

# languages ICT



## What is Text Chat in MFL?

Text chat via the Internet is a form of synchronous communication, meaning that all participants are at a computer and online at the same time. Participants type messages to each other, which everyone in the 'chat room' can read. Text chat does not need much bandwidth, making it an easy form of synchronous communication to establish from a technological point of view. It can be an ideal environment for intermediate and advanced students to develop skills of spontaneous communication in the foreign language. Conversation text can also be copied and pasted into a Word document for further work.

A text chat environment is usually presented as a large window on screen and has three main components. Messages are displayed chronologically in the main section of the screen, a small bar sits at the bottom where students can type in their own messages and a section to one side shows students who else is available to talk to at any given moment. Text chat is one of the media frequently used by students in their spare time and capturing it in an educational context can be highly motivational. Students who know this environment well may be particularly driven to take on a leading role.

### Security in chat rooms

Some existing text chats are run by educational sites in other countries and can be a good starting point for practice, such as on the [Kindernetz](http://www.kindernetz.de/netztreff/chat/-/id=17426/17pssty/index.html) website. They are usually only open at certain times, when they are policed by a moderator. Whilst this does not guarantee the absolute safety of the site, it does decrease substantially the chance of any uninvited participation. As with all Internet-related communication, students should be warned against using their real names or disclosing any personal information. Please see [the Becta Schools section on e-safety](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss_to_es_pp_aup_03&rid=11087) for further information.

Some easily created Virtual Learning Environments, such as [Yahoo! Groups](http://groups.yahoo.com/) include a text chat room, which can be secured so it is accessed upon invitation only. This is a good way to incorporate text chat into an existing exchange between two classes, or within one class to allow learners to collaborate on certain projects.

### Timings

As text chat is synchronous, organisation can be difficult, as all participants have to be online simultaneously. Timetabling an international exchange may turn into a logistical nightmare, particularly if different time zones are involved. It is vital that teachers at both ends help to set up such 'meetings' and where a whole class of 30 students are involved, the session may need to be staggered.

Because text chat is in written, real-time format, students need time not only to understand a message and think about a response, but also the actual time it takes them to type in their response. Some pre-agreed strategies could help here, such as sending the message in sections, to allow the other participants to start 'de-coding'. Students can indicate they are not finished yet by typing '...' at the end of each section sent and/or to use vocabulary that indicates the sentence is not finished. For example, 'I like going to the cinema too, but...' 'my town doesn't have a big cinema, so...' 'I often do sports instead.'

### Practicalities

Group size can be very important in text chatting; too large a group and students will be tempted to 'lurk' (to be present, but not participate.) If the group is too small, the exchange can resemble a role play more than a discussion. Whereas just two able students may be able to successfully hold a discussion online, most students will start feeling more comfortable in groups between three and six participants. Another option would be to pair students in front of computers, and allow them to pool their knowledge to translate messages and respond to them more quickly.

The choice of language can be problematic, where native speakers of two different languages are 'chatting.' It can be beneficial initially to write in the mother tongue and read the target language, using the others' messages to increase passive vocabulary. With more confident learners, it may then be possible to slowly increase the amount of the foreign language used, without slowing the speed of communication down too much.

To help stimulate and support meaningful communication, a detailed outline for students to adhere to can be helpful. This can be an actual list of questions to ask, or a goal of finding out specific information, allowing for differentiation in the task set. Alternatively, groups of students may work towards a specific outcome, such as a trip itinerary or information poster, which they would then share with the class.

Typing at speed often means that elements such as accents, punctuation and capital letters are forgotten. This could be seen as a trade-off for spontaneity, but if you prefer students to work as accurately as possible, you can make sure they know accent short-cuts. The [Penn State University website](http://tit.its.psu.edu/suggestions/international/bylanguage/index.html) (<http://tit.its.psu.edu/suggestions/international/bylanguage/index.html>) offers useful information on inserting accents. Click on your language to be taken to the relevant pages.

#### **Further tips**

See the Becta Schools section on [Text Chat](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&catcode=as_cu_sec_sub_09&rid=8876) ([http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&catcode=as\\_cu\\_sec\\_sub\\_09&rid=8876](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&catcode=as_cu_sec_sub_09&rid=8876)) for further information.

To read about tried and tested ideas for using text chat try searching the Useful ICT ideas, effective language lessons database on the Languages ICT website.

*Note: Information in this booklet has been collated by a number of practising teachers and advisers and is accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time of writing. CILT and ALL do not take any responsibility for inaccuracies contained within. The inclusion of any software products and/or companies within Languages ICT guidance does not imply endorsement by CILT or ALL in any way.*