

Instant Messaging Clients - Relaxed, Free & Enjoyable English Learning and Training Tools

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ABSTRACT

In a demanding world of using English as a second language, computer technology and the internet are being dominantly used as they provide an incredible boost to language learning environment. At present, we can experience a more exciting way of learning a language by taking the advantages of the Instant Messaging Networks widely available online. This latest incarnation of the online chat is one of the communication methods that has proven to be a very good complement to the ways in which we communicate, both privately and professionally. These brilliantly invented instruments such as *Skype*, *Yahoo Messenger* and et cetera are a godsend to those who like to seek knowledge and to improve their English. This paper aims to examine the effectiveness of these so called 'eclectic communicators' in second language learning; focusing more on their functions as relaxing, and enjoyable language learning tools in a higher educational setting. This qualitative paper begins by highlighting current literature in the area of computer mediated communication (CMC) learning environments in second language use and development. It also discusses some of the issues and challenges related to this matter. In conclusion, this paper provides an overview of the benefits and drawbacks of instant messaging in educational settings especially in second language learning environment.

Keywords: Second language, knowledge sharing, Wide Area Network, power distance, second language acquisition, synchronous and asynchronous learning, collaborative learning, computer mediated communication.

INTRODUCTION

Many people believe that e-mails were the best technology that ever came about after computers were connected to the Internet. After all, it was e-mail that powered the Internet's amazing growth. However in recent days, **instant messaging** (IM) is the technology that really made the Internet what it is today.

Instant Messaging (IM) is becoming so popular as it has become one of the most incredible communication tools in recent years, creating a simple and fast way for people to communicate with each other. Most instant messaging systems make use of a centralized server to coordinate user identities and allow them to interact with others in the communication network. It is possible to see who is on-line and directly contact a person to discuss various topics, to have project meetings and other conferences. Hence, the ability for instant communication and the benefit of knowing who is online has added IM as a tool together with ordinary phone and e-mail communication.

In present times, we can now experience a more exciting way of learning a language by taking the advantages of these Instant Messaging Networks widely available online. These brilliantly invented instruments such as Skype, Yahoo Messenger et cetera are God sent to those who like to seek knowledge and to improve their English.

Additionally, this latest incarnation of the online chat has proven to be a very good complement to the ways in which we communicate, both privately and professionally.

What is Instant Messaging?

Instant messaging or IM is a form of real-time communication between two or more people based on typed text. Instant messaging requires the use of a client program that hooks up an instant messaging service and differs from e-mail in that conversations are then able to happen in real time. Most services offer a presence information feature, indicating whether people on one's list of contacts are currently online and available to chat. This may be called a 'Buddy List'. IM is a form of computer chat that allows people to communicate with one or more "buddies" while connected to the internet.²

Recently there are scores of Instant Messaging Services (IMS) available over the Internet and best part of these services is most IMS are free to be downloaded and used. In 2003 there were an estimated 600 million active IM accounts in the world with users sending 582 billion messages per day. Market research firm The Radicati Group (2003) predicts this will soar to 1.4 billion accounts and 1,380 billion messages per day by 2007. Ten most popular⁴IMS thus far are as listed:

¹ http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/instant_messaging.

²

³ Cunliffe, R. (2005). Pilot study into the use and usefulness of instant messaging within an educational context

1. AIM: 53 million active users (September 2006), "over 100 million" total (January 2006).
2. Ebuddy: 35 million users (including 4 million mobile) (October 2006)
3. Windows Live Messenger: 27 million active (September 2006), 155 million total (April 2005).
4. Yahoo! Messenger: 22 million users (September 2006).
5. QQ: 20 million peak online users, 221 million "active" (July 2006).
6. Sametime: 15 million (enterprise) users (undated)
7. Skype: 8 million peak online (August 2006), 137 million total (January 2007)].
8. Xfire: 6.1 million users (January 2007)
9. Gadu-Gadu: 5.6 million user (June 2006).

Instant Messaging and its implications in language learning

Learning a language is not an easy task. Even under the best conditions students face many obstacles during their studies. Cultural differences, pronunciation problems, ebbing motivation, a lack of effective feedback and many more general challenges are commonly faced by language learners, making them feel bored, lose interest and give up. Discouraged by their school experience, they end up convinced that they cannot learn to be fluent in that language.

