

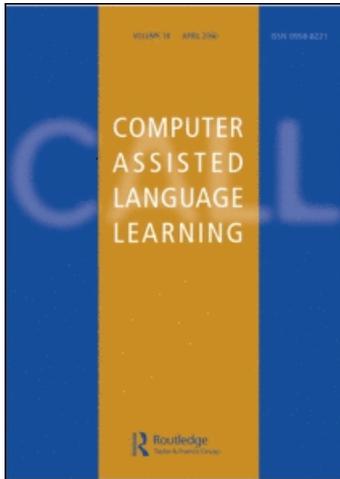
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Safi M. Mahfouz ^a; Fathi M. Ihmeideh ^b

^a Faculty of Educational Sciences, UNRWA University, Jordan ^b Queen Rania Faculty for Childhood, Hashemite University, Jordan

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Attitudes of Jordanian university students towards using online chat discourse with native speakers of English for improving their language proficiency

Safi M. Mahfouz^a and Fathi M. Ihmeideh^{b*}

^a*Faculty of Educational Sciences, UNRWA University, Jordan;* ^b*Queen Rania Faculty for Childhood, Hashemite University, Jordan*

This study aims to investigate Jordanian university students' attitudes towards using video and text chat discourse with anonymous native speakers of English to improve their English proficiency. To achieve this aim, a questionnaire was designed. The study sample consisted of 320 university students enrolled in two Jordanian universities. Results revealed that students' attitudes towards using video and text chat with English native speakers for improving their English language skills were higher concerning speaking skills, followed by listening skills, reading skills and finally writing skills. Furthermore, results indicated that there were statistically significant differences amongst students, which are attributed to their gender, the faculty they are enrolled in, the chat messenger mode they use most frequently and their seniority of study at university. In light of the aforementioned results, the researchers proposed a number of pedagogical recommendations.

Keywords: online chat; native speakers of English; synchronous computer-mediated-communication; language proficiency

Introduction

Jordanian university students whose major field of specialization is not English do not usually have the opportunity to speak with native speakers of English, either on or off campus. Such students do not practice using the language in lecture halls merely because English is not the language of instruction in most specializations, with the exception of some scientific areas such as medicine, engineering and mathematics. Instant messaging (IM) and video chat (VC) provide English foreign language (EFL) learners with a round-the-clock venue for real daily life communication and authentic interaction with native speakers of English. Using this technology means that the foreign language learning environment is no longer limited to the classroom environment and study hours. The learning environment and even its content have become that of the learner's choice and preference. During the internet chat session, the language learner can talk about any topic with the native speaker of English and can even choose the accent he or she wants to learn.

*Corresponding author. Email: fathi@hu.edu.jo

This attitudinal study investigated Jordanian university students' attitudes towards using synchronous interactions with English native speakers (ENS) for improving their English proficiency. Instant messaging (IM), audio chat and video chat are three modes of synchronous computer-mediated-communication (SCMC). Instant messaging involves the exchange of online text messages between two chatters or more. In the audio chat, both speakers speak to each other using a microphone and earphones. Video chat involves using a webcam, a microphone and earphones throughout the chat session. However, the general term online chat discourse covers all modes of synchronous interactions. Each mode of SCMC has its benefits and drawbacks. Although video chat improves students' oral and aural skills simply because it makes use of a webcam, a microphone and headphones, this mode of communication does not improve students' writing and reading skills. In contrast, text-based chatting improves EFL learners' writing skills, but does not improve their oral and aural skills substantially. Therefore, it is recommended that all modes of SCMC be used simultaneously in all native speaker–non-native speaker (NS–NNS) chat sessions.

If e-mail is viewed as “the mother of all internet applications” (Warschauer, Shetzer, & Meloni, 2000, p. 3), IM and video chat can be seen as an alternative to face-to-face conversation. Such new technologies have proven to be effective pedagogical tools for foreign language learners. Several studies have considered the potential of using online text-based chatting as a bridge to face-to-face conversation and as a means of negotiation of meaning involving foreign language learners (Darhower, 2002; Fukai, 2004; Pellettieri, 2000; Tudini, 2002, 2003c).

Previous studies have reported on the miscellaneous advantages of SCMC for language learning: it may facilitate interactive competence due to the many types of discourse initiation (Chun, 1994; Fukai, 2004; Tudini, 2002); give foreign and second language learners a greater role in managing the discourse (Chun, 1994); promote the nonnative speakers' self-monitoring which leads to frequent repair of errors (Pellettieri, 2000); improve EFL students' oral inter-language and pragmatic competence (Xiao & Yang, 2004) and create a new exciting and thrilling learning environment through collaborative videoconferencing (Bonham, Bonham, Surin, Nakano, & Seifert, 2003). In addition, both the implicit and explicit feedback that learners receive from their native key pals may help them incorporate target forms into their chat and thus improve their language both lexically and grammatically (Edasawa & Kabata, 2007; Pellettieri, 2000). Finally, the interactional modifications that take place in chat sessions strongly resemble those that take place in ordinary face-to-face conversation (Sotillo, 2000; Tudini, 2003c).

