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Using Existing SNS Platforms as Learning Management Systems

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Abstract

Learning Management Systems (LMSs) are becoming increasingly popular in creating blended learning environments in education, and more specifically in English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching contexts. Concurrently, the youth population is increasingly relying on Social Networking Services (SNSs) for communication, entertainment, and news. This exploratory study examined the perceptions of 190 students taking EFL courses at one Japanese university in regards to using an SNS in place of, or to supplement, the institution's existing LMS. The students were offered access to both a traditional LMS (Moodle) and SNS (LINE) to engage in much of the blended learning functions on offer in the course. The students self-reported their own LMS and SNS usage hours, and their perceptions of Moodle and LINE for EFL learning were then elicited via four open-ended qualitative questions. The results were then coded and quantified. The results indicate a preference for LINE as a learning tool, though students expressed hesitation in using LINE for some functions due to a perceived casualness associated with the application. Implications for this technology in the EFL classroom are finally discussed.

Introduction

Background

The advancement of technology has provided language educators and learners with a wealth of resources they can utilize to engage with their target L2, in and out of the classroom. With the rise of web 2.0 technologies, many researchers have examined the benefits of blended classrooms, in which in-class lessons are supple-

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mented with an online or digital component.

One common instrument used to heighten learning is the Learning Management System (LMS). Pilli (2014) defines an LMS as

. . . the infrastructure that delivers and manages instructional content, identifies and assesses individual and organizational learning or training goals, tracks the progress towards meeting those goals and collects and presents data for monitoring the learning process of the establishment as a whole. (p.90)

LMSs provide educators of both fully online and blended classrooms a central location, accessible both on and off campus, to interact with their students. Soliman (2004) pointed to the interactivity, learner autonomy, greater opportunity for learning, and the variety of learning styles that can be addressed as potential benefits for the use of an LMS.

While technology has been heralded as a revolution in education, many educators are quick to employ it without carefully considering why or how it is being utilized. While the Internet is increasingly being accessed through mobile phones, many LMSs offer very poorly constructed mobile access or none at all. A survey by the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan (2016) found that while only 79.1% of households with more than two people had a personal computer, 95.3% had a cellphone and 67.4% had a smart phone. While these numbers represented a 12.4% increase in the number of households with smartphone access, there was only a 1.4% increase in household personal computer access over the same period. LMSs are indeed technological platforms that students would not utilize were they not required to for their courses. Though LMSs continue to evolve and have moved into the mobile domain, the platforms themselves are often unintuitive and not easily accessible to students via smart phone. According to Leh (2014), this is because the development of many modern LMSs preceded the advent of mobile phones and tablet computers, thus the companies overseeing their development have to rewrite their software piece by piece to make it mobile-friendly.

Concurrently with the rise of the LMS as a tool to manage classes, Japan (much like the rest of the world) has witnessed the rise of the social networking service generation, who in turn form the majority of the learning populace in tertiary education. Charles (2015) reported that in 2015, approximately 50 million Japanese people were using the LINE SNS, a further 26 million were using Twitter, and 22 million were on Facebook. A multitude of studies have already demonstrated the efficacy of leveraging existing SNS platforms in language education. Prichard (2013) found success in using Facebook for L2 learning with a class of Japanese university students, despite only 46% of them reporting that they had a Facebook account prior

to the study. Acar and Kimura (2012), alternatively, utilized Twitter as a platform for communication between students in the L2 classroom. They identified a greater enthusiasm among students towards communicating in English.

Notable among the statistics related to SNS usage in Japan is the permeation of LINE among the Japanese. Even more telling is the level of penetration of LINE among youth. The Social Media Lab (2015) reported in 2015 that 81.6% of male and 80.6% of female users between the ages of 15 and 19, and 73.9% of male and 76.7% of female LINE users were using the application daily. Not only is LINE familiar to Japanese postsecondary students, it has evolved to provide many of the same functions available through LMSs, with the accessibility and sense of familiarity that a traditional LMS does not have.

Examining the Merits and Demerits of SNSs as LMSs

Utilizing culturally-familiar learning practices. While LMSs are designed with the express intent of servicing the needs of students and language educators, their design is often quite antiquated and unintuitive. Among the main criticisms levied at LMSs is that they are designed for use via personal computer, even though students exceedingly access the internet via their mobile devices (Ishii, 2011). Takahashi (2014) noted that Japanese students' dependence on mobile phones throughout junior and senior high school has led to a situation in which they find it easier to write on their mobile than on their PC.