However, in the era of new technologies, people can now experience more relaxed and enjoyable way of language learning environment through the emergence of Instant Messaging networks online.

As we know from a variety of research sources, Instant Messaging Networks can be a very effective teaching tool as its pedagogical goal is to privilege student input and create a collaborative and fun learning environment. One of the primary reasons IM can be an effective learning environment is that it allows teachers to address many of difficulties they confront when conducting face to face discussion in a traditional classroom:

IM provides more fun and fascinating learning tools

Traditional classroom methods are not as efficient as the internet. It is difficult to cater to learners of different levels and interests. Stress and boredom are often the results. But now by using the IM networks, learning can be more fun and fascinating. Findings of recent studies motivated by theories of SLA indicates that the audio-and video-enhanced components of IM applications have potential benefits for the language learning environment (Wang, 2004). Most of the popular ones provide features that qualify them to be considered as a wonderful communication instrument, for instant Yahoo!

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instant_messaging

Messenger, Skype and Windows Live Messenger, naming a few, provide pleasurable features⁶ such as:

Photo Sharing, where users can drag and drop shots into IM windows and discuss about them as if they are there. Some full-fledged IM such as Yahoo! Messenger and Windows Live Messenger provides **Radio Services**, hence user may listen to their favorite music while having a conversation. Furthermore, users can effortlessly share doc., jpeg, mpeg, MP3, files et cetera with **File Transfer** tools. Users can also make a world wide **PC-to-PC**, **PC-to-Phone**, and **Phone-to-PC** calls for a minimum rate using a voice transfer protocol or VOiP. The most fun part is that the users can use web camera to share **live video feeds** with other users around the world and as well as doing a **web conference** with multiple people in one IM. Best of all, some of IMS provide extended network so that users from different IM can communicate with each other.

Discussion via IM provides more comfortable learning environment for shy, or socially marginalized students

IM learning environment provides students with more relaxed and comfortable learning environment. It avoids the tension and boredom of the classroom and increases students' motivation.⁷ Sullivan (2002) claims that, "the dynamics of a classroom can change as a result of using asynchronous communication by removing the trauma of talking in front of the class; shy or reticent students are often much more comfortable about contributing in a positive way to class discussion (Sullivan, Using the Internet, 24). It reveals that a much broader range of students is likely to be comfortable and are likely to contribute because a networked discussion environment is more welcoming and hospitable to these kinds of students, much more class participation becomes possible and the opportunity to encounter a richer variety of voices and perspectives is usually enhanced considerably.

IM encourages motivation and enjoyment

In the relaxing atmosphere of internet online discussion, learners and tutors become friends and form a community of people helping and encouraging each other. These are not stressful lessons. There are pleasant opportunities to communicate. Both learners and tutors can share their experiences and they can even record their conversations or produce their own oral essays and file them or share them with others. In this way, both tutors and learners can keep track of the learners progress⁹ as they learn English on the Internet. As what Sullivan says in "Using the Internet to teach Composition": Students write not just for a single reader (the teacher), as they usually do in a traditional classroom, but for a community of readers, their online classmates. All of their written work is "published"

⁶ <http://messenger.yahoo.com/>

⁷ Kaufmann, S. The Internet-The Best Place to learn English. <http://www.thelinguist.com/front/articles>

⁸ Subsequent citation of this same quoteKaufmann, S. The Internet-The Best Place to learn English.

⁹ Subsequent citation of this same quoteKaufmann, S. The Internet-The Best Place to learn English.

online, read, and often commented on by classmates. Many students find the challenge of writing in this public environment exciting because their work is scrutinized by a variety of readers. Their sense of purpose and audience is greatly increased, as is their understanding of the value of crafting their work carefully and thoughtfully (Sullivan, 2000:25) This kind of interaction can somehow motivate and encourage the students to put more efforts on their individual learning.

