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Conversational elements of online chatting: speaking practice for distance language learners?

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- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. The teaching and learning context: strategies for development of competence in oral interaction at a distance](#)
- [3. Methodological framework: indicators of oral discourse](#)
- [4. Outline of tasks and conditions](#)
- [5. Analysis and discussion](#)
- [6. Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

1. Introduction

The study of languages by distance education is an attractive option for students who require flexibility in their study. However, a critical issue in the delivery of language courses at a distance is to provide adequate scaffolding and monitoring[1] to permit the development of learners' interlanguage. This is a particularly complex issue where interlanguage development through oral interaction is concerned. As part of the Cassamarca Foundation project Italian Online [ItalianOnline03] at the University of South Australia, the potential of online chatting as a forum for practice in aspects of oral interaction in Italian is being explored.

A number of researchers in the fields of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and CMC (Computer-mediated Communication) have uncovered similarities between text-based interactions via computer and face-to-face interactions. These studies, carried out mainly with campus-based learners, are particularly relevant to the distance education context.

Chun [Chun94] 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. Decentralization of the instructor made a difference in these discussions since it gave learners a greater role in managing the discourse. She therefore suggests that text-based CMC is a useful bridge between written and spoken skills for learners. Kern's [Kern95] extensive analysis of transcripts from chat sessions in French indicates that higher levels of student-to-student exchange occurred in the computer session than in the teacher-centred face-to-face session. The researcher also indicates that sentences tended to be simpler and shorter in the computer sessions since such sentences tended to elicit more responses than long complex ones (Kern, op. cit. [Kern95]: 468). An experimental study by Warschauer [Warschauer96] which compares face-to-face and electronic discussion, appears to contradict Kern's [Kern95] findings on the lack of complexity of language produced in the electronic forum. This study indicates that a group of 16 students of English as a Second Language used language which was lexically and syntactically more formal and complex in electronic discussion than in face-to-face exchanges. He also found more equal and increased student participation in electronic discussions when compared with face-to-face discussion.

Negretti's [Negretti99] study of chat sessions of non-native speakers' chat sessions in English is based on a CA (Conversational Analysis) perspective and focuses on differences between chatting and face-to-face interaction. Her observations are based on chats carried out using Webchat software in a group setting, with group and one-to-one postings intermingling. Native speakers also participate in these sessions. The main aspects of oral interaction analysed by Negretti [Negretti99] in chat sessions are: overall structure of interaction and sequence organization, turn-taking organization (especially openings and closings), turn design, expression of paralinguistic features and some pragmatic variables. These conversational features are all present in the chat session but are handled quite differently. The study warrants replication in a one-to-one chat context since these differences may have been less marked in a chat restricted to two participants. While oral proficiency is thus not the object of her study, and in spite of the identified differences, she nonetheless claims to have observed improvements in the oral proficiency of her participants after two months of chat activities (Negretti, op. cit. [Negretti99]: 78).

Pellettieri [Pellettieri00] focuses on the issue of grammatical competence in a study of chatting as a tool for the negotiation of meaning. Her study is based on a model for non-native speaker negotiation established by Varonis and Gass [VaronisGass85]. Tasks which promote collaborative learning and which rely on correct usage of the target language are a crucial element for the success of this study's one-to-one sessions. A slightly different chatting tool (Y-Talk) is used in this study and permits learners to view and interrupt other participants' elaboration of messages as they are being written, as occurs in oral discussion. This is different from other chatting tools where participants only view the final version of interlocutors' postings. The transcribed negotiations of learners indicated that 70% of explicit and 75% of implicit feedback led to incorporation of target

forms in subsequent discussion, where it was conducive to conversation. There was also a great deal of self-monitoring as indicated by the cases of backspacing and repair of errors of typographical, spelling and morphological agreement.

Sotillo [[Sotillo00](#)] compares synchronous and asynchronous text-based communication and finds a much stronger resemblance to spoken language in the former. As in Pellettieri's study, synchronous communication presented discourse functions which were

similar to the types of interactional modifications found in face-to-face conversations that are deemed necessary for second language acquisition (Pellettieri, op. cit. [[Pellettieri00](#)]: 82).

