# Using audio-conferencing for language learning tasks

Audio-conferencing tools enable users to talk to (and sometimes see) one another in real time over the Internet. In this activity we will see how you can use these tools to allow learners to practise their speaking online in pairs or small groups.

What can I do in this DOTS activity?	Where can I find the information? (click on the link to go to the section)
Part 1	
Find out about what audio-conferencing is.	A. What is audio-conferencing software?
Think about some pedagogical reasons why I would want to use audio-conferencing for my teaching.	B. Why would I want to use audio-conferencing in my classroom?
Part 2	
Learn about some basic features of audio-conferencing.	C. A guide on how to download, install, and set up Skype and CallBurner
Consider what I need to keep in mind when using audio-conferencing in my teaching and find an example of an activity in which audio-conferencing is used.	D. Pedagogical considerations and sample activity
Find out about practical considerations that can help me in using audio-conferencing in my class.	E. Practical suggestions
Part 3	
Check my understanding using a quick and easy checklist.	F. Check your understanding
Think back over what worked and what didn't work (in the DOTS activity and/or in my use of this tool).	G. Reflect!
Check out what other teachers do with podcasts. Discuss and evaluate ideas and activities in a DOTS forum. Create additional tasks and share them with colleagues online.	H. Explore and share!
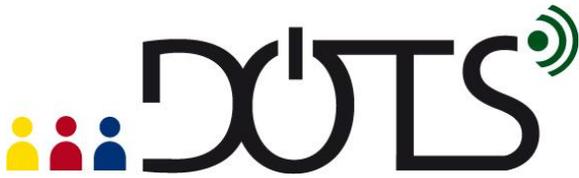
Part 1

A. What is audio-conferencing software?

Audio-conferencing software uses Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology to allow two or more users to have a spoken conversation online in real time. Here are four examples of audio-conferencing tools which are free and easily accessible:

- Skype: www.skype.com
- Google Talk: http://www.google.com/talk/
- Elluminate vRoom: http://www.learncentral.org/user/vroomreg
- FlashMeeting: http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=3101

The features of different audio-conferencing tools vary, such as the maximum number of participants, video capabilities, or whether the sessions are recordable. Another important consideration is whether audio transmission is via **half duplex**, which only allows users to speak one at a time by means of a "push-to-talk" button (i.e., similar to a walkie-talkie), or **full duplex**, which permits two-way simultaneous communication (i.e., like a telephone conversation). A summary of these key characteristics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of some features of four freely available audio-conferencing tools

Audio-conferencing tool	Maximum no. participants	Audio technology	Video capabilities?	Sessions recordable?
Skype	26	Full duplex	yes (free for up to two participants; pay version required for conference calls)	yes (by means of call recording software)
Google Talk	2	Full duplex	Yes	No
Elluminate vRoom	3	Half duplex	Yes	No
FlashMeeting	30	Half duplex	Yes	yes (sessions automatically recorded)

Due to its widespread popularity and ease of use, in the rest of this activity we will concentrate specifically on Skype, although much of the general information is also relevant for the other audio-conferencing tools.

As we shall see, Skype sessions can be easily recorded using call recording software, thus enabling teachers and students to replay the conversations once the original speaking session has ended.
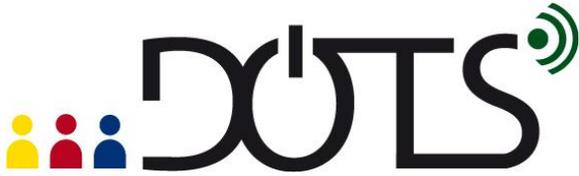
B. Why would I want to use audio-conferencing in my classroom?

One of the most obvious reasons for using audio conferencing in your classes is for a tandem speaking exchange to allow your learners to come into contact with native speakers of the language they are learning. If the native speakers are also learning the language of your students, the benefits for both groups could be reciprocal, with approximately half the time devoted to the language your students are learning and the other half to the language the others are studying. If you are interested in setting up such an exchange, the following sites are excellent sources of information:

- The International Tandem Network: http://www.cisi.unito.it/tandem/email/idxeng00.html
- The eTwinning Project: http://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm

Tandem exchanges, however, are not the only possible use for audio-conferencing. Students in the same class can also be asked to do pair or small group speaking tasks online outside of class as homework in order to practise their oral skills in the language they are learning.

Whether used for tandem exchanges or between students in the same class, students can record Skype conferences using CallBurner (see next section) and send the file to their teacher for feedback and/or assessment. As part of the activity, students could be asked to listen to their recordings and reflect on their performance.