Most SCMC attitudinal studies have been generally positive. Students reported that synchronous interactions improved their four language skills of speaking, writing, reading and listening (Al-Jamhour, 2005; Bulut & AbuSeileek, 2007); increased their self-confidence in learning a foreign language and enhanced their learning autonomy (Akbulut, 2008; Al-Jamhour, 2005); increased their motivation to improve their language proficiency and facilitated the process of foreign language learning for students with diverse learning styles and different personality types (Aacken, 1999; Beauvois & Eledge, 1996); helped them learn the language in a stress-free, informal, exciting and enjoyable environment (Holmes, 1998; Stevens, 1991); fostered their sense of community; improved their computer literacy and developed their reflective learning (Altenaiji, 2005); alleviated their communication anxiety; (Zhou, 2007); reduced their second language writing apprehension and improved their writing skills significantly (Al-Ahmad, 2003); helped them express their ideas

freely and think creatively while composing their ideas online (Warschauer, 1996); and increased their total immersion in the target language (Hampel & Hauck, 2004).

Problem statement and research questions

Despite the fact that recent research on foreign language learning has reported on the benefits of interactional competence resulting from negotiation of meaning in face-to-face conversation settings, both EFL learners and even their instructors rarely have the opportunity to use the target language interactively with native speakers of the target language (Fukai, 2004; Pellettieri, 2000; Sotillo, 2000; Tudini, 2002). Studying English in Jordan is no exception to this situation. Therefore, it becomes clear that speaking English in authentic real-life situations with native speakers of English is quite essential for Jordanian students. Instant messaging, audio chat and video chat with native speakers of English can certainly compensate for Jordanian students' inability to communicate with such interlocutors in real life.

This research strives to fill the gap in the literature on the pedagogical uses of online chat with native speakers of English. The study was designed to elicit answers to the following questions:

- (1) What are Hashemite University and Faculty of Educational Sciences (FES) students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English to improve their English language?
- (2) Are there statistically significant differences between students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English to improve their language proficiency that are attributed to the variables of gender, faculty, messenger mode, and seniority of study at university?

Significance of the study

Very few studies have addressed university students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English for improving their oral and written language proficiency. Several previous studies have reported on the influence that SCMC has on improving foreign learners' language proficiency because it increases second language learners' interactive participation in using the target language and gives them the opportunity of receiving the input and producing the output in the target language (Fukai, 2004; Tudini, 2002). In the context of the Arab world, attitudinal studies toward SCMC use are quite rare (exceptions are Bataineh & Baniabdelrahman, 2006, and Baniabdelrahman, Bataineh & Bataineh, 2007) and none of them has investigated Jordanian students' attitudes toward video chat and text chat with native speakers of English. In addition, most of the studies cited in the literature on the subject have investigated online chat interactions that take place between language learners, whereas very few studies have explored interactions that take place between English native speakers and learners (Iwasaki & Oliver, 2003). Although there are some exceptions (e.g. Davies, Shield & Weininger, 1998), even those studies that have investigated online chat or electronic dialogue between native speakers and learners usually take place under the direct supervision of the language instructor and are limited to classroom settings (Fukai, 2004; Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003).

This attitudinal study provides an assessment of Jordanian university students' attitudes towards using online video and text chat with native speakers of English for

improving their English proficiency. The abundance of studies investigating the effect of online chat with native speakers of English on Japanese, German, French and Italian learners of English, the scarcity of attitudinal studies investigating its effect on Arab learners of English, and the limited availability of CALL attitudinal studies in the Jordanian context make this study a rare contribution to the existing literature on SCMC. Previous research on online chat with native speakers is based on group chats (Fukai, 2004) or dyads in which the native interactants were familiar to the learner (Iwasaki & Oliver, 2003; Tudini, 2002) or audio conferencing systems in a distance education setting (Hampel, 2002; Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999). Unlike previous studies, this study is based only on chatting with native speakers who have no interest in intentionally using the language for the purposes of teaching. Such scarcity of data is surprising, as SCMC is widely used worldwide and there is evidence that foreign language learners unconsciously imitate native speakers' electronic discourse (Darhower, 2002; Tudini, 2003a).

Theoretical framework and literature review

In the twenty-first century, in which cyberculture and internet-aided distance education have become prominent, EFL learners have been empowered to learn collaboratively and chat with native speakers of English using multimodal and multi-dimensional networks. Nonnative-native synchronous chat is multimodal in nature, since chatters sometimes use different modes of communication at the same time to convey their ideas on line. This feature of online discourse reflects Kress's idea of multimodality, which stipulates that it is no longer possible to understand language without understanding the effects of all modes of communication that are copresent in any text (Kress, 2000). It is worth noting that segregation of the web-based modes of discourse has been quashed and that multimodality has been stressed by several studies (Hampel, 2002; Kress, 2003). This means that in a multimodal online learning environment, the language learner can choose which communication mode he or she prefers to use while chatting with the native speaker of English, whether it is video chat, text chat or both simultaneously. The learner might even chat with different native interlocutors concurrently using different modes of synchronous interactions. Multimodal synchronous interactions are vital in online discourse since they cater for students' learning styles and personality types. In multimodal learning environments, learners exert more control over the learning situation, and the multimodal synchronous interactions allow learners to combine text chat, audio chat and even graphics, thus working collectively at a distance in a multimodal and multi-dimensional learning environment (Hampel, 2002).

