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Enhancing Online Language Learning Task Engagement through Social Interaction

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Abstract

Encouraging learners to engage in learning activities outside of formal class time is an ongoing challenge for language teachers. It has been argued that the social aspect of technologies can used as a support for learning, but how to achieve this remains a challenge. There is evidence that from a theoretical perspective, social networking appears to provide many of the conditions necessary for supporting learning, and there is an increasing number of studies that have started to explore the potential of social networking in language learning contexts. Results thus far have been rather mixed, where learners tend to show positive attitudes but limited interaction. The purpose of the current study is to examine how social networking is used by teachers and learners as a support for supplementary out-of-class vocabulary learning through Quizlet. Learner engagement was investigated in two consecutive semesters using the same two intact classes in each semester (N=48), the first semester where learners were given support in class, and the second semester where learners were provided with support by the teacher using LINE. Learner engagement in the Quizlet activities across the two semesters were investigated, as well as the logs of all interactions in the class LINE group and the individual interactions with the teacher. The results are discussed in terms of how social networking may be used as a support tool in terms of a community discussion tool, a teacher-to-student reporting tool, and student-to-teacher reporting tool.

Keywords: online language learning, task engagement, social interaction, social networking

Introduction

Many language teachers are faced with the challenging task of encouraging students to engage in activities outside of class time. There is evidence to show that sustained engagement with the target language outside of class is beneficial to language learning (Nakata, 2008), but this requires not only motivation, but also specific learning strategy skills to be able to make the most of the time that they spend engaged in the activities (Romeo & Hubbard, 2012). Language learning outside of class has

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attracted an increasing amount of attention over the past several years (e.g., Nunan & Richards, 2015). There have been numerous studies that have linked technology with learning outside of class (see Irie & Stewart, 2017), but it is necessary for students to be sufficiently familiar with the technologies they are required to use as well as knowing how to use them for studying (Stockwell, 2013). It is easy for learners to lose track of what they should be doing, and how and why they should be doing it when engaging in activities outside of class.

There is an enormous range of materials available to learners—particularly learners of English—that can be accessed over the Internet or through dedicated language learning apps on smartphones, and even YouTube guides that can provide explanations about how to use these resources (see Vandergriff, 2016). Despite the availability of these resources, an issue of concern for teachers is that they seem to go largely unused by the majority of users. This has often been attributed to poor motivation (Kikuchi, 2013), but it may be easier to dismiss this lack of task engagement outside of class as being simply related to motivation when there may be deeper issues at hand that are worthy of consideration. One factor that has recently begun to surface more frequently in studies of out-of-class learning is that students would like to feel the greater sense of teacher presence (Guichon & Wigham, 2016). This has been raised in distance education for some time (see Levy & Stockwell, 2006), but discussion in more "traditional" learning environments has lagged somewhat behind, perhaps due to the fact that learners are believed to have sufficient presence from the teacher through face-to-face access to the teacher in class. This study explores how social interaction may play a role in facilitating a greater sense of teacher presence in language learning outside of class. An overview of the complexities of learning outside of class along with how social media can play a role in this are discussed in the following sections, concluding with the research questions that were posed for the current study.

Learning Outside of Class

As touched upon above, encouraging learners to engage in language learning tasks outside of class time has shown to be a rather difficult undertaking. The reasons behind engagement in language learning tasks are a complex intersection of various interrelated factors, some of which relate to motivation and others to contextual factors (Dörnyei, MacIntyre & Henry, 2017). One of the more widely discussed factors has been the development of learner autonomy, which has attracted a good deal of attention in recent years (e.g., Benson, 2011). Autonomy has proven to be an elusive concept as well, as evidenced by the various discussions that have attempted to define it (e.g., Little, Dam & Legenhausen, 2017). While there has been some criticism of most definitions of autonomy, one widely accepted description is that it is self-directed where learners take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2011; Ushioda, 2011a). Simply completing required tasks outside of class should not be equated with autonomy (Stockwell, 2016). In other words, just because learners do homework or what the teacher requires of them does not mean that they are autonomous learners. Learner autonomy is an extremely complex notion, and it is unlikely that any claims about the development of autonomy itself can be made without looking at the learning process and learner attitudes towards their learning in a longitudinal manner. A more short-term definition of autonomy that focuses more on individual tasks appears to be a more realistic goal for teachers, where learners become able to take responsibility for how, when, and where they engage in specific tasks.

