

An Attempt on Establishing Instant Class in Chinese Teaching via IMs—A Case Study on Comparison of WeChat and Line

SHU Tan, ZHOU Rui

Southwest University, Chongqing, China

The innovation of mobile App has been affecting modern life style dramatically, including Chinese teaching and learning. As the most widely used mobile instant messengers (IMs) in Asia-Pacific, WeChat, and Line have already had more than 300 million registered users by the end of 2013, majority of whom are teenagers. By comparing the similarity and diversity of these two popular Apps to discover the significance of innovative methodology of Chinese teaching in many aspects such as user distribution, distinct feature, user experience, development intention, new instant communicative feature, illustration-based mode, balance of privacy and publicity, etc., this essay tries to apply the two Apps' practical value on teaching and learning Chinese in order to establish a mode of virtual instant class which is different from actual or online class by the aid of new technology tendency.

Keywords: App, WeChat, Line, teaching Chinese, instant class

Introduction

Nowadays, with the rapid development of science and technology, the mobile phone has become an indispensable tool which integrates communication, recreation, and learning into one. At the same time, the mode of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL) becomes increasingly diversified, from physical class to online one, from text teaching to paperless teaching. All sorts of inventions of mobile phone applications provide new ideas and methods in varying the mode of TCSL. Benefiting from the development of instant messaging Apps, creating an instant TCSL class which is completely different from traditional modes becomes possible. The instant TCSL class regards mobile phone as medium, using mobile Apps to set up an instant classroom for Chinese teaching. This class provides a better language teaching experience, reducing the teaching limitation resulted from scheduling and distance conflict between teachers and learners, so that learners could learn more initiatively and efficiently. In order to discuss the possibility and necessity of establishing an instant TCSL class, the study on instant messengers seems to be necessary. This study takes WeChat and Line, the most widely used mobile instant messengers (IMs) in Asia-Pacific as example, comparing the similarity and diversity of these two popular Apps in many aspects for finding out the role played by IMs in instant TCSL class.

SHU Tan, bachelor, Chinese Language and Literature, Southwest University.

ZHOU Rui, associate professor, Ph.D., Chinese Language and Literature, Southwest University.

The Possibility and Necessity of Establishing an Instant TCSL Class

Popularity of Mobile Phone, Especially the Smart Phone, Provides Essential Condition for the Class

At the end of 2013, the number of global smart phone users has been over 1.4 billion, according to the latest report from Allied Business Intelligence (ABI) Research. Based on the finding from market research firm Information Handling Services (IHS), the global smart phone sales accounted for 50% of the total phone sales in 2012 and the number will be expected to increase to 67% in 2016. The popularity of smart phone is a precondition not only generalizing the use of IMs, but also providing more material guarantee in establishing an instant TCSL class. Meanwhile, according to ABI Research data, the inventory of Tablet PC in total has already reached up to around 268 million since the end of 2013, which is also helpful.

Time for Chinese Learning Has Been More Scattered Under the Fast-Paced Life of Modern Society

Nowadays, people have so much work to do, varieties of entertainment to enjoy and plenty of information to read that it is difficult to set aside a block of time for learning Chinese. So, establishing an instant, brief, and efficient Chinese learning platform seems to be urgent. The instant TCSL class can guarantee learners more allocated time, meanwhile help teachers make their teaching plan more flexibly.

The Popularity of Instant Messengers Provides a Platform for Instant TCSL Class

The main function of IM is instant communication, including chat, message, picture, and video sending and others, which satisfies the conditions to establish the class.

Instant chatting. Teachers can send contents of courses by voice; while learners receive the message and response to teachers via IM Apps. If learners cannot understand the course completely, they can run the voice message repeatedly in their phones. At the same time, they can also ask teachers questions by IM Apps. Compared with the traditional class, the course and question can be recorded and saved in their phones, and teachers and learners can solve the problem timely. By sending voice message, teachers can pass on learners' Chinese language knowledge, correct their pronunciation and design several quizzes.

Instant picture and video sending. Instant picture and video sending can help learners get a deeper understanding of Chinese language, also create active atmosphere and reduce tensions. If there are some communication barriers caused by language difficulties between teachers and learners, sending pictures and videos can be more efficient. After class, learners can take pictures of their tasks and send to teachers.

Instant pushing. Teachers can register a public account, and learners follow the account. After that it is feasible for teachers to make assignments, tell some useful pedagogy and post out some interactive notification through the account. Instant pushing function can make a one-to-many communicative mode at the same time, and can also urge learners make use of the time to study.