In general, most attitudinal studies have suggested that students have positive attitudes toward synchronous interactions in CALL-based learning environments. The following attitudinal studies yielded positive results for CALL: Beauvois and Eledge's (1996) study of the attitudes of learners with introvert and extrovert personality types toward foreign language learning in CALL classrooms; Holmes' (1998) survey of freshman students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of a university-level English CALL course on improving their English language proficiency; Klassen and Milton's (1999) investigation of university students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of a multimedia-based English language learning program; Aacken's (1999) study of CALL for Kanji; Bulut and AbuSeileek's (2007) investigation of Saudi students' attitudes toward learning the four language skills in a CALL-based

learning environment; Koroghlanian and Brinkerhoff's (2008) survey of students' attitudes toward internet-aided instruction; and finally Akbulut's (2008) evaluation of the attitudes of freshman EFL students toward CALL.

In most native–nonnative chat attitudinal studies, foreign language learners reported that online chat improved their language proficiency; helped them increase their vocabulary repertoire; exposed them to a variety of functional language discourse (Lee, 2004); increased their total immersion in the target language; enhanced their oral skills (Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Rossade, Heins & Hampel, 2005); and gave them the chance to communicate immediately with real language informants from their own age group (Coverdale-Jones, 2000).

In the context of the Arab world, attitudinal studies toward SCMC use are still very few. For instance, Al-Jamhoor's (2005) study revealed that students' attitudes towards the online synchronous interactions were positive as they reported that their intercultural interaction with the American native speakers online significantly improved their writing skills. Altenajji's (2005) study, which surveyed students' attitudes toward the online learning community, concluded that the medium fostered their sense of community, improved their computer literacy and enhanced their reflective learning. Other studies have suggested that students' attitudes toward SCMC were generally positive, mainly in improving their four language skills (Almekhlafi, 2005, 2006; Bulut & AbuSeileek, 2007). In contrast, AbuSeileek's (2007) study revealed that students' attitudes towards the cooperative computer-mediated technique improved their aural and oral skills significantly.

Most previous research on online chat has been carried out with learners chatting under the direct supervision of their instructors and is limited to the classroom environment. Moreover, previous research on native–nonnative speakers' chat is very scant and is still restricted to group chats (Darhower, 2007; Fukai, 2004; Lee, 2004; Tudini 2002). Learners of EFL do need to communicate with native speakers of English who can act as accurate informants of the language with their correct pronunciation, varied writing styles and accurate grammatical competence. However, since it is not possible for learners to see and talk to native speakers of English in their country, it becomes quite necessary for them to chat with such communication partners in English chat rooms. In this context, Hanna and de Nooy (2003) pointed out that language learners should use the appropriate strategies that help them communicate with anonymous, random speakers of the target language such as politeness and apologizing for their linguistic inadequacies.

Previous studies have suggested that the different modes of SCMC can solve this problem, as they provide distant foreign language learners with an optimal authentic language context (Fukai, 2004; Kötter, Shield & Stevens, 1999; Tudini, 2002; Warschauer, 1997). SCMC – in its multiple modes primarily instant messaging – resembles face-to-face conversation in nearly all aspects. Sotillo (2000) states that the discourse functions of SCMC are “similar to the types of interactional modifications found in face-to-face conversations that are deemed necessary for second language acquisition” (p. 82).

By and large, previous studies have indicated that SCMC may positively affect foreign language learners in three ways. First, it may equalize learner participation; second, it may increase learner output and productivity; and third, it may enhance learner interaction (AbuSeileek, 2007; Ortega, 1997). Text-based chat has been reported to facilitate and enhance the learners' interactive competence, increase their use of the target language in the electronic mode, develop their grammatical

competence and generally improve their oral fluency (Oliva & Pollastrini, 1995; Tudini, 2003b). For instance, Pellettieri (2000) correlated SCMC with the development of grammatical competence and stressed the fact that negotiation of meaning emerges in written chat as it does in verbal chat. It was also reported that it provides EFL learners with ample opportunities for negotiation of meaning and offers them an optimal environment for second language acquisition (Tudini, 2002). Other studies have revealed that SCMC may help build the learner's oral fluency by facilitating the automatization of lexical and grammatical competency at the formulator level (Blake, 2006). It may also substantially improve learners' linguistic performance and metalinguistic abilities through tandem exchanges (Kötter, 2003); foster students' social behavior and strengthen their interpersonal relationships (Darhower, 2007); and empower EFL learners to convert the chat room milieu into a social chat community conducive to foreign language practice, thus enhancing their learning autonomy (Darhower, 2002; Warschauer, 1996). Synchronous text-based chat was also found to enhance learners' writing abilities (O'Connor, 2005) and facilitate their learning of certain skills associated with electronic literacy, namely discourse management and technological skills (Simpson, 2005).

