# Identification of Moves of Informal Internet-based Chats Between Iranian EFL Teenagers and Foreigners

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## Abstract

This study aims at explaining informal Internet-based chat format with respect to its genre and writing components and system. The researchers analyzed 53 chat samples which were produced by 53 Iranian students in high intermediate and advanced levels of English in a private institute while chatting with foreigners. Besides the genre analysis, the purposes why people all around the world chat on the Internet were investigated based on these samples[i]. Five moves and seven purposes were found. Our data suggest that although purposes of samples are different, they follow the same moves. The results show that informal Internet based chat concerns with different purposes as chatting for improving English language, familiarity with different peoples and countries, friendship, finding a sexual partner or talking about religious or political ideas.

**Keywords:** Genre analysis, Internet-based chat.

## 1. Introduction

For thousands of years human beings have been social, and communicated with each other through different ways. As a result of cultural and political developments, different systems of writing are established. It is true that life has become complicated and people are mostly separated from each other;however, the stream of communication still continues. By the development of technology humans seek to find the best, fastest and the cheapest way to have contact with people far from them. Although connecting with others through World Wide Web may not be the easiest and the cheapest way, the least we can assert is that it is the most well-known way people use to interact with each other. Millions of people use the Internet every day to create and maintain interpersonal relationships. This kind of communication is a one on one or in group interaction in which participants cannot see each other while interacting, so it differs from face to face interactions in many ways (Markey & Wells, 2002).

Viewing from a global perspective, scholars have realized the importance of the Internet. Greenfield (2004) for instance says: "Internet could bring about the realization of an electronic global village, with no race, gender, infirmities, or social problems that often accompany these physical indicators of difference" (p.3). For many it is a"powerful form of communication through which social dynamics can be amplified and given new scope" (Napoli, Vizzari, & Menicucci, 2008,p.3).Communicating through the Internet has different kinds of which chat is the most common.

Because of the importance of the Internet as a well-known medium of communication, much attention has been put on analyzing the psychological and social aspects of chat and chat rooms.Researches are

of threekinds generally.Some researches have dealt with chat and chat rooms and the problems they will bring about. In a survey by Beebe, Harrison, and Quinlan (2003), using MSS( Minnesota Student Survey Question)[1]50,168 9th grade public school students were studied.The results show that both girls and boys who usedthe Internet for chatting (in chatrooms) had psychological distress. In another study by Mitchell and Ybarra (2007), in which 1500 Internet users (ages 10-17) participated, findings suggest that young userswho wereengaged in self- harm behaviorswere more likely to engage in on-line behaviors that have the potential to place them in risky situations, and that they preferred to have more interactions with people known only on-line by sex. Sometimes these kinds of interactions make the partners addicted to chat, as shown in a study by Napoli, Vizzari, Pratolongo,and Menicucci(2008).

Besides psychological problems many parents are now worried about the Internet and chat rooms because of their potential of  making children the targets of commerce and of leaving a bad effect on theirchildren's native religion and culture (Greenfield, 2008).

Previous research has shown the advantages of Internet-based chat. In an exploratory study Coniam and Wong (2004) examined a group of Hon Kong secondary school students (grades 7-10). The experimental group participated in an on-line "chatting" program (in a text-only mode) over a one- month period while the control group did not have any access to Internet chatrooms and studied only the text in the traditional mode. The data gathered based on responses to questionnaires and samples of written work suggested that although the rate of errors were somehow the same, the experimental group used more complex sentences or sentences

which have auxiliaries beyond their interlanguage grammatical levels.

Yuan (2003) maintained that in face-to-face interactions participants' language problems may block the meaningful communication by making them aware of such problems whereas in on-line chatting participants are provided with unique opportunity to put their grammatical knowledge into practice through meaningful communication in more authentic situation, so it can prevent error-phobia and will help the learners to improve their language.In a similar vein, Jia(2008) who used Computer Simulation in Educational Communication (CSIEC) system noted that chatting can help the English learners to improve their communicational skills.The system is used for English instruction and focuses on supplying a "virtual chatting partner which can chat in English with the English learners any time anywhere and generates communicative responses according to the user input, the dialogue context, the user's and its own personality knowledge" (p.249). The results of such type of instruction suggested great improvement in learning English for non-native students (Jia, 2008, p.249).

