
Splendid Speaking Articles

Topic: Do You Skype?

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This article first appeared in *ETp* (English Teaching Professional) in Issue 56



TECHNOLOGY

Do You Skype

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It has never been a better time to study languages. Developments in technology offer our learners many opportunities to use the internet for language learning, whether through online interactive quizzes, downloaded podcasts for authentic listening practice or through connections made with the various networking sites like *Facebook* or *Myspace*. One of the most practical technologies for the language learner which has emerged in recent years is 'instant messaging', a way of communicating from computer to computer instantaneously by text, voice or videocam.

Capacity to communicate

Language teachers will all be aware of two inherent limitations of class-based language learning. Conversation time is valued highly by our learners and yet speaking opportunities are at a premium in face-to-face sessions. What's more, until recently, frequent practice with native speakers (for many) has been out of their reach. Thanks to instant messaging, this no longer needs to be the case. Whether studying alone or as part of a group, with tools like *Windows Live* and *Yahoo Messenger*, students can now speak to others in all four corners of the world at a time that suits them – and it's absolutely free!

If you've yet to dabble in instant messaging and worry that it's all a bit too high-tech, then think again. These tools are quick to learn and allow users to text chat, make telephone-style voice calls and even video conference from one computer to another with very little technical expertise required. So, whether you want to offer flexible speaking opportunities for your students, link up with native speakers or simply keep in touch with your favourite auntie on the other side of the world, the opportunity is now just a mouse click away.

Let's look at one tool in particular: *Skype*, found at www.skype.com. *Skype* allows you to call a single *Skype* user or run conference sessions with up to five other people free of charge. You can also host a 'Skypecast', essentially a session open to the public, which allows up to 100 people into a 'room' at the same time and gives the moderator, that's you, the choice of who speaks and when. So, whether your needs are for a one-to-one chat, an online paired or group discussion or a formal presentation or lecture, you can do it with *Skype*. And, with the addition of a third-party simple-to-use product, these conversations and presentations can even be recorded for people to listen to later as podcast-style audio files!

Starting *Skype*

Begin by installing the *Skype* software on your computer; this should really have a broadband connection for *Skype* to work at its best. If you're intending to use *Skype* from within your institution, there are bandwidth considerations which your local technicians will want to think about first. An overview of these can be found at www.ja.net/documents/services/vas/skype-janet.pdf.

If you're planning to use *Skype* on your own computer, then head over to www.skype.com and download the latest version. The *Skype* window will eventually contain a list of your contacts with an icon to the left of each ID informing you of the person's availability. To start building your list of contacts, you simply click the 'Add contact' button and search for a person's ID. You then request the individual's contact details; they will be asked to accept this request, and if they're happy to be your contact, they agree and their details will be added to your list. Once they've agreed, it's simply a case of highlighting their name in the list and clicking the green 'Call' button to start a conversation. When you've finished speaking, you end the call by clicking the red button.

Using *Skype*

Your learners will need to create a list of contacts interested in practising English. To start with this could be other members of the class and your students can simply swap *Skype* addresses. You could extend this to include students at another school you have close links with. To connect with a wider audience, there are community sites where your students will be able to join and request speaking partners. They can do this independently, for example through our own *Splendid Speaking* forum or *Facebook* group, details of which appear on the *Splendid Speaking* website, or as part of collaboration with other classes (see *Mixer* below). There are of course dangers in connecting with strangers online and the extent to which you encourage your learners to do this independently will be determined by your student profile. The younger your learners, the more likely it is you'll prefer to adopt a managed, class/school collaboration approach.