Technology has often been proposed as a means of promoting task autonomy—often tacitly—but any type of autonomy, be it of a task level or more global, requires ongoing assistance to develop and is not a natural outcome of using technology (Stockwell, 2013). Technology in and of itself is unlikely to contribute to the development of autonomy, which is a product of both motivation and skills, both of which are variable (Stockwell, 2012). This means if students possess either motivation or skill only without the other, autonomy is unlikely to be achieved; that is, they need both factors to build and

maintain autonomy. Engaging in online tasks outside of class is dependent upon sufficient training in the tools to develop the required skills, which in turn can have a positive impact on motivation as well (Romeo & Hubbard, 2012; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2014). The reality is, however, that class time is limited, and language teachers have expectations placed on them to cover the content of the syllabus meaning that alternative ways of motivating students and providing sufficient training are needed. This places pressure on teachers to be able to find ways of maintaining contact with learners outside of class time, and one such option that has become more accessible in recent years is the use of online communication tools that allow for social interaction, as described below.

Online Social Interaction in Language Learning

Vandergriff (2016) suggests that online learning communities can provide a forum through which teachers may maintain contact with students at the same time as enabling students to discuss their own learning. In language classrooms, students develop and express their own identities through the language they are learning (Ushioda, 2011b), therefore language teachers can have serious, life-altering consequences for their students and can significantly influence their motivation, identity construction and development as autonomous learners (Murray, 2011). As Little (2004, p. 16) puts it, "what they learn becomes part of what they are." Social views of the development of autonomy have gained momentum in the past few years (see Murray, 2014), and the perspective that learners are able to engage in learning activities without support from the teacher or other learners have started to be called into question (Murphy, 2014). There is evidence that from a theoretical perspective, social networking appears to provide many of the conditions necessary for supporting learning (Lomicka & Lord, 2016), and an increasing number of studies that have started to explore the potential of social networking in language learning contexts (e.g., Álvarez Valencia, 2016).

Social networking as a learning tool is not without difficulties. Results thus far have been rather mixed, where learners tend to show positive attitudes but limited interaction (Tran, 2016). As Rennie and Morrison (2013) point out, not all learners are receptive to engaging in online interactions, and without intervention from the teacher, online social interaction between learners has shown to be difficult to maintain (Fuchs & Snyder, 2013). There are also concerns from the teacher's perspective, where they must deal with additional tasks as well including training students with appropriate technical skills to use the technology and meeting learners' expectations regarding technical support, particularly outside of class time (Lai & Yeung, 2016). These extra duties could be a burden if language teachers are not familiar with the technology and/or may simply not have enough time to deal with ongoing requests for help that may take place at various times of day or night.

Studies that have looked at the use of social networking as a support for language teaching and learning have varied in their focus. Many studies have looked for features that are typically associated with face-to-face interaction to determine whether or not they are also evident in online social interactions, such as negotiation of meaning (Liu, 2017), communication breakdown (Peeters, 2018), scaffolding (Cappellini, 2016), and feedback (Ware, 2017). In the majority of cases, researchers have found that many of these features are indeed seen in online interactions, and as such many of the frameworks for analyzing face-to-face interactions are also applicable to online interactions as well. Other studies have also examined important features such as development of identity online (Reinhardt & Chen, 2013; Vandergriff, 2016), how learners choose and use social networking sites (Pasfield-Neofitou, 2012; Liu *et al.*, 2013), and community building (Barnes, 2018). This research is insightful and does provide a starting point for analysis of online social interaction, but research has remained largely descriptive of the environment and its potential for learning rather than learning itself.

Research that looks specifically at the relationship between learner engagement and social networking

has remained extremely scarce. One such example is from Tran (2016), who found that learners using Quizlet as a support for out-of-class learning posted their quiz scores through Facebook, which resulted in impromptu competition between the learners that appeared to prompt active usage of the Quizlet activities. Learners indicated that they found the interactions to be motivating, but the study did not specifically investigate the impact that the interactions had on engagement. As a result, the current study aimed to explore how learners actually interacted online, and how this related to learner engagement in online activities.

There were three main research questions which guided the study, as described below:

1. How can online social interaction be used in supporting online out-of-class learning?
2. What is the impact of using online social interaction on learner engagement?
3. How do learners perceive online social interaction as a support to their learning outside of class?

