Perceptions of Anonymity in a Language Learning Text Chat Room

Karen Bond (teacherkaren@hotmail.com)
Global English, U.S.A. and Leicester University, England

Introduction

The hosted chat room is a new and novel place for language learners to improve their written and even spoken fluency skills. It is a real-time text chat community on the Internet, where students 'chat' (write) synchronously. With the advent of the hosted text chat room, students now have the opportunity to communicate with native speaker teachers, in an uninhibited manner, as this mode of communication gives them a high degree of anonymity. This paper seeks to explore how and why students exploit this anonymity, how anonymity can be helpful, or a drawback, in a language learning context, and what the implications are for teachers. A small-scale study has been carried out to explore these questions and will be discussed later on in this paper.

Review of Literature on Online Anonymity

Learning English in a chat room is a relatively new concept, and there has therefore been little research done on this topic, let alone the affects of anonymity on language students. There has, however, been much research done on anonymity in chat rooms in general. This literature review aims to bring together and critique the contributions to this topic, and discuss their relevance to a language learning context.

Chat rooms are places on the Internet where multiple users can go to communicate with each other in real-time, also known as 'synchronous computer-mediated communication' (CMC). Allen & Guy (1974) call it 'interactive written discourse'.

Anonymity and identity are key elements of the chat room. The user has the power to decide how much other users know about his/her true identity. One can hide or change one's name, gender, age, or social status (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), as well as personality, appearance, occupation, etc. Anonymity can have the effect of egalitarianism, with only your contributions being what others judge you upon (Parrish, 2001). It also gives the freedom to construct a new identity, to:

- maintain one's privacy.
- lose one's inhibitions (Parrish, 2001).
- invent stories either for entertainment, to get a point of view across (Parrish, 2001), or to deceive.
- be able to behave differently, for example, more informally or openly.
- 'gender-bend' (Spender, 1995), to fool a user, to experiment with one's sexual identity, or to be taken more seriously.
- be protected from prejudice (Spender, 1995).

Frizler (1995) suggests language learners may choose to maintain their anonymity to:

- avoid losing face.
- take risks. Lightbown & Spada (1993) comment that taking risks due to a loss of inhibition is considered vital in the progress of learning a language.
- be in a more equal environment, where not one student will dominate.
- be able to ignore the postings of particular students that they do not connect with.
- not feel the need to compete, and be free from peer pressure.
- be on a more equal footing with the teacher.

The flaws in Frizler's argument are that she only takes into consideration the teacher's perception, not questioning the students, and does not discuss any drawbacks.

The chat room goes further than role-play, a traditional technique for encouraging students to lose their inhibitions in the classroom, which Smith (1986) notes as being dominated by the more fluent students. Unlike role-playing, students in the chat room can also participate whenever and however much they want. Kern (1995) and Warschauer (1996) both discovered that students produce more of the target language in a CMC environment than in a traditional speaking lesson. Perhaps this is due to the unpredictability of the class, the authentic language, and a more fun atmosphere (Cadorath & Harris, 1998), as well as the loss of inhibition.

However, there are some disadvantages specific to the anonymity of learners. Backer (1998) notes that 'flaming' (unnecessary harsh criticism) by the teacher or other students, which would not have happened in a face-to-face setting, could make students more anxious or demotivated.

Discipline may be a problem, as students become more open and direct. Harmer (1991) suggests adopting a code of conduct, establishing this code over the first few lessons. But this is not practical in such an online environment, as there are constantly new students, and the teacher never knows when and if each student will return. For the students who do return, however, there is a unique system of understanding (Reid, 1991), an unwritten code, and pressure from the teacher and peers to adhere to that code. Respect and goodwill between the teacher and students, which can also limit discipline problems (Ur, 1991), is also something developed over time.

Anonymity can make it difficult for the teacher to get to know his/her students, which Harmer (1991) suggests is 'obviously necessary' to be able to select appropriate activities. One can never be sure if the user is telling the truth, but it is impossible to be purely anonymous for an extended period, as to build a relationship, one needs to divulge some personal history and establish a reputation (Donath, 1996). If the teacher does not have adequate knowledge of the student, then she/he will have difficulty in providing for that student.