Blake's [[Blake00](#)] study tests the interaction hypothesis in a CMC context with learners of Spanish who work in pairs. He finds that most of the negotiations between students are triggered by lexical confusions rather than morphological or syntactical ones. He also ascertains the importance of task design in eliciting negotiations, with jigsaw-type tasks containing the greatest number of negotiations (Blake, op. cit. [[Blake00](#)]: 128).

In summary, the main features of synchronous CMC reported in the research indicate that it provides some advantages over classroom-based face-to-face interactions and might also serve as a forum for practice in verbal interaction. Other implications of the studies are that if language teachers were to include chatting as a regular activity for both internal and external students, task design is an important issue to ensure that learners engage in the type of negotiation that occurs in authentic conversation and chatting does not become an end in itself. The importance of an appropriate and engaging task if collaborative learning and negotiation of meaning are to occur is highlighted by Pellettieri ([Pellettieri00](#): 71) and Blake ([Blake00](#): 138). Dyads also seem to be the preferred set-up for learners' CMC sessions in more recent studies.

Language teachers may question whether some of these findings can be applied in the teaching and learning of languages, given that so 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 don't integrate the various physical aspects of talking with other aspects of oral interaction. Non-verbal aspects of communication such as facial expression, context, and pragmatics of oral interaction are also important elements for successful communication. A study by Kramsch and Andersen [[KramschAndersen99](#)] points out that even when engaging with filmed multimedia interactions, learners are in a somewhat impoverished context compared with interactions in a "real" context which 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 (Kramsch and Andersen [[KramschAndersen99](#)]: 32).

Oral interaction in the real world is a multidimensional activity which is imbued with a multiplicity of elements which provide meaning. It might however be argued that many such elements are also missing from the average language classroom, even where language teachers go to great lengths to create a microcosm of the target culture by using the support of props, posters and music, for example.

Text-based chatting also appears to be missing many of the obvious non-verbal, contextual elements that give meaning to communication. It is therefore surprising that in spite of this apparent lack of contextual support, research in CMC suggests that text-based communication is a worthwhile and motivating activity for interlanguage development, particularly as a bridge to oral interaction. "Chatting" may technically be a writing activity, but this does not necessarily mean it is "written" in genre, as Kern [[Kern95](#)] suggests:

[students] may operate largely within a framework that resembles that of oral communication, even though the medium is written (Kern [[Kern95](#)]: 460).

Drawing on CA and SLA research, the present study has a major objective which is to consider elements of oral interaction which are common to both face-to-face oral interactions and chatting via computer, apart from the real-time communication feature.

The presence of these elements is subsequently analysed in the context of the chat session of a group of intermediate learners of Italian enrolled internally (as campus-based students). The analysis is conducted within both a large and small group chat session, since there appears to be a shortage of studies of small groups in the research on CMC, other than in Negretti's [Negretti99] work. An additional pedagogical objective of this study is thus to confirm whether chatline discourse, more specifically the chatline discourse of intermediate learners of Italian, is similar enough to oral discourse to support the development of speaking skills and interlanguage of distance language learners. If demonstrated, this should allow language teachers to consider the inclusion of chat-based tasks in language programs, as a bridge to oral interaction, both in internal and particularly in external (distance) programs, where oral-like activities which can be monitored are very much needed. Regular chat participants are familiar with the conversational flavour of chatlines (which gives them their name) but the oral aspects have not yet been fully defined in previous research.

Many of the features of oral interaction identified in this research are nonetheless likely to be expressed differently in the CMC context due to the constraints imposed by the medium, as indicated by Clark and Brennan's ([ClarkBrennan91]: 141-142) analysis of how discourse varies across media and Negretti's [Negretti99] differentiations between chatting and conversation. The nature of the task, as noted by Blake [Blake00]), is also likely to influence the degree of negotiation and hence "orality" of learners' discourse.

The following section describes current strategies used in distance-taught Italian courses at the University of South Australia and the possible role of chatlines in providing additional monitoring opportunities for teacher and learner in oral-like activities.