The questions were intentionally quite exploratory in nature in order to get an overall picture of the ways in which online social interaction could be used as a support for learning outside of class.

Methodology

The study was an exploratory study which took place over two semesters at a private university in Tokyo. In the first semester, Semester 1, 2016 (n=48), subjects were given vocabulary lists for each lesson covered in the textbook. Learners were shown in class how to use Quizlet to make vocabulary lists for self-study, and how to study. Students were encouraged to show their completed lists to the teacher in the next class. Students could contact the teacher using email if they had problems.

In the second semester, Semester 2, 2016 (n=50), subjects were given vocabulary lists for each lesson covered in the textbook. Learners were shown in class once more how to use Quizlet to make vocabulary lists for self-study, and how to study. Students were encouraged to send their completed lists to the teacher using a messaging system widely used in Japan called LINE. Students were informed that they could contact the teacher using LINE at any time during the semester if they had problems, and they could also interact with one another if they so desired.

Participants

Participants in the study were 48 Japanese students in two intact classes (15 and 33 respectively) at a private university in Tokyo. Both were low intermediate English listening and speaking classes of 2nd year and 3rd year of their undergraduate degree. Almost all of the same students were in both classes in the first and second semesters of the same academic year (Semester 1: n=48; Semester 2: n=50). There were two extra students in the second semester, but they were excluded from the study, although they were given the same training treatment as the other students during the semester. Despite being in different years, the levels of the two classes were comparable, with a different but equivalent commercial textbook was used in each class. All students had a smart phone, with iPhones being the selected by the vast majority of the students, at around 85% ownership.

Instruments

There were two main tools that were used in the study, Quizlet and LINE, which are described in more detail below.

Quizlet: This is a freely available vocabulary learning program app that can be used on both mobile and PC platforms. Students can use existing sets or create their own, with various activities associated with the vocabulary lists, consisting of learning mode, flash cards, simple matching game, writing mode or testing which the learners can aim to complete the tasks in as short a time as possible. Learner progress can be tracked through the teacher site. In the current study, the students could make their own set of vocabulary items based on the lessons they had in class.

LINE: A freeware messaging app for instant communications on electronic devices such as smartphones, tablet computers, and personal computers. LINE users exchange texts, images, video and audio. In Japan, LINE is the most widely used messaging app, with nearly 97% of people in their twenties having an account (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, 2017). Informal requests for information from participants revealed that 100% of the students had LINE accounts, and as a result LINE was the logical choice as a social tool in the current study. Once users have an account, they can also access this account on PC through downloading the PC version of the software.

Data Collection

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the current study. A pre-treatment survey was administered to identify basic demographic information such as experience with learning through mobile devices and the technologies preferred by the participants, and to determine learner attitudes towards the prospect of learning through technology. A post-survey was used to find out how learners felt about using Quizlet for vocabulary learning and LINE as a forum for discussion about their learning. In addition, focus group discussions were held with six volunteers (three female and three male) to get better insights into learners' views of using their social networking for language learning and to find out why learners behaved as they did with both Quizlet and LINE. Furthermore, learners' interactions on LINE were analyzed to determine the nature of the discussions that took place, along with the access logs and scores that were recorded in Quizlet. The focus group discussions were based primarily on the content of the post-treatment survey, but the discussion was not restricted to this.

Provision of Training

In the first semester, the learners were provided with technical training in detail in class in the first two weeks while ongoing strategic and pedagogical training (see Stockwell & Hubbard, 2014) were provided in class and in a combination of interactions through Email if learners had questions over the period of 15 weeks. Technical training was undertaken in detail in the first two weeks and included showing how to use the Quizlet app with showing the features of Quizlet and other functions. Learners can show their Quizlet set in class. Learners could also discuss their strategies in class.

