From Classroom to Conversation: Exploring University Chat Corners as Hybrid Spaces for Language Acquisition

Francois Waldeck Rousseau
Kaohsiung Medical University
Email: fwrousseau@gmail.com

Abstract: *For learners in an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment, institutions like chat corners often constitute the only opportunity to interact socially with native speakers. Being more sheltered than real-life situations, yet more socially authentic than the classroom, it is a hybrid environment where EFL learners can begin to interact cross-culturally using L2 in a social setting. This study explores the learning potential of chat corners by examining linguistic and cultural learning opportunities, as well as affective factors. The study was conducted by recording and analysing conversations occurring at the Chat Corner of Tamkang University in Taiwan, supplemented with a group interview at the end of the semester. Results highlight the unique role of chat corners in enhancing EFL learners' language skills and cultural understanding, alleviating anxiety, and providing an organic yet supportive environment that balances authenticity with educational scaffolding and language exploration.*

INTRODUCTION

The sociocultural view of second language usage as not only the product but also the process of second language acquisition has generated growing interest in non-classroom settings conducive to language learning, such as online platforms (Burston, 2015) and naturalistic environments (Sun et al., 2024). One such emerging phenomenon, particularly in EFL environments, is the voluntary gatherings of participants aimed at social interaction in English. Commonly known as "English corners", "chat corners", "conversation corners", or "English rooms", these gatherings facilitate informal language practice and cultural exchange.

In China, for instance, English corners are typically conducted in public venues or near universities and are open to the public at no cost. Su & Wu (2009) estimate that around 60 such English corners exist in China's big cities. There are no organizers, and people generally stand around in clusters with newcomers moving among these until they find a conversation of interest to them (Kellaway, 2021).

Gao (2009) found such English corners to resemble social communities that exemplify humanistic learning, consisting of non-native speakers trying to communicate with one another in English. In these weekly gatherings, students and passers-by from all walks of life create their own learning environment in which to practice their English communication skills (Jin and Cortazzi, 2002).

English corners in various countries are often organized by educational institutions such as high schools or universities (Reynolds, 2019), indicating recognition of the need for a more egalitarian and communicative setting in which learners can experiment and practice with the L2. Dewaele (2007) underscores this need when he points out that, however well linguistic skills may have been learned at school, "the brutal immersion in authentic interaction in the L2 may suddenly reveal unexpected problems" (p.2).

The apparent ubiquity of English corners notwithstanding, research regarding them is notably scarce. Existing studies, furthermore, are almost exclusively focused on English corners in China, and little information is available on how English corners function in other places. Most studies tend to be based on personal experience or interviews with attendees and report positively on participants' perceptions and the social structure of such events.

Gao (2009), in addition to talks with participants, also gathered information from posts on an online discussion forum used by members of the English club he observed. He found that participants valued the fact that they could find the support of peers in their learning process and that the club gave them the opportunity to assert themselves and engage in autonomous learning. Yang (2014) also conducted a study of English corners in China, drawing upon language learning theories as well as questionnaires to propose guiding principles and implementation strategies for such events. Reynolds (2019) investigated perceptions of government funded English corners in Taiwan universities with questionnaires distributed to student attendees and university professors. He found evidence of such events being conducive to greater willingness to speak English and more enjoyment doing so, yet many contextual factors influence students and teachers' perceptions of their efficacy. In the present study, which is a revised interpretation of the data collected for my M.A. thesis, conversations at the Chat Corner of Tamkang University in Taiwan were recorded and analyzed, complemented by participant observations and interviews, to examine the potential of this environment as a sheltered and hybrid space that bridges the gap between the classroom and the real world.

The Chat Corner at Tamkang University
The present study, which is a revised interpretation of the data collected for my M.A. thesis, focuses on one such institution, the Chat Corner of Tamkang University, Taiwan. Since 2010, Tamkang University's International Office has overseen the Chat Corner project, designed to provide EFL learners with informal opportunities to engage with native speakers of various foreign languages, most of whom are international students at the university who serve as "chat leaders" as part of their scholarship conditions. This role involves being available for chat sessions at the dedicated chat room, styled like a restaurant with tables, chairs, and snacks, during specified hours.

Students from the university who wish to participate in the Chat Corner are assigned to a chat leader of their choice for hourly chat sessions. The service is provided free of charge. There are native speaking chat leaders of several different languages available, mainly English, French, Japanese, Korean, Russian, German and Spanish. The chat corner usually runs during the afternoon for 4 hours per day, from the middle of the semester through to just before the final exams, for a total of 216 hours. During the period of this study, there were 53 chat leaders of 7 different languages, and a total number of 165 students registered to chat.