The third trend of investigations relates to chat language analysis and its writing system which is completely different from any kind of interaction. So the only thing apparent on the electronic contact is language. In a research by Posteguillo(2002), a new field of research and study within applied linguistics called "Netlinguistics" was introduced, which is a "functional and pragmatic analytical framework concerned with the technology of the Internet"(p.21).Chatrooms are of hot interest to people specially teenagers, and chat language is well illustrated by the overwhelming acceptance of the language and it is one of the most commonly used

media of communication especially among teenagers. Chat rules and traditions are so widelyspread nowadaysand have been extended to other communicative areas such as short message systems including different kinds of abbreviations, teenager expressions, acronyms, incomplete words and sentences, etc. Researchers have now gathered valuable information on chat language, its acronyms and abbreviations (Davis, 2003).

In an experimental research, Erickson (2004) studied the effect of chat genre on the social behavior of user groups and the participatory genre which has been applied to synchronous chat systems.Inmost similar investigations chat is considered as a meansfor different purposes not a common system of communication. Despite a bulk of research on analyzing chat discourse, its style (formality and informality), little to no research has so far been conducted to analyzechat genre.The aim of this study is first to find and analyzethe specific genre of informal Internet-based chat samples and second to categorize them based on their purposes and finally to analyze the writing system and language component used inchat.Therefore, the following research questions are to be answered:

1. What specific chat moves following Swales (1991) model are used by the participants of this study?
2. Which move or moves have frequently been used by the participants of the study?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Participants

53 students in two English classes in an English private institute were asked to have chat conversations with foreigners. Students were at the age of 16 to 24, all girls and at high intermediate and advanced levels.

The foreigner partners were both natives of English language and non-natives. The gathered information is tabulated below for clarification.

**Table 1.** Number of native and nonnative participants

|  | Country names | number |
|---|---|---|
| Native countries | U.S.A, AustraliaCanada, England | 21 |
| Non native countries | China,   Pakistan   Norway,   Nigeria Colombia , Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Dubai | 32 |

**2.2 Procedure**

The first class comprised 28 students who were asked to chat with foreigners by asking the purpose, for which they chat, and the second class comprised25 students who were asked to chat freely. To avoid any change in the students' attitudes during the study, the classes were not aware of each other1. To provide natural samples, no instruction or guideline was given by the teachers and in order to increase the external validity of the research, Omegle2 site was introduced to the studentsto make it easier for those who didnot like to use their own names or IDs.We asked them not to write their names on thesamples.

**2.3 Data collection**

In order to gather chat samples, the researchers asked the students to deliver the saved documents. Therefore, fifty three informal samples were gathered and analyzed according to the purpose and the specific genre. The genre analysis followed the Swales'(1991) Model of genre analysis. An acceptable inter-rater reliability was obtained ($r\sim85\%$) on determining the moves. The similarities and differences among samples

were analyzed with respect to abbreviations, acronyms, misspellings, syntactic problems, format, moves, and length of the sentences and their frequencies were measured.

### 3. Results and Discussion

As mentioned before, the participants of the samples were 53 persons from native and non-native countries, each of whom chatted for a special purpose. The number of the participants based on their nationality and the purposes for which they have conversations are tabulated below:

**Table 2:** frequency and purposes of samples based on nationality

| Nationality and number of the foreigners | number | Purpose | Frequency (purpose) |
|---|---|---|---|
| American | 11 | Hobby | 7 |
| | | Sex | 3 |
| | | Politics | 1 |
| Canadian | 3 | Familiarity with country | 2 |
| | | Hobby | 1 |
| Australian | 4 | Familiarity with cultural issues | 4 |
| English | 4 | Hobby | 3 |
| | | sex | 1 |
| Chinese | 9 | Improving English | 9 |
| Norwegian | 1 | Hobby | 1 |
| Pakistani | 3 | Politics | 2 |
| | | Hobby | 1 |
| Nigerian | 1 | Familiarity with technology | 1 |
| Colombian | 4 | Hobby | 3 |
| | | friendship | 1 |
| Arabs (Saudi Arabia) | 4 | Religion | 2 |
| | | sex | 2 |
| Arabs (Qatar) | 2 | Religion | 1 |
| | | Friend ship | 1 |
| Arabs (Dubai) | 6 | Politics | 4 |
| | | sex | 2 |
| Danish | 1 | Hobby | 1 |