In a study on using Moodle to enhance EFL reading, writing and pronunciation activities, Brine, Wilson and Roy (2007) stated the aim of using the LMS was "to build toward autonomous learning through culturally familiar learning practices" (p. 1059). At the time of publication, smartphones were not a common item students had access to, however, much has changed since and students are increasingly using their mobiles for all aspects of their lives. Romrell, Kidder and Wood (2014) noted of the device students use for learning that "borrowed devices are less familiar to the owner, which often makes the device harder for the learner to use and makes the learning feel less personal" (p. 3). Assuming that educators subscribe to this sensible concept, students should be allowed to access course content via devices they are comfortable using. LMSs such as Moodle, Blackboard, Desire 2 Learn, and so on are not only unfamiliar to most students prior to starting postsecondary education, they are unintuitive and difficult to use.

Comparing LMSs and SNSs through the lens of technological frameworks. Technology can heighten learning and provide students with more opportunities to interact in their L2. However, as with any new tool or pedagogical vehicle that emerges, educators and institutions are often quick to adopt them without considering how to adapt them to best suit the context and specific needs of the learners.

Mishra and Koehler (2006) noted the lack of theoretical grounding in educational technology pedagogy and proposed the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge — or what would be come to known as the TPACK framework. The TPACK framework suggested that the most effective use of technology in education would occur at the point where technology, pedagogy and content knowledge overlap. In successfully implementing technology, educators must then adopt the idea that “successful technology integration is rooted primarily in curriculum content and content-related learning processes, and secondarily in savvy use of educational technologies” (Harris & Hofer, 2011).

Separately, a second technological framework emerged to assist teachers in deciding whether the integration of technology into a lesson was beneficial or a burden to the learning process. Puentedura (2013) created a hierarchy of technology use: Substitution, Augmentation, Modification and Redefinition (SAMR) and argued that the former two designations enhanced learning, while the latter two transformed learning. While Puentedura was examining the general use of the framework in education, others (Hockley, 2013; Romrell, Kidder & Wood, 2014) have specifically looked at the application of SAMR to English language teaching.

As the TPACK framework relates more to how a teacher implements their course content, both an LMS and SNS provide a platform for a teacher to deliver their lessons in a way that incorporates pedagogy and content knowledge. It is important to consider then whether the use of an SNS instead of a traditional LMS prohibits an educator from introducing content in a pedagogically informed way. From that perspective, there are few limitations presented by LINE, especially as the application evolves. As a concrete example, the application recently began to allow the sharing of files, event creation, and group polls. Thus students could potentially both submit assignments and receive files on LINE instead of through a traditional LMS, while educators could schedule important event reminders, and poll students to give them greater control over course content.

As previously discussed, under the SAMR framework, the application of technology is only considered worthwhile if it can be classified as “modifying” or “redefining” learning. As traditional LMSs serve a variety of purposes and transform students’ abilities to engage with and participate in their courses, it is hard to brush them off as not passing this standard. However, it certainly can be argued that some of the tools offered through the traditional LMS — e-mails, discussion forums, quizzes, polls — indeed substitute existing, decentralized services. LINE however, offers teachers the same features concentrated in one location, that may not be easily accessible through other platforms. Teachers can do real-time messaging, live video, picture and video sharing, and one click file submissions.

To the same degree that the LMS substitutes a number of functions that are

otherwise achievable but less convenient, LINE offers students a greater degree of convenience. The accessibility afforded to students by being able to access course content and tools from their mobile device allows them “to consume— that is, to access and store—all sorts of knowledge almost instantly and almost wherever they are, with little or no effort compared with earlier technologies” (Traxler, 2010 p.154). The addition of functions such as live video and photo sharing, and instantaneous messaging surely ‘transforms’ learning, as it allows teachers and students to conduct activities synchronously without being in the same room together. Educators are afforded a simple and effective means of having students engage in real-world activities that can be managed centrally from a PC or mobile, that only requires students to have a mobile device of their own. This might manifest itself as an interactive scavenger hunt activity, practicing directions through practical navigation, or in finding real examples of whatever content or theme is being covered in a course. In this sense, using LINE in the classroom “allows for learning to be situated within a real-world setting and provides context sensitivity” (Romrell, Kidder, & Wood, 2014, p.4).

Comparing LINE to other SNSs for educational purposes. Facebook, like LINE, offers many of the tools a traditional LMS provides, in a way that students are already familiar with. A number of cross-cultural, cross-contextual studies have examined the efficacy of Facebook in language learning (Alm, 2015; Manan, Alias & Pandian, 2012). Similarly, the efficacy of Twitter has also been examined in the context of Japanese EFL education (Acar & Kimura, 2012). The table below (Table 1) compares the functions offered by one traditional LMS, Moodle, and Japan’s three most popular SNS services.

