

The Role of Student-Led Social Media Use in Group Dynamics

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In recent years, teachers and researchers have begun to investigate and make use of the role of new technology and social media in language classrooms. This study focuses on the role of student-led social media, completely free of teacher input, and the influence and perceived positive effects it can have on group bonding and cohesion. It found that participation in a class LINE group was utilized for a variety of practical and personal purposes, which was seen by the students to have had a positive effect in terms of building relationships and providing a supportive and enjoyable information network of peers. This can be said to have led to a more cohesive and bonded group that felt engaged and committed to the class.

本論は学生主導のLINEグループが果たす役割について、日本の2つの大学における必修コミュニケーション英語クラスの1年生を対象に調査した。結果として、学生が自主的に始めたLINEグループは、実践的で個人的な多様な目的に機能を果たし、学生同士の協力的なネットワークができ、授業への貢献度が上がるという点で、全体的に明確な効果があった。これらの結果は、日本人の集団への帰属性という見地から、学生主導のLINEグループの作成が帰属集団となり、そこに力学的結束力を生み出すという観点を示唆している。

Group Dynamics in Language Learning

As teachers, we all have the experience of perceived “good” and “bad” groups; those classes that we look forward to and enjoy teaching and others that we simply dread. Senior (1997) found that any class that was seen to have a “positive whole-group atmosphere” (p. 3) was perceived by teachers to be “good,” whilst any class that lacked this cohesion was perceived as “bad,” regardless of the individual achievements of the students. As Stevick (1980) succinctly puts it, “success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” (p. 4).

Indicators of a successfully bonded group include: a feeling of warmth, mutual support, an absence of fear, rapport between class members (Senior, 1997); members having a definite sense of themselves as a group, members are not cliquy but interact with all members of the group, trust between members, a sense of fun, individuals are not competitive and do not seek individual attention (Hadfield, 1992); and

shared norms and goals, and knowing each other’s names (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003). Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) refer to this as group structure. Group structure is concerned with the relationships between group members and includes group norms, status of group members, group roles, group cohesion, and classroom goals (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997, p. 72). Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) place great emphasis on knowing the names of students (and students knowing each other’s names), as well as fourteen other methods of promoting group cohesion. These include:

- Learning about each other by sharing personal information.
- Proximity, contact, and interaction. This includes spontaneous communication between members.
- Shared group history.
- Group legend. This includes giving the group a name as well as creating group logos, mottoes and other symbols.
- Public commitment to the group.
- Investing in the group.
- Extracurricular activities.

More recent research on the importance of situational context in language classrooms has used the concept of complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) to argue that not only are students influenced by the context (physical, social, psychological) that they are in, but that they also help to shape and influence the context itself (King, 2015).

Technology and Social Media in Language Learning

As technology such as smartphones, tablets and social media become an increasing part of our lives, language teachers have seized upon them to assist and enhance their lessons. Many studies have focused on the benefits for language production of utilizing technology in the classroom (Amer, 2014; Stockwell & Liu, 2015; Richards, 2015) rather than the social and psychological advantages. This study

focuses exclusively on the social benefits of student-led technology use, particularly in relation to group dynamics.

Technology and especially social media use is a fast-changing environment in which certain websites and services enjoy waves of popularity at different times. At the time of this writing, by far the most popular social media site in Japan is LINE. Current statistics put the number of LINE users in Japan at 64 million, with the 10-20 age range making up 96.9% of smartphone users using the LINE application (Statista, 2017a; Statista, 2017b). LINE is a social networking service that was launched in 2011 as a direct response to the failure of traditional non-internet-based communication channels in the immediate aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake (Bushey, 2014). The service allows users to form closed groups of any size to send texts, photos, videos and short voice messages. The service is free, but users are able to purchase emoji-like sets of images representing feelings and emotions as well as popular characters. These are known as “stickers” and can be attached to any message.

A social media application that connects people, such as LINE, can play an important role in the lives of young people, especially university students who are experiencing being outside the family unit for the first time. The Japanese concept of *uchi* can refer to “a sense of belonging together in family or social groups” (Takahashi, 2014, p. 14). Japanese communities and families are historically tight-knit, with group identification playing a large role in individual identity construction, which Takahashi (2014) links to the popularity of certain types of social media among university students. Young people leave the family *uchi* to attend university, and this is replaced by an *uchi* of peers. Thus, social media, especially LINE with its ability to create closed-off bespoke groups, acts as a surrogate *uchi* for young people, who are often alone and isolated in a new city and social environment. Within this context, LINE groups also help facilitate several of Dörnyei and Murphey’s (2003) methods for encouraging group cohesion. They allow for the exchange of personal information via frequent status updates and comments, and by definition, produce spontaneous communication between members in a (semi-) public setting. They also provide a forum for the creation of group legends through the use of mottos and symbols (represented by “stickers” attached to messages) and through the selection of a unique group name that pertains to the group that it represents. Lastly, they allow scope for extracurricular activities and an extension of the classroom time.