**Graph 1.** Frequency of purpose of chat
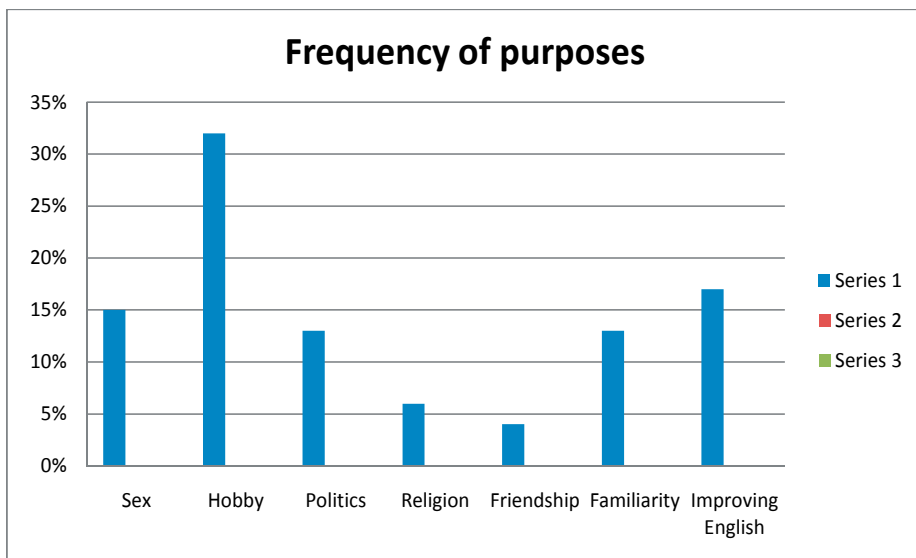


As shown in the tables, the highest frequency with respect to the purpose relates tohobby; that is chatting on the Internet is considered a hobby for most of its users in this study. Although factors as familiarity with new technology, cultural and social issues are considered here as separated purposes, if we look at them generally, they can be considered as hobbies too. The second purpose for which the participants chat is sex. Although WorldWide Web is so international to provide sexual partners, participants of a chat conversation seek pictures and videos through using slang/sexual language while chatting.

Most of the time when two partners are of the same sex, the conversation is stopped at the beginning, however, the purpose is not sexual matters. The partners of a chat prefer to have chat with different genders.

**Table 3:** Moves in informal chat

| Moves | Steps | Definitions |
|---|---|---|
| Move(1): Expressing Greeting | Step (1): Saying Hi, Hello, Hey, etc. Step (2): Solicitation (how ru doing?) | all the informal internet based chats start with greeting. It can be only a word such as "hello" "hi", and "hey" or ect. or can be continued by solicitation e.g: "hi! How ru?" |
| Move (2): Giving and gathering information | Step (1): Asking about age, sex, and location(ASL?) Step (2): Asking about job or major (e.g. "r u a student?" "what's ur major?") Step (3): Talking about hobbies Step (4): Asking about climate, or Calendar (weather or date) | In this move which has several steps the interlocutors ask each other about their major or job e.g: "r u a s t?"(That is are you a student?) or "ur major?" they also talk about their own hobbies (e.g: "i chat in my leisure time" , "I love Tennis" ) Then they may ask about calanders , date and time (e.g: "time there? " "day?") These steps can be used interchangeably or two of them may be deleted. But in most of the samples we had almost all of them. |
| Move (3): giving and gathering information about cultural political, and religious issues | Step (1):  Giving and gathering social information Step (2): Giving and gathering  cultural information Step (3): Giving and gathering political and sometimes religious issues | in this move    interlocutors talk about the dominant political and religious situations in their own count "r u Moslem? So you believe in God!" or "u hav bomb? or "Iranians have bf ? (boy friend) |
| Move (4): Personal desires And information | Step (1): Showing positive or negative attitude approval or disapproval of the present conditions Step (2): Asking for e-mail address and websites if any Step (3): Asking for adding to friends Step (4): Asking for pictures and webcam video | Here the partners of a chat speak about their own ideas or the issues mentioned in previous move , and approve or disapprove them (e.g: "i myself believe in nothing" or "I think Iranians are terrorists" ,"u r very limited / restricted" In the next step they try to gather personal information from each other if they desire to continue chatting and to be in touch. For example they ask for e-mail address, websites or ID. |
| Move (5): Closure of the conversation | Step (1): Dating the next contact Step (2): Saying goodbye ( Bye, Farewell, pictures animation, ect.) | It usually contains dating for the next contact and saying goodbye. This move is optional, there are so many chat partners who do not say goodbye to each other and they leave the conversation without dating. But sometimes the participants of a chat say "goodbye", "bye bye", "farewell" or they use pictures and animations. |