Table 1 Comparison of functionality of Moodle (LMS) vs. Japan’s three most popular SNSs

<u>Functions</u>	Traditional LMS		Social Networking Services		
	<u>Moodle</u>	<u>LINE</u>	<u>Facebook</u>	<u>Twitter</u>	
Blogs	✓		✓		
Calendar	✓				
Class Announcements	✓	✓	✓		✓
Content Storage	✓	✓			
Cumulative Discussions	✓	✓	✓		
Customizable Profiles		✓	✓		✓
File Posting	✓	✓	✓		
Glossary	✓				
Grade Posting	✓				
Group Formation	✓	✓	✓		
Journals	✓	✓	✓		✓
Newsfeed		✓	✓		✓
Real-time Video		✓	✓		
Student Evaluation	✓				

One of the obvious troubles in using Facebook, in addition to having a considerably lower penetration in the Japanese market than rivals LINE and even Twitter (Purnell, 2016), is the site's insistence on users using their real names. Seilhamer (2013) noted that "in contrast to Facebook's focus on self-presentation to a large extended network, LINE's emphasis is on chatting and relationships with individual LINE 'friends'" (p. 42). This is of significant cultural importance when one considers the greater hesitancy among Japanese towards using real names and pictures online when compared with their western counterparts (Omori, 2014). Wen and Clement (2003) define this phenomenon among East Asian students as "*face protection*", a value that Aubrey, Colpitts, and Nowlan (2015) noted was instilled in Japanese students through the Japanese education system's historic rooting in Confucianism. Essentially people, and by extension students, in the collectivist societies of East Asia tend to be more sensitive to social evaluation by others. This explains why Japan's original homegrown SNS, Mixi, and now its successor LINE allow users greater control over what information they make public. With these factors in mind, Facebook may not be particularly fitting culturally or practically when it comes to teaching English to Japanese students.

Another alternative would be Twitter. It has greater market penetration than Facebook and offers users complete anonymity. Mork (2009) noted the main benefits of using Twitter in the context of EFL in Japan, stating that Twitter: aided in the transmission of class content, allowed educators to send out short, timely bits of information, encouraged collaborative learning, and pushed students to engage in concise writing. However, if one were to compare the tools and functions offered by a traditional LMS and compare them to those offered by Twitter, the deficiencies are obvious (see Table 1). Unlike LINE, Twitter does not offer a way of discussing or sharing information cumulatively, that makes it easy for students to participate in and add to discussion, and find and share common content. Acar and Kimura (2012) found that Japanese EFL students used Twitter enthusiastically to communicate in English, but that the content of their tweets largely fell in the realm of greetings, thanking other users, and daily life. This could perhaps be reflective of the limitations imposed by Twitter's 140-character limit. While this might force students to write more concisely, it does not allow them to engage in complex discussions about more complicated topics.

This paper examines the efficacy of LINE as an LMS through an exploratory study of 190 Japanese postsecondary students at one Kansai-based university. The students were given a survey which measured their SNS usage, and their perceptions on the use of LINE and Moodle as LMS systems in an EFL classroom through four open-ended, qualitative questions. The study looked to address the following questions:

1. Can existing SNS frameworks be leveraged for educational purposes?
2. What are the limitations of using SNSs in place of LMSs?

Methods, Participants, Materials, & Procedures

This study was conducted at one Japanese university in the spring semester of academic year 2015. The sample group was initially comprised of 191 students enrolled in both mandatory and elective English courses, however one student's results were discarded due to incomplete or incorrect data entry. The sample population thus consisted of 190 students ($n = 190$), 147 of whom were male and 43 who were female. The students were from a variety of departments and grade years (84 first-years, 101 second-years, 2 third-years and 3 fourth-years).

Students were given the option to use either Moodle, LINE, or both, when submitting assignments, participating in pre-emptive group discussions for their classes, contacting their instructor regarding absences and other administrative issues, and in group formation and group project planning.

At the conclusion of the semester, students were given a survey in Japanese (Appendix A) in order to elicit their perceptions of the efficacy of both tools to supplement their in-class English learning. The survey measured students' usage of Moodle and several other popular SNS platforms, then asked them to self-report their weekly usage (in hours) of each of the platforms. They then responded to four qualitative questions related to their experiences using the platforms in their English courses. The results were then coded and quantified, and are explained below.

Results

Analysis of SNS Usage.