The Chat Corner at Tamkang University therefore differs from English corners in China in two important ways. The first is the presence of native speakers who function as chat leaders in these sessions. This has important ramifications for the dynamic and interactions that take place and lends the Chat Corner its distinctive hybrid characteristics. The environment bridges real-world and classroom contexts, where chat leaders function as peers, consultants, participants, sources of language expertise, and learners themselves, as evidenced in the study findings. Secondly, the Chat Corner is somewhat more structured, with small groups (typically no more than five participants) assigned to each chat leader for the duration of the session. This setup, along with seated table arrangements, fosters a stable group dynamic that encourages participant interaction and turn-taking.

Purpose of the Study
This study explores the potential of the Chat Corner at Tamkang University, and by extension, other similar institutions, as means to improving students' ability to communicate in a foreign language. More specifically, it examines the potential of this environment as a sheltered and hybrid space that bridges the gap between the classroom and the real world. To this end, attention is given to various aspects of language learning, namely acquisition of vocabulary, the use of communication strategies, cross-cultural learning, and affective factors.

METHOD

Participants
The participants in this study consisted of eight undergraduate students at Tamkang University who attended sessions at the Chat Corner. They were chosen, firstly, because of the frequency of their participation in the chat corner, and secondly, their willingness to be recorded during the sessions. All eight participants were female Taiwanese students from different departments of the university who had studied English for approximately 10 years from elementary to senior high school. In the transcripts they are referred to as S1-S8, while the chat leader is referred to as L. Where more than one chat leader participated in the exchange, they are referred to as L1 and L2 respectively.

Procedure and Instruments
This study is somewhat unique in that it did not commence with a predetermined set of research questions, but rather emerged from a practical scenario. My involvement as a chat leader in the Chat Corner, a role that came as part of a scholarship award, sparked my curiosity about the learning dynamics and benefits of these sessions for participants. Initially, I began by casually recording conversations among a group of regular attendees, setting up an audio recorder and then engaging in

the chat sessions without a preconceived notion of the study's structure or specific focus areas. It was only during later analysis of these recordings that particular aspects of learning worthy of investigation began to crystallize and guide the direction of the study.

During the two-month period of the study, the participants engaged in twelve hours of chat sessions with me. Each session lasted an hour and typically involved three to six participants. Prior to recording, I informed them of my intention to record our conversations for research purposes and obtained their consent. To minimize distraction and alleviate any potential anxiety among participants, I then discreetly positioned the recorder out of sight for the duration of the session.

Subsequently, the recorded conversations were meticulously reviewed and transcribed. Out of the ten hours of recorded material, seven sessions were selected for transcription. The selection took into account participants' attendance (excluding sessions with only one student or infrequent attendees) and chronological distribution (ensuring representation from sessions held at the beginning, middle, and end of the two-month period when the Chat Corner was active).

In addition to the recorded conversations, a comprehensive group interview was conducted in English with four participants (S4, S5, S6, and S8) who had actively participated in the chat sessions. These individuals were selected because of their frequent attendance and familiarity with the Chat Corner, having attended the highest number of sessions (both recorded and unrecorded) before and during the study period. In the interview, lasting approximately two hours, participants were invited to share their thoughts on various aspects of their experiences at the Chat Corner.

Questions raised during the interview were designed to elicit information regarding participants perception of the usefulness and benefits of the Chat Corner, their experience speaking to foreigners and native speakers of their L2, opportunities and experiences of such interactions outside the Chat Corner, and perceived differences between the Chat Corner and conversation classes. Audio recording was used instead of video, as the latter was deemed too invasive and a possible cause for anxiety. The audio recordings were supplemented with notes where necessary, to record demeanour or other visual cues.

Data analysis

The conversations recorded at the Chat Corner were transcribed and analyzed to identify learning opportunities and potential benefits of the chat sessions. These included linguistic aspects, particularly evidence of vocabulary acquisition, as well as socio-pragmatic factors such as the development and practice of communication skills, cross-cultural understanding, and affective elements. Findings were corroborated and enriched where applicable with data from the interview conducted with participants, documented through audio recordings and notes. This aimed to provide a holistic assessment of the Chat Corner's benefits, its impact, and its potential as an environment for learning and practicing foreign language communication.

RESULTS

Vocabulary acquisition

During the chat sessions there were numerous instances where opportunities for vocabulary acquisition were observed. These involved interactions where the unfamiliarity of words was made manifest through (a) questions from L2 learners or a hesitant repetition of the word, (b) exchanging of questioning looks, prompting the chat leader to assess comprehension, or (c) difficulty producing a word to convey the intended message. These instances, where the unknown nature of lexical items was rendered overt and opportunities for vocabulary learning were created, were found to differ both in terms of the extent and manner in which participants engaged with the word in the subsequent interaction. The distinction between focal and peripheral attention (Schmidt, 1990) entails that learners can acquire vocabulary in two ways: deliberately attending to the word and trying to memorize it or paying only peripheral attention to the word while attending to the message to be conveyed. In the transcripts there were evidence of both these types of learning, showing how the versatility of exchanges in the Chat Corner, conveniently situated between real life and the classroom, creates and shapes unique opportunities for vocabulary acquisition.