2. The teaching and learning context: strategies for development of competence in oral interaction at a distance

In the case of campus-based students, learners' progress in speaking the target language is supported and monitored mainly in the classroom. As far as external students at the University of South Australia are concerned, metropolitan area (city-based) students are encouraged to attend the language and small group classes which focus on oral interaction. Nonetheless, many do not attend classes, particularly non-metropolitan students who are dispersed all over Australia or abroad. Both conventional and new technologies are of assistance in the delivery of distance language programs which seek to address the issue of competence in oral interaction.

[Table 1](#) describes some strategies for the development of speaking skills within distance education programs at the University of South Australia, where students cannot attend intensive courses or regular conversation classes. It should be noted that the strong presence of an Italian community in Australia and other countries, provides some additional options for the distance-learner of Italian, which are not necessarily available to other languages. A rating from low to high has been provided to assess both the level of compulsion and the degree of monitoring and assessment which the language lecturer can realistically provide for each of the cited activities[2].

Tasks/technological tools	Level of compulsion	Degree of monitoring / assessability
Telephone conversations (with lecturer)	High	High
Teleconferences (phone)	High	Average
Multimedia resources (audiotapes, videotapes, CDs)	High	High
Italian community radio	Low	Low
Italian government funded conversation classes	Low	Average
Italian national TV via cable/satellite	Low	Low
Italian movies and news broadcasts via the State - funded SBS (Special Broadcasting Service)	Low	Low
Projects requiring interviews with the local Italian community	High	Average
Conversations with Italian neighbours, friends or relatives	Low	Low
Chatline conversations (students only)	High	High
Chatline conversations with native speakers	High	High
Voice (audio) emails and forums	High	Low

Table 1 - Tasks and technological tools for the development of speaking skills in distance-learners of Italian. []**

The above strategies have advantages and disadvantages for teacher and learner which it is not the purpose of this paper to explicate. Suffice it to say that in spite of the various listening comprehension activities, instructions, tasks and assessment procedures that have been put in place to promote oral interaction, the weighting of assessment in relation to this skill is very low (20-30%) and reflects the degree of monitoring that can realistically be provided to external students. For this reason, the use of chatlines has been introduced as an assessed component (5-10%) of both internal and external courses.

From an assessment point of view, the ability to print out the logs of learners' interactions is a useful monitoring and assessment tool for distance learners. Unlike tape recordings or contributions to voice forums, which give students the opportunity to write responses before recording them, the immediacy of real-time interactions via computer provides a snapshot of learners' interlanguage as it might occur in an oral setting. It is also more difficult for students to submit work which is not their own when chatting for assessment points since their password-protected chat sessions are recorded in real time and can be accessed by the lecturer and other students enrolled in their course.

In the following section we describe characteristics of oral interaction which require further investigation via an analysis of language learners' chat sessions and we define those features which are the object of this study.

3. Methodological framework: indicators of oral discourse

It is beyond this study's intentions to provide a complete description of features of Italian speech on which there have been exhaustive studies by CA researchers such as Bazzanella [[Bazzanella94](#)], [[Bazzanella02](#)]. However, there are aspects of conversation that are of particular concern from the teaching and learning point of view and which students need to practice. Paralinguistic features are the obvious elements of speaking which are missing from CMC. Other elements in need of further investigation within chatline contexts include pragmatic and interactional norms, grammar and lexicon, speech acts or functions, discourse markers, negotiations and repairs. This study focuses on repairs and incorporation of target forms, variety of speech acts, particularly questions and clarification requests, and the presence of discourse markers and feedback tokens.

Repairs are a feature of spoken discourse which can be prompted by implicit or explicit feedback from the interlocutor or can be self-initiated (self-repair). Special attention has been paid to repairs with subsequent incorporation of target forms, since these are considered important indicators of negotiation of meaning by SLA researchers and hence are also important indicators of oral discourse and possible interlanguage development.

Speech acts or functions are a central part of oral discourse which should be present in chat discourse if it is to be useful in teaching. For example, one should be able to identify instances of greeting, thanking, complimenting and joking, as these are essentially oral though they can also be found in informal writing. The presence of questions and requests for clarification in particular can be taken as a strong indicator of interactivity typical of real time oral-like interactions which assume the presence of an interlocutor. Questions in their various manifestations are considered to be a fundamental turn-taking device, according to CA literature (for example Sacks and Schegloff [[SacksSchegloff74](#)]), hence the degree of questioning was taken to be an important signal of conversational discourse.