Chattingfor religious purposes is only seen in Islamic countries (Qatarand SaudiArabia in this study).Almost half of the participants who chatto have hobby, asked for e-mail address, so we can consider it as a kind of seeking friends on internet; although, they didn't mention it directly.

Comparing the samples, we found five moves. The first 2 moves are about greeting and asking personal information. They are used as opening part of the conversation. The third move relates to the national informatione.g., cultural, political, social and sometimes religious issues dominant in the countries. Move 4 again turns back to personal information and desires, but here the conversation is based on the information given in move 3. The last move is the closure of the conversation and dating for future chat, if they desire to be in contact. Although all the samples contain the first and second moves, the third, four and the last moves and their steps are optional. A chat conversation may contain the third and the last moves, or the forth move only, but if all the third, fourth and fifth moves are used they are sequenced systematically based on table (4), although steps may be used interchangeably.

**Graph 2:** Percentage of moves in chats
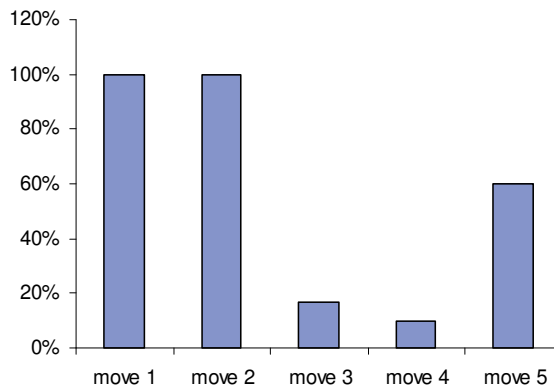
Not all the moves could be seen in all samples, somesamples did not contain move 3, 4 or 5 but as the results show all samples contained moves 1, and2. The steps are not sequenced as mentioned before, for example in move 3, the steps can be used interchangeably and sometimes one or two steps are deleted, but the most common sequence was the one presented in the previous section.

**Table 4.** Frequency of steps

| Moves | Steps | Frequency |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Move (1) | Step (1) | 53 |
| | Step (2) | 14 |
| Move (2) | Step (1) | 53 |
| | Step (2) | 46 |
| | Step (3) | 23 |
| | Step (4) | 33 |
| Move (3) | Step (1) | 9 |
| | Step (2) | 15 |
| | Step (3) | 24 |
| Move (4) | Step (1) | 28 |
| | Step (2) | 31 |
| | Step (3) | 14 |
| | Step (4) | 28 |
| Move (5) | Step (1) | 14 |
| | Step (2) | 35 |

The results of this study are in line with Maness (2007) who shows that in all the samples informal English is used and the participants all used acronyms, abbreviations, and non-verbal compensations as signs.In all these moves general and widespread system of writing is

used. This writing system consists of abbreviations, acronyms, pictures, animations, and signs. The table below shows the items and their frequency in detail.