Learning Vocabulary while Focusing on Message

In most cases, participants were driven by the need to communicate and negotiate real meaning. While in some cases there was a brief language related episode (LRE) to achieve comprehension, the focus of the exchange was entirely on the content of the message. These types of exchanges resemble real-life conversations where meaning is paramount, and research has shown that engaging with new vocabulary in such an incidental and contextual setting facilitates the acquisition of new words (Gass et al., 1998). The collected data revealed several instances illustrating this principle, showing varying degrees of participant engagement with the new words.

In many cases, having been introduced to a new lexical item, participants actively and meaningfully incorporated it into subsequent turns of the conversation. Thus did S3 in Exchange 1 progressed from the apperceived input of the word "peacock" towards producing it twice again in a meaningful context a few turns later, while S4 did the same with the word "caterpillars" in Exchange 2.

> Exchange 1
>> L: When I was 2 years old, I was attacked by a peacock.
>> S1: (laughs) A peacock!
>> S3: What is a peacock?
>> S5: 孔雀
>> S3: Oh!
>> L: I was outside, we lived on a farm, and the peacock attacked me. I guess it was jealous because my parents didn't give it as much attention as me.
>> S5: Wow!
>> S3: Interesting!

S1: So your parents raised peacock as pet?
L: Yes. It was a pet.
S3: So that's why. Maybe he… she... maybe the peacock... I think... loves your parents.
L: Oh maybe. It didn't love *me!*
(Laughter)
S1: But a peacock is beautiful animal, very beautiful.
L: Yes, they are.
S3: So on your farm… have many peacock?
L: No, no, only the one.

Exchange 2

S4: Last weekend, I went to Yangmin Mountain, and there is many many many .. 毛

毛 蟲.
S5: Worms?
S4: Butterfly's baby
L: (laughs) Worms, yes, or caterpillars.
S5: Ahh, yes! Caterpillars.
S4: Caterpillars. Many many caterpillars hang on the tree. And that time the wind is coming, and the caterpillars... come here.
L: Oh, the wind blew them closer to you? When you walked near the tree?
S4: Yes.

Such progression, exemplified in Exchanges 1 and 2, from apperceived input to meaningful output during a single exchange, were not isolated events, nor were they limited to the meaningful production of the newly acquired word directly after it was introduced, as in the cases above. In one exchange, for example, the chat leader used the word "superstition", which was unfamiliar to all participants. After clarifying its meaning, the chat leader used it several times throughout the conversation (3, 5, 14, 20, 52, and 54 turns later), but more significantly, participants incorporated the word into the conversation many turns later: S5 used it 27 and 48 turns later, and S4 used it 58 turns later.

This is an illustration of how natural and meaningful communication set the stage for vocabulary acquisition in the Chat Corner, particularly when the vocabulary pertained to the topic of the conversation and needed to be processed and memorized in order to participate in meaningful conversation. This was facilitated by repeated comprehended exposure to the word when used by the chat leader, who simultaneously acted as a participating peer in a naturally developing conversation, and, in terms of Vygotsky's (1978) model of ZPD and scaffolding, as expert, serving as informant and temporary support. This dynamic demonstrates the one aspect of the hybrid nature of the Chat Corner in action, and the benefits it confers upon the participants.

Learning Vocabulary through Metalinguistic Discussion
The hybrid nature of the Chat Corner is further exemplified in a second type of scenario, when the new vocabulary item became the subject of a metalinguistic discussion, thus making the linguistic code the

focus of explicit teaching, usually embedded in an ongoing conversation as a side sequence while the topic of the conversation is put on hold. For example:

Exchange 3
    L: What subject did you have this morning?
    S4: Accounting. Financial accounting.
    L: Financial accounting? Is there another kind of accounting?
    S4: Hmm...
    L: All accounting is financial.
    S4: (laughs) That's right.
    L: That's like... a tautology. Tautology.
    S4: Tautology.
    L: It's like, when you say the something two times, the same thing.
    S4: How to spell?
    L: t-a-u-t-o-l-o-g-y.
    S4: (writing) tautology
    L: What other tautologies are there? Like... he killed him dead. When you kill someone it already means dead.
    S4: Aah!