In conclusion, research has shown that anonymity in a language learning chat room is generally supported for its role in enabling students to lower their inhibitions, be treated equally, and encourage learner responsibility. Drawbacks have generally been overlooked, but it should be noted that there is a risk of discipline problems, 'flaming' and for the teacher to not be able to fulfil a student's needs.

There has been very little empirical evidence published on this issue, and this paper seeks to redress that, by presenting data collected from both students and teachers.

The Research

Background

The research was undertaken in the on-line school in which I work, established in 1999, to provide quality online instruction. The chat room is hosted by qualified and experienced native-speaker instructors, round the clock. Students are encouraged to ask questions about English grammar, vocabulary, and culture, and to practise their conversational writing skills.

The students are from all around the world, in both EFL and ESL contexts. The dominating nationalities are Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, and Brazilian. They are of all ages, from mid-teens, and most are either university students or work. The students in this research were not selected randomly, as there are so many who enter the room just once, and I would not have had the chance to build rapport or trust with them. However, there is a large number of regular students, so twelve males and ten females were selected randomly from that group. They are of all ages, some are students, some work. Most live in their home country, but several are in an ESL context. Most are at an intermediate level, but there are also basic and advanced students.

Purpose

The purposes of this exploratory study are:

- to discover both students' and teachers' perceptions of anonymity in the chat room.
- to discuss the implications.

Instrumentation

The Survey

Students were approached in the chat room and were told about the purpose of the study. They were asked if they would like to participate, and their email addresses were extracted. A survey (Table 1) was sent out and then returned to me. I never met these students face-to-face.

Table 1.
The Survey

1	Do you ever change your identity in the chat room?
2	What do you change? - Gender (from male to female, or female to male) - Age - Nationality - Job - Location - User name - Anything else?
3	Who do you lie to? - Teacher - Other students
4	Why do you change your identity?
5	Why do you think some male students pretend to be female, and some female students pretend to be male?
6	What questions could you ask to detect a male user pretending to be a female user? (without asking the obvious question 'Are you male?')
7	Have you ever mistaken the gender of a student, and then only found out later?
8	Why did you think they were of the opposite gender?
9	Do you ever behave in a certain way in the chat room that would not be acceptable in your 'real life'/culture? For example, more direct, less polite, more open. Can you explain?
10	What do you think are the advantages of the relative anonymity that you have in a hosted chat room when learning English?
	Any other comments?

Teachers' feedback

Teachers at the school were sent an email, asking for comments on the issue. Several questions were asked, but mainly to stimulate idea. I also participated in this exercise, by taking notes on my personal experiences.

Limitations

This was an exploratory study and, given its modest scope, conditions did not exist for a totally random sampling, or for the interviewing of a large number of students, which makes it difficult to make generalisations about the topic.

The students were sent surveys by email, which seemed to be an effective method for tapping into their views. They may not have been completely honest with their answers, for fear of offending the teacher, although a healthy rapport had already been established between the teacher and these students. The respondents may have misinterpreted some of the questions, although I rephrased them if I received irrelevant answers.

There was also a possibility of researcher bias in the findings, as I was looking at the subject from the inside. To avoid this, I ensured there was feedback not only from the students but also from other instructors.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected in the form of the students' written responses to the survey, feedback from teachers in emails, and observations. The answers to the survey were tabulated, percentages calculated, and the results analysed to establish trends. The teachers' feedback was written in letter form, and their comments were noted, and added to my list, to discover common experiences. Observation notes were taken periodically, particularly when a new issue about anonymity arose.

