

# 15 Uses for the Chat Box Function in Online Language Lessons

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## Introduction

With the move to online classes in 2020, Zoom has proved to be one of the more popular synchronous meeting tools (SMTs) at educators' disposal. While others have discussed Zoom's features such as annotation tools, polls, breakout rooms and screen sharing (see Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2020), one feature has remained largely overlooked: the in-meeting chat box. This chat box can essentially be used as a mini whiteboard during a lesson, and while a dedicated whiteboard function is included with the Zoom software and boasts increased functionality over the chat box, its use during lessons is not as seamless as the chat box. For example, by using the chat box instead of the whiteboard feature for some activities, the teacher can retain sight of all students (assuming their cameras are on) and any visual cues their faces might convey.

Uses for the chat box function in Zoom and similar programs can be categorized into the following three functions: 1) administrative tasks 2) learning tasks 3) genuine communicative uses. Listed below are 15 ways educators may use the chat box in a Zoom lesson.

### 1. Getting answers from everyone when asking a referential question

In a traditional EFL classroom, often the same outgoing students will dominate any casual chat initiated by the teacher. By using the chat box, a teacher can elicit responses from every member of the class, scan the responses, then select a few to follow up with. It should be remembered that shy students do interesting things on the weekends too.

## **2. Brainstorming vocabulary**

Vocabulary items can be added to the chat box by either the teacher, students, or a combination of both during a brainstorming session.

## **3. Generating questions for group discussion on a topic**

This can be done before students head to their breakout rooms for discussion. Again, the questions can be added to the chat box by the teacher or the students.

## **4. Practicing new grammar structures**

When learning a new grammar structure, the chat box allows for all students to simultaneously write their own example sentences. This gives the instructor immediate access to all of the student-generated language, and they may provide feedback in real time, either orally or in the chat box.

## **5. Writing (or reiterating) the instructions for a task that students are to do in their breakout rooms**

A useful feature of the chat box is that students can continue to view its content while they are in their breakout rooms. This allows the teacher to ensure that students can see their task instructions.

## **6. Having students indicate when they have finished a quiz or task**

Having students type “finished” or “done” in the chat box after a task can prove a valuable time saver.

## **7. Private questions and comments to students**

There is no need to embarrass students by asking them questions in front of the class. In this case the chat box can essentially act as a private whiteboard in which a teacher may enquire about missing homework, admonish a student for looking at their smartphone during the lesson, etc.

## **8. Quick quiz**

There is no shortage of software available for teachers wishing to do online real-time quizzes in class. Sometimes however the teacher may wish to ask a single piece of trivia and gauge the students' answers. The chat box serves this purpose well, negating the need to share any additional screens. The teacher also has the ability to have students make their answers visible or invisible to one another.

## **9. Quick vote**

In cases in which teachers give some control of the lesson's direction to students, the chat box can be used to take a quick poll of what the students would like to do.

## **10. Highlighting key words in a discussion**

Some teachers also provide vocabulary lists for reading activities through the chat box.

## **11. Giving feedback in breakout rooms without interrupting**

Instead of verbal feedback on students' spoken English, the instructor can provide unobtrusive, discreet error correction as discussions ensue.

## **12. Taking names as attendance**

This is an especially effective way of checking attendance for larger classes. Students can add their name or student number to the chat box, which the teacher can then copy and paste into another document.

### **13. Providing links to external websites or other resources**

Teachers and students can share hyperlinks within the chat box.

### **14. Providing files to students**

The chat box allows for the sharing of files, and the teacher can use it to provide lesson materials, either to the group as a whole, or to individual students (for example, returning homework).

### **15. Soliciting feedback**

Teachers can ask students pointed or general questions about an activity or test they have taken part in. Again, the teacher can have students make their answers visible or invisible to one another.

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps the greatest benefit of the chat box is that it allows for all students to make their voice heard without actually having to speak up. Much has been written about “the shy Japanese student”, and there will always be those students who can go for an entire semester without ever raising their hand in class or volunteering anything to the instructor. The chat box has allowed this author to get to know some students who probably would have blended into the background in a regular classroom setting.

Zoom’s multiple features have made it one of the most popular teaching tools in the ongoing pandemic, but educators may overlook the chat box and its functionality in favour of the SMT software’s more glittering features. This list is by no means exhaustive, and educators and students alike should continue to explore ways to use the chat box during Zoom lessons.

## References

Kohnke, L., & Moorhouse, B. L. (2020). Facilitating synchronous online language learning through Zoom. *RELC Journal*.  
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