Students were first asked to select whether or not they used Moodle and each of seven popular SNSs in Japan (LINE, Twitter, Google Plus, Mixi, Facebook, Instagram and Skype). The results indicated that Moodle was used by 183 students (96.83%), while LINE was the most popular SNS with 178 users (94.18%), followed by Twitter with 125 (66.14%). The remaining data is included below in Table 2. As anticipated, LINE was by far the most popular of the SNS platforms and had only five fewer users than Moodle. Also of note is that not all students reported to be using Moodle at all. This may reflect student disengagement with the LMS platform.

Table 2 Comparison of Students' SNS Usage

<u>LMS/SNS</u>	<u>Users (<i>n</i> = 190)</u>	<u>Users (as a % of <i>n</i> = 190)</u>	<u>Self-reported hours per week</u>
Moodle	183	96.315%	1.5
LINE	178	93.684%	8
Twitter	125	65.789%	7
Google Plus	32	16.842%	1.7
Mixi	9	4.736%	7
Facebook	43	22.631%	1.6
Instagram	49	25.789%	2.7
Skype	50	26.316%	2.4

From this data we can ascertain that only LINE and Twitter were used by more than 27% of the students among the SNSs, and only LINE neared Moodle in terms of usage, falling behind by less than 3% points. Of perhaps more relevance though, is the number of hours students spent using each platform. Students self-reported accessing LINE five times more than the school LMS.

Qualitative Analysis

In questions 1 and 2, students' feelings regarding the use of Moodle and LINE as learning tools in their English classes were elicited. The students' answers were then given a qualitative analysis, and were coded using four categories. Answers that were all positive were coded as PP (positive-positive), while answers that were entirely negative were coded NN (negative-negative), with answers having a mix of positive and negative comments coded as PN (positive-negative). The fourth category was for answers that were left blank or in which students indicated they didn't use the platform they were being asked about, and were coded as NA (no answer). The results indicate a much more positive inclination towards LINE in EFL learning (63.68%), than Moodle (34.21%), with only 4.74% of students having an entirely negative inclination towards LINE, as opposed to 19.47% towards Moodle. The complete results are below in Table 3.

Table 3 Students' Perceptions of Moodle and LINE as Learning Tools

	<u>PP</u>		<u>NN</u>		<u>PN</u>		<u>NA</u>		<u>Total</u>
Moodle	65	34.21%	37	19.47%	51	26.84%	37	19.47%	190
LINE	121	63.68%	9	4.74%	26	13.68%	34	17.89%	190

Students were finally asked which platform they preferred for submitting homework (Q 3) and which platform they preferred for communicating with their teacher (Q 4). The results were coded in to those who preferred Moodle, those who preferred LINE, those who preferred both or whose answer depended on the reason for usage, and those who gave no answer or did not use either platform. A potential

disadvantage for using LINE emerged here. Though students largely preferred LINE for communication with their teacher (75.80%) over Moodle (7.37%), they did prefer Moodle (64.74%) to LINE (14.21%) for submitting homework. The complete results are listed in Table 4.

Table 4 Students' Perceptions of Moodle and LINE as Tools for Homework Submission and Communicating with Instructor

	<u>Moodle</u>		<u>LINE</u>		<u>Both</u>		<u>No Answer</u>	
Submitting Homework	123	64.74%	27	14.21%	15	7.89%	25	13.16%
Communicating with Teacher	14	7.37%	144	75.80%	8	4.21%	24	12.63%

Discussion

There has long been a general cynicism in the academic forum towards new methodology or teaching practices, and technology is certainly no exception. McCurry (2010) notes that “critical pedagogists have been slow to engage the contemporary rush to technology-centered learning, either as a domain of critical inquiry itself or as a potential avenue for advancing a critical pedagogical project” (p. 102). As has been discussed, there is merit in taking careful consideration as to how technology can benefit learning. To this end, educators should continue to critically examine the role of technological tools in the classroom.

The use of learning management systems is no exception in this regards. Educators must ask why LMSs are being used and how they are being used. When making the decision to employ an LMS in a blended learning classroom, educators might ultimately arrive at the conclusion that the LMS they or their institution are using is not appropriate or not the best choice for their particular teaching context. In this situation, employing an SNS as an alternative may be a viable option. By examining the results of this study, students have a clear preference for using LINE as a tool for communication and spend a great deal of time using it, as opposed to Moodle and even other SNS tools. This familiarity with the application lends itself to Brine, Wilson, and Roy's (2007) notion of culturally-sensitive learning practices if one considers generation one factor under the larger umbrella of ‘culture’.

As the SNS with the highest penetration in Japan, LINE can serve as a powerful learning tool to encourage greater engagement with course content and more efficient delivery of course materials. Despite some of the challenges previously discussed, LINE streamlines many of the services on offer from the traditional LMS through a platform that is both highly familiar and accessible to students. It also holds up under scrutiny from a variety of technological frameworks, such as TPACK and SAMR. Furthermore, LINE offers more of the services a traditional

LMS would offer than its SNS competitors, and allows students to easily access course materials through their mobile device. To this end, it is at least worthy of consideration for educators whose teaching context it suits.