When you're ready to try *Skype* out with your learners, the uses of instant messaging are limited only by your imagination. Here are a few suggestions you could use ranging from communication between class members only through to wider connections:

- A good start might be a learner independence session on safe chatting, including choice of ID, what to post in a user's profile and issues about connecting with strangers. See Vicki Davis's blog for a nice overview of how she managed this with her students: coolcatteacher.blogspot.com/2006/10/using-skype-in-classroom-or-just.html.
- If you're looking for engaging websites that cover safety issues which you can use with your students, try these:
www.thinkuknow.co.uk
www.chatdanger.com
- Before they take part in conversations with strangers, a gentle introduction for students new to *Skype* can involve discussions with their colleagues. Organise out-of-class pair or group discussions in *Skype* with a clear task focus to run prior to or after a face-to-face session.
- Set up an exchange with learners from another city in the same country. Students can interview each other for project work and even prepare for a visit to each other's school.
- Set up an international exchange with another school and pair your class up with students wishing to study your students' mother tongue. For learners studying in a non-English-speaking country, the chance to converse with native speakers will be very motivating. Exchanges with schools in different regions of a country will also introduce your learners to a range of accents. A fantastic site to help you do this is 'The Mixxer' at: www.language-exchanges.org.
- Make your timetabling more flexible by organising out-of-hours tutorials, especially for students with access to the internet at home.
- Organise a 'conference call' for up to five people for an out-of-hours session on an exam the group are preparing for or a language 'question and answer' session.
- Do you need to practise your presentation skills? Do you have an area of expertise you'd like to share with a wider audience? Organise a 'Skypecast' around a subject of your choice and advertise the subject and time on the *Skype* website. You'll get up to 100 guests arriving. Listeners can text comments during your talk and you can open the discussion up to the audience towards the end. You might choose to script or semi-script your talk since speaking to a microphone with no feedback from others can prove quite difficult without the help of notes. Find out more at: <https://skypecasts.skype.com/skypecasts/home>.
- With the addition of a third-party product like *Powergramo* (www.powergramo.com) or *Audacity*, you can record these conversations. You will, of course, need the consent of the people taking part and should never record someone without getting their permission first. *Powergramo* is particularly easy to use; it installs itself within *Skype* and records automatically. When the conversation is over, you simply save the finished file in MP3 format and distribute it on your institution's network, or intranet. Failing this, email the file to your students for them to listen to on their PC or MP3 players. If you're feeling really adventurous, the recording could even form the basis of a podcast. Our own *Splendid Speaking* site has many examples of recordings of students participating in exam-style tasks, which were recorded using *Skype* and *Powergramo*:
www.splendid-speaking.com.

In addition to these pedagogic uses, *Skype* can be employed by your institution for more strategic purposes. With a school *Skype* address, initial enquiries could be made for free by prospective learners. Your school could even carry out informal assessment of prospective students using short *Skype* interviews. And, of course, if your institution is looking into the possibility of running distance or blended learning courses, then instant messaging tools like *Skype* will be an invaluable addition.

Things to watch out for

As with simple telephone conversations, lack of body language or eye contact can cause communication to suffer, as turn-taking will often be awkward for those new to instant messaging. Your students can overcome this to an extent by making use of expressions to signpost they are handing over to their partner, such as *What about you? What do you think? Have you? Do you?* etc. In addition, students taking part in language exchanges with native speakers are likely to find themselves outside their comfort zone as unfamiliar accents and use of idiomatic language may make the conversation difficult. Students may benefit from developing coping strategies, such as how to ask for repetition or clarification.

One or two technical considerations include remembering to use headphones – otherwise the person at the other end will hear their voice coming back to them as well as your own. And it is worth spending time experimenting with how far away from your mouth the microphone needs to be. If it's too far away, you'll come across very faint; too close and there'll be lots of 'pops' and distortion.

These issues aside, *Skype* and other instant messaging tools will offer you an exciting addition to your teaching repertoire, give your learners real-world speaking experiences, create opportunities to build confidence through fluency practice and, of course, offer a wonderful opportunity for cross-cultural understanding through exchanges. And if adopted widely at a managerial level by your institution, these tools can offer flexible solutions to classroom overload and even open up new markets. Give it a try and see what you think, and please let us know about your experiments with *Skype* at *Splendid Speaking*.

Peter Travis is the co-founder of Flo-Joe, a website for Cambridge Exam preparation. He also manages the *Splendid Speaking* website at www.splendid-speaking.com, which features podcasts of students participating in exam-style interviews. Teachers can now sign up to the 'Teaching with ICT' newsletter at the *Splendid Speaking* website: www.splendid-speaking.com/teachers.

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