Circle of friends. A group of Chinese learners can set up a private circle via IMs. In this way, they could communicate learning experience and discuss the learning questions together.

The Reason for Choosing WeChat and Line as Case Study

WeChat is a mobile phone App which sends text and pictures instantly and supports voice intercom, which developed by Tencent since 2011 in China. Line was developed by Next Human Network (NHN), a Japanese subsidiary of an internet group in South Korea in 2011. Similar with WeChat, its main function is voice intercom

and pictures and video sending.

Considerable Number of Users and Optimistic Prospect of Development

WeChat was developed in January 21st, 2011. By the late March of 2012, its population of users broke through 100 million firstly which only have existed 433 days. In September 17th, 2012, the users reached to 200 million in less than six months. In January 15th, 2013, the number broke through 300 million. According to Macquarie Securities' estimation in May of 2013, WeChat has owned about 400 million users totally, three-quarter of whom is from mainland China, and the other is distributed in overseas area. As the main competitor of WeChat, Line has a rapid development as well. In January 11th, 2013, Line's user number firstly broke through 100 million. Four months later, the number increased by 50 million. By the end of July 23rd, 2013, it had had 200 million users. Four months later, the number had broken through 300 million until November.

The Advantage of User-Distribution

Ninety percent of WeChat and Line's users are distributed in Asia-Pacific. WeChat was developed by a popular Chinese company, so it has distinct advantage in mainland China; while Line has about 41 million users in Japan, it means one Line user in every three Japanese. In Taiwan, the number is 12 million; almost half of Taiwanese is its fan. Even in Thailand, where penetration rate of smart phone is not high enough, the number is over 11.8 million, one sixth of Thailand's population. Moreover, WeChat and Line also have a wide range of users in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macau. Asia-Pacific is the area which possesses the most widely users of Chinese. This will be a promising factor for establishing of instant TCSL class. If learners use WeChat and Line, it is easy to get more chances to make friends and communicate with others in Chinese language. Wide user-distribution of Chinese means more potential Chinese teacher and volunteer resources for these learners. By using WeChat and Line, learners can also get a deep understanding of Asian culture which is useful for Chinese learning.

Free for Downloading and Using

It is a huge advantage of WeChat and Line's free download and use compared with other IMs, also the key factor of their rapid development. Free download and use can reduce the cost of instant TCSL class and absorb more users. For example, the most widely used IM, WhatsApp, whose new users use on free trial in the first year, and charge of 0.99 dollar every year after free trial. Under this circumstance, parts users of WhatsApp choose WeChat or Line as alternative. For example, WeChat has turned into the best seller of IM in App Store in some countries of Latin America, such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Italy, Spain, and so on since July, 2013.

Comparisons of Similarities and Differences Between WeChat and Line

Both of WeChat and Line have approximately similar functions mainly in instant voice message, text message, pictures, and video delivering. Nevertheless there also exists some diversity in user-distribution, distinct features, users' experience, products position, and development prospects as well.

Comparison in User-Distribution

It has been indicated that the users of both Apps are mostly distributed in East Asia. By relying on Tencent Co., WeChat has practically dominated the market of instant communication Apps in mainland China (nearly

75%) which strongly repels towards other IMs. On the contrary, Line, which is mainly distributed in Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, has a good development tendency in Greater China area nowadays. As different areas have different Chinese pronunciation and teaching methods, instant TSCL class should also consider the learners' distribution.

The Comparison of Function

The primary functions of WeChat and Line contain, voice messages, videos, pictures (including expressions) sending and reception, group chat and text messages as well which could match with either of iPhone Operating System (IOS) and Android perfectly.

Compared with Line, WeChat could support group chat accounting to 20 members. More members mean a larger instant TCSL class. It could check people around us who are using it (Location Based Service (LBS)), and are compatible with QQmail, Drift bottle, Voice notebook, etc.. Series of functions can give Chinese learners more ways to communicate with Chinese local residents. WeChat also possesses the function of sending messages in groups and pushing, by using public accounts that teachers could send significant notifications or interesting contents to their students. Moreover, WeChat possesses the function named "Shake" which means people could find man or woman who shakes his/her phone at the same time. It would provide much more fun in Chinese learning.

On the other hand, the most characteristic features of Line are its individual chartlet and expressions. The chartlet which could be chosen in stores is really cute. The vivid chartlet could set up a smooth information exchange platform and make the distance between teachers and learners much closer. What is more, free-call among Line users through Wi-Fi which could reduce the cost in Chinese learning is popular as well. Furthermore, the notebook of Line has specific advantage which means among the users, they could type in the mixture information of texts, pictures, movies, expressions, etc. and submit them in the notebook in order to send them to their friends at all times. The notebook could be a teaching aid in instant TCSL class for the record of teachers' key words and learners' learning experience.