Findings

Students' Comments and Perceptions

Thirteen of the students (59%) admitted to changing their identity at some point in the chat room. Fifteen of them said they changed their user name, five changed their age or location, three their nationality or job, two their characteristics, and, most surprisingly, no one admitted to changing their gender. 'Gender-bending' is a well-discussed topic, but does not seem to be relevant in an online learning environment. This is not to say it does not happen, and the respondents did seem to be aware of this issue, and how to identify a gender-bender through the use of questions, like 'Do you have a boyfriend?', 'Do you spend much money on cosmetics?' etc. Other suggested questions, along with the complete results of all the questions, can be found in Appendix A at the end of this paper.

The respondents were more likely to lie about their identity to other students (64%) than to the teacher (46%). It was interesting to discover why they would change their identity:

	#	%
For fun	7	32
To avoid a teacher	7	32
To avoid particular students	7	32
Didn't explain	7	32
To reflect/change my mood	3	14
To play a different role	3	14
To get a different reaction	3	14
Do not want to be recognised	2	9
Lack of confidence	2	9
To protect my privacy	2	9
To look for a friend without feeling obliged to stay	2	9
To have a different view of life	2	9

What is particularly interesting is that anonymity gives students the ability to avoid the teachers or students that they do not have a good relationship with. This is practically impossible in the regular classroom.

Even though no respondent admitted to gender-bending, 82% had mistaken the gender of a user before, mostly because of the confusing user name (41%), but also because of the expressions used, and the attitude.

Asked why people might choose to gender-bend, the respondents suggested that it was mostly for fun (36%). It might also be to play a joke (23%), to get to know how the other gender thinks (18%), to get closer to/attract the opposite sex (18%), to get more attention (14%), and to deal with a sexual identity problem (14%).

When asked the question "Do you ever behave in a certain way in the chat room that would not be acceptable in your 'real-life'/culture?", 50% (11) said yes. Everyone who indicated 'yes' stated that it made them feel more open and free to give their opinion. Harry said:

> I can feel free here when speaking some political-related issues. If i dare enough to speak out what i really think, i could be hanged by Chinese government

Thirteen said they were more direct, and four admitted to being less polite. Nearly a third (6) felt less shy and more expressive, four more outgoing, and two were able to talk about sex and were more flirty.

What is perhaps the most interesting result of the survey, from a teacher's perspective, is that of Question 10: What do you think are the advantages of the relative anonymity that you have in a hosted chat room when learning English? 41% (9) said that it enables them to make mistakes without losing face. Students noted that it is a less stressful environment, and allows you to take more risks, lose your inhibitions. However, 14% (3) of respondents felt there were no advantages of anonymity, and one student said that face-to-face interaction is better. Another student mentioned that anonymity might cause discipline problems. But overall, the respondents felt that the chat room is a positive environment in which to learn English.

Teachers' Comments and Observations

The teachers mostly commented favourably about teaching and learning in a chat room, and these issues have already been discussed in the literature review and in the previous section. However, the teachers also noted negative aspects of anonymity, which is interesting, as there appears to be very little published on this.

Discipline - As students can come and go as they please, even after being forcibly 'kicked out' by the teacher (they can return under a different name), and as most have not paid for a course, so have not given the school any personal information, it can sometimes be a challenge to discipline disruptive students. This is a common complaint among teachers. However, discipline is an issue for all kinds of teachers, and I do not think that it is necessarily worse in the chat room, although not being able to see the teacher, and knowing that you can disappear at any time, might make the temptation greater. Some might disagree with me though.

Teachers pretending to be Students - It is usually easy to identify a native speaker, often a teacher checking out the site, or doing research. It can be extremely annoying therefore when that native speaker pretends to be a learner.

Hacking - The school has experienced one hacker, who took pleasure in sending vulgar private messages to students as if from the teacher. The technicians managed to ban him/her, but there is always the possibility that this will happen again.

Non-Participation - Students are not accountable for their actions, due to anonymity, so may `lurk` in the chat room, or even be in two rooms at once.

Lack of Privacy - Although you would expect to get a lot of privacy in an on-line environment, chatting day-in, day-out with students, and feeling relatively secure in your anonymity, can mean divulging far more information about yourself than you would ever do with regular students.

