

Tech Tip on Partner Chat Applications

I. Scenario

For years, Dr. Thornton has always prided herself on providing students opportunities to engage with native speaker speech in a variety of formats. This could be in the form of pre-arranged videos with native speakers, visits by international scholars and students or visits to the local theater. However, with the pandemic, most of those opportunities had disappeared. One way to solve this problem and give students an opportunity to engage with different kinds of output is through partner chat applications.

II. What is it?

Partner Chat programs are applications designed to help people practice conversational foreign language skills in an interactive way. It is reminiscent of a traditional “pen pal” relationship. Within these applications, there is messaging between two people where you take turns communicating in respective native languages. John Carroll students’ native language being English and the other’s being Spanish, for example. Instructors can integrate these programs into their class by making it an assignment and conversing about it in class or by having students write a reflection outside of class. Another possibility is that the instructor requires students to send screenshots of the conversation that they have participated in for homework. Instructors can submit discussion questions with a certain topic that pertains to the class for the students to communicate with their respective “pen pals”. It is a mutually beneficial relationship between two people interested in improving their conversational skills in foreign language, taking turns speaking one another’s language. Teachers can assign this as an assignment where students turn in their conversation with a native speaker.

III. Different Partner Chat Applications

There are a variety of partner chat applications on the market. The ones presented are all platforms allowing students to message their respective partners to practice communication skills.

A. Partner Chat Applications that Allow for Face to Face Communication

The first set of partner chat applications that would be pedagogically useful for instructors are those that use Zoom and other virtual platforms to have students dialogue with native speakers from across the world. The two most commonly used by higher education institutions are [Boomalang](#) and [Talk Abroad](#).

[Boomalang](#): Boomalang is a conversation platform created by a team of professionals originally from Vanderbilt University. They train college age native speakers to host 15 or 20 minute conversations in Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, Italian and ESL. Through their platform, students are able to select an appointment from a speaker's calendar. Boomalang asks instructors for discussion topics beforehand to guide the conversation at the appropriate level. The platform also allows audio recordings of the conversations to be saved so that instructors can review the conversations afterward and provide feedback. Institutions do pay per conversation on a decreasing scale (ie: the more conversations you purchase, the lower the price per conversation). As distinct from the second option below (Talk Abroad), Boomalang's primary audience is higher education institutions and their technical support is geared towards that audience.

[Talk Abroad](#): Similarly, Talk Abroad is a conversation platform which also permits 15 or 30 minute conversations with native speakers. Similar to Boomalang, institutions pay for conversations on a decreasing scale and can add discussion topics to guide the conversation. Both platforms also allow the ability to listen to audio recordings after the fact. With that said, Talk Abroad also provides pre-scaffolded activities based on common topics discussed. Talk Abroad also has trained native speakers in specialized fields which could be useful for upper division courses. With that said, Talk Abroad does seem to want to cater to a wider variety of learners (high schools and universities both use this platform).

B. Partner Chat Applications that use Text Messaging Technology

As distinct from Boomalang and Talk Abroad which do incur a fee, there are also a series of free partner chat applications that allow students to communicate with native speakers via text messaging. The text message style platform is a familiar medium which allows for a sense of comfort for students, while promoting fluency. The most popular options on the market are [Speaky](#), [HiNative](#), and [Idyoma](#). All three options are available in the App store or on Android devices, making it accessible to all. Each platform states similar goals and purposes.

IV. What are the advantages and disadvantages?

The advantages of these applications are their accessibility; most students have smartphones or computers that can accommodate these applications. Another advantage is that the messaging between student and native speaker allows for a compelling method of communication that promotes interpersonal communication and intercultural exchange. As distinct from Boomalang and TalkAbroad, these applications are also free to use, which is beneficial to the students and to the University.

One feature in HiNative is potentially beneficial as it allows the native speaker to correct grammar or spelling errors. It would also encourage John Carroll students to correct the English of their partner. Having a real person correct the Spanish, for example, of a learner is more

beneficial to having a more authentic understanding of the language. It corrects things that the internet fails to catch or the cultural dialects can be better understood.

However, even though these text messaging applications support as many as 110 languages, they also involve speakers who do not necessarily have pedagogical training and instructors cannot personalize activities for these platforms. Moreover, there is very little oversight of the platform. As such, it would be difficult to impose deadlines or scaffold an activity as both speakers and students can participate in their free time and are not held to a particular schedule.

VI. Where to Find out More

For more information, CGLC staff are more than available to assist faculty in integrating partner chat applications into their courses. In the case of Boomalang and TalkAbroad, faculty can also schedule personalized demonstrations of their platforms.