**Table 5.**  Frequency of signs, animations, acronyms and abbreviations

|  | Frequency of samples | % Of samples | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abbreviations and acronyms | 53 | 100% | 341 | 72% |
| Signs | 50 | 94% | 105 | 22% |
| Animations | 25 | 47% | 30 | 6% |

**Table 6.** Frequency of abbreviations and acronyms used in samples

| Abbreviations &acronyms | Frequency of samples | % | Move | Definition |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ASL | 53 | 100% | 2 | Age, sex, location |
| f/gf | 40 | 75% | 2 | Boy friend/ girl friend |
| CYA | 4 | 8% | 5 | See you |
| BBS | 15 | 28% | ALL | Be back soon |
| AFAIK | 9 | 17% | ALL | As far as I know |
| KIT | 10 | 19% | 5 | Keep in touch |
| IC | 17 | 32% | ALL | I see |
| JK | 22 | 41% | ALL | Just kidding |
| BTW | 3 | 6% | ALL | By the way |
| LOL | 25 | 47% | ALL | Laugh out loud |
| B4 | 1 | 2% | ALL | Before |
| EMA | 27 | 50% | 2 | e-mail address |
| TNT | 14 | 26% | ALL | Take care |
| TC | 2 | 4% | 2,5 | Your welcome |
| u | 48 | 91% | ALL | You |
| ur | 50 | 94% | ALL | Your |

**Table 7.** Frequency of signs

| Signs | Frequency of sample | % | definition |
|-------|--------------------|----|------------|
| *k* | 7 | 13% | Kiss |
| <s> | 3 | 6% | Smile |
| U> | 1 | 2% | Cup of coffee |
| \~/ | 1 | 2% | Glass of drink |
| ? alone | 50 | 94% | Question |
| ! | 43 | 81% | Surprise |

AsTable 6 shows all of the samples contain the abbreviation "ASL?" which refers to race or ethnicity (L: location in ASL).The results are supported by the ones achieved by Tynes, Reynolds and Greenfield (2004) who stated that most of the teen participants of informal chat tend to know about the race and ethnicity of their partners, so there is a chance of being exposed to negative remarks about a racial or ethnic group while they are chatting.

The results in a similar study by Subrahmanyam et. al.,(2005)show that almost all of the participants revealed their identity, most frequently their gender, and in this way they tried to compensate for the language of chat by providing the information that would be visible in a face to face conversation.

Sex and identity are also mentioned in all of the samples. Although we cannot be sure about the sexual information communicated in the samples (at least on one side), it can be asserted that the most frequently mentioned information in teen chat samples relates to gender/ sex. In this case the obtained results go in accordance with those of Subrahmanyam,Smahel, and Greenfield (2005). Besides their study

showed that the participants who were self-identified as male produced more explicit sexual communication than those who were self-identified as female. In a similar micro-analyzed qualitative discourse study, Subrahmanyam, et. al., (2004) stated that the teen participants who are male tend to be self-identified as older and the female ones tend to be self-identified as younger, but the thing which is common in all the samples is sexual and identity representation.

In addition to identifying moves and writing system in chat, we found some special communicative characteristics.Due to the fact that Internet-based chat mostly is an unseen conversation and the partners do not see each other, they show their emotions through different ways e.g., using signs, animations, pictures, and repetition of letters (e.g., when they want to emphasize their negative answers they will write noooooooooooo!) or sometimes they change the font of writing or use bold faced letters.

**Table 8.**  Frequency and percentage of written emotions

| Showing emotions | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| Signs | 12 | 23% |
| Prolonged words | 47 | 89% |
| Bold faced words | 11 | 21% |
| Changing font | 5 | 10% |

Syntactic problems are very common in chat conversations, for example chat users ask questions not in question form but in an incomplete statement with a question mark (e.g.: "you in yet baby?" ), or most of the time they use a clause or an incomplete sentence or even a word instead

of a complete sentence (e.g.: "from Iran.").Misspelling is very common too. Besides misspelling of words, the participants in a chat conversation use a letter instead of a complete word (e.g.: "u" instead of "you".)

**Table 9.** Frequency of syntactic problems and misspellingS

| Problems | Frequency of samples | % |
|---|---|---|
| Syntactic problems | 50 | 94% |
| Misspelling | 53 | 100% |

As Table 9 shows almost all the samples have syntactic problems and misspelleditems. Sometimes we can see that long and complete sentences are used in the conversations.That kind of sentences as the gathered samples show are related to the chats for religious purposes, where the person is going to convince his conversational partner and wants to give a complete and convergent explanation.

