

Using Internet Relay Chat in Teaching Chinese¹

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I. Introduction

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has been used successfully in teaching English and other languages as a second language for some time. By CMC I mean the highly structured, instructor planned and directed on-line communication for second language students. This type of activity or “synchronous communication” (Connick, 1999) provides students with learning opportunities that cannot be duplicated in the classroom. “[T]he use of on-line chat rooms as a medium for communication provides an individualized, interpersonal, and interactive environment which allows students to gain active learning experience beyond those of the traditional classroom.” (Lee 1998). As more language instructors have become aware of the benefits of CMC, they have had access to various programs that help them integrate synchronous communication into their teaching methodology. The earliest and the most widely used CMC programs are known as “MUDs” and “MOOs.” MUD stands for “multiuse dialogue, multiuse domain, or multiuser dimension,” while MOOs are “object-oriented MUDs” (Falsetti, 1997). English language teachers use MUDs or MOOs to encourage students to interact with each other in class or in various places outside of class. Spanish language instructors depend upon on-line chat rooms in teaching their students reading, writing and comprehension skills. Recently developed programs such as mIRC (Windows - based IRC program), Microsoft Chat (Windows - based program) and many other web - based chat rooms are functionally similar to MUDs and MOOs. Language teachers already familiar with the benefits of CMC have found these newer programs to be effective.

Not surprisingly, for Chinese language teachers the temptation to adopt CMC is great. Can we, too, take advantage of synchronous communication in our teaching? The answer to this question can be derived from a pilot study involving university students who were taught Chinese, in part, with an IRC program. The study targeted the primary concerns of Chinese language teachers who are contemplating relying on CMC: First, can CMC, specifically IRC, be useful in Chinese language instruction? Second, if so, how do we implement it in our teaching and related activities? Third, what are the benefits of using IRC? Finally, what are the problems we teachers face in resorting to such technology?

In this article, I begin with a brief description of IRC, including its hardware and software requirements, before turning to how the pilot study was conducted using the program. Then I assess the feasibility of employing IRC for Chinese language teaching, including an analysis of its benefits and problems as revealed in the pilot study. I also provide student reactions to synchronous communication as a learning tool. Moreover, I offer additional ways that teachers can rely on IRC to assist students outside of class. Lastly, in my conclusions, I summarize my findings as they address the primary concerns of Chinese language teachers.

¹ I would like to thank Professors Bai Jianhua and Lu Bingfu for their valuable comments and suggestions. All errors are mine.

II. A Description of IRC

What is IRC?

IRC stands for “Internet Relay Chat.” Initially, IRC was used at a Unix platform. Some universities have installed IRC servers allowing students to log on to the server and then enter a “channel” similar to the typical on-line chat room that enables groups of people to converse informally. However, because Unix IRC does not support Chinese codes, other chat programs had to be created to meet the needs of Chinese language computer users. For example, the web-based HTML chat programs allow users to type Chinese in a small window and then send the message to the “chat room.” This program has proven to be somewhat cumbersome. Because the user must constantly refresh the screen to communicate with others, there are unavoidable time delays. The spontaneous exchange of ideas and information is therefore hindered. Java Script-based chat programs are much faster than HTML-based chat programs, but some chat sites either require a higher version of browsers or do not support Chinese codes, thereby discouraging Chinese language users. One program that does support Chinese codes is mIRC developed by Khaled Mardam-Bey & mIRC Co. Ltd. (<http://www.mirc.co.uk>). This program does not require a browser. After connecting to the Internet and initiating mIRC, the user can directly log on to an IRC server and begin “to chat.” Moreover, mIRC supports both basic Chinese codes (gb and big5) and displays messages almost instantaneously, which has led to its popularity among native-Chinese speakers. Many computer users in China (mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan) rely on mIRC to chat over the Internet. Microsoft Chat is another chat program that supports Chinese codes. There are numerous chat servers and the number of chat topics ranges from tens to hundreds.