Exchange 4
    S2: Oh, sometimes they also use a big microphone. What's that?
    L: Oh, yea – a boom mike. It's like a long stick with a microphone on the end.
    S2: Yes, what's this?
    L: It's called a boom. A boom mike. They hold it above the people who are talking.
    S2: Yes, yes.
    L: You know when you park a car in a parking lot, you have that thing that goes up and down?
    (Participants look confused)
    L: You know, it stops the cars. Then when you pay it will open.
    S2: Oh, I see!
    L: That's also called a boom.
    S2: (Writes) Boom maker?
    L: Boom mike. (Spells it) Mike is short for microphone.
    S2: So, we can call this a boom mike.
    L: Yes. But this is not a boom mike. This is just a sound recorder. A boom mike is the microphone on the long stick that you hold above the people talking.
    S2: Oh, ok.

Exchange 5
    S2: I have a question. (Stands up and moves to the window) Just like this (gives a little jump to sit on the windowsill) how to say?
    L: This? (Gestures to the windowsill) Windowsill?

S2: No, no. I mean this action. (Repeats the movement) Jump and sit on the...
L: Oh, I don't think there's a special word. Hop on? Hop unto...
S2: Hop unto?
L: Yes.

In these exchanges there is strong evidence of intentional rather than incidental learning of vocabulary. As found by Bialystok (1978) and Ellis (1990), learners are able, on the one hand, to pick up L2 items while attending to the meaning of the message, but they can also deliberately learn L2 items by focusing their attention on the code of the language itself. In Exchanges 3 to 5, the vocabulary became the topic of the conversation, whereas in the earlier examples the vocabulary appeared in a supporting role, secondary to the topic under discussion. It has been found that such occasional shifts of attention to linguistic code features, triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production, could be conducive to acquisition-rich interaction (Long and Robinson, 1998). In this way the word explanation sequence constitutes a side sequence that puts the on-going interaction on hold while dealing with a parenthetical, linguistic issue.

These metalinguistic discussions are seldom to be found in real life interactions and are more typically encountered in the language classroom. As is evident from these examples, the unique nature of the Chat Corner allows for such interactions to be initiated at will, either by the participants or the chat leader. Linguistic material was usually imbedded within an on-going, meaningful interaction and therefore highly context dependent, but not always. In Exchange 5, for example, the question did not arise from the conversation, but was rather introduced during a lull in the conversation. Apparently, S2 had realized this gap in her linguistic knowledge on an earlier occasion and was afforded the opportunity to resolve it during the chat session.

The exchanges in the preceding sections demonstrate the variety of ways that vocabulary was learned during the chat sessions. The hybrid nature of the Chat Corner lends itself to the possibility of free and natural conversation, of engaging in metalinguistic discussions embedded within a meaningful context, and even offers the participants the benefit of a consultation on language issues, independent of the topic under discussion. Furthermore, the social nature of the Chat Corner was exemplified by the web-like network of input and output among the participants. Many instances were seen, for example, where support or word explanations and translations were supplied by other participants in the exchange. This peer-to-peer interaction created mutual scaffolding that eliminated the usual teacher-student power relations existent in classroom settings.

Communication Strategies
Many language learners believe that their limited knowledge of the language prevents them from engaging in conversations in L2. Because of this, they never venture to engage in conversation with native speakers, or with others, if that meant having to rely on the L2 to communicate. However, in communication, as in other facets of life, creative use of limited resources often yields superior results compared to uninspired use of more advanced skills. Effective communication involves a blend of social skills, identity, emotions, and cultural understanding, drawing upon various resources to communicate effectively and competently. In the Chat Corner, this principle was frequently observed

in action. It was often the contributions of less proficient English speakers that proved more intriguing, engaged fellow participants in conversation, or added vibrancy to the exchange. In this section is shown how participation in the Chat Corner placed participants in situations where they encountered gaps in their linguistic knowledge, how they managed these situations, and the potential implications of these experiences.

Using Paralinguistic Cues
The use of mimicry and gestures often helped participants convey meaning where their linguistic knowledge proved insufficient, as can be seen in the following exchanges.

> Exchange 6
>> S3: I go to threw my garbage, and I want to throw some rice in the garbage... can. But the dog is coming to me and it (sniffing gesture) smell... so I feel very afraid, yeah, but I don't... I don't care it...
>> L: Hmm.
>> S3: But then... then... I want to go out, it follow me... yeah, then... I stand... It... (mimics barking noise)
>> L: (laughs)
>> S3: So... I say... Whoao! (barking noise) and Huh! (mimics surprise), and then it's... Woo Woo! (mimics crying and running away) Run to its... its...
>> L: Owner?
>> S3: It's owner. Woooo! (mimics scared dog running). Just like this.