Methodology

This study investigated university students' attitudes towards using the three modes of synchronous interactions with native speakers of English: instant messaging, audio chat and video chat for improving their language proficiency. The study was conducted over one semester (from February to June 2007) at the Hashemite University and the FES-UNRWA University. A quantitative approach using a survey questionnaire was used to investigate students' attitudes at the end of the semester. The questionnaire, as a research method, has several advantages, such as:

- (a) it permits a wide coverage at minimum expense in terms of both money and effort;
- (b) its reliability can be higher in comparison to other methods of data collection;
- (c) anonymity for the respondents; and
- (d) its results could be generalized to a large population.

The standard questions used in this approach gave the researcher categories of response that were reasonably easy to interpret. In addition, the survey questionnaire was an appropriate way of gathering information from a large number of people and within a short period of time.

However, the questionnaire also has some limitations, such as:

- (a) probing is impossible;
- (b) the long time needed for drafting;
- (c) the pilot questionnaire takes time to develop; and
- (d) the questionnaire provides descriptive information rather than explanations (Black, 1999).

The researchers found the questionnaire quite reliable for collecting the data at low costs in terms of time and effort and helpful for generalizing the findings gathered from the sample to the whole population. In addition, the questionnaire

enabled the researcher to investigate statistically the differences among the variables. For instance, in the present study, a number of variables were tested, such as gender, faculty, seniority of study at university, and the chat messenger mode. Consequently, it will be easy, using the questionnaire data, to manipulate the main variables to general statistics, such as frequencies, mean, standard deviation, etc (Black, 1999).

Participants

The study sample included 320 university students enrolled in two Jordanian universities: the Hashemite University, a public university located in Zarqa governorate, and the Faculty of Educational Sciences (FES), a private faculty of education run by UNRWA-Jordan. The subjects are of different specializations but none of them is an English major. Table 1 below shows the distribution of the study sample in accordance with the required variables.

Regarding the distribution of gender in both universities, Table 2 below shows that the number of male students in both universities vastly outweighs the number of females. This is because male students normally chat with ENS more than females. In addition, when the questionnaire was distributed amongst the sample, only those respondents, mostly males, who chat with English native speakers were selected. This explains why most of the respondents were males.

Regarding the distribution of gender across faculties, Table 3 below shows that the number of male students in the scientific faculties (175) is more than the number of female students (39), while the number of female students in social sciences faculties (55) is more than the number of male students (51).

Research instrument

A questionnaire designed by the researchers for the purpose of conducting the study was circulated among all the subjects of the study enrolled in the two Jordanian

Table 1. The distribution of the sample by the study variables.

Variable	Frequency and percentage of total (320)
Gender	226 males (70.6%), 94 females (29.4%).
Faculty	136 scientific faculties (42.5%), 184 social science faculties (57.5%).
Seniority of study at university	105 freshman* (32.8%), 36 junior (43.4%), 139 sophomore (43.4%), 40 senior (12.5%)
Chat messenger mode	143 instant messaging (44.7%), 177 video chat (55.3%)

Notes: *Freshman: first year students; junior: second year students; sophomore: third year students; senior: fourth year students.

Table 2. The distribution of gender in both universities.

University	Male	Female	Total
Hashemite University	120	53	173
UNRWA University	106	41	147
Total	226	94	320

Table 3. The distribution of gender across faculties.

Faculty	Male	Female	Total
Scientific faculties	175	39	214
Social sciences faculties	51	55	106
Total	226	94	320

universities to elicit their attitudes towards using online chat discourse with ENS for improving their language proficiency. The filled-in questionnaires were collected and statistically analyzed.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part asked about personal information such as gender, seniority of study at university, the faculty in which students were enrolled, and the chat mode they preferred to use. The second part of the questionnaire contained 34 questions on students' attitudes towards using chat discourse. All items were answered on a five-point Likert scale, with five indicating "Strongly agree" and one indicating "Strongly disagree." (see Appendix). The questionnaire was administered only among respondents who reported that they frequently chat with native speakers of English.

The questionnaire was based on a pilot exploratory study. A small pilot study conducted on a number of randomly selected participants ($N = 50$) was designed as an initial stage for designing the questionnaire to obtain first-hand knowledge of the participants' perceptions of online chat with native speakers of English (Oppenheim, 2000). The pilot study consisted of a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit the participants' responses such as how often they chat and what benefits they gain from chatting with native speakers of English. It is worth mentioning that the participants' responses to the open-ended questions showed that there was a consensus among them as with regards to the importance of online chat for improving their language proficiency. The participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire and to express their views, opinions and reactions. The time in which the participants were involved in responding to the questionnaire was tested as well. Oppenheim (2000) stated: "questionnaires have to be composed, and tried out, improved, and then tried out again, often several times over; until we are certain that they can do the job for which they are needed". (p. 47). Findings of the pilot study suggested that some items had to be changed. Consequently, some of the necessary modifications were made before the actual study started. Thus, the final drafts of the instruments were produced, typed and made ready to be distributed to the selected actual sample.