In the second semester, the learners were provided with technical training in class, while ongoing strategic and pedagogical training were provided through interactions of LINE both individual and group chat over the period of 15 weeks. Similar to the first semester, technical training was undertaken in detail in the first two weeks and included showing how to use the Quizlet app with showing the features of Quizlet and other functions, but one extra feature of the second semester is to explain the usage of the LINE group and individual chat among teacher and learners for discussion outside of class. Further supplementary training was also carried out in class in the following weeks to ensure learners were familiar with the functions of Quizlet. Strategic training was conducted in class and consisted of showing learners specific strategies on how to use Quizlet to learn vocabulary, including, for example, how to create a vocabulary set, how to set up listening function as writing or how to share the vocabulary set to classmates, and so forth. These strategies were not presented in one session, but in small chunks over the period of the study. Learners could also discuss their strategies through LINE

group as well, and this was explained in class. Learners can show their Quizlet set through LINE. Finally, pedagogical training was undertaken to facilitate learner understanding was to why they should use the technology to learn a language, in this case why they should use Quizlet to learn vocabulary.

Procedure

The study was carried out over two semesters with the period of 15 weeks per semester.

First semester

Week 1-2:	Pre-treatment survey
	Technical training for mobile Quizlet
Week 3-4:	Discussion of using Quizlet in class
	Dealing with technical difficulties and problems in class
Weeks 4-14:	Discussion of learning in class
Week 15:	Post-treatment survey
	Focus group discussions

Second semester

Week 1-2:	Pre-treatment survey
	Technical training for mobile Quizlet & LINE
Week 3-4:	Discussion of using Quizlet in class
	Dealing with technical difficulties and problems in class
	Introduction to using LINE for discussing learning
Weeks 4-14:	Discussion of learning in class and on LINE
Week 15:	Post-treatment survey
	Focus group discussions

At the beginning of each semester, subjects were administered pre-treatment attitude and background surveys to determine the demographics of the participants, revealing that 100% students with a smart phone, with iPhones being the most popular. The majority of the students indicated they would like to study with their mobile phones (70.2%). More than half of the subjects planned to spend less than 30 minutes studying through Quizlet (53.2%), and more than half of the participants had never downloaded language learning apps before the study (57.4%). Regarding using free or commercial apps, 42.6% of the students indicated they do not wish to pay anything for language learning apps. When asked to provide which skills participants wanted to learn through mobile devices, listening skills accounted for 46.3% and vocabulary 31.7% respectively. A total of 59.6% of participants thought they couldn't use Quizlet without teacher support and 57.4% of them were willing to add new vocabulary to Quizlet. Participants commuted back and forth from the university, so it was not surprising that 75.6% answered that they planned to use their smartphone for learning on the train or bus on their way to or from classes.

Bi-weekly quiz scores were collected and analysed to see the change in their improvement. Quizlet records were collected and analysed to evaluate learner engagement through online vocabulary activities. All LINE logs in both individual (i.e., teacher-to-student) and class group interactions were collected for analysis for teacher and student interaction outside of class. Records of all interactions with students and observation notes from in-class discussions with students were analysed as well to support the validity of the data. At the end of each semester, post-treatment attitude surveys were administered and focus group discussions were recorded to get a deeper view on how the learners felt

about the social interaction as a support for the online vocabulary activities.

On completion of the study, participants were asked if they would like to take part in the focus group discussion voluntarily and six learners were willing to participate. As an exploratory study, it was hoped that the project would shed some light onto the potential role of social networking in enhancing online language learning task engagement.

Results

Background surveys for both the first and second semester appeared to be solid baseline data to determine any changes in perceptions towards using technology for language learning. Of course, it should be noted that in the first semester, the support for using Quizlet was only provided in class with the opportunity for using email if necessary. There were, however, no cases of email being sent to the teacher whatsoever with regards to the use of Quizlet during the semester. Rather, four students contacted the teacher to confirm the test date, and two others notified the teacher that they would miss the next class because they were ill.

Table 1 *Background Surveys*

	First semester	Second semester
Smart phone (SP) ownership	100% (75.6% iPhone)	100% (70.2% iPhone)
Intention to study with SP	Yes: 64.5%	Yes: 70.2%
Intention to use Quizlet	Yes: 87.2%	Yes: 83.9%
LL app download experience	Yes: 42.6%	Yes: 56.4%
Desired skills to learn with SP	1.Listening 2. Vocabulary	1. Listening 2. Vocabulary
Willing to pay for LL app	Nothing: 42.6% 100-300 yen: 23.4%	n/a

As Table 2 reveals the bi-weekly quiz scores through the two semesters. Students were required to complete six quizzes through the semester. In the first semester, from Quiz 1 to Quiz 6, there was a slight rise in the score, although Quiz 4 was just 66.5%, accounting for the lowest score in the semester as that was the week after the mid-term test and students seemed to have experienced a drop in motivation for studying, a phenomenon quite often observed in classes taught by the research in this and other classes. In the second semester, there was some variation in the mean scores, but they were generally much higher among students and SDs were smaller compared with those of the first semester, indicating that students did appear to achieve higher scores on the weekly quizzes more consistently with the gap among students being somewhat smaller. While it is difficult to make claims about actual acquisition of vocabulary in the absence of a pre-test or post-test, the results could still be considered as quite positive in that many of the learners engaged more into the tasks, and that this did seem to be reflected in the generally higher scores achieved in the quizzes.