Requests for clarification are defined as such where there is evidence that a chat participant's message has not been fully understood and an interlocutor requests further explanation. Such misunderstandings can be prompted by semantic or linguistic issues and in SLA research are broadly classified as a type of negotiation (see for example Long [[Long96](#)]: 452).

The presence of discourse markers is also taken into account in the analysis. Discourse markers have been included in this study since they signal engagement with an interlocutor who is present in real time, as occurs in conversation. For example in Italian the discourse marker *a proposito* (by the way), allows the speaker to shift topic; and *cioé* (that is to say), allows the speaker to persist in a certain topic. Again, we note that this also applies in informal writing. Feedback tokens have been included in this category since they are generally considered indicators of spoken discourse and are often classified as a type of discourse marker (see for instance Heeman et al. [[HeemanByron98](#)]). These are verbal or facial signals which listeners give to speakers to indicate that they understand or acknowledge what the speaker is saying. In conversation they can be communicated through nods, smiles and other non verbal means which are often substituted by emoticons in chatline communication. It should be noted that emoticons have not been included in this study, which focuses on verbal feedback tokens. *Ho capito* (I understand/I get it) and *davvero?* (really?) are examples of verbal feedback tokens. These conversational items need to be a regular feature of chat sessions if they are to be of pedagogical use in the context of oral interaction.

Given the small size of the group (39 students) and the short length and time of the chat sessions (30 minutes per group in total), this analysis is qualitative rather than statistically-based, though some patterns are taken into account. These patterns are specific to these particular chat sessions and task types (debate, evaluation, personal discussion of past conditions and events, organization of future chat meetings).

4. Outline of tasks and conditions

Two groups of internal students were involved in tasks which were carried out in a networked computer laboratory, using the university's password-protected teaching and learning environment. The chat sessions were set up with the following purposes:

- evaluation of courses by students;
- providing practice in specific grammatical structures;
- researching the suitability of chatting as a pedagogical tool in both internal and external courses.

4.1. Task 1 (internal students of [Italian 3B](#))

For this task, 10 students were asked to evaluate and debate the texts and films which make up the society and culture part of the [Italian 3B](#) course. This course includes students who are in their second year, second semester of study of Italian after completing final school year Italian and [Italian 2A](#) and [2B](#). It also includes students who are in their third year of study after completing first year beginners ([Italian 1A](#) and [1B](#)) and then [Italian 2A](#) and [2B](#).

Since students seemed to have difficulty with the language of one of the literary texts, their opinions about set texts and films were probed in the chatline forum so that their suggestions could be documented and the normally quiet students would have a chance to speak up, in keeping with what CMC research suggests might occur. It was also thought that a chat session would provide more exhaustive feedback on the course than existing evaluation tools (questionnaires). The following questions were asked:

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

Well-known Italian novels and films based on these novels were offered as topics for the chat: Fontamara by Ignazio Silone, A ciascuno il suo by Leonardo Sciascia and I Malavoglia by Giovanni Verga. The lecturer/researcher did not get involved in the chat but was physically available to provide any help with technical problems. Students therefore had complete control of the discussion.

4.2. Task 2 (internal students of [Italian 2A](#))

In a chat session lasting approximately 30 minutes, 19 students of [Italian 2A](#) (first semester post final school year and post first year beginners) were asked to describe their childhood and compare their childhood with that of their parents. They were also asked to organize an appointment with other students for further chat sessions outside class time. This session was set up after two weeks of instruction dedicated to the imperfetto and passato prossimo tenses. Similar conditions to those described in [Task 1](#) were adopted, except that they involved smaller chat groups. Six chat groups were set up and students were encouraged to allow only two to four students to join each group. It was hoped that this would more closely resemble chat discussions of external students, who would be encouraged to meet in smaller group sessions or pairs, as recommended in previous studies.

