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A day in the life of an online language educator

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Yaodong ([Meet Yaodong](#)) is an English teacher in Liuzhou, China. He has very large classes of smiling young students, as we can see from images broadcast from his web cams. You can imagine that one of the greatest challenges for an English teacher in the vast interior of China is arranging for students to have communicative language practice and exposure to authentic target language through interaction with native speakers of English. In previous years this would have been out of the question for the majority of Yaodong's students. But since Yaodong is willing to experiment with the Internet, he is able to bring native speakers to his large classes quite often. This is all the more remarkable when you consider that Yaodong's budget supports only the most basic computer equipment and, fortunately, an Internet connection.

Permission granted by Yaodong Chen for use of this photo, Dec 17, 2002

How does Yaodong do it? Like many 'wired' language teachers these days, Yaodong has got quite adept at applying to his purposes many of the CMC (computer-mediated communications) tools available for free on the Internet. Specifically, he

1. keeps current about what tools are available
2. experiments with the tools he finds, and
3. joins communities of like-minded educators who help him practice with the tools and keep him informed of latest developments.

The process percolates through cycles of learning more about CMC technology and experimenting with what is learned, thus being in a position to learn more, etc. The notion of community is crucial to this process. Yaodong's community of teaching colleagues spans the globe. The community expands as members introduce

each other to other colleagues online or gather either spontaneously or by design in common chat areas (which might even include f2f or 'face to face' meetings at international conferences).

It becomes obvious to anyone wishing to start out with CMC that the first hurdle is to find a remote partner to experiment with. Once you begin to interact with a community, partners appear out of the virtual woodwork. Thus the community serves not only to inform, but also to assist with experimentation.

Partners are essential to the percolation process. For example, suppose I install a web cam and want to see if it works. One good way to find out is to go online and check my buddy lists to find someone else who is online at the same time I am. I use several programs that tell me when other users of those programs are online; for example, ICQ, MSN Messenger, and Yahoo Messenger. My buddy lists are full of people I have met over the years whom I can see online and who can see me online. Chances are there will be someone online that I can ask if he or she can see my web cam. Most (probably all :-) people in my virtual community are more than willing to take a few minutes to help each other with online troubleshooting or items of this nature. If called upon, I will try to respond, because I might need a similar assist tomorrow, and more importantly, helping others with what they are trying to do online is how I gain greater familiarity with the tools and learn how to use them myself.

Yaodong has often asked me to help him surmount this or that technological hurdle, join him at an interesting Internet site, or take a moment to speak with his students or with his colleagues before whom he is using or demonstrating techniques with CMC tools. In one such instance he met some of our students at the MLI online (using a dialup connection in my office; Webheads chat logs from December 11, 2001). In another, we engineered a meeting between students in his class and one in Turkey (Webheads chat logs from October 29-Nov 3, 2001). That encounter presaged a reunion of the two classes before a live audience at the Teacher to Teacher 2001 conference in Abu Dhabi (Webheads chat logs from November 7, 2001), as reported in Stevens and Altun (2002).

Yaodong is also a great one for trying things out online. Once for example, he asked me how to broadcast a PowerPoint presentation running on his computer to mine. I had no idea but together we figured it out, and eventually I was running the application on his computer from mine, using Netmeeting. The point is that, before Yaodong asked me about it from half a world away in Liuzhou China, I had no idea you could do that with Netmeeting, let alone how, and after our encounter, we both knew. On another occasion Yaodong contacted me for help in answering riddles in English. It turned out he was at a MOO called Grassroots. One characteristic of MOOs is that they can have 'bots' to interact with real people who visit the MOO. Yaodong had found a bot at Grassroots that asks riddles and handles attempts at answering them. Yaodong was doing these with his students who were getting language practice not only with comprehending and attempting to answer the riddles, but through interaction with native English speakers in the 'greater' online environment who were available at the time to help them understand the riddles and their possible answers. And Yaodong was making use of the native speakers in his online community to successfully compensate for his own shortcomings in the language he was teaching, thus overcoming a common problem often faced by non-native speaker teachers of foreign languages.

This kind of interaction is fairly typical among community members who might find each other online and ask for help to test a Netmeeting connection or troubleshoot a firewall, or even join each other in conference presentations. Proponents of participation in such communities feel that they encourage scaffolding among members of the type suggested in the socioculture theory of Vygotsky (Gallagher, n.d.), which underpins constructivist (Ryder, 2002) approaches to language learning, such as that embodied in the work of Bruner (Kearsley, 2002). More recently there has been increased interest among language educators using CMC in how these principles mediate the formation and functioning of communities of practice (Snyder, n.d.), a construct articulated particularly well by Etienne Wenger (e.g. Wenger, 1998). Essentially, communities of practice are groups of people who meet to discuss a topic (technically, a 'domain') of interest to community members. This topic will be of such interest to CoP members that they will be intrinsically motivated to enhance their understanding of the topic through frequent interaction in order to further their work or interest in the field to which the topic pertains. Obviously, CMC tools can promote the development of communities of practice over distances.