IM provides better tutors online

Messaging software such as ICQ or Instant Messenger provides an instant connection to the people on a user's list of contacts by letting the user know when those people are online. These programs facilitate quick communication by making a connection to an individual as easy as clicking on a name. These new technologies are already powerful and have the potential for tremendous impact on the ability of students to communicate directly with native speakers in target language environments. A quick search on a few professional web sites will locate native English speakers, writers, editors or professionals from all over the world who are interested in acting as language tutors or coaches.¹⁰ If learners want to learn English, they can interact with this outstanding pool of qualified people with a wide range of experience and knowledge. A pilot study carried out by Sotillo (2006) involving the provision of corrective feedback to ESL learners through collaborative work utilizing the text-based chat and audio features of Yahoo! Messenger (Yahoo IM), found that corrective feedback made available to L2 learners by their Native Speaker (NS) or Non- Native Speaker (NNS) partners using Internet IM tools allows learners to detect a deviant use of a certain lexical, grammatical, or semantic form in their second language output, and research has shown that this may facilitate second language development. When corrective feedback is embedded in learning activities conducted via IM tools, learners are able to expand their linguistic competence outside the traditional face-to face classroom environment.¹¹

IM discussion changes the social dynamics in a classroom in some very positive ways

Whenever a group of students comes together for a face to face discussion, teachers must contend with a variety of powerful social dynamics, dynamics that play a significant role in the way the individuals in any given class negotiate their working relationship with one another (Cazden, 1988). However, at some degree, these dynamics play a less decisive role in an online discussion.¹² Researchers report that students often feel more comfortable sharing their opinions in an online environment, and are much less likely to be 'silenced' or intimidated or made feel uncomfortable by classmates than if they are talking together face to face (Kiesle, Siegel and McGuire, 1984). According to Patrick

¹⁰ Kaufmann, S. The Internet-The Best Place to learn English. <http://www:thelinguist.com/front/articles>

¹¹ Sotillo, S.(2006).Using instant messaging for Collaborative Learning: A Case Study. *Innovate* 2 (3).

¹² Sullivan, P. (2002). " Reimagining Class Discussion in the Age of the Internet". *Teaching English in the Two Year College*. 29: 393-410.

Sullivan, “ individuals who communicated via computer networks, because they are not conducting face to face conversations, are free to eliminate or ignore many of the social/ hierarchical cues that mark traditional ex-changes-cues associated with gender, race, position in established organizational hierarchies, social status, or appearance (Technology in the English classroom:125) Since these factors¹³ are less visible, the class will become more engaging and enjoyable for everyone. The students are more likely to engage in the thoughtful and respectful exchange of ideas, opinions and emotions that is so essential to the language learning process.

Language learning in IM environment helps to create a more student-centered classroom

Conversations in the traditional classroom tend to be marked by patterns of teacher dominance.¹⁴ In a study by Hudson & Bruckman examining how communication patterns compare between a traditional foreign language learning classroom and a synchronous text-based CMC environment, they found that approximately 84% of the total words spoken in the classroom was dominated by the teacher. However, when conversations moved online, a completely different pattern of interaction arose. When the teacher asking a question about the chosen topic, nearly every student answered with no prompting. When the students found the chosen topic boring, they said so and offered alternative topics and throughout the discussion students also began addressing one another without the mediation of the instructor. Having the conversations online, the teacher only spoke approximately 14% of the total words and many more students were talking with one another than happens in the classroom.¹⁵

THE TECHNICAL DRAWBACKS

Security Issues

Instant messaging services offer not only the capability to not only conveys text messages but as well as transferring files. Thus, it can transfer worms and other malware. Further more, instant messengers can also provide an access point for Backdoor Trojan Horses.

Worms can be spread through emails by downloading and opening an infected files or attachments. It also can be circulated via file transfer if the users are reckless enough. If a worm begins to multiply using instant messaging, it cannot be blocked before it reached the user’s computer. So does Trojan Horses, as the instant messaging clients allow peer-to-peer file sharing, a Trojan Horse can configure the instant messaging client to share all

¹³ Sullivan, P. (2002). “ Reimagining Class Discussion in the Age of the Internet”. Teaching English in the Two Year College. 29: 393-410.

¹⁴ Hudson, J.M & Bruckman, A. Effects of CMC on student Participation Patterns in a Foreign Language Learning Environment.

¹⁵ Subsequent citation of this same quote: Hudson, J.M & Bruckman, A. Effects of CMC on student Participation Patterns in a Foreign Language Learning Environment.

files on the system with full access to everyone, and in this way gain backdoor access to the computer¹⁶.

