

Handout 1: Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)

CMC refers to situations as diverse as sending emails, using Skype, participating on a forum, or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). CMC can be divided in synchronous and asynchronous communication (the former is communication which takes place in real time, such as chat, while the latter refers to communication where there is a time delay, such as email).

There are a number of ways CMC can contribute to structured language learning. This may be through doing an online language course or a hybrid course which is done partially in the classroom and partially through CMC (such a course is referred to as *blended learning*).

The most common CMC forms that might be used for language learning are:

- Texting
- Email
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Skype
- Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

VLEs are web-based platforms designed to support teachers in the management of online education courses. A VLE consists of 'communication tools' such as email and a discussion board, and tools for organising the administration of a course. A further dimension involves the testing of learners through quizzes, and the dissemination of information. Blackboard and Moodle are two of the best-known VLEs. Unlike Blackboard, Moodle software is free. But there is a charge to host a Moodle site. For more information see www.blackboard.com and <http://moodle.org>. A Facebook group or a teacher's blog can also function as a VLE.

At its simplest, a VLE is a delivery system for documents and other information, and in many higher-education environments this is how it is used. Instead of having to deal with paper print-outs, learners can pick up material, deliver exercises and find out information about the course electronically. It is also possible to develop quite sophisticated courses involving automatically marked placement tests, group projects using synchronous and asynchronous communication, webquests and many other methods applicable to a blended learning environment.

Activities

1. A weekend with a friend from out of town

Aim: To develop general communicative competency, especially in expressing opinions

Level: A2

Technology: class Whatsapp group

Rationale: Learners who are somewhat shy in speaking may express themselves more confidently and competently through the medium of writing. This activity encourages learners to interact without inhibitions in a small-group format through the medium of writing.

Preparation: Print handouts with the instructions of the task you are going to use in class

Procedure:

1. Explain the task to your learners: they are going to carry out a discussion entirely using text. They should discuss each idea offered by a member of the group and together decide what they should include in their final plan. Emphasise that they all have to agree on what they finally write down.
2. Elicit from the learners expressions they can use when they are discussing the task. Focus especially on expressions for stating opinions, such as *I believe, I agree with, I don't agree with, and I think that*, and write these on the board.
3. Give the learners the task handout and ask if there are any questions.
4. The learners begin their chat on Whatsapp. Monitor the activity, either through the group yourself or by wandering around the room
5. Give learners a five-minute warning when time is nearly up so that they can round off their discussions
6. You may wish to give feedback on anything you noticed in terms of the use of language. It is also possible to print off the text of the discussion, read it later and give feedback in a future lesson

Follow on: Both as homework or in class, the learners can write a diary entry on the day they spent with their friend and how their plan worked out

2. Pre-discussion task

Aim: To allow learners to prepare in advance of a discussion lesson, to practise the second form of the conditional

Level: B1↑

Technology: VLE or email

Rationale: Some of the less confident learners will appreciate being able to think about a particular topic in advance of a fluency class, rather than being asked to give an opinion on the spur of the moment. Being able to prepare their thoughts may give them more confidence in class, and enable them to participate more.

Preparation: decide how far in advance of the lesson you wish to email participants and send a text such as the following. Include the name of a different crime (e.g. murder, kidnapping, robbery, mugging, etc) in each mail

We will be discussing crime & punishment in our next class. Consider the following crime (XXX) and decide on a suitable punishment (e.g. jail sentence, non-custodial sentence, a fine etc). Be ready to tell the group the punishment you have decided and to find out whether they agree or not. Please check the meaning of any unknown words in this email before the class. Also, consider if the death penalty (capital punishment) is ever justified. You will find it helpful to study the language of agreeing and disagreeing in your course book.

Procedure:

1. Set up the discussion. Divide the class into small groups. Tell each group to choose a chair person to moderate the discussion. Tell each learner to tell the group about their crime, and explain to them their preferred punishment and the reasons behind it. Each learner should find out what the other group members think about their sentence. The *if...* form will naturally arise during the conversation. Encourage learners to reach an agreement on an appropriate sentence
2. After the groups have finished their discussion, go systematically through the crimes and ask each group to give feedback on their punishment. Encourage a whole-class discussion

3. Give language feedback. If there is no time for this, post the feedback on the VLE or email it out.

3. Writing a business letter

Aim: To give learners practice in writing a business letter

Level: A1↑

Technology: VLE + a range of other communication tools

Rationale: one of the potentials of using a VLE with your learners is to create a climate of collaboration & community. This can enable learners to learn from each other as much as from you; to allow learners to build knowledge through communicating with each other and challenging each other's ideas. This task allows peer feedback on a simple writing task and introduces learners to this collaborative form of learning.

Preparation: Ensure that all learners can use the communication possibilities offered by the VLE and/or Skype.

Procedure:

1. Provide some useful phrases used in a typical business letter. Give learners information on the layout of a typical letter. This can be done in class, and/or a model letter can be posted on the VLE.
2. Listening exercise: play the learners an audio extract of a telephone message involving a complaint
3. Tell learners to write a letter in response to the telephone call
4. Learners exchange letters with another learner for peer editing
5. Learners provide feedback on each other's letters using a convenient method for them (text, Skype, face-to-face etc)
6. Learners revise their letters in the light of peer feedback. The revised letter can be submitted to you via the VLE for marking and comment
7. You return the letter with comments, either in class or via the VLE