The Instructor Facilitated Instructional Communication System (IFICS):
Why It Was Developed and How It Is Being Used

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Abstract: The Instructor Facilitated Instructional Communication System (IFICS) was developed by the authors to overcome some of the problems that the authors identified with traditional text-based synchronous communication tools. In this brief paper, the authors describe some of the major problems associated with traditional text-based synchronous chat tools and how IFICS was designed to address such problems. The authors also describe some of the major features of IFICS and include information about how the system is currently being used in university courses.

Introduction

The Instructor Facilitated Instructional Communication System (IFICS) was designed and developed as a tool to improve synchronous text-based communication among students in online learning environments. Based on their experiences with text-based chat rooms, the authors have identified several problems with the use of this tool for instructional purposes (Thirunarayanan, 2000; and Thirunarayanan & Perez-Prado, 2001). These identified problems include the fact that conversations in text-based chat rooms tend to overlap as students submit their comments simultaneously without knowing what the other students are also submitting. There can also be confusion because students could start discussing more than one topic at the same time and thereby lose track of the original purpose or intent of the chat session. Students with advanced language skills and those who are fast typists tend to have an advantage over those who are less fluent in the language and those who are slower typists.

How IFICS Works

IFICS allows instructors to better manage synchronous online discussions. This is accomplished through a set of features inherent in the IFICS communication system. These features allow the instructor to review students’ comments before such comments are allowed to enter the area where the conversation is taking place. This is achieved by having all comments initially submitted by students appear in a window that is visible only to the instructor. Once a comment appears in this window, the instructor can either

(a) accept the comment thus sending it directly into the chat area
(b) accept it with a comment. In this case the student’s original message is sent to the common chat area that is visible to all students, while the instructor’s comment itself is visible only to the student
(c) decline the comment, in which case the student and the student alone is notified that the comment was declined by the instructor
(d) decline the comment with suggestion for improvement. In this case the student is offered reasons why the comment was declined and perhaps also suggestions from the instructor to improve the comment and make it more acceptable for inclusion in the main chat area.
(e) hold the comment and use it at a later, more appropriate time, or when the appropriate topic is being discussed.
While IFICS has a number of pre-programmed comments for the instructor to use when they accept or decline with suggestions, they can also type their own comments and send them to the students. A screen image of IFICS is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. An image of IFICS

![Screen Image of IFICS](image)

The left side is the public chat area with the student view...

...while the right side is seen only by the instructor.

The instructor may maximize either side of the display at any time.

How IFICS Is Being Used

IFICS is currently being piloted in several university courses. During Spring 2003, IFICS was used in a course in which students from four different countries were enrolled. These students communicated with each other using IFICS. The system is also being used in teacher education programs with students of diverse language backgrounds and varied skill levels in the English language. These and other uses will provide the empirical data to compare IFICS and other more traditional text-based chat rooms.

References