5. Analysis and discussion

5.1. Quantity of language produced

A total of 263 turns were recorded during the [Italian 3B](#) session. A total of 550 turns were recorded during the [Italian 2A](#) session, in spite of the fact that some students did not spend the full allotted time chatting on the computer. The language contained in the chat logs does not include the numerous, mainly metalinguistic, exchanges which occurred between participants who were face to face, and which consisted mainly of questions regarding vocabulary, particularly requests for unknown words. Such linguistic reflections would also be worth recording in a long-term study, as in Mrowa Hopkins' [[Mrowa00](#)] work on the verbal exchanges of students working on the computer.

The [Italian 2A](#) students were encouraged to chat in small groups of three to four students. For this reason, six chat rooms were previously set up for 19 students participating in the session. However, only four rooms were used, two of which attracted six students throughout the session. One of the dyads preferred to join other groups, as they preferred to be part of a group of more than two. (see Rooms 1 and 2 in [table 2](#))

This indicates that only 17 students were actively chatting. The smaller size of the groups may also explain the additional turns which the [2A](#) session yielded (550 turns), compared with the [3B](#) session (263 turns). This may be explained by the fact that smaller groups encourage individual students to carry out more turns, as may occur in conversation.

[Table 2](#) shows the configuration of [Italian 2A](#) students and conversational turns in each chat room.

Room number	Number of students	Number of turns
Room 1	4 students actively chatting (2 additional students made brief contribution)	154
Room 2	6 students actively chatting (2 additional students made brief contribution)	221
Room 3	4 students actively chatting	135
Room 4	3 students actively chatting	40

Table 2 - Number of [Italian 2A](#) students and turns in each chat room.

It is also worth noting that while students generally adhered to the set task, a considerable amount of time was dedicated to discussion about their past and future trips to Italy, as a corollary of the main discussion on childhood. As was to be expected, while the chat logs of Room 4 were not prolific in the number of turns, they contain the longest, most complex turns of all the chat logs. This may well be related to the fact that two of the most advanced students were present in this chat room and they tended to use a more sophisticated form of language.

5.2. Repairs and incorporation of target forms

A few clear instances of attention to form were noted within the chatline discourse. They mainly related to vocabulary and spelling, which in turn could either reflect a typing error, or a pronunciation problem, as in the case of the non-target form *estro* in place of *estero* (abroad) as reported below. The data contains numerous non-target forms and in the [Italian 3B](#) session, the verb *piacere* initially triggered a series of non-target variants, due largely to the fact that students were required to express likes and dislikes. A few students started using *mi ha piaciuto* (I liked it). After using this non target form a few times, one particular student (student D in Log C, [Table 5](#)) incorporated the quasi-target form *mi è piac[i]uto*, including the correct auxiliary verb, into her contribution. It is interesting to note that this happened after student G joined the conversation and used the verb correctly ([Table 5](#)). Student G was looked up to by other students for her high academic performance.

Note that the following extracts do not belong to the beginning of the conversation, but occur after the exchange has been proceeding for a while. Thus [Table 3](#) shows turns 26 to 33, while turns 47 to 51 are reproduced in [Table 4](#) and turns 71 to 80 in [Table 5 \[3\]](#).

Speaker	Receiver(s) and Italian message	Translation
A	[student nickname], tii ha piacuto il libro	did you like the book
B	Scusa volevo dire Verismo	Sorry I meant to say Verismo
C	cos'e' Verga	What is Verga
D	[student nickname] ha piacuto molto	[] liked it a lot
E	verismo, che cos'e' questo ?	verismo, what is it?
F	E, ti piace il libro di Verga ?	E, do you like the book by Verga
A	[student nickname] E' PIACUTO IL LIBRO ???	[] DID YOU LIKE THE BOOK???
D	A, e`piacuto molto era un libro molto...	A, I liked it a lot the book was very...

Table 3 - Log A.

Speaker	Receiver(s) and Italian message	Translation
D	suza [scusa], sono d'accordo con E, pero `mi piace molto i romazi. A, chi pensi tu ?	Excuse me, I agree with E, but I like the novels a lot. A, what do you think?
A	si anche io D	Yes me too, D
A	ah grazie per il vosti commenti	Ah thanks for your comments...
B	Io preferisco i libri di oggi giorno	I prefer modern day books
D	mi ho piaciuto fontamara piu	I liked fontamara more/the most

Table 4 - Log B.