Undoubtedly, as with any new technological tool being introduced into language education, problems are going to emerge that need to be addressed. Seemingly, the most obvious issue that arises when using a third-party platform such as LINE is security. Whereas traditional LMS systems are integrated into the institutions' intranets, which involves paying for licensing and the signing of contracts, using LINE in a classroom requires no agreement between the SNS and the institution. While this is clearly beneficial in that the service is free and does not require students already using the service to reregister, it does not offer a central location where any information shared through the service can be protected. Some of the negative impact may be mitigated by the fact that LINE users are not required to use their real names or pictures.

The students in this study did indeed express some hesitancy in utilizing LINE for some of the functions associated with a traditional LMS, such as submitting homework. Many students noted that LINE felt much more casual and that they worried the technology could fail when it came to something that could have an effect on their grades. This might indicate that LINE (or some other contextually appropriate SNS) may not be able to replace a traditional LMS in its entirety, and should instead be used to supplement an institution's LMS. Educators should consider whether students will feel comfortable with the blurring of lines between their private and public personas before adopting LINE for the classroom. There may be resistance from students who feel using LINE with classmates and their instructors impacts on the separation of their private and school lives. After all, LINE provides a "timeline" on which users can share their private thoughts, photos, and videos. However, this friction can be reduced by instructing students in how to adjust their privacy settings. LINE does allow users to decide what they share with individual LINE friends. Conversely, a teacher may worry about possible overlap between their private and public lives when using LINE. Virtual mobile software such as BlueStacks though, allows an individual to create an additional LINE account which can then be used solely for educational purposes.

Study Limitations

This study was conducted at one Japanese university with a relatively small sample size. As the study was exploratory in nature, it focused on students' perceptions of the efficacy of the institution's LMS (Moodle) and the teacher chosen SNS (LINE). It did not provide any evidence of the efficacy of LINE over Moodle. As

the study was highly context-specific, the suggestions contained within are not intended to be seen as inflexible for educators both inside and outside of Japan. Future studies might try to validate these perceptions empirically.

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Appendix A

Survey on Technology in English Learning

This semester you were able to submit your homework, conduct group work and contact your teacher, among other things, by Moodle or by Line. In order to help me improve this class in the future, please answer the questions below in as much detail as possible. Your answers will be used to inform my own research.

Part 1

Age: _____ Gender (M / F) Academic Year: _____

Course: Basic English Communication ____ Elementary English Communication ____
Intermediate English Discussion ____

	Yes/No	Number of Hours Per Week (roughly)		Yes/No	Number of Hours Per Week (roughly)
Moodle			Mixi		
Line			Facebook		
Twitter			Instagram		
Google Plus			Skype		

Part Two

Thoughts on e-Learning

1. What do you like about using Moodle in this class? What don't you like about using Moodle in this class?

2. What do you like about using Line in this class? What don't you like about using Line in this class?

3. Did you choose to submit your homework by Line or Moodle? Why?

4. Did you prefer to communicate with your teacher by Line or Moodle or something else? Why?

5. Other comments

英語学習でのテクノロジーの採用についてのアンケート

今学期は、宿題の提出、グループワークの進行、先生との連絡及びその他が Moodle または Line を通じて行うことが可能になりました。授業内容を改善し、これからのこのクラスをもっと良いものにするため、下記の質問にしっかり答えて下さい。また、この回答用紙は、今後の私自身の研究に使われる可能性があります。

Part One

年齢 _____ 性別 (男性/女性) _____ 学年 _____

コース：基礎英語 _____ 初級英語 _____

中級英語ディスカッション _____

入っているコースをチェックしてください

	はい/いいえ (Y / N)	週のおおよその作業時間		はい/いいえ (Y / N)	週のおおよその作業時間
Moodle			Mixi		
LINE			Facebook		
Twitter			Instagram		
Google Plus			Skype		

Part Two

e-Learning についての意見

1. Moodle を授業内で使うことについて、気に入っている点は何ですか？ また、気に入らない点は何ですか？

2. LINE を授業内で使うことについて、気に入っている点は何ですか？ また、気に入らない点は何ですか？

3. あなたが宿題を提出する際に使ったのは LINE でしたか？それとも、Moodle でしたか？また、なぜそれを選びましたか？

4. 先生と連絡を取り合う手段は LINE が良いですか？それとも、Moodle や他の手段が良いですか？

5. その他、意見等