The IRC Hardware and Software Requirements

In order to engage in on-line chat, the user needs an IBM compatible PC and an Internet connection (either by modem or direct network.) The mIRC program supports Chinese under Windows environment. As “shareware” it can be downloaded from <http://www.mirc.co.uk>. In addition to mIRC, a Chinese system is also required to display and input Chinese characters. Chinese systems such as NJ Communicator, Chinese Star, Unioway or Twinbridge work well with mIRC. When users connect to one of the IRC servers, they find many channels (or chat rooms). By selecting one of them, a user then enters the chat room to converse with other users by typing messages.

III. The Pilot Study

The Procedures

The Student Participants and the Structure of the Study

The pilot study participants were students who, at the time, were enrolled in their third year of Chinese language instruction at the University of California, Davis. Most of them were bilingual and their oral Chinese language proficiency was very high. The students were reading *Beyond the Basics* by Bai Jianhua (1997), the textbook for the course in which the pilot study was

conducted. One of the lessons in the textbook dealt with the homeless. After the instructor had taught this lesson, he mediated the students' participation in three online "chat rooms" or discussion sessions. In devising each session's specific format and in monitoring the students' on-line interaction, the instructor hoped to determine whether synchronous communication is both practical and beneficial to students as a learning tool. The three separate sessions the instructor planned were a preparatory, a semi-serious, and a serious session. As will become evident, the sessions followed a definite learning progression in content and discipline to maximize the effectiveness of IRC. The preparatory session was "free-wheeling" and anonymous interaction between instructor and students. The semi-serious and serious sessions obligated students to display and improve their Chinese language abilities. Only the serious session was devoted to a class "chat room" discussion of the homeless. Each of these sessions was "logged" (recorded) for subsequent analysis by the instructor.

The Preparatory Session

What the instructor anticipated and what this study revealed is the importance of the preparatory session. It instills students with the confidence necessary for them to take full advantage of synchronous communication as a learning tool. In this preparatory session, the instructor explained how to set up the IRC program, connect to the server and begin "chatting" on-line. To encourage students to participate in the ensuing discourse, the instructor asked them to "talk" anonymously. He had the students choose any nickname they wished that would hide their true identity. The instructor also urged students not to be self-conscious about typographical errors or typing speed. This particular preparatory session typified those that should always introduce a class to any kind of computer - assisted instruction. It served as a kind of "warm-up" period before students were compelled to demonstrate their Chinese language proficiency to the instructor and to the class. In the context of synchronous communication, the preparatory session enables students to become familiar with the lab environment, the chat room program and the Chinese system and codes. Without this session students would have been completely unsure of what they were supposed to do and how they should do it. Such uncertainty would have dissuaded even the most motivated students from engaging freely in the later semi-serious and serious sessions. Any benefits of IRC as a learning tool would have been diminished if not nullified.

The following is a selected portion of this preparatory session:

*** seven (ucd-irc@olson27-22.ucdavis.edu) has joined #chn112

<heehee> 你好

<Casanova> 大家好!

<seven> hi

<Mob> 老師我一出聲你就知到我是誰了...

<Wraven> 你好

<Mob> Wraven 你好

<Raven> 我不好!!!

<cupid> 你好,

<KE> 我們的topic是什麼?

<stjenarig> 你們想談what
 <Mob> 老師早說過了 談戀愛嘛!
 <JuJuB> 這裡誰有男/女朋友?
 <happy> 我不知道談什麼
 <JuJuB> happy,你沒有男朋友還是'happy'?
 <Raven> 我太愛玩弄感情了!!!!
 <moonbrigh> 謝老師故事真有意思。
 <cupid> 對不起, 我不能做你的男朋友, 女朋友可以, 好嗎?
 <happy> 誰說一定要男朋友才能是happy????
 <You143110> 他愛上了誰?
 <Blueberry> 現在誰想跟我談話?
 <WeiWei> 這個話是 'ANONAMOUS' !!!