The Present Study

The purpose of the study was to identify how LINE was being used by students, whether this enhanced group cohesion, and whether students perceived that participation in a class LINE group helped to establish a positive attitude towards their English lessons. To this end, paper-based anonymous questionnaires were administered to two compulsory English communication classes in two different universities in Japan, one private and one public. They were distributed, completed and collected within the same class in order to ensure the maximum number of returns. However, the inevitable result of this approach was that data from absent students were not included. Questionnaires were issued at the end of the second term of the first university year for one class (Group A), and at the end of the first term for the other (Group B). In each case, they were only issued after it had come to my attention, through informal in-class discussions with students, that the group had spontaneously formed a LINE group for the respective English class under their own initiative, without any directive or suggestion from myself. In this respect, the groups studied were self-selected. The groups consisted of 20 and 18 students respectively, of which 17 and 15 respondents completed the questionnaires. Group A was comprised of 10 female and 7 male intermediate level students. Group B was comprised of 10 female and 5 male lower-intermediate level students. Participants in both groups were aged between 18 and 20 years old.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires consisted of nine questions (see Appendix) that asked respondents to identify how often they used this particular LINE group, what they use it for, how students felt about non-participant class members, whether they believe that the LINE group has helped them to enjoy the classes more and encouraged them to attend, and finally to identify any good or bad points about the LINE group. These final questions were open and allowed respondents to answer freely in either Japanese or English. Any responses in Japanese were translated into English by a fluent Japanese-speaking native English speaker and checked and confirmed by a fluent English-speaking native Japanese speaker. Due to space restrictions, only the most salient results will be presented below.

Findings and Discussions

What the LINE Group Was Used For

The answer choices for this question were created based upon informal preliminary enquiries with students about their LINE use. This involved asking open questions about their general LINE use in relation to university classes and noting down responses. From these discussions, eight categories emerged and a ninth “Other” option was also added in order to document any additional uses that had not been identified by these preliminary discussions. Respondents were free to choose multiple categories. The options were:

- A. Telling absent students about homework
- B. Discussing homework
- C. Telling others if you plan to be absent
- D. Finding out what was studied in missed classes
- E. To discuss what happened in the class (Give an example)
- F. To organize social events
- G. To talk about the teacher
- H. To talk about other students
- I. Other (please write)

Results from this section were similar across both groups and demonstrate how the LINE group may have been used to encourage group cohesion as defined by Dörnyei and Murphey (2003). For both groups, the most common use was telling absent students about homework (Group A = 13, Group B = 7) and discussing homework (Group A = 12, Group B = 6), and for Group B, telling others that they plan to be absent (Group A = 3, Group B = 8). This illustrates the extent to which students show mutual support and a certain investment in the class, which is often not the case in compulsory university classes (Fryer, Ozono, Carter, Nakao & Anderson, 2014). Group A reported a higher incidence of organization of social events than Group B (6 and 2 respectively), which mainly consisted of group dinners at restaurants. This is a clear example of the extracurricular activities outlined by Dörnyei and Murphey to encourage greater cohesion. An extension of the social aspect could be seen in the responses to the “Other” category choice on the questionnaire. For Group A this included using the LINE group to organize a birthday surprise (purchase of cake and coordinated dress) for the teacher and sending photos of classmates. This can be seen as showing both investment in and public commitment to the group (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). For Group B it consisted of light-hearted poking fun at each other as an extension of in-group jokes that

had originated in class. This was illustrated by one comment under option E (*To discuss what happened in the class (Give an example)*) that stated: “(student X) is *charai!* (student X) is a ladies’ man!”). This was a light-hearted reference to the persona that this particular student had created within the class group and had been alluded to on various occasions in classes and presumably extended to LINE group discussions. This referencing implies that another of Dörnyei and Murphey’s (2003) methods for promoting group cohesion, that of shared group history, was being facilitated by the LINE group. In the wider sense, these uses of the LINE group may have helped to facilitate empathy amongst group members as Hadfield (1992) recommends.