Validity and reliability of the instrument

The validity of the items of the questionnaire was ensured by interviewing some students about their attitudes towards online chat with native speakers of English. Furthermore, the questionnaire was piloted among seven judges who taught English and instructional technology at Jordanian private and public universities. Finally, eight questions out of the 34 questions were reverse-coded to help ensure that students were not merely answering the questions randomly. The role of the judges to whom the questionnaire was sent out was to confirm whether the content of the questionnaire was precise, appropriately worded and adequate to elicit the required

responses from the respondents. In particular, the judges were requested to provide information on the relevance of each item to the main section in the questionnaire, the language clarity of every item, select any items to be added or removed, and provide any additional comments or corrections. The judges' suggestions were taken into account in designing the final draft of the questionnaire. As a result, some items that received the judges' consent level of 80% were added, others were excluded and others were reworded or refined. For instance, it was suggested that American English should be included in a number of items along with British English (see items 1 and 10). A number of items were added to include improvement of the four language skills (see items 8, 15 and 18) and items including issues unrelated to the Jordanian context were removed.

To test and retest the questionnaire's reliability and to examine whether the same responses were obtained, participants were required to fill in the questionnaire twice within a two-week interval. To estimate the reliability of the questionnaire, internal consistency measures were computed using the Cronbach Alpha method for each domain and for the total domains. Accordingly, the reliability coefficient rating for the four domains and the total was satisfactory for the purpose of this study (see Table 4).

Administration of the questionnaire

The researchers obtained permission from the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to administer the questionnaire among the study participants. Having obtained permission, the researchers met students in both universities. Students were acquainted with the aim of the study and were encouraged to respond truthfully to all the items in the questionnaire. Ethical considerations were taken into account while carrying out the research. First, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Students were informed that the questionnaires were part of academic research and were assured that their responses will be treated in strict confidentiality and information identifying their identities will not be divulged under any circumstances. This was important because assuring the participants that their responses would be treated with the strictest confidentiality would make them express their real attitudes as openly, freely and frankly as possible. Second, anonymity was also taken into account, as no information identifying the respondents would be disclosed. Thus, the researchers did not ask students about their actual names. Third, the respondents' privacy was taken into account from three different perspectives: the sensitivity of information taken from the participants, the settings being observed and dissemination of information

Table 4. Results of the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the various domains in the questionnaire.

Domain	Cronbach's Alpha coefficient	No. of items
Listening skills	0.94	10
Speaking skills	0.92	11
Reading skills	0.92	6
Writing skills	0.94	7
Total	0.93	34

(Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). It is worth mentioning that it is not necessary in Jordan to obtain signed waiver forms from all participants in the research. Moreover, although the researchers obtained permission from the concerned ministry and the two universities involved in the study to carry out the research, they also informed participants that it was their choice to fill in the questionnaire or not.

Data analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using the statistics software SPSS. The mean Likert score on each item of the questionnaire was calculated and compared to a hypothesized mean of 3, which represents a neutral score to determine which questions engendered positive or negative responses at a greater than chance level. The researchers also calculated the mean score for all participants on all items to check whether they showed overall positive or negative attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English. A t-test for the independent sample was administered to explore any statistically significant differences between students' attitudes towards using online chat that were attributed to their gender, faculty, and the chat mode used. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine any statistically significant differences that could be attributed to their seniority of study at university.

Findings and discussion

The purpose of the study was to investigate Jordanian students' attitudes towards using the different modes of online chat discourse with anonymous native speakers of English in chat rooms for the purpose of improving their English proficiency. Research question one addressed students' attitudes towards using online chat with native English speakers. In order to answer this research question, means and standard deviations for students' attitudes were used to determine the common aspects of their attitudes towards the four language skills as shown in Table 5. The table shows that students' attitudes towards using online chat with English native speakers for improving their English language skills demonstrated a higher level of interest in speaking skills, which had the highest mean score (4.46) with a standard deviation of 0.91. This was followed by listening skills, which had the second-highest mean score (3.21) with a standard deviation of 1.00. As with regard to improving reading and writing skills, the data indicated that the mean score on reading skills was 1.82 with a standard deviation of 1.15, which had the third rank, while the mean score on writing skills was 1.77 with a standard deviation of 1.12, which had the fourth rank.

Table 5. Means, standard deviations and ranks of students' attitudes towards using online chat with ENS for improving their language proficiency.

Domain	Mean	Standard deviation	Rank
Listening skills	3.21	1.00	2
Speaking skills	3.46	0.91	1
Reading skills	2.67	0.76	4
Writing skills	2.93	0.76	3

Analysis of students' perceptions revealed that they generally believed that video chat with native speakers of English improved their oral and aural skills more than the other two remaining skills (reading and writing). This could be attributed to students' preference for using video chat rather than using text-based instant messaging and to their overuse of the webcam, the microphone and the earphones when chatting with native speakers of English rather than keyboarding. This result is not surprising, as video chat using the webcam, the microphone and the earphones may be perceived by this group of informants as useful and convenient mainly because it is easier to handle, does not require any typing speed, and above all, it may seem to them to be much more interesting than instant messaging. Live video chat enables the learner of English to see and hear his native interlocutor while chatting with him or her. In addition, it is speaking and listening skills more than any other skill that students seek to improve when chatting with native speakers of English, whereas they pay little attention to improving their reading and writing skills during the native chat sessions. This result supports the findings of previous research, namely Bulut and AbuSeileek's (2007) study, which suggested that students' attitudes toward using CALL for improving their listening were stronger than their attitudes towards the other language skills. This result is also similar to the findings of Fukai's (2004) study, which found that the American students' oral interactions improved significantly as a result of frequently chatting with the native speakers of Japanese. It also corroborates the findings of Hampel and Hauck's (2004) study, which indicated that students reacted positively toward the online audiographic tutorials and reported that they enhanced their oral skills.