As Table 3 shows, from the comparison of the engagement in Quizlet between the first and second semester, we can see the total activities done in the second semester were nearly triple that of the first semester. This can be explained by the fact that the LINE group interaction made it possible for students to share their Quizlet sets with each other freely and easily. The average number of activities was much higher, with 26.8 activities in the first semester versus 75.7 activities in the second semester.

Table 2 *Quiz Scores*

	First semester		Second semester	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Quiz 1	69.3	18.1	82.5	19.2
Quiz 2	67.6	18.8	87.1	15.8
Quiz 3	76.1	27.4	87.2	13.0
Quiz 4	66.5	23.7	82.2	16.9
Quiz 5	75.7	20.4	83.1	15.2
Quiz 6	72.4	25.5	80.6	16.3

*Mean is the average score among students.
*Standard deviation (SD) means how much variation there is among subjects.

Table 3 *Quizlet Engagement*

	First semester	Second semester
Total activities	438	1169
Total on smart phone	373 (85.2%)	1081 (92.5%)
Ave time on activities	26.8 mins	75.7 minutes
Ave number of activities	5.26 activities	14.12 activities

Post-surveys were conducted to determine whether engagement in the Quizlet activities could be prompted by conducting in-class training or by LINE interactions (Table 4). In the pre-surveys, the percentage of students who indicated that they intended to use Quizlet was 87.2%, but in reality, just 52.1% of students actually did. However, in the second semester, the percentage of students who planned to study with Quizlet was 83.9% but actual usage exceeded this at 89.6%. This increase could be explained as being a result of increased motivation through interaction by LINE (71.4%), but it may also be caused by the fact that students realized the usefulness of using Quizlet app for learning language as well (48.3%) after exposure in the first semester. It was interesting to note that nearly half of the students admitted that they used Quizlet because they were requested to by the teacher (44.1%). In the first semester, students didn't send any questions about Quizlet by email or ask questions in class, so they couldn't get feedback from the teacher; however; in the second semester, students could send their Quizlet sets by LINE anytime and were able to get feedback from the teacher which may have motivated them to complete the Quizlet activites. One of the functions the teacher used in LINE was sending reminders to students about assignment deadlines, completing Quizlet sets, or other matters related to class. When asked if they wanted to get reminders through LINE, more than half answered they did, at 54.8%, but it was interesting to note that many did not want them.

Table 4 *Post-Survey Results*

	First semester	Second semester
Used Quizlet	Yes: 52.1%	Yes: 89.6%
Reason to use Quizlet	Useful: 24.2%	Useful: 48.3%
	Requested: 23.5%	Requested: 44.1%
Need more training	Yes: 27.5%	Yes: 39.1%
Motivated by interaction	Yes: 26.2% (Email)	Yes: 71.4% (LINE)
Feedback helpful for LL	Yes: 23.4% (Email)	Yes: 64.3% (LINE)
Want reminders	Yes: 13.3% (Email)	Yes: 54.8% (LINE)

Comparing the social interaction between the first semester and the second semester, we can see a marked difference, as Table 5 shows. The total interaction in the first semester was 106 times while in the second semester, that was 1253 times. Having said this to see, students engaged much more in the tasks compared to that of the first semester. In the first semester, students could ask any questions during class time or sending emails, but few students actually did so. For non-class-related issues,

there was only three times in class in the first semester; however, through LINE, student-teacher interaction occurred 189 times. This was encouraging for the teacher, as the teacher could build a closer relationship with students through this social channel. This interaction may be considered as a burden for teachers because teachers have to manage their work time outside of the class time as well. This point is raised again later in the discussion.