As the above segment indicates, the on-line discussion during the preparatory session was very casual because it occurred in a relaxed atmosphere, without any pressure. Although this kind of environment is encouraged, it should not supplant all learning standards. To ensure that the discourse did not turn into socializing, the instructor in the study set definite ground rules at the outset of each session. For example, he told those students who alternated between English and Chinese to converse only in Chinese on-line. Whenever students mixed the two languages, the instructor would immediately remind them to use exclusively Chinese. He also made students promptly aware of their on-line substantive errors, those that would affect a message's meaning. For example, when a student mistakenly typed '知到', the instructor pointed out this error by quickly typing the correction in blue font. The mIRC program has a function to change the color of the font, thereby enabling a teacher to bring mistakes to the attention of the entire class, with a timely correction.

The Semi-Serious Session

The second session is semi-serious in the sense that no specific discussion topic has been assigned to the class beforehand. The purpose of the semi-serious session is to train students to be responsible for what they type while maintaining the relaxed atmosphere of the preparatory session. The semi-serious session makes it easier for students to transit from the informal preparatory session to the rigorous serious session. In this study the instructor informed students that their on-line discourse would still be an "open talk." But unlike the previous session, students were now required to identify themselves with their true names so that the instructor and the class knew who were "talking." Students were cautioned to continue to avoid grammar and syntax errors, but also to be careful of spelling errors in Chinese.

The following excerpt is from the study's semi-serious session.

Session Start: Mon Mar 02 14:14:00 1998

* Logging #chn112 to '#chn112.log'

...

<david> the essay was too hard.

<SteveYuan> david, stop writing in english

<George> 別在寒宣了 我們要討論什麼?
 <Xie_laosh> 請用中文交談
 <polly> 我們今天講甚麼?
 <jennie> 今天的topic是什麼?
 <Tami> 不知道。
 <George> 請問Mike 董在嗎?
 <Xie_laosh> 第一個問題：今天的考試難不難?
 <Xie_laosh> 是不是比較長?
 <Kai> 太長。
 <George> laoshi: 超級的難啊!!!
 <Jenny> 太長!
 <Irene> 還好。
 <Xie_laosh> 實際上並不長啊。
 <jennie> 今天的考試有一點難
 <Tami> 我覺得比較長。
 <polly> 我覺得比以前的考試難一點。
 <Irene> 對。
 <Don> 大家好!
 <Chen-Pin> 滿長的
 <George> 難就難 什麼難一點....
 <Jenny> 問題太複雜!
 <George> 假仙!
 <Sally> 我也想有點難和長。
 ...
 <Xie_laosh> 謝謝大家! 今天的討論比上一次有進步。
 <Jeffrey> 我也同意
 <Xie_laosh> 是很負責任的討論, 不是開玩笑
 <Tami> 再見!
 <Xie_laosh> 下星期再見
 Session Close: Mon Mar 02 14:58:18 1998

The preceding passage shows that communication was taking place. Students were exchanging ideas and information as opposed to merely swapping banter and silly remarks. In other words, they now felt sufficiently comfortable with IRC to start depending upon it as a learning tool. Students still slipped into English and were error prone. In the course of “chatting,” they would frequently type the wrong characters, necessitating immediate correction and/or clarification by the instructor as shown by the following excerpt from the same session:

<Jeffrey> 太幸福了
 <Xie_laosh> 幸福
 <Jeffrey> 平音太爛
 <Xie_laosh> 不懂

<Xie_laosh> 什么意思?
 <mike> 老師說的好...
 <Jeffrey> 拼音
 <Xie_laosh> 拼音太爛?
 <Tami> 我也不懂。
 <Xie_laosh> 大概多打了一個 g , 是 pinyin, 不是 pingyin

The Serious Session

The purpose of the serious session is to reinforce the earlier classroom lesson by making it more meaningful to the students. The instructor builds the chat room discourse around the lesson in a way that motivates students to be eager, pro-active learners. As a result, the lesson becomes the starting point for the students' shared reasoning and reflection on-line. After designating a theme pertinent to the lesson, the instructor guides the class through an in-depth discussion in Chinese by asking a series of questions. In answering these questions, students trade their thoughts and opinions about the theme. Having the ability to express themselves in the vocabulary and grammar of the lesson, the students now find it to be significant. They are more likely to retain what they have learned, having invested emotionally and intellectually in IRC with their peers.