In addressing question two of the study, a t-test for the independent sample was administered to explore any statistically significant differences between students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English that were attributed to their gender, faculty, and the chat mode they frequently used. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine any statistically significant differences that can be attributed to their year of study at university. On the whole, subjects of the study reported that chatting with native speakers of English in chat rooms helped them improve their language proficiency and improve their four language skills. Also, they reported that they did not feel stressed or embarrassed when chatting with native speakers of English.

Gender

As shown in Table 6, the outcomes of the t-test indicated that there were statistically significant differences between students' attitudes towards online chat with native speakers of English that were attributed to their gender. These differences were noticed with regards to both listening skills and speaking skills in favor of the males, while there were statistically significant differences in the writing skills domain in favor of the females. The males' preference for speaking could be due to the fact that there are more males than females in scientific faculties where they are required to make oral presentations for their projects. In contrast, the females' preference for writing may be because there are more females than males in social sciences faculties where students are normally involved in more writing activities than their counterparts in the scientific faculties. This result is dissimilar to the findings of Akbulut's (2008) study, which suggested that gender had no effects on students' attitudes toward CALL. This result is also inconsistent with the findings of

Table 6. Differences between male and female students' attitudes towards using online chat with ENS.

Dependent variable	Gender	No.	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Listening skills	M	226	3.32	0.980	3.131	0.002*
	F	94	2.94	1.013		
Speaking skills	M	226	3.69	0.858	7.552	0.000*
	F	94	2.91	0.799		
Reading skills	M	226	2.62	0.931		-1.697
	F	94	2.81	0.953		
Writing skills	M	226	2.86	0.766	318	0.013*
	F	94	3.10	0.726		

Note: *The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Baniabdelrahman's et al. (2007) work, which investigated Jordanian EFL students' perceptions of their use of the internet for both general purposes including chat and EFL learning purposes and revealed that gender did not significantly affect the students' use of the internet.

However, the results revealed that there were no statistically significant differences in the reading domain that can be attributed to the chatters' gender. This could be attributed to the fact that Jordanian female chatters prefer IM to video chat while chatting with native speakers of English since they are, in some way or another, conservative and more likely to be reserved about chatting with foreigners. Refraining from chatting with foreigners via the webcam and microphone denies such female chatters the chance to improve their oral and aural skills. However, their frequent keyboarding while chatting with ENS improves their writing skills remarkably. In fact, both male and female chatters should take personal safety and privacy into account when chatting with strangers they encounter in chat rooms. For example, reserved females could chat only with female counterparts.

As a further contrast, Jordanian male chatters preferred to use the video chat mode to using IM. Using the webcam, microphone and earphones allowed them to see their native interlocutors while chatting with them. Analysis of the perceptions of the Jordanian male chatters involved in the study revealed that they believed that their frequent video chat with native speakers of English helps them improve their oral and aural skills much more than their writing skills.

Faculty

Participants in this study were divided into two categories according to the faculty they are enrolled in. Scientific faculties including faculties of engineering, medicine, science and nursing, and faculties of social sciences including faculties of business administration, education and arts. Table 7 shows that there were statistically significant differences between students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English that are attributed to the faculty in which students are enrolled. These differences were noticed in the speaking skill domain in favour of students from scientific faculties and in the writing skill domain in favour of students from social sciences faculties. However, there were no statistically significant differences in listening and reading skills. This could be due to the fact that English is the language of instruction in scientific faculties, whereas Arabic is the language of

instruction in nearly all faculties of the social sciences except for the faculty of arts, which includes the English department. This could also be attributed, as mentioned earlier, to the fact that there are more female than male students in the social sciences faculties where students are involved in more writing activities. There are more male than female students in the scientific faculties where students are normally requested to present their projects orally (see Table 3).

Chat mode frequently used

Students were divided into two categories according to the chat mode they frequently used when chatting with native speakers of English: instant messaging (IM), audio chat or video chat (VC). As shown in Table 8 there were statistically significant differences between students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English that are attributed to the chat mode they frequently use. These differences were noticed in the listening skill domain in favour of the VC mode and in the writing skill domain in favour of the IM mode. However, there were no statistically significant differences in the speaking and reading domains. It is apparent that video chat improves students' oral competence simply because it makes use of a webcam, microphone and headphones. However, IM improves students' writing skill because the language learner spends all the chat time keyboarding. This finding, however, is dissimilar to the findings of other studies such

Table 7. Differences between the attitudes of scientific faculties students (Sc.) and social science faculties students (So.) towards using online chat with ENS.

Dependent variable	Faculty	No.	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Listening skills	Sc.	136	3.18	1.11	- .386	0.700
	So.	184	3.23	0.91		
Speaking skills	Sc.	136	3.75	0.87	4.961	0.000*
	So.	184	3.25	0.88		
Reading skills	Sc.	136	2.58	0.96	- 1.524	0.129
	So.	184	2.74	0.92		
Writing skills	Sc.	136	2.70	0.83	318	0.000*
	So.	184	3.10	0.65		

Notes: *The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 8. Differences between students' attitudes towards the chat modes (instant messaging, audio chat or video chat) they prefer when chatting with ENS.

