicknames and even expletives and imprecations.

### 7 Student evaluation

I conducted a brief evaluation session a week later. It should be noted, however, that only six students were able to participate. The questions I put to them about the chatting experience are listed in Appendix 2.

The first question probed whether any students felt they were at a disadvantage with the medium if they happened to be slow typists. Students rated their typing skills from average to very good, so this did not seem to be an issue.

The second question checked students’ attitudes to CMC compared with classroom discussions. Four out of six claimed they were more confident in CMC mode. Strangely enough, two of these were generally good speakers during classroom discussions.

The third question sought explanations for the students’ greater confidence in either CMC or classroom discussion. The students who felt more confident in oral discussion than in CMC said:

- I think faster than I type and talk faster.
- When typing I also have to think of spelling whereas in the classroom I can speak my thoughts aloud.

Some of those who favoured CMC gave the following responses:

- I’m not very practised in spoken Italian.
- The computer is easier because you have more time to think about what you want to say and how you’re going to say it. Orally I find that my Calabrese dialect pops up when I momentarily forget how to say something.
- Because you don’t have the pressure of everyone watching you, waiting for your answer in Italian. With the computer you feel alone, more confident.
This last response was from one of the weaker students, who was usually barely heard during classroom discussions.

The final question asked the students whether they thought chatting could help develop their speaking ability. Research will be able to yield more objective answers to this question, but the students in this group provided intelligent responses which indicate that this area is worth following up. Four out of six answered affirmatively, listing the following benefits of CMC, on the basis of their single chat session:

- I am able to experiment with expressions and words that I might not have the confidence to use verbally.
- ...one has written in front of them other people’s thoughts and impressions, which we can go over and analyse. One can have a paper copy of the discussion.
- ...students who may not be as quick to speak in Italian orally have more time to think and therefore feel more confident to express themselves more. When the computer is used on a regular basis, after a while the ‘spoken Italian’ becomes more fluent and therefore the student becomes more confident to speak more in class discussions too. It is also a fun way!
- Because it will help with the spontaneity and flow of spoken Italian, it helps make you think quickly. It wouldn’t help in the pronunciation of words though.

One student did not have an opinion, while another gave an opposing view to that of the last comment above, with an interesting insight into how she perceives the production of speech in Italian:

I am confident (reasonably) with the Italian language, but I really need to improve my ability to spontaneously respond to conversation; accelerate the ability to structure phrases within my head.

These comments were made by students who are uninformed about research in the area of CMC or language acquisition, yet some of their replies echo research findings and are encouraging. However, it may be that, with further use, the novelty of the medium will wear off and leave the students less enthusiastic. The students may also have been influenced by my own positive attitude to this medium. This small sample indicates that qualitative research, which delves into students’ attitudes to chatting, needs to be carried out alongside any quantitative study.

8 Conclusion

Although promising, these observations are derived from only one chat session by a small group of students. Future research needs to be based on long-term monitoring of learners’ logs in order to identify patterns, especially where negotiated meaning and interlanguage development are concerned. It is also clear that the issue of task type needs to be factored into future research. Dividing participants into smaller groups or, ideally, into dyads, is also likely to yield different results.

However, it is fairly clear from the recent studies described above, and from the student evaluations and samples of chat logs presented in this paper, that there are many aspects of chatting that suggest it warrants further investigation. The student logs indicate that, despite some missing elements, chatting is probably closer to oral communication than written, as suggested by previous research. From the teaching and learning point of view, while chatting cannot be labelled speaking practice, it may be nevertheless worth introducing as a small proportion of the assessment for both internal and external students.
An important research question that requires further investigation is: if student logs indicate that there is a continual improvement of learners’ interlanguage, as demonstrated through a constant incorporation of target forms in their discourse, are those newly acquired target forms likely to be transferred to their spoken discourse? For example, would student 4, who started out a chat session using *mi ha piacuto* and half way through the session began using *mi è piacuto* (consciously or unconsciously), be likely to transfer the latter form into her spoken Italian? Did she use this form because she acquired it from a model student or because of the focus on this verb during language classes, or for both reasons? Through such a study, it would be interesting to see whether learners’ oral interlanguage improves, as well as their interactional competence, as a result of extra practice in authentic and interactive activities using the chatline.

References


Appendix 1: Chat logs

The chat discourse is reported here verbatim, apart from student identity numbers, which have been replaced with neutral student numbers. Identifying names or nicknames used in the discourse are indicated in square brackets.

LOG 6

student 2
turn 25
Di come tu pensi verga ha usato verga

student 1
turn 26
[student nickname] tii ha piacuto il libro

student 2
turn 27
Scusa volevo dire Verismo

student 3
turn 28
cos’e’ Verga

student 4
turn 29
[student nickname] ha piacuto molto

student 5
turn 30
verismo, che cos’e’ questo|?

student 6
turn 31
[student nickname], ti piace il libro di Verga?

student 1
turn 32
[student nickname] E’ PIACUTO IL LIBRO???

student 4
turn 33
[student 1] e’ piacuto molto era un libro molto....

