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Chatting with Andy

Flora Debora Floris, Eunike Listyoyanti Suseno, Ellara Yusea Ananda and Irene Juliana Hia find a role for chatbots in language teaching.



A chatbot is a computer program or artificial intelligence software application that uses audio or text to interact with users by giving intelligent responses in a natural and conversational way. The responses that a chatbot gives come in the form of comments and answers to questions. The world's very first chatbot was developed by Joseph Weizenbaum in 1956. It was called Eliza and was designed to mimic a psychotherapist.

As a chatbot offers instant availability and the ability to react naturally via a conversational interface, it is now becoming popular as a tool for carrying on conversations with digital entities in a variety of contexts, including English language teaching and learning. Luke Fryer and Rollo Carpenter suggest that for language learners, chatbots can be useful resources for the following reasons:

- They offer a learning environment that is anxiety-free.
- They endlessly repeat the same material for learners.
- By means of text and synthesised speech, they give opportunities for learners to practise their reading and listening skills.
- They motivate learners and increase their interest in language learning.
- They offer learners opportunities to practise target language.
- They provide instant and accurate corrections.

At present, most chatbots have been developed to interact with native speakers, so they are probably best suited as tools for students at a higher level of proficiency. In addition, high-proficiency learners are generally more mature and, therefore, likely to be the sort of independent learners who would benefit from interaction with a chatbot.

Say hello to Andy

This article looks at the feasibility of using chatbots in the English classroom and provides some suggested activities. These focus on the use of a chatbot called Andy, but similar activities could be conducted using other chatbots.

Andy is available for Android and iOS users. The file size is 11MB, which is relatively small, and the interface is pretty simple, using a combination of green and white for the text bubbles. Andy was designed to help English learners to practise conversational skills and expand their vocabulary. It has a built-in dictionary and an English grammar resource at three different levels (basic, intermediate and advanced). To keep the conversation natural, Andy asks questions, uses open-ended phrases, presents grammar lessons, and corrects a user's grammar, spelling and pronunciation depending on their skill level. Some features, however, are only accessible for premium users. In 2018, the chatbot won Hyatt International's CEO's Award for Innovation for its value in supporting the hotel's concierge team.

Activity 1

The teacher invites the students to interact with Andy for a set period of time, eg ten to 15 minutes. After that, the teacher asks the students to share their experience of talking to Andy and to explain what they were talking about. The students can also be asked to share any new words they learnt or to reflect on any grammatical mistakes that they made in their virtual conversation with Andy.

Here are some follow-up questions for the teacher to ask:

- What were your questions to Andy?
- How did your conversation with Andy go?
- What new words did you learn from Andy?
- Did Andy correct your grammar?
- Did you like talking to Andy?
- If Andy was a real person, would you like to be his friend?

Activity 2

Andy has a feature called *Exercise* where the students can learn some new words. It takes the form of a game with several rounds in which the students are required to learn words – five words per round. For each word, Andy will give the students three options that they can choose from:

- *I know this word.* The students select this option if they encounter a word that they already know. The word will then be added to the known-words list.
- *Explain.* When the students find it difficult to understand a particular word, they should choose this option so that Andy can provide further explanations and examples.
- *Got it.* The students can choose this when they fully understand the explanation given.

Using this feature, the teacher can make vocabulary teaching and practice more fun. They can, for example, ask the students:

- to find a synonym or antonym of a word that they have just learnt from Andy;
- to create new sentences or short stories using the words they have learnt;
- to write an acrostic poem for each word that they have learnt, using the initial letters to determine the first word in each line.

Activity 3

Another feature of Andy is related to grammar practice. Andy was designed to provide direct responses to its users' queries on the grammar topics available at each level. After receiving Andy's explanation, the students have the opportunity to complete grammar exercises on the topic discussed.

The teacher can bring Andy into the grammar classroom by asking the students to spend time discussing a particular grammar topic with him and completing the assigned exercises. They can then be asked to share their understanding and the scores they achieved in their grammar exercises, as well as to talk about their experiences of using this feature of Andy. This activity can be done before or after an in-class discussion on the same grammar topic.

Activity 4

The teacher chooses a particular topic or issue to discuss with Andy and opens up the chatbot dialogue in front of the class. The students are then asked to speak to Andy about the designated topic or issue. A class discussion afterwards is based on the dialogues that took place.

Activity 5

More advanced students could be asked to design a chatbot for language practice, such as for booking a hotel room or for inviting a friend to dinner. First, they have to write some scripts or 'dialogue flows' for their chatbot. They then input these into a free platform such as *Flow XO* (<https://flowxo.com>) or *Landbot* (<https://landbot.io>). These platforms will help the students to create, manage and publish their chatbot without the need for coding skills. An example of a chatbot template created with *Flow XO* on the topic of booking a restaurant table can be found at <https://fxo.io/m/eezk6a56>. Another example can be seen at <https://youtu.be/G2qqMcmWILE>:

here, the students were asked to create a chatbot about alternative energies, using *Flow XO*.



The potential value of a chatbot is immeasurable, especially given the progress the technology has made in the last ten years. One of a chatbot's strong points is the convenience it offers, being readily available at any time to students with internet access, and generally for free or with an affordable subscription.

We hope this article will motivate English teachers to try one or two of the suggested activities to maximise the value of a chatbot in supporting their students' learning journey. ■

Fryer, L and Carpenter, R 'Bots as language learning tools' *Language Learning & Technology* 10 (3) 2006



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