In this study, the instructor assigned for discussion a theme concerning the homeless, stemming from the lesson they had studied in *Beyond the Basics*. To begin the session, the instructor typed the theme, followed by several pertinent questions, which students spontaneously answered. Their responses often generated lively interaction, including frequent challenges and criticism from other students. Among the questions posed, for example: "If you see a homeless person, would you give him/her money?" The passage presented below, begins with the instructor's follow-up question: "If you don't give money, does it mean that you are not sympathetic?"

Session Start: Mon Mar 09 14:17:28 1998

* Logging #chn112 to '#chn112.log'

...

<Xielaoshi> 第二個問題比較難：如果不給錢，是不是沒有同情心？
 <Mike> 他們那麼多時間在街上晃就表是這些人不願意上敬(進)
 <jenny> 不一定。
 <Jeffrey> 大概是
 <shirley> 如果他/她是真的是需要幫助，我願給。
 <Xielaoshi> 何以見得？
 <shirley> 不一定
 <Patty> 不是啦
 <liz> 很多次流浪漢堡官(包管?)你說你沒有錢，他們就要得不停。
 <jennie> 不是。。是因爲我沒錢可給。
 <jenny> 我同情心夠，可是錢就不夠！
 <Jeffrey> 給25cents
 <clara> 不給錢不一定是沒有同情心。有時候很難看出他是不是個流浪漢。
 <Mike> 有這麼多時間爲什麼不去唸書? 有了知識, 就不會在街上要錢.

<shirley> 如果那一個人是一個說謊的人，我一定不給。

<tami> mike, 有一些流浪漢都是有知識的人。

<Xielaoshi> 我看到Davis的流浪漢好像教育程度比較高，是不是這樣？

<Winnie> 我把我的同情心給孤兒院的小孩也(unfinished sentence)

<Patty> 我可以給他們時(食)物

<jenny> 老師，你那裡看得出他們教育高？

<Xielaoshi> 從他們的舉止看

<Mike> 那麼，有知識就會想辦法，不會在街上混 tami

<Geo> 老師: Davis 真有很多流浪漢嗎？

<Xielaoshi> 不是很多，但是我看到過，在Anderson跟Covell的路口

<Xielaoshi> 如果用納稅人的錢，給流浪漢造房子，給他們吃的，你同意不同意？

<Irene> no.

<Vicky> 不

<Xielaoshi> 不要只說NO。

<Patty> I agree

<Geo> Lsoshi: 我同意 因為這種是國家預算的牛毛

<Geo> 牛毛

<Irene> 那樣他們就有了依賴了。

<liz> 幫他們是很好可是他們自己也要開始努力的做事。

<Steve> 等於是welfare!

<Xielaoshi> 當然應該從兩方面著手。

<Winnie> 他們已經用了taxpayer的錢。

<Jeffrey> 乞丐都是on welfare

<Sally> 有個問題：沒有人想有流浪漢做他們的鄰居(居)。

<Xielaoshi> 流浪漢沒有家，怎麼會有鄰居? Sally?

<tami> 我們可以幫他們，可是他們也要自己找工作。

<jenny> 我們要給的不是short term 的幫助，是需要教他們自己幫自己。、

<Xielaoshi> Jenny說得對，應該教他們自己幫自己。

<Patty> 因而他們在路上

<Geo> 我想Sally 的意思是 臨時的鄰居也不好...