Hijacking and Impersonation are also a risk to IM user. Hackers posing as an acquaintance frequently used attack known as phishing¹⁷ or stealing valuable information from unsuspecting users. This is simply done by impersonating one of the chatting parties and dispatches a password-stealing Trojan horse. Stolen confidential information for instant messenger can be very disparaging.

Denial of Service¹⁸ (DoS) may attacks users' computer and IM can make it very vulnerable to it. The end results are very annoying, it can cause programs hang even worst it can cause the entire computer to crash. One well-known type which a hacker can cause a DoS on an instant messenger client is by flooding users with a huge amount of messages or spamming.

Bandwidth

Bandwidth is amount of data, instructions, and information that can travel over communications channel¹⁹. Bandwidth determines how fast data and information travel over transmission media. Thus, higher-speed broadband Internet connections have a higher bandwidth than a dial up connections. For instance, ISDN (Integrated Services Digital Network) line has more bandwidth than a dial-up line. To date, Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM) is the broadband Internet connection with the highest speed. It can broadcast voice, data, video, and multimedia at tremendously high speeds but however ordinary user such as students definitely cannot afford the cost of it. Therefore, some may experience a 'jerking' episode while having a live video conferencing while using a dial-up line.

Peripherals

Last but not least to ensure voice communication achievable via Instant Messaging Services, aside from the basic hardware and software, users must have computer system equipped with the good Internet connection and certain apparatus such as headphone complete with microphone. To do a video conference for instant, users should have a net camera or web cam and these equipments costs quite a lot for some people. On the contrary, for education purposes, these extra costs should not be a stumbling block if one acknowledges that learning via IMS is fun, relax and enjoyable.

¹⁶ Hindocha, N. (2003). Instant Insecurity: Security Issues of Instant Messaging.

¹⁷ Shelly, G.B.,Cashman, T.J., Vermaat, M.E. (2006). *Discovering Computers 2006: A Gateway to Information*. Pp 419

¹⁸ O'Leary, T.J., O'Leary, L.I. (2005). *Computing Essentials*. McGraw Hill. Pp. 278

¹⁹ Williams, B.K., Sawyer, S.C. (2005). *Using Information Technology: A Practical Introduction to Computers and Communications*. Pp. 40

²⁰ Shelly, G.B.,Cashman, T.J., Vermaat, M.E. (2006). *Discovering Computers 2006: A Gateway to Information*. Pp 482.

CONCLUSION

Finally, looking at the various benefits it offers ultimately, it is incumbent upon the language teachers to integrate this tool into the curriculum in a pedagogically sound and meaningful way. Since findings from studies evolving online practices show that the use of real-time communication systems such as IM in second or foreign language learning will probably alter current notions of negotiated interaction, pedagogical tasks, linguistic awareness, and language development,²¹ researcher therefore need to take into account the complicating effects of technology on current theories of second language acquisition. Research of IM usage has shown that the visibility it provides is useful for promoting informal, on- the- fly exchanges²² as well as “a sense of community, and ease in collaboration”.²³ All these benefits make IM a potentially fun, relaxed and enjoyable tool for learning, communicating and community building.

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²¹ Kern, R., Ware, P. & Warschauer, M. (2004) Crossing frontiers: New directions in online pedagogy and research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 24:243-260.

²² Sotillo, S. (2006). Using instant messaging for Collaborative Learning: A Case Study. *Innovate* 2 (3).

²³ Quan-Haase, A., Cothrel, J., & Wellman, B. (2005). Instant Messaging for Collaboration: A case study of a high-firm. *Journal of Computer-mediated communication* 10 (4): 120-121.

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Quan-Haase, A., Cothrel.J, & Wellman. B. (2005). Instant Messaging for Collaboration: A case study of a high-firm. *Journal of Computer-mediated communication* 10 (4): 120-121.