Possible Impact of the LINE Groups on Attendance and Lesson Enjoyment

Table 1. *Do you think having the LINE group has made you attend more classes?*

Group A			Group B		
Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No	Don't know
53%	24%	24%	53%	20%	27%

In terms of motivation to attend classes, both groups reported similar opinions with over 50% feeling that it had made them attend more, while only around 20% felt that it had not. This could be interpreted as another example of the LINE group facilitating investment in the group (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003).

Table 2. *Do you think having the LINE group has helped you to enjoy the lessons more?*

Group A			Group B		
Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No	Don't know
76%	6%	18%	67%	7%	27%

When it came to whether the LINE group had enhanced the enjoyment of lessons, 66% of Group B and 76% of Group A answered in the affirmative, with one student in Group B adding an unsolicited “Very!” comment to the questionnaire sheet next to the ‘Yes’ option. Only one respondent in each group felt that it had not helped. This would seem to reflect one of Hadfield’s (1992) criteria that a successfully bonded group has a sense of fun.

Table 3. Would you recommend other classes to set up LINE groups?

Group A			Group B		
Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No	Don't know
71%	12%	18%	80%	0%	20%

As the table shows, the positive assessment of the LINE group influence—in terms of enjoyment and encouragement to attend—extended to include an inclination and willingness to recommend that other classes set up LINE groups, with 70% of Group A and 80% of Group B stating that they would do so. Only two respondents in Group A stated that they would not recommend this. Unfortunately no space was given on the questionnaire for these respondents to explain their answers.

The prominent feeling of enhanced enjoyment of lessons due to the existence of the LINE group can be seen as evidence of the power of social media and the virtual world to positively impact the real world of the classroom. The LINE group can allow for greater and more frequent opportunities to spontaneously interact, create legends, share individual personal histories, create a shared group history, empathize with others and solidify group identity. Thus, the LINE group can be seen as a useful enhancement of the group dynamics methodology established by Hadfield (1992), Dörnyei and Malderez (1997), and Dörnyei and Murphey (2003).

Advantages and Disadvantages of the LINE Group

For Group A there were 17 positive comments and only 3 negative comments, for Group B there were 14 positive and 3 negative ones. Across both groups, positive comments ranged from the practical (“It is convenient to tell homework if absent class,” “we can confirm the homework, so we won’t forget it,” “get a information”) to the more intangible and emotional (“can contact a lot of people,” “can more communication,” “Be the best friend!,” “be more friendly,” “make friends,” “can deepen friendship,” “can casually ask questions,” and “between group relationship make good”).

Negative aspects also included the mundane and practical (“it uses the (phone) battery,” “everyone uses Japanese”), as well as more telling comments that revealed that the group solidarity was not as strong as the answers to other questions implied (“sometimes it’s a bit of a hassle, not everyone checks it so often”) and most revealingly, “people

join in the conversation, but only particular person. I don’t join the conversation actually.”

The insights gathered from these more open questions imply that the majority of students see the LINE group from a positive perspective. The practical use of the service for sharing information about missed class contents and homework assignments is considered important for the students. This willingness to share class information without prompting from the teacher indicates a level of motivation and commitment to the class that is often lacking in many compulsory university classes (Fryer et al., 2014) and shows empathy between group members that was identified by Hadfield (1992) as essential to effective group dynamics. It is also evidence of mutual support as recognized by Senior (1997).

This intuition is elucidated further by the number of comments reinforcing the LINE group’s role in initiating and deepening friendships and relationship building. This implied transition from classmate to friend that the LINE groups in this study helped to facilitate, again demonstrates several of the positive characteristics identified by researchers for a successfully bonded group. These include a feeling of warmth and rapport (Senior, 1997), deepening of relationships (Hadfield, 1992) and investment in the group (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

Conclusions

Although it is always difficult to extrapolate from small-scale, preliminary case studies such as this, the findings point to some useful observations that hopefully may be of immediate use and interest to some teachers. In both of the classes surveyed in this study, the existence of a student led, independent social network group had a perceived positive influence on both individual students and the group as a whole. From the point of view of the teacher, the increased levels of engagement and commitment to the class that the sharing of information about class contents and homework brings can definitely be seen as positive. Additionally, the increased camaraderie brought about by spontaneous communication by class members outside of the limited class time, can help to promote a warm and positive atmosphere inside the class. Although not directly tested in this study, this may be seen to have an impact on a wide range of other classroom issues such as willingness to communicate (WTC) that has been identified as a key problem amongst Japanese students (King, 2013).