Speaker	Receiver(s) and Italian message	Translation
F	Mi piace il racconto, davvero, pero' spero che e' scritto in inglese o in italiano piu' facile	I like the story, truly, but I hope that it is written in English or in easier Italian...
D	A, hai piaciuto ?	A, did you like it?
E	vorrei dire di a ciascuno il suo [title of novel]	I'd like to say [talk about] A ciascuno il suo
E	per favore	please
C	cos'e' l'ora ?	what's the time?
G	A ciascuno il suo mi e' piaciuto [target form], forse perche era assai moderno	I liked A ciascuno il suo, maybe because it was very modern
E	mi piace molto questo libro	I like this book a lot
F	va benne [student E chatbased nickname] - sorry, [student E first name]	fine []-sorry, []
F	oops, bene	Oops, fine
D	si mi e' piaciuto [correct auxiliary but missing 'i' before 'u']	yes I liked it

Table 5 - Log C.

This series of exchanges was an interesting case of possible "implicit" feedback and self-repair occurring in the chatline context. The quasi-target form *mi è piaciuto* occurred two turns after the end of our example in a contribution by student A, who had previously used the incorrect auxiliary *avere* instead of *essere* and had excluded the indirect object pronoun *mi* (Table 3). We may assume this correction was through imitation.

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

However, such resolutions of formal issues can also occur incorrectly, again through what we may assume is imitation, this time of non target forms. In the [Italian 2A](#) chat session, the incorrect spelling (possibly based on incorrect pronunciation) of the word *estro* in place of *estero* (abroad) by student I was picked up by other students (for example student L), in spite of the fact that the correct model was provided by a more competent (near-native speaker) student, as can be observed in [Table 6](#). The table shows turns 64 to 96 in the conversation.

Locuteur	Allocutaire(s) et énoncé italien	Traduction
J	Chi vuole cominciare?	Who wants to start?
I	si... spero che	yes ... I hope that
K	Jane [deuxième prénom de J. connu du groupe car inclus dans l'identifiant de clavardage], così fai durante queste vacanze	Jane, what are you doing these holidays
L	la mia infanzia era migliore dei miei genitori perché ho molte cose che loro non hanno avuto	my childhood was better than my parents because I have many things that they didn't have.
J	Chi è Jane... e Tarzan dove sta ?	Who's Jane... and where's Tarzan?
I	hahahahahaha	Very funny!
H	si la mia infanzia ero più migliore di i miei genitori	yes my childhood was better than my parents'
L	perché, H, perché ?	why H, why?
J	sto scherzando !	I'm kidding!
I	chi sono andata all'estero durante le sue infanzia	who went abroad during their childhood
J	Si H, perché ?	Yes H why?
I	all'estero, mi scusa	abroad, I'm sorry
G	la mia infanzia era molto bello, più migliore dai miei genitori	my childhood was very pleasant, better than my parents'
I	miei	my
G	MIEI	MY
I	G. !!!	G. !!!
H	L, perché io avevo tanti giocattoli	L, because I had many toys

K	si i mei infanzia e molto piu migliore dai i mie genitore	yes my childhood is better than my parents
J	Veramente non ho mai chiesto ai miei genitori come e' stato la loro infanzia	Actually I've never asked my parents what their childhood was like
L	Si, sono andata all'estro quando ho avuto otto anni. Ho visitato l'italia	Yes, I went abroad when I was eight years old. I visited Italy
I	chi sono andata all'estro durante le sue infanza ?	who went abroad during their childhood?
H	J. e vero	J, that's true
L	grazie per la risposta H.	thanks for the answer, H
G	M, dove M ??	M, where's M??
I	Scusa L... anche io sono andata in itala	Excuse me L... I went to Italy too
H	va bene	that's OK
I	italia	italy
J	io non sono andata mai all'estero quando ero bambina solo quando ho risparmiato abbastanza soldi io (si anche lavorando al convention centre) a comprare il biglietto.	I never went abroad as a child only when I saved enough money (yes also working at the convention centre) to buy the ticket
H	e una bene idea	it's a good idea
L	si, si, si	yes, yes, yes
K	chi vole tanti soldi per andare in Italia	you need a lot of money to go to Italy
I	spero che tu vai all'estro J... anche io voglio ritorno all'estro	I hope you go abroad J, I want to go abroad again too
L	anchi'o	me too

Table 6 - [Italian 2A](#) Room 2.

