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VoIM-Mediated Cooperative Tasks for English Language Learners

The use of telephones—even mobile phones—in language learning is not unique (see Chinnery 2006). The literature is also replete with imaginative ideas on how to apply Internet chat software like instant messengers (IM) to language learning. A more recent technological development of use to educators is Internet telephony, or Voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP). The premiere example of this technology is Skype, which has been described in discussions of distance and tandem language learning as a *disruptive technology*—one that replaces other existing technologies or practices (Godwin-Jones 2005). In addition to being disruptive of traditional telephone communications, VoIP programs like Skype are also altering the way people use text-based IM software to communicate. Indeed, hybrid tools that combine instant messenger and Internet telephony features are now referred to as Voice-over-Instant-Messenger (VoIM) clients, as they combine the function-

ality and benefits of both text-chat and voice-chat media. This article discusses three of those benefits—(1) computer-mediated communication, (2) negotiation of meaning, and (3) cooperative task-based learning—and describes how they can be uniquely combined to create a VoIM-mediated cooperative activity for English language learners.

Benefits of computer-mediated communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been defined most basically as "human communication via computers" (Simpson 2002, 414), and is commonly dichotomized into *synchronous* and *asynchronous* forms. Synchronous CMC (SCMC), such as IM and live chat, involves real-time text-based interactions between users, whereas users of asynchronous CMC like email and discussion boards may or may not be online simultaneously.

The communication resulting from the use of SCMC is unique in that it possesses characteristics of both written and spoken discourse.

In the words of one scholar, it "is neither here nor there, neither pure writing nor pure speech but somewhere in between" (Foertsch 1995, 304). This uniqueness is reflected in the prevalence of text-based paralinguistic features, which are deemed necessary in order to compensate for the lack of prosodic elements (e.g., stress, intonation) and non-verbal cues (eye contact, gestures, posture) typically available to speakers in face-to-face interactions. Examples of such text-based compensatory paralinguistic features include emoticons (e.g., smileys), capitalization, and abbreviations.

SCMC was first applied to group language learning with hearing impaired students at Gallaudet University (Batson 1988). Since that time, a plethora of research has documented its benefits for language learners in general. Many of these benefits are summarized by Swaffar (1998, 1), who indicates that "networked exchanges seem to help all individuals in language classes engage more frequently, with greater confidence, and with greater enthusiasm in the communicative process than is characteristic for similar students in oral classrooms."

Benefits of negotiation of meaning

Another finding in the research on SCMC use with language learners is the presence of the same modified interactions, or negotiations, that are deemed beneficial in face-to-face communications (Pelletierri 2000). According to interactionist perspectives of second language acquisition, negotiation of meaning facilitates both learning and acquisition and is defined as "the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility" (Pica 1994, 494). Because SCMC is written, its use is thought to enhance modifications and negotiations by giving learners additional time to attend to, process, and reflect upon the message, via a process Beauvois (1998, 198) has referred to as "conversations in slow motion." According to Kitade (2000), three features of SCMC that positively facilitate negotiation of meaning are text-based interactions, the lack of turn-taking competition, and the absence of nonverbal cues.

Benefits of cooperative task-based learning

Cooperative learning has been defined as "a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others" (Olsen and Kagan 1992, 8). Participating learners are encouraged "to communicate, to share insights, test hypotheses, and jointly construct knowledge" (Crandall 1994). Although cooperative learning was originally developed for general education, several researchers have documented its application to second language learning (High 1993; Holt 1993; Kessler 1992; McCafferty, Jacobs, and DaSilva Iddings 2006). The emphasis on cooperation in this approach makes it a natural complement to task-based language instruction (Larsen-Freeman 2000). In particular, convergence tasks, where students work together to reach agreement, have been identified as the most efficient task types for eliciting valuable communicative interactions. In this category, SCMC jigsaw tasks have been found to be superior in promoting negotiation of meaning (Blake 2000).

A VoIM-mediated cooperative task

This task is comprised of a two-way information gap—essentially a jigsaw—utilizing VoIM clients. Not only do participants benefit from key aspects of its design—use of CMC, negotiation of meaning, and cooperative task-based learning—but these benefits are extended beyond text-chat to voice-chat. For example, VoIM clients can help self-conscious learners to focus on the task at hand and not react to distractions such as facial expressions. Furthermore, VoIM clients provide opportunities for language development via peer and instructor feedback, which can be given in a direct yet unobtrusive manner. The use of these programs, however, is not promoted as an end in and of itself; rather, they offer learners a stepping-stone from which to advance their understanding and use of English.

The technical requirements and procedures for running this activity, as well as guidelines on selecting useful VoIM clients and appropriate video clips, are described below. In

addition, the Appendix contains a reference list of the programs and websites mentioned in this article.