<Sally> 我的意思是沒有人想有homeless shelter in their neighborhood.

<jennie> 他們也應該共(工)作。

<Xielaoshi> 謝謝Sally.

<Mike> US花那麼多錢幫助別的國家，只要US把這些錢拿來幫助自己國家，問題可能會好一點...但是，一有了幫助他們，這些流浪漢就會一直利用the system 而不上近(進)...

<Geo> mike 說得很有理

<Steve> that's just the way the society works!!!!!!

<Steve> our society!

<Xielaoshi> 用中文

<Mike> yeah but that's because you're living a good life...

<Xielaoshi> 請用中文

The instructor's questioning provoked a thoughtful and sometimes emotional exchange of ideas and information among the students. Interestingly, participating students generally felt "safe" enough in this chat room to debate their moral convictions and political beliefs. However, as the session grew progressively more heated, many students simply stopped communicating, leaving the session to be dominated by three male students, Mike, George and Steve. These students, as well as others (Jenny, Sally, and Patty), tended to revert to English when they became excited about a particular issue. The instructor had to remind all of them repeatedly to type only Chinese.

The Assessment

The pilot study underscored the benefits as well as the problems of relying on IRC in teaching a second language. Teachers should be aware of both before making synchronous communication a part of their methodology. Furthermore, they should realize that not everyone feels at ease with computer - assisted learning. Educators as well as students may resist it. Teachers who wish to take advantage of this technology by using IRC in their classes must be sensitive to the concerns of administrators and colleagues. Perhaps such fears could be dispelled with a simple demonstration of chat room language instruction. Furthermore, teachers using IRC should ascertain how their students view it. In the following assessment of IRC, I include an (informal) evaluation of synchronous communication by the students in the pilot study. I suggest teachers adopt a similar means of gauging their own students' attitudes toward IRC as an effective learning tool. Finally, two aspects of this pilot study admittedly influenced its results, especially in terms of IRC's perceived benefits and problems. First, the students in the study were quite advanced in their Chinese language study. IRC supplemented (rather than replaced) their traditional classroom learning. Second, the students were gradually exposed to IRC, in three separate stages (sessions) and through a structured format. They were not expected to become quickly adapted to using the technology.

Some Benefits of IRC

Students who receive second language instruction in the United States are at a definite disadvantage in that they rarely experience situations in which to practice the target language. Relatively few non-native Chinese speakers have easy access to a Chinese speaking community. Even heritage students are inclined to speak English to each other in their daily interaction. When they do converse in Chinese, they seldom have the chance to discuss serious political, social or economic issues in depth. Synchronous communication is a solution to repeated demands among linguists that there be more numerous and realistic opportunities for students to talk in their target language outside the traditional classroom. (e.g., Ellis, 1988; Swain & Lapkin, 1986). IRC enables Chinese language students to converse in Chinese on serious topics. Additionally, it creates a fairly non-threatening atmosphere in which "students can express, negotiate, and interpret meaning within a meaningful context." (Beauvois, 1992, 1994.) As a consequence, on-line chat room discussion satisfies the four principle conditions for optimal language learning, consistently acknowledged in both second language acquisition (SLA) and

English as a Second Language (ESL) literature. In brief, these conditions are the following:²

1. Learners have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning with an authentic audience.
2. Learners are involved in authentic tasks, which promote exposure to and production of varied and creative language.
3. Learners have opportunities to formulate ideas and thoughts, promoting intentional cognition.
4. Learners are exposed to an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level in a learner-centered environment.