A few turns later Student J repeats (deliberately or not) the correct form estero:

I, che bello 7 settimane all'estero. Quando sei andata?" (*I, 7 weeks abroad how wonderful. When did you go?*)

Finally, in spite of her previous use of estro, Student L uses the correct form later on in the conversation:

Si non posso aspettare piu di andare all'estero!!!!" (*I can't wait to go abroad!!!!*)

Without a follow up interview, it is difficult to determine whether this student resolved this spelling (or pronunciation) issue through consultation with other students, a dictionary, through imitation of student J or by recalling the target form which she already knew and recalled on this occasion.

To summarize, the [Italian 3B](#) chat logs indicate that there were four repairs. Two of these were corrections of terminology (eg. Verga was changed to Verismo). Only one repair was a result of miscommunication due to a learner's confusion in the use of an interrogative adjective and an interlocutor's clarification request: come questi (like these) was modified and became come quali romanzi? (like which novels?) in a sequence which is not reproduced in this article. This is the only case which confirms Pellettieri's [\[Pellettieri00\]](#) claim that modified or pushed output is an outcome of tasks which involve the negotiation of meaning in the context of chatting. In the [Italian 2A](#) chat

logs, six repairs are present, four were self-repairs, including the case of *estro* described previously. Two repairs were corrections prompted by other students' feedback, as in the case of *miei* shown in [Table 6](#) above.

5.3. Variety of speech acts

According to the various parameters of oral interaction described before, the chatline discussion was without doubt very interactive and conversational in style. The chat sessions contained numerous speech acts (though unspoken), including exclamations, greetings, leave-takings, well-wishing: from *auguri* (congratulations) and *buona fortuna* (good luck) to *spero che tutti i vostri sogni vengano veri* (I hope that your dreams come true). Of a total recorded 263 turns in the [Italian 3B](#) session, there were 41 questions (15.6% of total turns).

Of a total 550 turns in the [Italian 2A](#) session, there were 153 questions (28% of total turns). Within this session, the breakdown of questions per room is as follows:

- Room 1: 27 questions per 154 turns (17%)
- Room 2: 80 questions per 221 turns (36%)
- Room 3: 31 questions per 135 turns (23%)
- Room 4: 15 questions per 40 turns (37%)

The higher level of questioning and interactivity, on average, of the [Italian 2A](#) session (28%) compared with [3B](#) (15.6%) can possibly be attributed to ease of interaction promoted by smaller groups though further data is required. There were only four requests for clarification in the [Italian 3B](#) session while there were eleven such requests in the [Italian 2A](#) session. The conversations cited in [Section 5.2](#) provide a sense of the variety of functions present in the chat sessions.

5.4. Discourse markers

Discourse markers such as *d'accordo* (do you agree?), *no* (don't you think?) or *e tu?* (what do you think?) at the end of a question were present to elicit a response and *scusa* (hey/excuse me) and *scusa volevo dire* (excuse me I wanted to say) to draw attention to a statement. There were also instances of discourse markers such as *beh!* (well!), *per rispondere alla tua domanda* (to answer your question) and *vorrei dire di* (I wanted to talk about) or *volevo dire a tutti* (I wanted to say to everyone) to take the floor or introduce an opinion.

There were also many discourse markers which might be classified as feedback tokens. For example *davvero!* (really!), *ah sì!* (is that so!), *anch'io!* (me too!), *brava* (excellent/good on you). *D'accordo* (I agree) and *e' vero* (that's true) were used copiously to express agreement. In the total 263 turns of the [Italian 3B](#) session, 86 discourse markers were present. *Sì* and *no* have been included as indicators of feedback to questions and observations, as can occur in conversation. In the 550 turns of the [Italian 2A](#) session, there were 156 discourse markers, not including emoticons.