Please note: CallBurner is compatible ONLY with Windows 7, XP, Vista or 2000. Recorders available for other operating systems are:

- **Mac:** Ecamm Call Recorder (http://www.ecamm.com/mac/callrecorder/)
  The demo version is free for the first seven days. After that time a license must be purchased.
- **Linux:** Skype Call Recorder (http://atdot.ch/scr/download/)
  This is an open source application available completely free of charge.

Part 2

## C. A guide on how to download, install, and set up Skype and CallBurner

This section contains practical information on how to set up Skype and CallBurner on your computer.

Technical requirements
Audio-conferencing tools require a broadband connection and students need to use a headset/microphone and webcam (if they wish to be seen by their speaking partners).

Main features of Skype
One-to-one calls
Conference calls with up to 26 participants
Instant messaging (text chat)
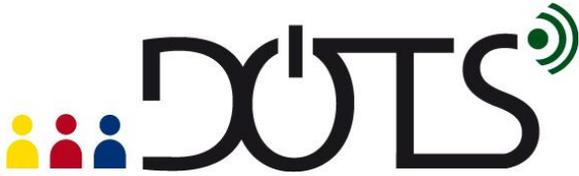
Video capabilities (free for one-to-one calls; pay version required for conference calls)

Downloading and installing Skype

Instructions on how to download and install the latest version of Skype can be found here:

Windows: http://www.skype.com/intl/en/download/skype/windows/
Mac: http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/download/skype/macosx/
Linux: http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/download/skype/linux/

Instructions on how to open Skype and create a user name can be found here:

http://www.skype.com/help/guides/startskype/

Making a test call

To check that your audio equipment is functioning properly, log onto Skype, go to your contact list, select "Echo / Sound Test Service", and click on Call. You should hear an automated recording, which will prompt you to make a test recording. If you have any problems, go to Tools -> Options -> Audio Settings, make any necessary adjustments to the audio, microphone, and corresponding volume controls, and repeat the sound test. If you are still having difficulties, you should go to http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/help/guides/soundsetup.html.

Recording conversations

CallBurner allows you to record the audio of Skype conversations and to save them in MP3 format. The trial version of CallBurner allows you to record all Skype calls for free for 30 days. After that time, you can still record calls as long as the person on the other end is also using the program. You can record conference calls (calls with three or more people), providing at least two of the participants are using CallBurner.[1]

To install the program…

1. Open Skype and go to Tools -> Extras -> Get extras.

2. Type "callburner" in the search Windows.

3. Click here.

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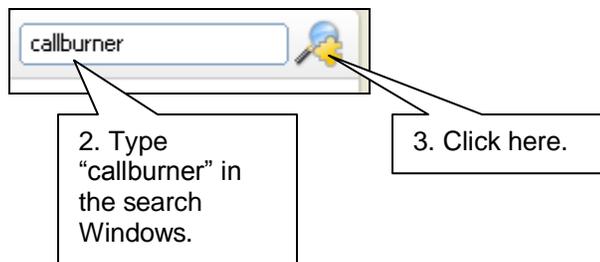
[1] These were the conditions of use for the trial version in June 2011. If these conditions have changed, an alternative program might be available. One way to check this is by opening Skype, going to Tools -> Extras -> Get extras, and doing a search using the key word "recorder".

4. Click here to begin installation.

During installation you can choose to have CallBurner record your Skype calls automatically. If you do not, you will need to start the recording manually as shown below. You can test the recording feature by calling the "Echo / Sound Test Service".
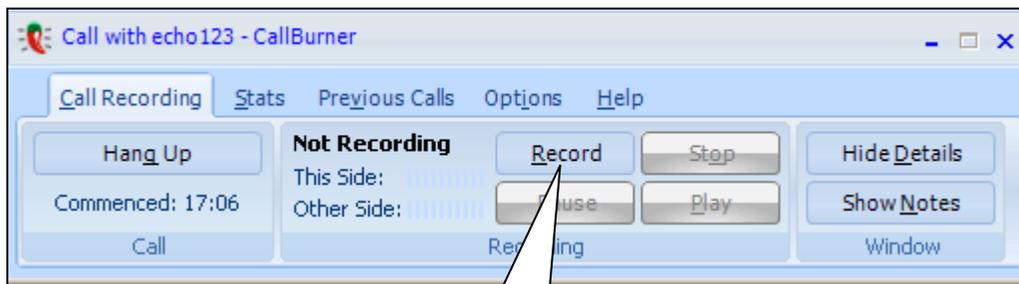

Click here to begin recording.