Requirements for a VoIM-mediated cooperative task

The entire VoIM-mediated cooperative task can be conducted in a single room or lab, but certain requirements should be met in order to run it most successfully. Optimally, the room or lab should possess:

- A personal computer (PC) for each student
- Audio cards in each PC
- Internet access for each PC
- A VoIM client downloaded on each PC (see guidelines below)
- A video clip with dialogue (see guidelines below)

- A headset (or microphones and headphones) for each student

Procedures for a VoIM-mediated cooperative task

This activity consists of eight stages, including a preparation and follow-up stage. The time required depends upon the number and level of the students; the entire activity described in Table 1 can be spread out over several sessions, if necessary.

Guidelines for selecting a VoIM client

Various researchers have conducted elaborate evaluations of chat clients and compared their features and usefulness in language learning (Cziko and Park 2003; Smith 2003). The pervasiveness and functional capacity of modern SCMC programs, however, is quickly

Table 1: Eight Stages of a VoIM-Mediated Cooperative Task

Legend: T = Teacher
              Ss = Student

Stage 1: Preparation	• T (or Ss) downloads VoIM clients on all PCs. • T and Ss create VoIM accounts. • T writes up a list of all VoIM usernames/IDs. • T selects a short web-based video clip from a movie (see guidelines below). • T bookmarks the video clip in the browser on every PC.
Stage 2: Setup	• T explains the procedures (and optionally distributes written directions). • T divides the Ss in half (Group A, Group B). • T pairs-up one student from each group by number (1A+1B, 2A+2B, etc.). • T distributes the class list of VoIM usernames/IDs. • Ss add their partners to their VoIM contacts (e.g., buddies, friends). • Optional: Ss can also add T as a contact for monitoring and feedback.
Stage 3: Audiovisual Jigsaw with Video Clip	• T uses title, subtitles, or imagery to invite Ss to guess what the video clip might be about. • Ss open the video clip in their browser (from the bookmarks). • Group A watches the video clip once without sound (they can mute the volume, or plug in their headsets without wearing them). • Group B listens to the audio of the video clip once (they can listen on their headsets with their backs turned to their computers). • Optional: Each group may be given a few minutes together to discuss their impressions.

Stage 4: Synchronous Text-Chat	• Ss begin text-chatting. • One student from each pair invites their partner (and T) to chat on the VoIM client. • Ss text-chat about what they understood from the video clip. • T redirects Ss to recreate as much of the scene as possible in the form of dialogue. • Ss save and/or print out their text-chat transcripts.
Stage 5: Synchronous Voice-Chat	• T redirects pairs to voice-chat using their headsets. • One student from each pair "calls" their partner with the telephony feature of the VoIM client. • Pairs practice acting out their saved/printed dialogues.
Stage 6: Role-Play	• Ss sign out of their VoIM client. • Pairs practice their dialogues face-to-face. • Pairs act out their dialogues in front of the class.
Stage 7: Review Video Clip	• T shows the video clip again complete with image and sound. • T and Ss debrief/discuss the video clip and their experiences during the activity (what they found interesting, unusual, challenging, etc.).

Stage 8: Follow-Up	• T and/or Ss analyze text-chat transcripts, with emphasis on target language elements and negotiations.
	• Sample negotiation:
	  ◦ Cindy: someone through something on his face
	  ◦ Kim: threw?
	  ◦ Kim: or through?
	  ◦ Cindy: threw
	• develops review activities (e.g., cloze exercises, transformations) around text-chat transcripts.

making the need for such reviews redundant. Today, most IM clients are in and of themselves multimedia web-conferencing tools (i.e., VoIMs). All of the leading clients (Yahoo, Windows Live, Google Talk, Skype) possess the requisite features (e.g., savable and printable text-chat, Internet telephony) for cooperative tasks like the one presented here, and offer near equal benefits for language instruction in general. At the time this article was being written, only Google Talk presented any real comparative advantage because it allows learners to e-mail their chat sessions to themselves, their peers, and their instructor for later content or discourse analysis, or for virtual modeling in a text-to-speech program such as those available from AT&T Labs and IBM Research.

Purely VoIP clients like Gizmo do not have text-chat capability and are therefore not useful in activities such as the one presented here. Embeddable (i.e., non-standalone) web-messengers, including those offered by the aforementioned leaders, are likewise not useful for a VoIM activity because they do not typically offer VoIP services. Multi-protocol clients like Pidgin can be used to access the accounts of competing programs, but they may not have audio functionality; their range of available options may also prove unnecessarily confounding. Useful alternatives, where downloading clients to PCs is restricted, are web-based conferencing programs like Vyew, which typically offer all the requisite features, as well as presentation tools.

While many of the VoIP clients useful for conducting cooperative tasks are free, Internet connections are usually not. Budget constraints may restrict the use of high-speed broadband Internet connections, which is a requirement for adequate use of certain VoIM features. Unlike text-chatting, for instance, which functions suitably even over dial-up

Internet connections, voice-chatting in such a situation may sound choppy, or calls may be periodically dropped. Where only lower bandwidths are available, however, substitutions will suffice. For example, during the synchronous voice-chat phase of this activity, participants can be paired up face-to-face to practice their dialogues.