> Exchange 7
>> S4: ... since I live in... I... I move to new house, and my bedroom didn't appear cockroach, but that time, at night, I just heard some... (imitates sound by scratching on a book) this sound...
>> L: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

> Exchange 8
>> S5: It happened when I was little. I was playing at the other side of the street.
>> L: Uh-huh.
>> S5: This me, and my mom is here (gestures positions on the table), and this is the road.

Capitalizing on the face-to-face interaction facilitated by the Chat Corner, the participants in the above exchanges employed gestures and mimicry to effortlessly convey meaning, eschewing the need for verbal expression. In Exchange 6, the participant used minimal speech, and told her story mainly through imitation. This method proved effective, as everyone not only understood the message but was entertained and engaged during the narration. In Exchange 7 the participant imitated the skittering sound of a cockroach by scratching on something with her fingernail, whereas in Exchange 8 the participant used gestures to explain the layout of the location in which the events took place. In all these instances, meaning was communicated with ease and efficiency despite the lack of linguistic resources available to the speaker.

Using CircumlocutionIn many cases, participants found creative ways to circumvent the gap in their knowledge using alternative words or expressions, as the following examples demonstrate.

Exchange 9

S4: Just very late, and uh... 超大… so very big… cockroach… just appear! And go everywhere! But I can't go out my bedroom because I have to stare… him.
L: So you can be sure where he is?
S4: Yes!
…
S5: So how did you know when it died?
S4: My dad move the bed and… but that time… it didn't die enough.

In this exchange the L2 users availed themselves to the vocabulary available to them in order to convey meaning, doing so successfully albeit not very grammatically. Here the participant used the phrase "go everywhere" to convey the fact that the cockroach scurried around all over the room. She also stated that she had to "stare him" to indicate that that she had to keep it in sight. Later she explained that the cockroach "didn't die enough", meaning that it was still alive despite their efforts to kill it. A similar example can be seen in Exchange 2 regarding the word "caterpillar".

Implications of Successful Use of Communication Strategies
Scenarios like these abounded in the chat sessions, and the fact that their inability to produce the appropriate language form did not cause a breakdown in communication had important implications for the participants. Firstly, they were able to notice the gap in their linguistic knowledge (cf. Swain's (1995) awareness-raising function of output), and secondly, they were given practice to bridge that gap using other available resources, a skill which every L2 user needs to develop when venturing into a real-life conversation. Yet arguably the most consequential impact lies in counteracting language learners' perception that their limited grasp of the second language inhibits them from engaging in conversation in the L2. This preconception is sometimes a debilitating fear that prevents many language learners from taking the leap from being a language learner to being a language user (cf. section 3.3). When it is seen to be groundless, it would result in a higher degree of confidence and willingness to use the target language socially. The participants in this study, having put themselves in a situation where they were forced to communicate with foreigners despite their anxiety and self-perceived limitations, found that their communicative ability extended beyond what they had thought possible. The Chat Corner provided a sheltered environment where such experimentation and discovery could take place. This leads us to the question of affective factors, discussed in the following section.

Affective Factors
The importance of affective variables in language acquisition and the emotional vulnerability of the language learner are recognized by many researchers (Krashen, 1985; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). This vulnerability not only influences the ability of the learner to acquire the language, but also plays a major role in how learners communicate, how they project themselves and how they form their social

and cultural identity. In this regard, the unique dynamic of the Chat Corner proved beneficial in several ways.

Allaying Anxiety

Anxiety and lack of confidence were conspicuous affective obstacles encountered by the participants in this study. This can be seen in the interview with the participants, all of whom were Taiwanese citizens who had not had the opportunity to travel abroad. In these exchanges, it is clear that their anxiety stems from the fear that their limited command of the L2 would not only hinder them from communicating effectively but create a negative impression on foreigners or native speakers.

> Exchange 10
> S5: I did... But when I see a foreigner comes to me, I feel anxious. I feel anxious. So I feel Chat Corner was a good place because it forced me to face the... foreigner and express myself.
> R: Do you others also feel anxious when you have to talk to foreigners?
> (Everyone nods agreement)
> R: Why?
> S8: Maybe because when we usually speak with friends, we can speak very... easy... fluent, but when we have to speak English, we always have to think how to say...
> S5: We are not confident enough. We don't believe we can actually speak with a foreigner... like a normal person? (laughs)
> ...
> R: Ok, so ... when you have to talk to a foreigner you will feel you don't want to?
> S4: I will feel the foreigner will think I am not good at English and is trouble.

The opportunity to familiarize themselves with this type of situation, however, by repeated engagement in social interaction with foreigners, was perceived as conducive to allaying this discomfort to a substantial degree.

> Exchange 11
> R: And when you were in the Chat Corner? What was your feeling?
> S5: The first time I saw [the chat leader] I was nervous. But after we went a few times the feeling fade... off.