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<http://messenger.yahoo.com/>

<http://www.aim.com/>

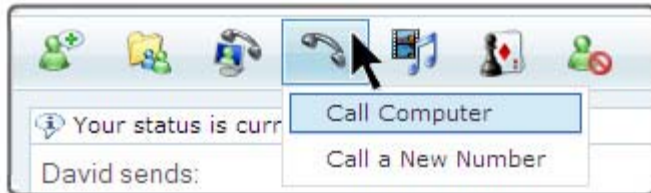
<http://get.live.com/messenger/features>

Appendix 1

EXAMPLE:

Windows Live Messenger Features

PC-to-PC Calling



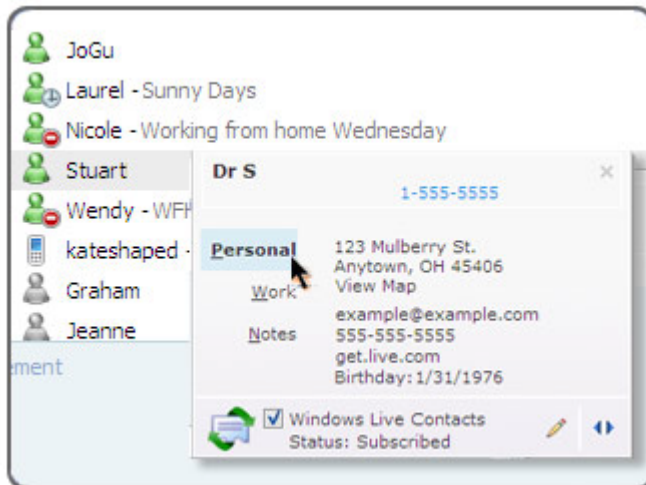
Even better video conversations



Sharing Folders



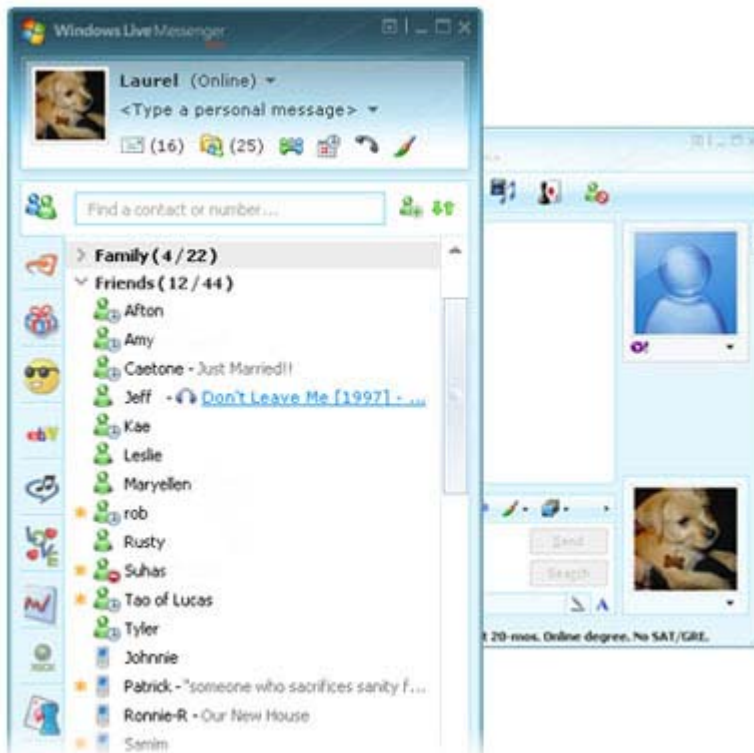
Your two-way, super-powered address book