6. Conclusion

The data described above provides some evidence of the high level of interactivity and hence of the oral nature of chat discourse. The interactivity which simulates real-time oral discourse is evident in the level of questioning and use of discourse markers, including feedback tokens. The practice of such interactional strategies would be of use to external students who aim to become competent speakers of the target language, even though they will not have access to the supportive verbal interactions which a laboratory based exercise provides. The small corpus described in this paper also appears to confirm previous research on the advantages of smaller group sessions. The [Italian 2A](#) session which involved slightly smaller chat groups appeared in fact to be more interactive than the larger [Italian 3B](#) group session, as evidenced by the higher number of questions and clarification requests. The higher level of interactivity of the [Italian 2A](#) session may however also be due to the fact that the task on childhood was more personal than the evaluative [Italian 3B](#) task thus promoting increased motivation and participation in the chat by students.

Future research on similar chatline tasks needs to be based on long term monitoring of learners' logs to establish patterns, especially where negotiation of meaning and interlanguage development are concerned. Interaction with untrained native speakers on public chatlines in one to one chat sessions may yield different results since such interlocutors are less likely to tolerate non target linguistic forms and learners are more likely to make use of the native speaker's linguistic expertise. The chat sessions described in this paper indicate that learners are very tolerant of one another's non target forms; without the presence of an expert or more competent learner, they may occasionally also imitate non-target forms. The number of repairs and clarification requests is quite low, and requires comparison with chat sessions involving dyads which include one native speaker.

Nonetheless, it is clear from previous studies and samples of student chat logs presented in this paper that there are many aspects of chatting between learners that make it worth investigating further. Student logs indicate that in spite of some important missing elements, chatting is possibly closer to oral communication than to the written variety. While chatting cannot be labelled "speaking practice", it is worth introducing as a small proportion of the assessment for both internal and particularly external students whose speaking skills and interlanguage development may be assisted by this highly interactive and conversational communication tool.

The focus of assessment would ideally need to be on pragmatic aspects of learners' interactions, as might occur in the assessment of oral proficiency or in this case, authentic informal written dialogue. In such a case, pragmatic competence would also need to be a focus of teaching and learning. If not, widely used oral proficiency assessment criteria such as fluency, richness of vocabulary and grammatical accuracy are appropriate. Learners' discourse management strategies and efforts in using the target language idiomatically (with minimal transfer from first language structures and expressions) also need to be taken into account. Given that chatting seems to promote negotiation, assessment criteria should promote and reward the ability to negotiate. Learners would thus be encouraged to reflect openly on linguistic issues and rewrite their contributions with corrections where this doesn't interrupt the conversation flow. Assessment of chat contributions would require consideration of the fact that learners are "thinking on their feet" and have little time for revision, particularly in small group interactions where typing of responses often causes delays in the conversation. They also lack the non-verbal support of real-life interactions though they have slightly more time to consult a dictionary.

Tasks which promote authentic interaction are particularly suited to chat participants who are enrolled at a distance. For example, the setting up of email or SMS exchanges, organizing virtual or "real-life" meetings, exchange and discussion of photographs, getting to know one another, description of one's place of origin, discussion of learning issues and use of the chat tool to collaborate in projects involving the World Wide Web are all suitable authentic activities which are likely to promote oral-like interaction.

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Notes

[1] By "monitoring" we mean both corrective feedback and formal assessment.

[2] Teleconferencing via computer is worth considering in future as a conversation option for distance-learners but is currently limited by bandwidth and low take-up issues. Email exchanges and written discussion forums have been excluded from this list of conversational activities, in spite of their use in University of South Australia distance language programs and potentially high level of interactivity. Only voice based and real-time communication tools have been included.

[3] The chat discourse is reported *verbatim*, including the use of quotation marks in place of accents. Student identity numbers have been replaced with a neutral letter of the alphabet which permits tracking of the discourse. Identifying names or nicknames which have been used within the discourse are indicated in square brackets. Explanations are provided in square brackets. The translation is literal, though it does not reflect non target forms. These forms are emphasized in the original Italian where they are relevant to the analysis.

[*] **Note from the editorial board:** [The French version](#) of the same article written by V. Tudini is published in this issue.

[**] **Note from the editorial board:** A table similar to Table 1 is included and discussed in a little more depth in an article by the present author, published in 2003 in the journal *Language Learning and Technology*, vol 7, 3, : "Using Native Speakers in Chat". Last visited November 2003: <http://llt.msu.edu/vol7num3/tudini/default.html>.

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