It is with respect to this opportunity that the Chat Corner proves to be of particular value, as it provides a sheltered environment where such exposure can be realized. When asked directly regarding the perceived benefit of the Chat Corner, the participants in the interview at once and without hesitation replied that it was a place where they were afforded the possibility to interact with foreigners without having to worry about the limitedness of their language ability.

> Exchange 12
> R: What is the thing that you found most useful in the Chat Corner? I mean, what do you think you found at the Chat Corner that you couldn't find anywhere else?

S5: To find someone who is willing to endure with your poor English.
R: (laughs) Oh, ok. You mean you had a chance to speak English but you don't have to worry about making mistakes or something.
S5: Yes.
S4: Don't worry some foreigner think your bad English so don't want to talk to you.

Exchange 13
S8: I think still a little bit… uncomfortable… not uncomfortable but a little afraid of speaking, but at least we know that [the foreign chat leaders] know that our English isn't very well, so… (laughs)
S5: I think once we know this part, we will feel more comfortable.

These exchanges underscore participants' impression of the Chat Corner as a sheltered environment for engaging in conversation with native speakers, contrasting with real-world interactions. This stems from the belief that within this space, foreigners have greater tolerance towards non-native speakers, understanding their wish to improve their language proficiency. Implicit in this view is the notion that accommodating students' linguistic limitations falls within the purview of chat leaders, and forms part of their role and responsibilities. This is effectuated by the distinctive characteristic of the Chat Corner as neither a classroom situation nor a typical social interaction such as would occur in real-life conditions – but rather something in between. Here participants can pursue English proficiency at their own pace and volition, free of coercive pressures such as institutional mandates or performance concerns. Similarly, the chat leaders play a dual role of facilitators with a responsibility and willing participants in spontaneous and organic social interaction.

Support
Another factor that significantly influenced the Chat Corner sessions was the provision of support. As demonstrated in Exchanges 1 and 2, participants frequently sought and received support from their peers during these chat sessions, particularly when they encountered difficulties in finding the right words. This peer support not only facilitated smoother conversations and mitigated communication breakdowns but also alleviated the anxiety associated with conversing in a second language with a native speaker, particularly in potentially stressful situations. This excerpt from the interview illustrates the point:

Exchange 14
R: Ok, so you mean when you have to talk to a foreigner you will feel you don't want to?
S4: I will feel the foreigner will think I am not good at English and is trouble.
R: How about you, [S8]?
S8: Yes, I have the same thoughts, and I think it is even better that we can go there with our friends and… uh, just like a real chat.

From this it appears that the presence and support of peers and friends during the chat sessions serve to lessen the anxiety that is felt by L2 users, by reminding them that they are not isolated in their effort,

and that the nature of the chat is furthermore social and voluntary. It could also be deduced that the presence of other members of the same culture allayed the feeling of alienation and identity crisis, reported in cases where L2 users are required to interact and function using a foreign language among people of a foreign culture (Dewaele & Pavlenko, 2001).

Support was also provided by the chat leaders themselves. During the chat sessions under investigation, various examples of such support emerged, ranging from the provision of the right word or phrase (cf. Exchange 2) to interjections to indicate understanding and supply encouragement and feedback (Exchanges 7 and 8). These events all served as scaffolding and support, bolstering not only the language development but also the confidence of the L2 users participating in the Chat Corner.

Role reversals
One of the primary sources of anxiety for L2 users arguably stems from the perceived power dynamics in conversations with native speakers. Due to their limited language proficiency, L2 users often find themselves at a disadvantage, thereby placing native speakers in a position of dominance, similar to that of a teacher-student relationship. However, during the investigated chat sessions, there were notable instances where this dynamic was reversed. This reversal not only led to heightened participation and enthusiasm among L2 participants but also fostered a more inclusive and collaborative environment. This can be seen in the following exchange:

> Exchange 15
>> L: Yes… Do you understand? Its bark is worse than its bite.
>>
>> S3: Yes, yes. Maybe in Chinese we say 紙老虎.
>>
>> S1: Yes, yes, exactly!
>> L: Say again?
>>
>> S7: 紙老虎.
>>
>> L: What is 紙?
>> S7: Paper.
>> L: Oh! (laughs)
>> S7: Paper tiger.
>> L: Oh, I've never heard that before.
>>
>> S7: There is another one. 虛有其表。
>>
>> L: Say it again?
>>
>> S7: 虛有其表.
>>
>> L: What does that mean?
>> S7: Just this… this meaning. Just this meaning.
>>
>> L: But literally? What is 虛有?
>>
>> S3: 虛有 is.... not.... have. It's not what you see.
>>
>> L: Oh, ok.
>> S7: Just appearance....

L: Appearances can be deceiving.

...

S1: Yes, but 虛有其表 means… what he says beyond his ability.