In this pilot study, all four optimal learning conditions were satisfied. The atmosphere for each session was appropriate to the level of learning and the nature of the task in which the class was involved at the time. Moreover, the second and third sessions allowed students to communicate about a topic that “mattered” to them, but which they would probably not ordinarily discuss with their peers. During the preparatory session, the instructor created a casual and protective learning environment, inviting students to “test-run” IRC anonymously. His goal was to have students accomplish a two-fold task: To understand how IRC works and to feel comfortable using it themselves. Because students could shield their on-line identity, they felt freer to experiment with IRC. The instructor’s relaxed attitude towards their typing skills and non-substantive errors motivated them to become acquainted with the program. In other words, students could “risk” learning the new technology, without fear of being judged by the instructor or the class. What made this informal atmosphere ideal was that it was geared to an unknown level of learning. The instructor did not know his individual students’ degree of computer expertise, so he allowed each of them to pace his or her own learning.

For the semi-serious session, the instructor set a more formal tone, commensurate with the purpose of this on-line discussion. He again envisioned his students completing a two-fold task: To begin to communicate, and to display accurately their knowledge of Chinese. A certain comfort zone remained in that students were still permitted to engage in “free talk.” Nevertheless, students experienced some anxiety now that it was imperative for them to reveal their true name and Chinese proficiency. At this point, the tasks and the audience became authentic. The heightened pressure caused the students to take the process seriously. They now understood they were to exchange ideas and information with known classmates rather than a series of quips anonymously.

In the serious session, the instructor intended students to practice what they had earlier learned in class and to exchange related ideas and information. The environment of the third session was more stressful, in keeping with the higher level of learning and the intense nature of the student interaction on-line. What is noteworthy is that the students themselves, and not the instructor, largely induced this atmosphere of heightened tension. The instructor simply asked questions on a controversial topic. The students who responded wanted to convince their peers to agree. To them, the reactions of classmates were extremely important to their own self-interest. Simply put, for the answering students, their peers constituted an authentic audience. As the discussion progressed, students tried to argue current social policy issues using the Chinese vocabulary and

² For a more thorough discussion of these conditions, see Egbert, 1993.

the grammar of the recent lesson. When this proved frustrating, some students relied on English to state their opinions. At this point, they were receptive to learning the additional Chinese vocabulary that would help them articulate their thoughts and ideas. Learning the target language had thus become a creative and dynamic process.

Some General Problems with IRC

One problem faced by teachers unfamiliar with IRC is the role of the instructor. Because synchronous communication is essentially student-centered learning, an instructor has to be careful to avoid intruding upon a productive chat room discussion. The nature and the extent of the instructor's on-line involvement are rather subtle. As the above-recorded passages reveal, the instructor's main tasks are to encourage and guide the students' participation. The extent to which individual student disputes are mediated or the overall intensity of class interaction is moderated is at the discretion of each instructor. Two tasks the instructor must aggressively perform are clearly stating the ground rules at the outset of the session, and then consistently enforcing them throughout the discourse. As indicated above, there are two ground rules: Use only Chinese and avoid errors. Inevitably students break these rules. When they do, the instructor must immediately intervene, either to remind the offending students to speak solely in the target language, or to correct a language error. Without the instructor's prompt feedback, the discussion would deteriorate or focus on irrelevant issues. Nor would students realize their mistakes.

Another problem instructors encounter is that not all students participate equally, if at all. Some students may be more "active" than others, inclined to control the discourse. Others may not talk at all. Throughout the pilot study, there was an uneven distribution of "speakers". I calculated the frequency of the students' individual posting for the second and third sessions. Every occurrence of a speaker's name was counted as one posting regardless of the length of his or her message. The statistics of the two sessions show:

1. Not all students participated in the discussion. At least three students remained silent during both sessions. (There were 24 separate postings (A-X), but the class totaled 27 students.)
2. Some students spoke more often than others. (Five students exceeded the average of 23 postings over the two sessions.) Others only conversed during one of the two sessions. (Seven students participated in the second session and kept silent during the third. Six students spoke solely in the third session.)
3. A few students obviously took control of the session (student "O" was the most active, but "H" and "U" also dominated the discourse), while others were less active or chose to be passive "listeners." (Seven students spoke fewer than ten times over both sessions. Again, the average number of postings for this period was 23.)