D. Pedagogical considerations and sample activity

When designing an online speaking task, the basic principles of face-to-face pair or small-group speaking tasks still apply. First of all, students must be provided with a reason to talk to and, crucially, to listen to one another. Remember that tasks which only require students to give their opinion on a topic tend not to generate much meaningful interaction. Unless participants have a compelling reason to pay attention and react to what their interlocutors say, this type of task often results in a series of mini-monologues. With this in mind, below are a few examples of task types that are more likely to lead to meaningful interaction:

- Information gap tasks (i.e., Each participant has bits of information the others don't have. In order to complete the task successfully, this information must be communicated to and comprehended by the other participants.)
- Ranking tasks
- Problem-solving tasks
- Simulations
- Cultural exchanges (for ideas for tasks, see the following from the Tandem Server: http://www.slf.rub.de/tandem/kultur/english/index.html)
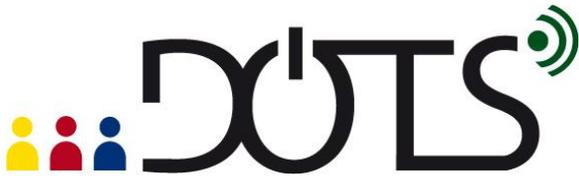
Hands-on Skype activity:

Now you will have the chance to have hands on experience of using Skype by doing a speaking task, in this case an information gap task, similar to what you might actually ask your students to do.

Before you do this, however, you will first need to find a partner. To do so, you could:

- send a message to the Audio-conferencing forum (available at: http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/mod/forum/view.php?id=41) and see if anyone would like to try "Skyping" with you,
- ask a colleague, a friend, or a member of your family to do this with you.

Important: Your partner will also need to install Skype and both of you will need to exchange user names. When you have your partner's Skype name, add it to your contacts. See http://www.skype.com/help/guides/addcontact/ for advice on how to do this.

Step 1: Log onto Skype.
Call your partner (see http://www.skype.com/help/guides/call/ for help). Exchange greetings to make sure your audio is functioning properly.

Note that you can incorporate video into this activity if you have a webcam, but beware that this may cause interference with your audio if you have a slow connection.

Step 2: Send an instant message to your partner.
In your contact list, right click on your partner's user name and select "Send IM" (see below). For more complete information on instant messaging, see http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/help/guides/im/.
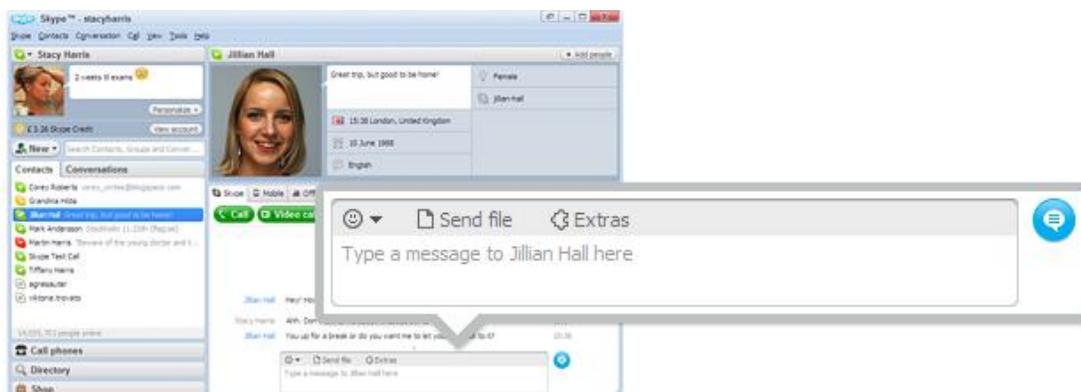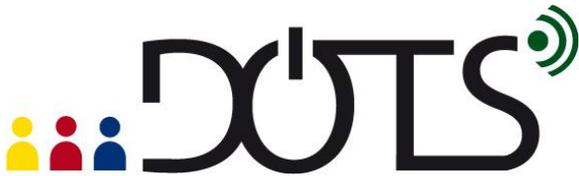

Figure 1: Sending an instant message in Skype

Step 3: Do the find-the-differences speaking task[2]

For this task, you and your partner will see two pictures which at first glance look the same, but which actually contain subtle differences. As you will not see each other's pictures, you will need to describe them to one another in order to find at least 6 of these differences.

> **Suggestion:** If you can, do this task in a language other than your first language or the language you teach. This will give you a better feel of what it's like to be "in the learner's shoes".

- If you did not choose to have your Skype calls recorded automatically, open CallBurner and click on Record.