L: Can you give me an example?

S1: Like a man always said… I want … I want to die for you, but actually he just a… loser.

L: Aha.

S7: Or maybe sometimes I think a man is very handsome, but....

...

L: Oh, I see!

This is an example where the "students" became the "teachers", putting them in a more powerful position, which resulted in more participants joining into the exchange and a more spirited and enthusiastic conversation. Besides the fact that it offered the chat leader an opportunity to learn something of the local language, this reversal of roles gave the confidence of the L2 users a sudden and unexpected boost. And even though L2 participants assumed the role of teachers, they continued to communicate meaning effectively in their second language, thus benefiting their language acquisition. This illustrates how the Chat Corner facilitates mutual teaching and learning, a dynamic seldom observed in traditional classroom settings or real-life social interactions.

Cultural Learning

Being a relatively homogenous society, Taiwanese have few opportunities to meet people from dissimilar cultures, and this is especially true of the young undergraduate students participating in the Chat Corner, most of whom had not had the opportunity to travel abroad. The Chat Corner is one of the few places where they can interact with members of other cultures, and from the interview it is evident that participants regard it as a rare opportunity.

Exchange 16

S6: I feel it's a special experience, can talk to foreigner.

R: Have you ever talked to foreigners outside the chat corner?

S6, S4: No…

...

R: Let's say the person is from your country and the accent is completely native-like, would it be the same? Is there something you can get from speaking to foreigners you won't get from speaking to someone from your own country?

S5: Yes, they think different. They have different point of view. Different culture.

S8: I think the vocabulary, the words they use, and how... they say something will not be the same.

R: Oh, yes.

S5: Yes, I think it's a good place to learn different perspectives from different countries. Like once I talked to a French guy who is very open to the… (laughs) to the love issue. (Laughter)

R: The French, you know.

(Laughter)

In the chat sessions and the interviews three main ways in which participants gained cultural knowledge were observed. The first was when the participants asked pointed questions about the country and the culture, and the ensuing conversation would be an elaboration on the topic. In the following conversation, for example, the conversation about cockroaches in Exchange 9 transitioned to a conversation on culture.

> Exchange 17
> S7: Yes. Do you have cockroach in South Africa?
> L: Yes, we do. But I guess in the cities are more. I don't know, there are many... I mean it's Africa so there are many bugs and animals and things.
> S7: Is there a... difference of being in the two countries? Like we think of Africa, and we don't know...
> L: Well, there's a big difference.

In the ensuing conversation the chat leader proceeds to describe some of the demographic, political and economic conditions in South Africa, and refers to an earlier conversation that took place in the group about the political history of the country. This turned the conversation towards cultural stereotypes, where the following exchange took place regarding B, a black South African chat leader with whom the participants have spoken on an earlier occasion.

> Exchange 18
> L: … I mean there is a big divide. But it seems B is… his family is not
>   poor, because…
> S7: I see he got an I pad! So far!
> (Laughter)
> S7: So, he's not poor!
> L: Yes, and he's been going around.
> S7: Yes, he said he's been to the movie theatre in Taiwan several times. But I haven't been to the movies in Taipei city because I feel it's too expensive. And he's been to several countries, and went to the movies several times, and … (laughs) And then he says, let's check the map, and he takes out an iPad, and I'm like: "Wow!" Not on my face but in my heart.
> (Laughter)
> L: It shows you the preconceptions you have, right? You see a black guy and he's from Africa, and he takes out an iPad, and you're like: "Huh?"
> S7: Yes, we are still old fashioned, but the era is changing.

This example shows the second type of cultural learning that took place in the Chat Corner, namely the modification of cultural preconceptions. The cultural stereotype of African people in the minds of the participants was that they were generally poor and without access to technology, which was dispelled and modified thanks to the opportunity to personally interact with them at the Chat Corner.

The third type of learning arose from exchanges that focused on the perceived differences between societal norms, which were equally educational for the local and foreign participants alike. Often it were discussions on the local culture that demonstrated the difference and brought the foreign participants' worldview to light. This, moreover, had the advantage of providing the local students an outside perspective on their own culture. The following exchanges offer some examples:

> Exchange 19
>> L: About Taiwanese customs, I'm not sure. I guess it's not really a custom, but I feel the Taiwanese people's hospitality and friendliness towards foreigners should be adopted by other countries too.
>> S1: But hospitality is not a culture…
>> L: It's not a custom, right? But it is part of your culture.
>> S3: Maybe, like do good things to the old, sometimes.
>> L: You mean like the grandparents live with the family?
>> S3: Yes, and the young kids... the parents will tell them to do good things for the old. It's different.
>> L: I think that is true. In a way I also feel that this custom in Taiwan is good because... it respects the old people, and it keeps the old people involved in the family, especially with the children, so they are an example. But if I'm thinking of myself, I wouldn't want my parents to live with me when I get married, you know? It's like ... a little strange! (Laughter)
>> S1: But then you have to think of the good things, like your parents can help to take care of the children, and you don't have to...
>> L: They can still do that if they live in their own place, right? If you live close together.
>> S3: I think it is the main difference between East and West. Maybe... Actually... Western people will think that marriage is two people's things. But East... in the East, we will think marriage is two families' things.