The Frequency of Students' Chat

(The first session was preparatory for which the frequency of posting was not tallied.)

	Session 2	Session 3	Total
A	10		10
B	12		12
C	4	5	9
D	2	4	6
E		9	9
F	35		35
G	11	9	20
H	32	16	48
I	13	6	19
J	12	10	22
K	2		2
L	5		5
M		13	13

N		13	13
O	33	29	62
P		14	14
Q	11		11
R	7	11	18
S		13	13
T	13		13
U	28	17	45
V	16	13	29
W		3	3
X		4	4
AVG	14	11	23

Problems Linked to Keyboarding skills

The level of a student's keyboarding skills is bound to affect his or her ability readily to engage in synchronous communication. Indeed, "[s]tudents who have low-level keyboarding skills will be at a disadvantage in a MOO... However, conversing in a MOO could be just the motivation some students need to get their fingers flying.... Though frustrating at first, with patience and a willingness to learn, students find MOO a rich and rewarding supplement to the language classroom" (Falsetti, 1997). In this study, student evaluations of IRC attest to this reaction among students with self-perceived low keyboard skills. Some students who did not actively engage in on-line discourse blamed their poor typing skills yet were anxious to have another IRC session.³

Special Problems Linked to the Chinese Language

Synchronous communication in Chinese demands some skills that are unique to communicating in that language. Chinese students must be familiar with at least one of the Chinese "input methods," either Zhuyin or Pinyin to use the Chinese system. An inability to input Chinese characters tends to compound any lack of keyboard skills. In this study, those students who were from Taiwan knew only Zhuyin. Most students could rely on Pinyin to input Chinese characters. However, their individual familiarity with this input method varied, either because they did not know the Pinyin equivalent of some words or they needed more time to recall it. As a result, students had to delay sending their messages and sometimes to forego making any on-line comments. This problem could be alleviated if Chinese language teachers were to make the instruction of Pinyin a priority. If their IRC students could input Pinyin "fluently," their discourse would have more "talkers" than "listeners."

The students' Chinese proficiency level is also crucial to the success of synchronous

³ See section entitled: The Students' Opinions of IRC

communication. As mentioned before, the students in the study were mostly heritage students who seemed to speak Chinese pretty fluently in the traditional classroom setting. IRC enabled them to become more adept at reading characters as well as formulating and expressing new concepts in Chinese with their peers. Students in the earlier stages of studying Chinese have a far lesser command of the language. Their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and syntax is quite limited. It would be fruitless to ask these students to conduct a third session IRC comparable to the one in this study. Further research is needed to discern what kind of on-line discussion would be appropriate for beginning Chinese language learners.

Another special IRC problem concerning the Chinese language is the extent to which participating students have access to the necessary software. All the on-line discussion sessions for this study were conducted at the campus computer lab. But what would happen if students were to log on from their homes to engage in IRC? Theoretically speaking, there should be no difference in their ability to participate in the on-line discourse. On the other hand, there could conceivably be some practical problems. For the chat room discussion to proceed successfully, all the participants would have had to install Chinese system software on their home computers. An additional potential problem is differing internet access. The connection speed and quality to access the Internet sometimes varies from one household to another. Finally, if there are distance learners, there could be the problem of differing time zones. Scheduling synchronous communication sessions would be difficult.

The Students' Opinions of IRC.

The students in this study expressed the following opinions as to the benefits and problems of using IRC in teaching Chinese:

<Mike> good because we can use computer skills, bad because i'm too slow and i have too much to say

<Jeffrey> 可以料(聊)天, 可以瞎掰

<tami> 我們可以用電腦打中文。

<shirley> there are some words we don't understand in your question.

<jennie> 是好。可是我不知道有多好。

<Mike> 我太慢了...