Misunderstandings - Lack of face-to-face interpersonal communication (lack of feeling you know your student), lack of non-verbal communication, plus different cultures and different native languages, can result in miscommunication and misunderstandings.

So although from a teacher's perspective, there are many advantages to teaching and learning online, the negative aspects should be noted, and considered, when preparing an online class.

Implications & Conclusion

As a result of this small-scale research, it can be seen that the teacher needs guidelines to deal with the issue of anonymity in this new mode of instruction. The teacher needs to be aware that:

The chat room is more learner-centred than the traditional classroom, and the teacher must be willing to give up the dominant role and focus on the students, or risk non-participation or discipline problems. Students should be encouraged to collaborate and peer correct.

● Anonymity can make students become more responsible for their learning, as it might make them feel a heightened sense of empowerment (Davies & Wells, 1992), making them less inhibited.

- Teachers need to not only have traditional grammar knowledge but also have an awareness of chat-dialogue peculiarities.
- Traditional methods of discipline may not work. There should be the facility to remove a disruptive student in extreme cases, but perhaps the teacher should be extra-tolerant in the chat room, aware that anonymity offers the student the opportunity to be more open and opinionated.
- The online learning environment can foster close relationships between the teacher and the student (Kilian, 1994), as the teacher/student may feel his/her privacy is protected by anonymity. The teacher should try to be honest with the students, but avoid giving such personal details as family members' names, hometowns, etc.
- There is a need to identify the interactive preferences of each learner. Each student could have their journal that they can write in, accessible to the teacher.
- Misunderstandings may occur, resulting in inflaming. The teacher should avoid sarcasm or any other ambiguous humour or expressions. However, making jokes and playing games can aid the teacher in getting closer to students and building trust.
- The user name can be a reflection on a student's personality, but could also be misleading, so the teacher should be careful to avoid making assumptions.
- The chat room has a distinct culture, and students can become a part of this unique community, with strong feelings of belonging and ownership. Encouraging students to contact each other outside the room can heighten this sense of community. The teacher needs to structure activities like this to enable students to get to know each other better. Some students may find it difficult to communicate with total strangers and to build a relationship with them.
- It is important to show that the teacher recognises a returning student when he/she enters.
- The chat room is not the place for constant error correction, because although the students do have a degree of privacy, it can still be humiliating to be corrected in front of one's peers.

Anonymity in an online learning community is an often neglected topic, but it can be seen from the review, and the small-scale research, that it is important to address this issue if one wants to achieve success in online teaching. Anonymity offers learners protection from humiliation, which can make them less inhibited and more open, which can only enhance the learning process. But the teacher must also be aware that anonymity brings with it less positive issues, such as discipline, lack of privacy, non-participation, misunderstandings, and even hacking.

There is still very little research published on this specific aspect of online learning, and I would recommend that other online teachers undertake further exploratory studies to establish standards for dealing with anonymity.

Bibliography

Allen, D. & Guy, R. (1974). *Conversation Analysis: The Sociology of Talk*, The Hague: Mouton & Company, pp47.

Cadorath, J. & Harris, S. (1998). Unplanned classroom language and teacher training, *ELT Journal*, 52(3), 188-196.

Davie, L. G. & Wells, R. (1992). Empowering the learner through computer-mediated communication. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 5(1).

Donath, J. (1996). Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community, http://smg.www.media.mit.edu/people/Judith/Identity/IdentityDeception.html

Frizler, K. (1995). The Internet as an Educational Tool in ESOL Writing Instruction, http://thecity.sfsu.edu/~funweb/allthesis.htm

Harmer, J. (1991). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Harlow: Longman, 249-265.

Kern, R. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *The Modern Language Journal*, 79(4), 457-476.

Kilian, C. (1994). How an online course works. *Toronto Globe and Mail*, November issue. ckilian@hubcap.mlnet.com

Lightbown, P, & Spada, N. (1993). *How Languages are Learned*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 38-39.