Dependent variable	Chat messenger mode	No.	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Listening skills	Instant messaging	143	3.12	1.09	- 6.376	0.000*
	audio & video chat	177	3.28	0.91		
Speaking skills	Instant messaging	143	3.12	0.96	- 1.450	0.148
	audio & video chat	177	3.74	0.76		
Reading skills	Instant messaging	143	2.80	1.00	2.216	0.027
	audio & video chat	177	2.57	0.87		
Writing skills	Instant messaging	143	3.08	0.81	3.113	0.002*
	audio & video chat	177	2.82	0.69		

Notes: *The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

as Blake's (2006) study, which found that text-based chatting plays a crucial role in building the learner's oral fluency.

Seniority of study at university

Students in this study were classified into four categories according to their seniority of study at university (freshman, junior, sophomore and senior). The one-way ANOVA was utilized to examine the differences among students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English with respect to their study year at university (see Table 9).

Results indicated that there were statistically significant differences that were attributed to students' seniority of study at university in all the language skills except for listening skills. With regards to speaking skills, the *f*-value was 3.701 at the significant level of 0.012, and this was significant at $\alpha < 0.05$. To determine which groups were different from the others, the Scheffe post-hoc test was administered. Based on this test (see Table 10), the results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between freshman students and senior students in favour of the latter. With respect to the reading skill domain, the *f*-value was 9.999 at the significant level of 0.000, and this was significant at $\alpha < 0.05$. Results of the Scheffe comparison test revealed that the differences were statistically significant between freshman, junior and sophomore students on the one hand and senior students on the other hand in favour of senior students.

Regarding writing skills, the *f*-value was 11.202 at the significant level of 0.000 and this was significant at $\alpha < 0.05$. Results of the Scheffe comparison test (see Table 10) indicated that there were statistically significant differences between freshman and junior students on the one hand and senior students on the other, in favour of senior students. This could be due to the fact that senior students may be more computer-literate than freshman, junior and sophomore students, and thus they use chat messengers more than the other groups either on-campus in the university internet laboratory or off-campus – or even at home during their leisure time. This result confirms the findings of Akbulut's (2008) study, which indicated that university senior

Table 9. Differences among freshman, junior, sophomore and senior students' attitudes towards using online chat with ENS for improving their language proficiency.

Dependent variables	Source of variances	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Listening skills	Between groups	3.313	3	3.638	1.330	0.265
	Within groups	262.414	316	0.983		
	Total	265.727	319			
Speaking skills	Between groups	10.914	3	1.104	3.701	0.012*
	Within groups	310.619	316	0.830		
	Total	321.532	319			
Reading skills	Between groups	24.490	3	8.163	9.999	0.000*
	Within groups	257.999	316	0.816		
	Total	282.489	319			
Writing skills	Between groups	17.767	3	5.922	11.202	0.000*
	Within groups	167.065	316	0.529		
	Total	184.832	319			

Notes: *Significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 10. Scheffe test for the differences among freshman, junior, sophomore and senior students' attitudes towards using online chat with ENS for improving their language proficiency.

Dependent variables	Seniority of study at university		Mean differences	P
Listening skill	Senior	Freshman	-.60726*	.013
	Senior	Freshman	-.72222	.000
Reading skill	Senior	Junior	-.84815	.001
	Senior	Sophomore	-.87146	.000
Writing skill	Senior	Freshman	.51863	.000
	Senior	Junior	.44176	.015

Note: *The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

students had more positive attitudes toward learning English in a CALL-supported environment than their freshman counterparts. This result also supports the findings of Koroghlian and Brinkerhoff's (2008) study, which revealed that older university students have more positive attitudes toward internet-aided instruction than younger students at the same university. This result also lends support to the findings of Bataineh and Baniabdelrahman's (2006) study, which investigated Jordanian EFL students' perceptions of their computer literacy and reported a significant effect for year of study on students' perceptions of their computer literacy.

Conclusions and recommendations

The primary objective of the present study was to investigate Jordanian university students' attitudes towards using online text-based chat, audio chat and video chat with anonymous native speakers of English for the purpose of improving their language proficiency. Results of the study have shown that students' attitudes towards using online chat with native speakers of English were stronger with respect to improving their speaking and listening skills respectively. The data analysis has revealed that male students have more positive and stronger attitudes towards improving their listening and speaking skills than female students, who have stronger attitudes towards improving their writing skills.

In addition, the findings of the study have shown that scientific faculties' students had stronger attitudes towards improving their speaking skills than their counterparts in faculties in the social sciences, whereas students from the social sciences faculties were more interested in improving their writing skills than students in scientific faculties. The outcome revealed that students who frequently preferred to use instant messaging rather than audio or video chat had stronger and more positive attitudes towards using texting to improve their writing skills. The findings also indicated that those students who preferred video chat to online messaging had stronger attitudes towards using online video chat with native speakers of English for the purpose of improving their oral fluency and listening skills. Finally, the results showed that senior university students have demonstrated a higher level of interest in using online chat for improving their language proficiency than freshman, junior and sophomore students.