<tami> 如果學生沒有這個irc program, 就很麻煩。

<Xielaoshi> 是不是沒有課堂的壓力, 想打就打, 不想打就看看?

<Mike> just playing with ya

<shirley> sharpen打中文字的skill.

<jenny> 讓平常不說話的同學說多一點。

<Xielaoshi> 很好,Jenny!

<Sally> 好處是我們大家可以說我們想說得。問題是有太多東西看。

<liz> 用電腦是很好玩因為我們不是每天在電腦上但是有一點慢。

<Winnie> 我認爲很好玩。也可以練習用電腦打中文字。

<Xielaoshi> 是的打字打得慢是一個問題, 可以多練習

<Lei> 還是你的拼音不是怎么好!

<Xielaoshi> 你還可以跟台灣大陸的人隨時談天

<tami> 用電腦很好玩，可是我們要好練習。

<shirley> MAJor Problem....can't express what you want to say quick enough

<liz> 用電腦比寫得好。如果不知道是哪個字可以找。

<Patty> 。。哦。。。。

<clara> 好處是：我們可以利用電腦來跟很遠的人談。打字很慢是的壞處。

<Mike> 好處：大家都可以發表意見，不過快的人發表的多

<Patty> 壓力大嘛。。。。

<Xielaoshi> 好像打字慢是主要問題

<shirley> 同意

IV. Other Possible Uses of IRC: Online Office Hours and Tutoring.

IRC can be used for tutoring and/or online office hours. The instructor announces the IRC channel and student appointment schedule in class. When the appointment is set to begin, the instructor selects the channel or enters the chat room first, before the student. Thereafter, when the student logs on, the session commences. Students in the pilot study were repeatedly offered on-line office hours. During their appointments, they would usually ask questions about the most recent class lessons. They particularly welcomed on-line tutoring just before a test to clarify general misconceptions and to practice specific grammar exercises. However, not all students took advantage of such services. Those who would rather not rely on the computer or who are unfamiliar with IRC were reluctant to make appointments for on-line tutoring and/or office hours.

V. Conclusions

In my introduction, I set forth the probable concerns of Chinese language teachers who are considering using IRC in their teaching. This pilot study was an effort to consider those concerns. Accordingly, in the following paragraphs, I have summarized my findings in response to each of them.

1. Can IRC be useful in Chinese language instruction? IRC can be very useful in teaching Chinese. It promotes communication among students in the targeted language. They can practice already learned vocabulary, grammar and syntax in the context of spontaneous and serious discourse with their peers. In effect, synchronous communication motivates students to use, and thus retain, what they have been taught in the classroom.
2. How do we implement IRC in our teaching? The most effective use of synchronous communication is student enrichment. It can serve as the means to motivate students to think creatively in Chinese by introducing thought provoking topics and new vocabulary related to earlier lessons. Typically, IRC can be conducted at the university language lab if it has the proper software.
3. What are the benefits of using IRC? There are several benefits. The instructor can direct the form and content of the chat room discourse, by setting and enforcing ground rules, choosing the discussion topics, correcting student on-line errors and providing feedback.

He or she can also control the intensity of the learning environment so that it corresponds to the current nature of the synchronous communication.

4. What are the potential problems posed by IRC? Perhaps a preferable term would be the potential limitations inherent in synchronous communication. IRC is most helpful to students with relatively high language proficiency, solid knowledge of Pinyin and good keyboard skills. It is useful practice for advanced or bilingual Chinese language students. Whether it can be geared toward lower level students or beginning learners of Chinese is unclear and requires additional research.⁴ Furthermore, not all students feel comfortable with the on-line discussion format and are disinclined to participate. Others attempt to dominate the discourse. Finally, IRC is feasible for students at the same location as well as students from different places. However, different time zones make this type of on-line discussion relatively difficult to schedule.

VI. References

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⁴ My preliminary answer to this question is that even beginning students would benefit from IRC, but their on-line activities would have to be highly structured.