## 4. Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring moves and steps in the informal chat language used by Iranian chat   users and their counterparts of nations. Second, there are some other factors common in the Internet–based chat conversations as use of abbreviations,  acronyms, signs and animations of which the most common usage refers to abbreviations, then signs and at the end animations.

If we don't consider "? " and "!" as signs, we can have a sample without signs but we never have a sample without abbreviations.

Third, the findings show that the entire sample without exception contains grammatical and misspelling problems.

The findings show that people chat for different purposes such as; religion, politics, hobby, familiarity with different nations, friendship, improving English and sex, among which hobby has the most frequency within the samples.

In general, this study should be considered as initial evidence for furtherresearch rather than a complete effort because chat is very widespread and so many people of different countries chat with each other through the Internetevery day; therefore, so many other purposes or even new moves can be found based on more samples.

Finally, although this study still suffers from some limitations as insufficient samples related to different nations or one sidedness of samples (that is on one part of the chat we have Iranian girls and only the second partner is changing), it can serve as a helping tool for future researches on international internet based chats.

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## End Notes:

MSS is a questionnaire which contains more than 117 questions (300 variables) addressing attitudinal behavioral and environmental issues.

If the second class become aware of the first class kind of chatting  (to ask the purpose), their attitude will be changed and they may ask the same question from their partners.

Omegle is a site in which every person can have a free chat with a stranger, without knowing each other or having any ID. Most of the partners in this site are foreigners and they chat in English.

"Net linguistics is a new field of research and study within applied linguistics which concerns with functional, stylistic and pragmatic linguistic and sociolinguistic analytical framework of technology of internet "(Posteguillo, 2002).

EIP: English for Internet Purposes which is a branch of ESP (English for SpecifiPurposes) and concerns with genre analysis and Net linguistics (Posteguillo, 2002).

**Appendix**

**Emoticons: (symbols used to display feeling)**

Note: For these little things called "emoticons" Often the idea is to turn your head sideways, and it makes a picture on a lot of the smiley faces. ;-) for example where the ; (semi-colon) are the eyes, the - is the nose, and the ) is the mouth. Also, you see some people use the hyphen (-) to show the nose, while others will show the same expression without the nose. Example: ;-) and ;) signify the same thing.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| s*, *S*, <s>, = smile | *g*, <g> = grin | xoxo = hugs and kisses | hugggggggsssss = hugs |
| *w*, <w> = wink | *g*, = giggles | *k*, *K* = kiss | ;-)~~~~~~~~ = giving someone the raspberries. |
| (((((person))))) = giving them a virtual hug. | \~/ = glass with a drink. (usually booze) | ^5 = high five | ?^ = What's Up? |
| \_/? = a cup of tea | [_]> + Cup of coffee | @@@ = Cookies | @--/-- = a rose |
| **:-) .. smile** | ;-) ... wink | <:-l ... curious | :~) ... cute |
| :-( ... sad | 8-) ... wears glasses | :-} ... embarrassed | :-/ ... perplexed, confused |
| :,-( ..or ;`-( .... to cry | :-< ... pouting | >:-( ... angry | 0:-) ... angel |
| :-l ... bored or no opinion | :-> ... grin/mischievous | l -) ... dreaming | :-O ... shouting, or shocked |
| :-o ... talking, or surprised | >:-ll ... mad / angry | :-D ... big grin or laugh | =:-O ... scared |
| :-x ... keeping mouth shut | :o) ... smiles (w/nose) | :-)))))))) ... lots of smiles | ;-P ... sticking tongue out :P ... sticking tongue out |
| # 8 - ) ... nerd, or or person with glasses and crew cut. | &-( ... crying | !:-) .. I have an idea | ;-{ ) ... person with a mustache |
| ;-)~ ... sexy tongue - or drunk | ;~) ... being cute | c["] ... coffee mug | [_]> ... another cup or mug |
| :-> ... grin/mischievous | <:-l ... curious | l-l ... sound asleep | :-x .. I'm keeping my mouth shut |