Windows Live™ Alerts



New: Talk to your Yahoo! friends, too



Source: Windows Live Messenger
<http://get.live.com/messenger/features>

Appendix 2

LIST OF INSTANT MESSAGING SERVICES TO DATE*

| Product | Author / Creator | First public release date | Cost |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------|----------------|
| Adium | Adam Iser, Evan Schoenberg | September, 2001 | Free |
| AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) | AOL | May, 1997 | Free Adware |
| aMSN | Alvaro J. Iradier Muro | May, 2002 | Free |
| Aytm | Colin Leroy and Philip Tellis | April, 2003 | Free |
| BitWise IM | BitWise Communications, LLC | March 17, 2002 | Free |
| BitlBee | Wilmer van der Gaast | August 9, 2002 | Free |
| Centericq | Konstantin Klyagin | ? | Free |
| Coccinella | Mats Bengtsson | December 1, 1999 | Free |
| eMeSeNe | Luis Mariano Guerra | 24 May, 2006 | Free |
| Exodus | Peter Millard | 2002 | Free |
| Fire | Eric Peyton | April 1, 1999 | Free |
| Gaim | Mark Spencer | November, 1998 | Free |
| Gajim | Yann Le Boulanger | May 21, 2004 | Free |
| GCN | Jason K. Resch | November 18, 2000 | Free Adware |
| GOIM | Herbert Poul | August 16, 2005 | Free |
| Google Talk | Google, Inc. | August 24, 2005 | Free |
| iChat | Apple Computer | August, 2002 | Free |
| ICQ | Mirabilis | November, 1996 | Free Adware |
| IM2 | IM2 Ltd. | April, 2003 | Free |
| imeem | IM2 Limited | 2003 | Free |
| IMVITE | IMVITE Inc. | August, 2005 | Free Adware |
| IMVU | | ? | Free |
| Instan-t | Interactive Networks Inc. | March, 2001 | Free |
| Interaction Chat | Auriance | August, 2006 | Free |
| JAJC | Mikel Ivanov | 2002 | Free |
| JMSN | sediah, xrath | 2002 | Free |
| Kadu | Kadu Team | August, 2001 | Free |
| Kopete | Kopete Team | March 3, 2002 | Free |
| Licq | Graham Roff (up to v1.0) Jon Keating | June 22, 1998 | Free |
| MECA Messenger | | ? | Free |
| meebo | Meebo, Inc. | 2005 | Free |
| Meetro | Paul Bragiel & Samuel Stauffer | 2005 | Free |
| Mercury Messenger | Danny | 2003 | Free |
| mICQ | Matthew D. Smith (up to ICQv5); Rüdiger Kuhlmann | 1997(?); 2001 | Free |
| MindSpring | Earthlink | April 3, 2006 | Free |
| Miranda IM | Miranda IM project | February 6, 2000 | Free |
| Microsoft Messenger for Mac | Microsoft | ??? | Free |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|-------------|
| MySpaceIM | MySpace | May 09, 2006 | Free Adware |
| Naim | Daniel Reed | Oct 05, 1998 | Free |
| p3t-phone | Anon Users | Nov 2006 | Free |
| OpenWengo | Wengo | 2004 | Free |
| pork | Ryan McCabe | December 6, 2006 | Free |
| Proteus | Justin Wood, et al. | November 2001 | Free |
| Psi | Justin Karneges | 2001 | Free |
| psyced | psyced.org Project | 1997 | Free |
| Qnext | | June 28, 2004 | Free |
| QQ | Tencent | February, 1999 | Free Adware |
| SIM | SIM project | ? | Free |
| Skype | Niklas Zennström and Janus Friis / eBay | 2003 | Free |
| talk | Kipp Hickman | 1982 | Free |
| Tkabber | Alexey Shchepin | 2003 | Free |
| Trillian | Cerulean Studios | July 1, 2000 | Free |
| Trillian Pro | Cerulean Studios | September 10, 2002 | \$25 |
| Windows Live Messenger | Microsoft | July, 1999 | Free Adware |
| Windows Messenger | Microsoft | ? | Free |
| Winpopup LAN Messenger | | 2002 | \$14.95 |
| Xfire | Xfire.inc | 2004 | Free Adware |
| Yahoo! Messenger | Yahoo! | June 21, 1999 | Free Adware |
| YSM | rad2k | 2001 | Free |
| Zephyr | Project Athena | 1987 | Free |
| Product | Author / Creator | First public release date | Cost |
| Adium | Adam Iser , Evan Schoenberg | September, 2001 | Free |
| AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) | AOL | May, 1997 | Free Adware |
| aMSN | Alvaro J. Iradier Muro | May, 2002 | Free |
| Aytm | Colin Leroy and Philip Tellis | April, 2003 | Free |
| BitWise IM | BitWise Communications, LLC | March 17, 2002 | Free |
| BitlBee | Wilmer van der Gaast | August 9, 2002 | Free |
| Centericq | Konstantin Klyagin | ? | Free |
| Coccinella | Mats Bengtsson | December 1, 1999 | Free |

*Source: Wikipedia the free Encyclopedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instant_messaging