Guidelines for selecting appropriate video clips

Streaming web-based video clips, such as those used during the audiovisual jigsaw stage, also require high-speed Internet connections. One solution to this problem can be quickly found by web-searching for "download video clips," the results of which will reveal numerous free programs available for transferring web-based videos to PCs, where they can subsequently be burned onto DVDs. It should be noted, however, that in many cases media copyright restrictions will prohibit this option.

A less risky, lower-tech alternative to using streaming video is to simply use a DVD or videocassette to show a video clip or scene on a television connected to a DVD player or VCR. Respective groups can take turns remaining in the classroom or lab to either watch or listen to the video clip, or one group can watch the muted recording in one room while the other group listens in another room to the audio of the video clip that has been recorded on a digital audio recorder, CD, or audiocassette. In this case, the members of each group receive an additional benefit because they can have extra time to discuss what they saw or heard.

The benefits of using streaming video clips, however, are that they are freely and widely available online at sites such as YouTube and Movies.com. The challenge lies in selecting clips that will be pedagogically useful, not to mention interesting. In evaluating readings materials, Nuttall (1996) considers three criteria: (1) readability, (2) exploitability, and (3) suitability of context/content. As noted below, these same criteria are useful in evaluating materials that target listening, the other receptive skill, albeit in modified form.

  1. The *listenability*, or level-appropriateness, of video clips should be slightly beyond the students' ability. Since "basal listeners" are few and far

between, instructors might consider adapting Mikulecky's (1990) guidelines for determining level-appropriate reading materials, where 61 percent comprehension is considered appropriate for independent work, 41–60 percent comprehension is suitable for successful instruction, and 40 percent or less comprehension is simply too frustrating for learners to benefit from. However, it can be difficult to evaluate authentic audiovisual media for sentence length and new vocabulary or structures. Not only are they replete with authentic pronunciation features such as linking, blending, and reduced forms, but their non-written form adds a challenge to learners' memory. Thus, rather than asking learners to lift a finger each time they reach a new word, as they might do when reading, a more useful measure to determine comprehension would be a multiple choice or cloze exercise based on a short sample clip.

  2. Video clips should be *exploitable*, which means that they should contain samples of target language functions, grammar, and vocabulary that correspond to what the teacher wants students to learn. Although this can prove more challenging for audiovisual media than written materials, the Internet offers relatively simple remedies. Many movie and TV scripts are available for free online (e.g., Drew's Script-O-Rama, SimplyScripts). Using advanced search tools such as those available on Google, these sites can easily be searched for relevant target language elements. Alternately, new technologies have the ability to conduct guided searches within audio and video files such as podcasts (e.g., Pluggd, Podscope, EveryZing). Tools of this sort are likely to become more widely available for other audiovisual materials in the future.

  3. Finally, useful video clips should contain content and contexts that sufficiently interest and motivate learners to comprehend them. For young learners, this might include animated (e.g., *Shrek*) or fantasy (e.g., *Harry Potter*) films. Teenagers might prefer coming-of-age

(e.g., *Stand By Me*) or action (e.g., *Die Hard*) movies. Adults are likely to prefer dramas (e.g., *Titanic*) or comedies (e.g., *Meet the Parents*). These guidelines, of course, are based on generalizations.

Conclusion

Ultimately, instructors—through their everyday interactions with their students—are in the best position to determine and select appropriately motivating (and exploitable and listenable) video clips. They are likewise in the best position to modify other aspects of this task according to their ongoing assessment of their students' needs. This includes adapting the task for use with other cooperative activities, such as decision-making tasks. Regardless of which is chosen, the successful activity will incorporate cooperative task-based learning, meaningful form-focused negotiations, and the use of text-chat and voice-chat via VoIM clients.

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Appendix — Website Resources for VoIM-Mediated Cooperative Tasks

VoIM-Mediated Cooperative Tasks for English Language Learners • George M. Chinnery

VoIM Clients	
Google Talk	www.google.com/talk
Skype	http://skype.com
Yahoo Messenger	http://messenger.yahoo.com
Windows Live Messenger	http://messenger.live.com
Alternative Chat Clients	
Gizmo	http://gizmoproject.com
Pidgin	www.pidgin.im
Vyew	http://vyew.com
Online Video Clips	
Movies.com	http://movies.go.com
YouTube	www.youtube.com
Movie / TV Scripts	
Drew's Script-O-Rama	www.script-o-rama.com
SimplyScripts	www.simplyscripts.com
Text-to-Speech Programs	
AT&T Labs	www.research.att.com/~ttsweb/tts/demo.php
IBM Research	www.research.ibm.com/tts/coredemo.shtml
Audiovisual Media Search Engines	
EveryZing	www.everyzing.com
Pluggd	www.pluggd.com
Podscope	www.podscope.com