Parrish, R. (2001). Conversation Analysis of Internet Chat Rooms, http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/~rdparrish/Chat%20Rooms%20for%20Web%20Site.htm

Reid, E. M. (1991). Electropolis: Communication and community on internet relay chat, Unpublished thesis, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

Smith, F. (1986). Is role-playing an effective EFL teaching technique?, (ERIC Document Reproductions Service No. ED274203).

Spender, D. (1995). *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*, Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 241-247.

Sproull, L. & Kiesler, S. (1991). *New Ways of Working in the Networked Organization*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ur, P. (1991). *A Course in Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Warschauer, M. (1996). Comparing face-to-face and electronic discussion in the second language classroom. *CALICO Journal*, 13 (2), 7-26.

Appendix A

Survey Results

1) Do you ever change your identity?

Yes	No
59%	41%
(13)	(9)

2) For those who make changes, what do you change?

	#	%
User Name	15	69
Age	5	23
Location	5	23
Nationality	3	14
Job	3	14
Characteristics	2	9
Gender	0	0

3) If you lie, who do you lie to?

	#	%
Teacher	10	46
Other Students	14	64

4) If you do change your identity, why do you do it?

	#	%
For fun	7	32
To avoid a teacher who I do not get on with	7	32
To avoid particular students	7	32
Didn稚 explain	7	32
To reflect/change my mood	3	14
To play a different role	3	14
To see how people react differently with a new name/different age	3	14
Do not want to be recognised	2	9
Lack of confidence	2	9
To protect my privacy	2	9
To look for a friend without feeling obliged to stay	2	9
To have a different view of life	2	9

5) Why do you think some male students pretend to be female, and some female students pretend to be male?

	#	%
For fun	8	36
To play a joke	5	23
To get to know how the other gender thinks	4	18
To get closer to/attract the opposite sex	4	18
To get more attention	3	14
Sexual identity problem or other problem	3	14
To be better accepted in the chat	2	9
To see if there are any differences in the chat when you change your gender.	2	9
To maintain privacy	1	5
To be more powerful	1	5
Don't know	1	5
Because they are shy	1	5
To talk about things that you couldn't if you were of the opposite gender	1	5
To chat with someone of your own gender	1	5

6) What questions could you ask to detect a male user pretending to be a female user?

Are you beautiful?
Are you interested in politics?
Do you have a beard?
Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend/husband?
Do you have children?
Do you spend much money on cosmetics? / Which make-up/lipstick do you like best?
How old were you when you got your period for the first time? Were you scared? Did you tell your mom or dad?
What are your favourite hobbies?
What do you like to do?
What do you think about men?
When are you planning to have a family?
Would you like to stay at home while your husband works or would you like to work outside?

7) Have you ever mistaken the gender of a student, and then only found out later?

Yes	No
82% (18)	18% (4)

8) Why did you think they were of the opposite gender?

	#	%
Because of the confusing nick-name	9	41
Because of the expressions they used or the way they talked	7	32
No explanation	5	23
They did not show interest in what they were supposed to	1	5

9) Do you ever behave in a certain way in the chat room that would not be acceptable in your 'real-life'/culture?

Yes	No
50% (11)	50% (11)

If you do behave differently, can you explain?

	#	%
More open/free	22	100
More direct	13	59
Less shy	6	27
More expressive	6	27
More outgoing	4	18
Less polite	4	18
Talk about sex	2	9
More flirty	2	9

10) What do you think are the advantages of the relative anonymity that you have in a hosted chat room when learning English?

Advantages

	#	%
Less afraid of making mistakes/losing face	9	41
More confident/less shy	4	18
No advantages	3	14
Less stressful	2	9
More willing to take risks	1	5
More fun	1	5
Don't have to worry about appearance	1	5
Can develop deeper relationships without appearance being a distractor	1	5
Can avoid annoying people	1	5
Can make more friends	1	5
Privacy	1	5

Disadvantages

	#	%
Take less responsibility for what you say in the room	1	5
Stressful if I'm the only student with the teacher	1	5
No face-to-face contact	1	5
Live teaching is better	1	5