Table 5 *Total Social Interaction (Student)*

	First semester		Second semester	
Class-related	Email	91	Email	0
	In class	12	In class	8
			LINE (Class)	29
			Line (1-1)	1022
Non-class-related	Email	0	Email	0
	In class	3	In class	4
			LINE (Class)	1
			Line (1-1)	189
	TOTAL	**106**	**TOTAL**	**1253**

Regarding the nature of interaction in LINE, as Table 6 shows, we can see the majority of interactions were from the teacher to the students, at 81 times and 30 times in the two groups respectively. The students predominantly played a more passive receiver role during the interactions. They received announcements, reminders, explanations and/or requests for information from the teacher, and in LINE, the "seen" function played an important role to serve as a means of acknowledging that they had read the postings from the teacher.

Table 6 *LINE Interaction (Class Groups)*

	Class 1 (N=15)		**Class 2 (N=33)**	
	Teacher	**Student**	**Teacher**	**Student**
Greeting	11	-	13	1
Announcement	8	-	6	-
Reminder	6	-	4	-
Explanation	4	-	8	-
Request for information	-	2	-	1
Acknowledgement	-	3	8	12
Narrative	2	-	4	-
Sticker	2	4	5	7
TOTAL	**33**	**9**	**48**	**21**

Another interesting function in LINE was stickers, where sometimes students and the teacher used stickers as greetings or acknowledgements. Stickers in this study were considered as making the conversations more friendly and smoother, however, it could also be perceived as a way of avoiding awkward moments during the conversations when both sides have nothing more to say.

Discussion

Social Interaction as a Support for Online Out-of-Class Learning

From the current study, it was evident that providing training such as learning strategies through LINE was not an easy undertaking. English was used in the postings, and it was thought that students would read through them in their spare time outside of class and would try to use English in their responses,

but there were very few cases of this in the data. It also appeared that learners were not ready to discuss their learning over LINE, but the reasons for this are not entirely clear. It is possible that they did not feel confident to respond for the discussions for the fear of losing face with making mistakes, or simply that they did not what they should ask about their learning. Stockwell and Hubbard (2014) showed in their study of learner training where learners were able to discuss their learning in class that there was an improvement in dialogue about how to engage in learning activities, but the current study suggested that this did not happen when attempting to use online interaction to achieve it.

Rather, the social interaction used to support out-of-class learning in this study served predominantly an announcement and confirmation tool role. In saying this, LINE allowed for a far greater amount of interaction than email, providing a closer relationship between the teacher and the students. Some comments from students included, *"I felt I could contact the teacher comfortably."* and *"I think I had less distance with the teacher because I could contact them whenever I needed to easily."* As mentioned, the postings were mainly in English, so class interactions were largely teacher to student.

The Impact of Using Social Interaction on Learner Engagement

The results seemed to suggest that learners engaged in the activities far more actively when supported through LINE (nearly three times). A slightly higher proportion of activities were completed on mobile phones than on computers when compared with the first semester, possibly due to the reminders through LINE which learners predominantly accessed through their mobile phones. Learners provided comments which reflected positive attitudes towards the use of LINE. A comment representative of this was seen in the post-surveys, where one student wrote, *"The teacher's reminders were good because I often forgot to study if I didn't have them."* In this sense, it may have been the fact that they sensed the presence of the teacher outside of class to encourage them to study may have been a contributing factor. However, those learners who said that they did not want the reminders said that students should already be aware of their study schedules, and reminders were not necessary for them.

Learners also indicated that they felt that seeing other students' Quizlet scores promoted a sense of competition as well. It is likely that the learners engaged more actively in the activities not only because the teacher's reminders served as a way of keeping them in closer contact with the activities, but also because they could feel the presence of other learners in the class. This resembles the prompting of seeing other students' engagement as seen in Tran (2016), and this is likely to have prompted greater engagement in the activities.

Learner Perceptions of Social Interaction in Online Learning Activities

In general, student's attitudes were positive towards using LINE and about learning though mobile devices. Because they have the device with them, they can receive the feedback from the teacher any time with notifications through LINE. When students sent their Quizlet set or Quizlet scores on a weekly basic, teacher could give advice on the received set and give advice on how to make it better or fix any mistakes if any. And mainly, students acknowledged the increased teacher presence as motivating, as can be seen in the following comments from the students in the post-surveys:

"The quick feedback from the teacher meant that I didn't waste time wondering what I should do."
"It was possible to get advice."