Comparison of Users' Experience

According to online survey, the voice transmission quality of Line is better than that of WeChat. Line has high degree of noise reduction, but the best sound quality or not depends on the network environment, thus Line is slower than WeChat on the transmission speed of voice, pictures, video, and so on. It is difficult to tell which one is better in Chinese teaching; however, there is room for improvement in these two Apps.

WeChat lays more emphasis on the communication of circle, such as social circle of friends; while Line concentrates on the prospective quality of communication. In addition, the TIMELINE of Line is more like a "mini blog". The circle could make the learners to share experience more easily and frequently. Applied for TSCL class, Line could boast higher quality of communication and learning.

Compared with WeChat, the read-mark function of Line was generally well responded by its user. "Read-mark" means the information has been read in the past. If receivers have read it, the status will switch to "Read", which is a very friendly feedback. Teachers and learners could get to know if the message they sent has been seen or not, and they can determine the next step based on the "Read-mark" status. "Read-mark" is also supervision for both teachers and learners, which makes the class more efficiently and interactively.

Comparison of Product Positioning and Direction

Line locates on its social interaction through its product center Line, Line Tools, Line Brush, Line Camera, Line Card, Line cafe and games to provide additional value to attract the loyalty of users in a great extent. As an extended product, Line learning may be developed in the future. Meanwhile, by its systemic expanded function, Line attracts more Chinese learners. WeChat is relying on a strong platform of Tencent, and it is not single social software, but extends to the outside of the social networks. For example, its new function of Lucky Money won the best reputation during Chinese New Year to meet with the traditional Chinese customs. This can be used in Chinese teaching and our instant TCSL class. Teachers can give the best learners Lucky Money as a reward, which can also bring more power and incentive for all the learners.

Inadequacies of WeChat and Line Being as Instant TCSL Apps

The functions of WeChat and Line have approaching perfection day by day which also exist a few flaws. Firstly, the main function of these two Apps is instant communication; they do not develop the special function for Chinese learning. Secondly, they have many recreational function and games which may reduce learners' learning time. For instance, "Shake" in WeChat might lead to the appearance of violence and pornographic crime harmful for learners. Thirdly, instability of the Apps may influence the instant TSCL class. For example, "Time-delay" in delivering message occasionally might influence the quality of Chinese teaching. Fourthly, the popularity coverage is just limited in East Asia; they may not be very popular in other areas, so it is difficult for learners to use them as a Chinese learning tool. Although the measurement may be deviation, it still sounds like an alarm for us and for the instant class.

Conclusion

With the development of technology, the transformation of people's living style and study mode is changing rapidly, the instant TCSL class is certain to appear in the closing future. This mode needs a platform which has extremely fantastic instant communication Apps. Either of WeChat and Line wishes to be the leader of this tendency. There is no denying that the two Apps themselves have problems, such as no specific function for TCSL, which could become the direction and breakthrough of its technical reform. Otherwise, these two Apps are competitors to each other at present. It is certain to believe that it would be a win-win-win situation which could affect technology, teaching, and Chinese learning if they could cooperate and develop an App specific to establish an instant TCSL class together.

References

- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- FAN, Z. K. (2007). *基于多媒体技术的对外汉字学习长时记忆效果分析* (Analysis on the effect of foreigners' long-time memory of learning Chinese characters based on multimedia technology) (Master's thesis). East China Normal University, Shanghai, China.
- JIANG, X. (2001). An experimental study of foreign learners awareness of phonetic cues in pictophonetic characters. *Chinese Teaching in the World*, 2, 128.
- Perry, W., & Rumble, G. (1987). *A short guide to distance education*. Cambridge, UK: International Extension College.
- Schommer, M. (1990). Effects of beliefs about the nature of knowledge on comprehension. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82, 498-504.

- Stross, R. (2010, April 17). Two billion laptops? It may not be enough. *The New York Times*. Retrieve from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/18/business/18digi.html?scp=6&sq=technology+training+teacher&st=nyt>
- WANG, H. (2011). Chinese for business professionals: Workplace needs and business Chinese textbooks. *Global Business Languages*, 16, 77.
- ZHOU, W. J. (2013, January 13). Wechat and Line, which one is better?. *Zhihu Forum*. Retrieved from <http://www.zhihu.com/question/20729591>