- Click on the link below to see your version of the picture. **Do not share this with your partner!**

  http://cv.uoc.edu/~grc_8222_w01/Student1.JPG

- Copy and paste the link below and send it to your partner in an instant message. **Do not look at this picture!**

  http://cv.uoc.edu/~grc_8222_w01/Student2.JPG

- Describe your pictures to one another and find at least 6 differences.

When you have finished your conversation, exit Skype and convert the recording into MP3 format. Listen to the file to check that it was made correctly.


E. Practical suggestions

Online speaking tasks such as the one described in the previous section must be carefully structured and have clear instructions so that students know exactly what they are expected to do. Unlike face-to-face contexts where the teacher can immediately answer questions, this is not possible in a situation where students are in an audio-conference on their own. Therefore, it is important that areas that might be confusing be pre-empted as much as possible.

Another consideration is how to provide students with input or visual stimuli in order to do the task. In a face-to-face classroom, the teacher might give one photocopy to student A and

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[2] Inspired by Mullen, T, Appel, M. C., & Shanklin, T. (2009). Skype-based tandem language learning. In Thomas, M. (Ed.), *Web 2.0 and second language learning*, pp. 101-118. New York: Information Science Reference.
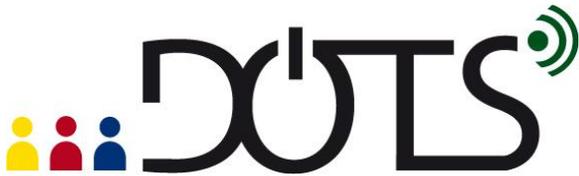
another to student B. This is obviously not possible in an online situation, so careful thought needs to be given on how to deliver the input to the students. One way to do this is to upload different documents to the Web and provide students with the URLs, as was done with the find-the-differences task we saw in the previous section.

Remember that when planning cultural exchanges between different countries you should take into account the different time zones and other possible time constraints for the synchronous online meetings.

Part 3

F. Check your understanding

	I can do this ☑	I would like to look at that again
Describe audio-conferencing to others (e.g. colleagues) briefly.	☐	Click here.
Give three reasons for using audio-conferencing in language teaching.	☐	Click here.
Describe and use basic features of audio-conferencing.	☐	Click here.
Set up a speaking task using audio-conferencing.	☐	Click here.
Understand practical considerations of using audio-conferencing in your class.	☐	Click here.

G. Reflect!

Did you do the hands-on task in section D? If so, think about the following questions and send any relevant comments you might have to the Audio-conferencing forum (available at: http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/mod/forum/view.php?id=41):

1. What did you think of the activity? Did you or your partner encounter any difficulties?

2. Would you use a similar task with your students? If so, how would you adapt it for your situation? What language (vocabulary, structures) would students need in order to complete the task? How would you provide this for them?
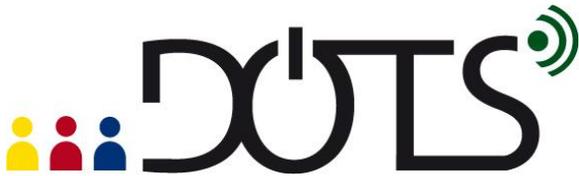
3. Where would the students carry out the activity? At your school in a computer lab? From their homes? How would this affect the set-up of the activity?

4. What kind of feedback (if any) could you give to students or ask them to give you after they had done a task of this sort?

H. Explore and share!

ACTIVITY A

Consider the following:

Find-the-differences tasks are examples of two-way information gap tasks. In order to complete the activity successfully each participant has information that must be communicated to the other. Research has shown that these types of tasks are much more effective in generating talk than those in which students simply exchange their opinions. With this in mind, how would you use an audio conferencing tool such as Skype to encourage your students to communicate with one another? Consider the following aspects: possible pairings/groupings, activity topics, feedback, integration into curriculum. Can you think of another information gap task your students could do using Skype? How would you set this up (i.e., direct them to different Web pages, provide them with different print documents, etc.)?

Post a message in the Audio-conferencing forum (available at: http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/mod/forum/view.php?id=41) in which you reflect on the above.

ACTIVITY B

If you have already implemented a task using audio conferencing with your students, consider the following questions:

1. How did the activity go? What was your experience as the teacher? What was the learners' experience? What were the most and least successful aspects of the activity? Which aspects would you improve if you repeated the activity with another group?

2. Which other tasks do you think would work in an audio conferencing setting such as Skype?

3. Are there any other audio conferencing tools that you would like to try out?

Summarize your answers to these questions in a message sent to the Audio-conferencing forum (available at: http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/mod/forum/view.php?id=41).

ACTIVITY C

Upload your own tasks on the Wiki (available at: http://moodle.dots.ecml.at/mod/wiki/view.php?id=24). ☺