Other students indicated that they felt that LINE helped them to develop a sense of community, which may be seen in the comment from one learner, *"We are family."* This may be interpreted as an encouraging sign that the teacher was able to build a good connection with students, making a non-

threatening learning environment where students could share mutual understanding and could develop the feeling of belonging to a certain group. As lower level learners, this sense of camaraderie may have had a positive impact on their view of learning (as indicated by several learners in the interviews and surveys), because they no longer felt that they were completely isolated from the teacher outside of class time.

Other Observations

With regards to learning through mobile devices, learners were aware that mobile devices made it easier for them to use small gaps in time. Some comments from the learners that reflected this view included:

"It's easy to open so I felt motivated to study."
"I could use my commuting time effectively."

As the fact that, Japanese students commute to university, so it is not surprisingly that they did some tasks on the train or bus on the way back and forth, many taking as much as an hour or more each way. Engaging in the activities might have been thought as a good way for students to make the most of the time during the long commute as well.

However, because the app was installed into their mobile devices, learners exhibited a rather practical view towards the distractions within the device.

"I would stop the activities when I got a notification of a message from my friend."

In other words, learners acknowledged the potential benefits of learning though mobile phones and had an idea of how they could be the best for effective usage, but at the same time, they also realized the practical problems such as the potential distractions (see Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). When learners use their mobile devices, they are faced with distractions both outside the device that might be caused by the environment in which they find themselves engaging in the activities, but also the problems caused by the pop-up notifications that come on the screen of the device itself. Both types of distraction have the potential to limit the learner engagement as it can result in the learner in ceasing what they are doing, and it is conceivable that it would then take some time to resume where they were, and in some cases, they may choose to simply stop altogether.

Another problem was that pointed out by Lai and Yeung (2016) regarding the potential burden on the teacher. Replying to the large number of messages that came in from students at all times of the day and night did in fact turn out to be difficult for the teacher. It was predicted from the outset that it was likely that there would be a large number of responses that needed to be dealt with on an ongoing basis, but this turned out to be quite time-consuming. The teacher-researcher in this case set up a separate LINE account on a different device to alleviate this potential problem, and in retrospect this did reduce the stress to a certain degree. The teacher was required to set aside time specifically to deal with questions from students, or to respond to posts made by the students to both the individual and class groups, but if this was left for a few days, it ended up taking quite some time to complete.

Limitations

The study was not without its limitations either. The same students were involved in both the first and second semesters, and it is possible that their views may have been influenced by their first experiences with Quizlet in the first semester. Secondly, it was just not possible to do random groupings of the

students, which means that there may have been some slight differences in the motivation of the students as a result in their different major fields of study. Data collection methods were intended to provide the greatest possible insights into learners' usage and perceptions of the activities and LINE, but ultimately the participants in the interviews were volunteers whose views may not have reflected the views of others in the study. The correlations between learner responses in the surveys and the interviews would indicate that they mostly coincided, but of course there remains some scope for conjecture as well.

Conclusion

The current study sought to investigate how online social interaction can support out-of-class task engagement. There appeared to be some impact on engagement as a result of learners interacting with the teacher and each other through LINE, and three roles of social interaction in supporting learning outside of class were identified. The first role is as a social community discussion tool where students can socially interact with each other and the teacher. It is a "social tool" in the sense of allowing spontaneous interaction between participants. And for lower level learners, this interaction may be important as they can feel themselves in a group that shares mutual understanding, which can encourage them to use more English as well. The second role is as teacher-to-student reporting tool. It was a teacher direction tool, for example, the teacher giving directions, instructions, reminders, feedback, and so forth. As mentioned before, some teachers may see this as a burden because of time constrains, however, this would help students with some basic steps to build their habits of learning outside of classroom which may ultimately lead to autonomous learning behavior. The third role is as a student-to-teacher reporting tool. This allows students to report back to the teacher on what they have done or achieved in a friendly and easier way.

In conclusion, it appeared that LINE had the potential to facilitate engagement with the learning activities, but another advantage was that it also played a role in establishing a more open relationship between the teacher and the learners, who felt that they could talk to the teacher more freely about any problems that they faced with their learning. In this way, it is feasible to conclude that social networking may well have an impact on task engagement itself, but further research is needed to determine what the factors were that led to this, and how the relationship between the teacher and learners may result in a more rewarding learning experience.

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