This brings us to the question of what CMC tools best lend themselves to distance language practice and formation and cohesion of communities of practice. Here are some considerations:

1. Cost - essentially, these tools must be free (to members of the community). If they are to appeal to a broad spectrum of users, then they must be simply 'downloadable' by anyone in the community with an Internet connection.
2. Usability - the tools must easy and intuitive to use. There should be easy installation, no complicated registration, and intuitive interface
3. Multicasting - in order to engage groups of people, the ideal CMC tools need to broadcast one-to-many. Text easily meets this test, but the choices for multicasting voice and video (for free!) are limited.
4. Cross platform - this is a hard one, but the ideal CMC tools run on Mac *and* PC
5. Eclecticism - there is no need to look for an all-in-one CMC tool. Several communications tools can usually be run simultaneously over slow Internet connections on common denominator computers (although users can normally have only one sound and one video device running from the same computer at any given time). Thus CMC enthusiasts can select from a choice of clients according to need balanced against the foregoing considerations.

And the winner(s) is (are) ...

First, we'll eliminate some otherwise strong contenders for the reasons indicated below:

No longer free: If we filter down through our 5 considerations, we find that some tools that have been used recently in language learning and other CMC contexts are no longer free. Wimba, for example, gave users the ability to create threaded voice-boards without cost. Now, these voice boards are no longer *freely* available (although I have found that you can still send voice email in demo mode from the Wimba web site). Wimba is a great product and has working relations with Longman, IBM, and Blackboard; but users must now purchase the ability to create threaded voice boards. Another fairly robust voice chat client is Chatterbox. Chatterbox allows the creation of voice chat rooms to accommodate numerous users, but again, it's not free (Chatterbox can be tried out online at StudyCom English for Internet).

Not easy to use: Most of the free CMC tools that I am aware of are fairly easy to use (with the possible exception of iVisit, but we won't reject it on this count, for reasons you will see in a moment).

Do not support multiple conference users: We can eliminate a few at this point that (in their freely downloadable form) are strictly one-to-one. This is the case with MSN Messenger's voice enhanced chat, and Netmeeting (which wins points on ease of use when conveniently launched from an MSN Messenger session). Netmeeting is an excellent CMC tool, with a useful whiteboard in addition to voice and video broadcast. The whiteboard enables users, for example, to draw or paste an image onto the whiteboard of one computer and have it appear on the whiteboard of the remote computer (very handy). Server software to enable Netmeeting multicasting is available but, unfortunately, not for free.

Allow multicasting: Still standing are three free chat clients that will enable voice and video multicasts. PalTalk will allow one voice speaker at a time to communicate in conference with multiple listeners, and these conference participants can select up to 4 available web cams to view at any one time. Yahoo Messenger does even better than that, allowing voice users to meet en masse and speak in duplex in conference mode, with voice quality and users allowed seemingly limited only by bandwidth available. Yahoo also allows broadcast and reception of multiple web cams, again limited it seems only by system resources available to the computer (with Yahoo Messenger, I can easily get a half dozen web cams and a dozen voice users communicating over a 56k dialup connection on a PIII laptop, 500 MHz, with 192 meg of RAM, assuming a robust feed from the dialup). Further good news for Yahoo Messenger is that Mac users can broadcast and receive video, though it seems that they can't access Yahoo Messenger voice yet.

Multicasting AND cross-platform: Enter iVisit, a cross-platform Mac and PC chat client that allows free creation of chat rooms and the ability to get multiple web cams and voice users therein. However, in practice,

and on the laptop computer mentioned above, I have found the down side to be that the interface is not intuitive (how *do* you create a chatroom?), voice can be erratic or not function at all, and the video display is inferior to Yahoo's. However, if the community contains both Mac and PC users, and if there is a need for voice and video enabled chat, iVisit is currently the only choice, with Yahoo Messenger however becoming increasingly friendly to Mac users.

The best in text chat: We haven't mentioned text chat. All the above clients are text-enabled, and this is important when sound is not clear, or when someone wants to copy and paste a URL that the others in the conference can click on. Most of these I believe will also allow you to save your chats (though Yahoo Messenger conference chat never saves when I do it, just gives me a zero byte file, so I have to copy from the chat window and paste to an application if I want to keep a record, which is supremely inconvenient). But the best free text chat client, in my opinion, is neither voice nor video enabled. This is [TappedIn](#), the portal for a community of educators who can join for free, keep and decorate offices, have chat transcripts mailed to them, join in online community activities, have avatars, project URLs on remote computers, and avail themselves of other features ranging from the amusing to truly utilitarian.

My choices: So down to the final consideration, being eclectic ... the ideal CMC environment available today is an amalgam of all that is useful above. My own choice for multimedia CMC is to meet in Tapped In and then open a multiple-user voice chat conference in Yahoo Messenger and share video windows with those who have web cams. If Mac users are present though, iVisit might be the best bet, but look for Yahoo to do more in the future to accommodate Mac users.

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Grassroots - Enabling Support Foundation - http://www.enabling.org/grassroots/
Tapped In - SRI International - http://www.tappedin.org

Software mentioned and where to get it

Blackboard - Blackboard Inc. - http://www.blackboard.com (license required)
Chatterbox voice chat client - Talking Communities Online - http://www.talkingcommunities-online.com/Client.html (license required)
ICQ - ICQ.com - http://web.icq.com (free)
iVisit - iVisit - http://www.ivisit.com (free)
MSN Messenger - MSN - http://messenger.msn.com (free)
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