

The advantages seem to be that learners can interact on an individual basis with an infinitely patient robot, who will wait as long as it takes for them to compose the language they want to use. It is also worth noting that opportunities already exist for learners to contact each other and exchange languages in real time by Skype and text chat, using sites such as the Language Exchange Community (see our accompanying website) but that they will probably need to be more confident users of the language to do so. In addition to giving learners opportunities to plan and rehearse spoken language, Harmer also suggests three other ways in which students can develop speaking skills: by repetition, by practising speaking in smaller groups before moving on to larger groups, and by making sure that everybody in the class takes part in speaking activities, something he calls 'mandatory participation'. At present, chatbots allow learners to practice orality in terms of interaction between speaker and listener, and they give them practice in responding appropriately in one of the fixed routines (question, answer, sometimes also feedback) which is commonly found in spoken language. The drawback is that the chatbot responses are often in language one would associate more with 'traditional' genres of written language, avoiding, for instance, colloquialisms or incomplete sentences. However, they do not allow them to rehearse many of the features of spoken language apart from pronunciation.