In this exchange, the conversation started from the chat leader's remark on the hospitality of Taiwanese people towards foreigners, moving towards the treatment of elderly people in Taiwan and the Taiwanese custom of married people living with their parents. Here the local participants were given an outsider's perspective on their own culture, and in the process also gained insight into the foreigner's worldview. This led S3 to make a poignant observation that summarized the difference between Eastern and Western people's views on marriage.

In the following exchange another South African chat leader (L2) joined a discussion on Taiwanese customs:

> Exchange 20
>> L: Yes, it's true. And when I arrived here the first thing… the thing that struck me is that your neighbours don't say hello to you. I mean we lived in an apartment, right, and

the people right next door to me, I never knew them. I saw them sometimes, you know, but they never said hi., or…

L2: That's strange!

L: Very strange!

L2: But is that not Chinese culture, because … for instance back in the University of Pretoria, when you get to class, and you find people already seated there you'd just say, even if you don't know them, you'd just say "Hi guys" and take your seat. But here, the Taiwanese, even if you know each other very well, they hardly ever greet you, I don't know why.

L: Yes! That's true, you know.

L2: What can you attribute that to?

L: In my school there is a teacher, even though I've been teaching there for two years, she never says hello when I come in.

L2: Yes, it seems it's always my responsibility to say "Hello, how are you doing?" But afterwards they would have a normal, nice conversation…

L: So it's not that they're unfriendly.

L2: No.

S7: Maybe we're just not too familiar with each other, so someone… sometimes you don't know if you should say hi or not. Because maybe you say hi and she already forget who you are. It's very embarrassed.

Here, the South African chat leaders observed that Taiwanese people tend not to exchange greetings in situations where it would be expected in their own country. This interaction allowed the Taiwanese participants to gain insight into social norms in other societies. Conversely, S7 offered an insider's perspective on local customs and habits, enriching the understanding of the foreign chat leaders. This exchange exemplifies cultural learning in the Chat Corner, where mutual understanding and cross-cultural awareness were nurtured through dialogue.

CONCLUSION

Summary

This study highlights several significant features of the Chat Corner setting. Most notably, it functions as an international platform where communication is driven by meaningful interactions, facilitated through a web-like scaffolding by all participants. The environment fosters authentic and spontaneous communication, contrasting with structured conversation classes found in academic institutions. A key distinction lies in the power dynamics: in conversation classes, despite efforts to create a sociable atmosphere, a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student persists, potentially influencing learner anxiety. Unlike the simulated environments of formal classes where performance expectations and conversation topics are prescribed and assessed, the chat corner offers a voluntary, agenda-free space that mirrors real-life interactions. This authenticity addresses crucial elements of social language use often lacking in traditional educational settings.

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Yet the Chat Corner also offers a contrasting feature to real-life interactions. While it aims to replicate authentic communication, it provides a sheltered and supportive environment where L2 learners can experiment and practice without the pressures or constraints of real-world interactions. This enables participants to test new language skills and strategies in a safe space, fostering confidence and fluency over time. Moreover, unlike spontaneous real-life conversations, the chat corner facilitates metalinguistic discussions and deliberate focus on language aspects. Participants can receive support and information from the chat leader in ways that may not naturally occur in everyday conversations, thereby not only enhancing their language ability but also alleviating their anxiety.

Together, these aspects highlight the unique role of chat corners in supplementing real-life language interactions by providing a structured yet supportive environment that balances authenticity with educational scaffolding and language exploration. This dual approach not only enriches language learning experiences but also prepares learners more effectively for communicating beyond the classroom and across cultures.

Suggestions for Further Research

The dearth of research on English corners as they exist in diverse countries and institutions presents a significant challenge in distinguishing various types of English corners and standardizing terminology for these institutions. Currently, the umbrella term "English Corner" can encompass anything from teacher-led English classes held during lunch breaks to informal environments focused on activities or conversational practice. To illuminate the distinct characteristics of English corners, studies comparing analogous environments based on their functions and attributes are necessary. Such research would also provide insights into the extent to which the Chat Corner examined in this study stands out from other comparable settings. Furthermore, research comparing the dynamics and characteristics of interactions between native speakers and language learners across different countries and language environments would provide valuable insights into these settings.

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