Opportunities for future research are numerous. Further research is needed to investigate the effect of using synchronous online interactions with native speakers of English so as to improve independent Arab EFL learners' language proficiency outside

the foreign language classroom. Additional research is also needed to investigate the possibility of establishing native–nonnative chatlines between Arab universities and universities situated in countries where English is spoken as a first language. Conducting similar attitudinal studies on online chat between Arab learners of English and learners of English of other nationalities is also recommended.

Further research is also required to assess whether the effects of online video chat with native speakers of English on Arab learners' English proficiency are temporary or durable and whether female learners who prefer to use instant messaging will be able to improve their oral fluency through the transfer of their linguistic output from the chat log to the spoken word.

Notes on contributors

Dr. Safi Mahfouz is an assistant professor of modern English literature at Faculty of Educational Sciences, UNRWA University, Jordan. His research interests include modern drama, world literature, synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication and teaching English as a foreign language.

Dr Fathi Ihmeideh received his doctoral degree in early childhood literacy from the University of Huddersfield, England in 2006. Previously he worked as an assistant dean of Queen Rania Faculty for Childhood in Hashemite University, Jordan. At present Dr. Fathi is the head of the Childhood Education Department. His research interests are in early literacy development, early childhood technology, and ICT.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on university students' attitudes towards using online chat discourse with native speakers of English for improving their language proficiency

Part I: Personal Information

1- Gender: Male Female

2- Faculty: Social Sciences Scientific

3- Seniority of study at university: Freshman Junior Sophomore Senior

4- How often do you chat with native speakers of English?

always often sometimes rarely never

5- Messenger frequently used:

Yahoo Messenger Windows Live Messenger Others (Mention.....)

6- Messenger mode frequently used:

Video Chat Instant Messaging Both modes

Part II:

Indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following items by ticking the appropriate choice

No.	Items	SA	A	U	D	SD
1	Video chat helps me recognize the pronunciation differences between American English and British English					
2	Abbreviations used in online messaging like pls, asl, thanx and u should be regarded as acceptable new writing forms					
3	The chat messenger jargon is an acceptable modern form of written English with all its abbreviations, absence of punctuation marks, inaccurate capitalization and telegraphic sentences					
4	The best way to pick up proper English from English chatrooms is to speak only to educated native speakers of English					
5	Chatting with uneducated native speakers does not help me improve my language because they do not speak standard English					
6	Video chat with native speakers increases my language output					
7	I feel at ease when chatting with native speakers online, but I feel embarrassed when I speak to people face-to-face					

(continued)

Part II. (Continued).

No.	Items	SA	A	U	D	SD
8	Audio chat with native speakers improves my pronunciation					
9	Chatting in English makes me tensed up and a little bit embarrassed because I always make grammatical mistakes					
10	Instant messaging helps me recognize the spelling differences between American English and British English					
11	Audio chat improves my listening skills more than face-to-face conversations					
12	Synchronous instant messaging through keyboarding improves my writing skills more than e-mail					
13	Video chat improves my language fluency and accuracy					
14	Chatting with male and female speakers helps me recognize the differences between the language of both sexes in terms of pitch and intonation					
15	Instant messaging improves my skill in using punctuation marks properly					
16	Watching English movies and sitcoms improves my language proficiency more than online chat with native speakers of English					
17	Instant messaging increases my typing speed					
18	Instant messaging should be regarded as a new pedagogical instructional technology because it helps improve students' writing skills					
19	Instant messaging increases my English vocabulary repertoire					
20	Chatting with English interlocutors from different countries where English is spoken as a first language acquaints me with a variety of English accents					
21	Chatting should not be blocked in Jordanian universities, but should rather be used for pedagogical purposes					
22	Learners should not imitate the language of some English chatters who use inappropriate capitalization, abbreviations, incorrect grammar and colloquial expressions and phrases					
23	Instant messaging exchange with uneducated native speakers of English helps me learn English in real-life situations					
24	Instant messaging improves my reading comprehension					
25	Chatting with both educated and uneducated English native speakers helps me learn a variety of accents and dialects					
26	Instant messaging increases my reading speed					
27	Instant messaging and video chat with common native speakers of English helps me learn colloquial English					

(continued)

Part II. (Continued).

No.	Items	SA	A	U	D	SD
28	Video chat with the native speaker makes the chat more personal thus helps me learn the language better					
29	Audio chat improves my fluency more than instant messaging					
30	Instant messaging exchange with common British and American people helps me learn idiomatic expressions and phrases rarely found in English textbooks					
31	Students should always ask their English chat partners to correct their grammatical and pronunciation mistakes					
32	Audio chat improves my ability to recognize sound stress and word stress					
33	Instant messaging improves my English writing skills					
34	Chatting with people from different countries where English is spoken as first language acquaints me with the cultures of these countries					

*Participants indicate their level of agreement with each item using a five-point Likert-type scale comprising the categories "SA = strongly agree", "A = agree", "U=undecided", "D = disagree" and "SD = strongly disagree".