For the students in this study, the role of the LINE group as a relationship-building tool with a

new set of acquaintances, offered a chance to build at least one new group identity for themselves as young people outside of the traditional family *uchi* for the first time. In the digital media age that we all now inhabit, the recommendations of peers carry substantial weight and influence in our lives. The fact that up to 80% of respondents to the survey would recommend using LINE to others is a clear signal to teachers that this kind of student-led virtual extension of the classroom dynamic may be a valuable tool not only as an enhancement to classes, but also to the lives of the students.

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Luke Lawrence has been teaching in Japan since 2002 and currently teaches at Yokohama City University. His interests include group dynamics, native-speakerism, teacher identity, and sociocultural aspects of language learning.

Appendix 1 Questionnaire

Please circle

1. How often do you use the English Communication class LINE group?

Every day Once a week A few times a month
Once a month Other _____

2. What do you use it for?

- Telling absent students about homework
- Discussing homework
- Telling others if you plan to be absent
- Finding out what was studied in missed classes
- To discuss what happened in the class (Give an example _____)

- To organise social events

- To talk about the teacher

- To talk about other students

- Other (please write) _____

3. How would you feel if a student didn't want to join this LINE group?

I'd be angry It's OK, but I don't understand why
No problem, it's their choice Other _____

4. How would you feel if a student wanted to remove themselves from the LINE group?

I'd be angry It's OK, but I don't understand why
No problem, it's their choice Other _____

5. Do you think having the LINE group has helped you to enjoy the lessons more?

Yes No Don't know Other _____

6. Do you think having the LINE group has made you attend more classes?

Yes No Don't know Other _____

7. Would you recommend other classes to set up LINE groups?

Yes No Don't know Other _____

8. What are some GOOD points about the LINE group?

9. What are some BAD points about the LINE group?

- Nothing
- Nothing!
- No
- Nothing
- Nothing
- Nothing
- Nothing

Appendix 2

Comments

Group A

Q2. Other

- Organise birthday party
- Go to restaurant at dinner
- Dinner
- みんなでご飯に行く約束をする (to make plans for everyone to go to dinner)
- Men often send some daily photo of classmate

Q8. What are some GOOD points about the LINE group?

- I can hear some informations about homework
- Can share many information
- Be the best friend!
- I found the homework when I forget HW
- It is convenient to tell homework if absent class
- Talk with (student X)
- Share information, for example homework, report
- By using SNS, everyone can connect. Si, if I was absent, my friends will tell homework
- Can more communication
- Communication more more
- 仲良くなれる(can become friends)
- 情報をシェアすることができる (can share information)
- Be more friendly
- HWを確認できるから忘れない (can confirm the homework so I won't forget it)
- We can exchange information HW and some important deadline
- 仲良くなれる(can become friends)
- organise to go dinner fun!!! good
- 仲良くなれる(can become friends)
- 仲良くなれる(can become friends)
- Let's go to dinner
- The LINE group helps me when I don't know homework

Q9. What are some BAD points about the LINE group?

- People join the conversation, but only particular person. I don't join the conversation actually
- Sometimes, ちょっとめんどくさい (sometimes it's a bit of a hassle)
- 通知がnoisy (the notifications are noisy)

Group B

Q2. To discuss what happened in class (Give an example)

- (Student X) is チャライ (Student X is a ladies man)

Q2. Other

- lovely talk

Q8. What are some GOOD points about the LINE group?

- Between group relationship make good
- 情報が入ってくる (can get information)
- We can discuss easily
- 気軽に質問できること (can casually/freely ask questions)
- I can know what to do in a class when I absented
- 皆が休むのかどういう状況かリアルタイムでわかるから (can spontaneously check in real time who is coming to class)
- Get information
- 情報を共有できる (provide translation)
- 強制力が強い (everyone has to join)
- コミュニケーションがとれる (can communicate)
- コミュニケーションがとれる (can communicate)
- 色々な人と連絡がとれる (can contact a lot of people)
- 休んだり、遅刻しそうなとき、誰かしらに気づいてもらえる (can talk to people when absent or late)
- 中が深まる (can deepen friendship)
- 宿題がどこかおしえてもらえる (provide translation)
- 出欠報告ができる (can let others know whether you are coming to class or not)

Q9 What are some BAD points about the LINE group?

- 特になし (nothing special)
- I don't know
- Nothing
- Nothing
- No
- No
- 特になし (nothing special)
- なし (nothing)
- なし (nothing)
- 特になし (nothing special)
- 関係のない会話がなされる時がある (there is sometimes unrelated talk)
- 充電がへる (it uses up the battery)
- 人によって見る頻度がちがう (not everyone checks it so often)
- 日本語が使われている (people use Japanese)