LOG 8

student 1
turn 47
suza, sono d’accordo con [student 5], pero’ mi piace molto i romazi. [student 1] chi pensi tu?

student 4
turn 48
si anche io [student 4]…

student 1  
turn 49
ah grazie per il vostri commenti..

student 2  
turn 50
Io preferisco i libri di oggi giorno

student 4  
turn 51
mi ho piacuto “fontamara” piu’

LOG 9  
student 5  
turn 53
dimmi un libro di romanzo, [student 1], che ti piace molto

student 5  
turn 54
ti piacciono mills and boom?

student 1  
[student 10 nickname] dove sta?

student 3  
turn 56
malavoglia saresti un libro difficile a leggere anche in inglese

student 10  
turn 57
Buongiorno a tutti. Come state. Beh [student 1], per rispondere a tua domanda, mi e’ piaciuto molto il libro. Vuoi sapere perche’? Beh perche’ credo che il libro ci insegna qualcosa di molto valore. Ci insegna cos’e’ la vita e cosa vuole dire la vita.

student 4  
[student 10 nickname]...HELLO

student 7  
turn 59
si Verga era difficile da leggere, ma sarebbe piu’ facile se avremmo gia’ letto libri quasi quanto difficile come quello prima

student 1  
turn 60
auguri [student 10] per scivere il primo romanzo italiano!!
LOG 11
student 6
turn 71
Mi piace il racconto, davvero, pero’ spero che e’ scritto in inglese o in italiano piu’ facile.......... 

student 4
turn 72
[student 1] hai piacuto?

student 5
turn 73
vorrei dire di a ciascuno il suo

student 5
turn 74
per favore

student 3
turn 75
cos’e’ l’ora?

student 7
turn 76
A ciascuno il suo mi e’ piaciuto, forse perch e’ assai moderno

student 5
turn 77
mi piace molto questo libro

student 6
turn 78
va benne [student 5 chatbased nickname]- sorry, [student 5 first name]

student 6
turn 79
oops, bene

student 4
turn 80
si mi e’ piacuto

LOG 12
student 5
turn 81
voi vi piace
student 1
turn 82
Si pero’ spero che la vita non e’ cosi’ triste per ogni persona,…mi e’ piacuto il libro e penso che e’ un buono libro per questo livello di italiano, anche se io l’ho trovato molto difficile.

student 8
turn 83
Si Ciascuno al suo e’ un giallo molto interessante e abbastanza facile a leggerlo. Io penso che dovessimo leggere di piu’ romanzi moderni

student 2
turn 84
IO preferisco libri come e’ stato così

student 4
turn 85
si ho trovato molto difficile anche

student 9
turn 86
Volevo dire a tutti, pensate non e’ troppo terribile se gli studenti in Italian 2B potrebbero studiare tutti di Marcovaldo, invece di leggere solo un capitolo? Potrebbe preparargli per Italian 3°

student 5
turn 87
come questi [student 8]

student 7
turn 88
mi e’ piaciuto anche che abbiamo un po’ della storia che provede il contesto del libro A Cias.il Suo

student 6
turn 89
Sono d’accordo [student 8], l’ho trovato piu’ facile di leggere

student 8
turn 90
[student 5] what do you mean by “come questi”

LOG 13
student 3
turn 91
un libro interessante perché’ parla della mafia, e come e’ una forza.
student 10
turn 92
Mi è piaciuto molto A ciascuno il suo. Dicendo questo era anche un po’ frustrante perché mi piace la giustizia e’ non mi piace quando “i cattivi” vincono in un libro. [student 1] mi piace molto quello che hai scritto....BRAVA!

student 4
turn 93
si mi piace libri che parlano di mafia

student 5
turn 94
scusa come quali libri di romanzi?

LOG 29
student 5
turn 236
ho va bene [student 6], buona fortuna per l’anno prossimo ed anche per i tuoi esami

student 1
turn 237
shit non e buono quando non hai i soldi per studiare...,mi piace il HEXS molto!

student 4
turn 238
chop chop

student 4
turn 239
[student 10] CHOP was meant for U

student 6
turn 240
anche tu, [student 5], ma petit :-)

student 9
turn 241
che comica, Enza ridero la settimana prossima

student 4
turn 242
and u to [student 10 nickname]

student 7
turn 243
ciao, ciao

student 9
turn 244
i mean ridera’
Appendix 2: Questions included in student evaluation

1. Do you consider yourself a good typist?
2. Are you more confident in expressing yourself in Italian in oral classroom discussions or via computer?
3. Why do you think this is so?
4. Do you think that computer mediated communication (CMC) could assist you in improving your spoken Italian? Why/why not? If Yes, how?