

Chapter 4.18

Social Networking Behind Student Lines in Japan

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ABSTRACT

In a cross-cultural educational context of TEFL in Japan, the author sought to enhance the integrative motivation of students toward the target language community through a supplementary online dimension. The social networking site (SNS), Mixi, was selected because it is familiar to most college students in Japan. The Mixi Japanese language interface is illustrated in this chapter, describing functions possibly applicable to education. A YouTube video that introduces Mixi in English, made in authentic collaboration with students, is also referenced as a representative CALL 2.0 classroom activity. More importantly, joining Mixi presented an opportunity to go behind the lines into student territory. Teachers and students, whether foreign or Japanese, customarily maintain their social distance in terms of separate affiliations. Social networking with Japanese students further involves issues of online technological proficiency, biliteracy, and the necessity of an invitation. The author negotiated with three 2007-08 classes on networking through Mixi, with varying outcomes extending beyond the

classroom and the school year. Metaphors of lines and perspectives including “technoscapes” (Appadurai, 1990) are proposed to interpret the results, but Japanese socioculture may be most salient to account for the particulars. Student attitudes are probed as to a possible ambivalence in valuing their free expression in Mixi versus the integrative motivation of social involvement with a teacher. One prediction was that results would differ as to whether or not a teacher was welcome in a student community depending on how students were approached for an invitation. Social networking is proposed as a Web 2.0 educational approach that is authentic, collaborative, and immersive in cutting through power hierarchies and positively blurring the distinction between the classroom and the real life of students and teachers, which nowadays includes a virtual dimension.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces Mixi, a social networking site (SNS) in the purview of most college students in Japan. More importantly, the chapter aims to describe and analyze what happened when a teacher

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went behind the lines into student territory in order to enhance their integrative motivation toward learning EFL. Metaphors of lines, which do not map predictably across cultures, are employed as a framework for understanding cross-cultural pedagogical issues particular to social networking with students. Among the metaphors employed are reading between the lines, reading and going behind the lines, crossing lines and, as delineated aggregations, territory, maps, and landscapes. Extending the latter perspectivity to technology in Web 2.0, Appadurai's "technoscapes" are considered for possible theoretical support in analyzing students' views of social networking. The methodological approach is to apply an understanding of the languages, cultures and technologies involved, not to generalize about populations but to discern particulars and variations that might be linked to pedagogical interventions. Drawing from socio-cultural theory, social constructivism, and the concept of integrative motivation, even one student in a clarified context can provide significant data for understanding complex technology-enhanced L2 learning across non-cognate cultures.

EFL UPTAKE AND TECHNOLOGY USE AMONG STUDENTS IN JAPAN

Briefly with regard to the subjects of this study, the EFL situation in Japan is problematical in a number of dimensions. While nearly everyone studies English for at least six years in secondary school, and children's English is increasingly popular among parents, the Japanese language predominates outside of classes, which do not meet often enough or provide enough listening input and speaking practice. English serves as a test subject for gatekeepers to rank students academically, affecting their future willy-nilly, whether they ever need English or not, so in compulsory EFL classes some students naturally regard the work as an imposition. A disincentive tied to a mutually exclusive sense of cultural identity is that a student

who speaks a foreign language fluently may be singled out from her peer group as different or crossing over in affiliation, which threatens the vulnerable young person living in a social world with exclusion. Educational officialdom is more concerned with maintaining Japaneseness than encouraging goals of bilingualism and biculturalism, so there is a pervasive ambivalence about English. Thus motivation tends to be extrinsic or instrumental rather than intrinsic or integrative. Yet teachers are expected to motivate students, so they either read their lines perfunctorily or go to great lengths including innovations in CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning).

The technological background of students is that of an advanced nation, but ubiquitous use of Internet-capable mobile phones with cameras and ever more functions has somewhat stunted the computer skills of students beyond what is necessary or convenient for school work. Despite a shortage of IT workers, computer-related courses are relatively less popular in Japan than in many other countries, which heightens the challenge of teachers to innovate while starting from where the students are in computer proficiency. As this chapter will show, however, social networking is very popular among young people and works to converge computers and mobile phones as they access the same platform.

The subjects of this study are female students, who tend to be shy with computers compared to males, as a sort of believed self-stereotype. Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC) has a women's 2-year and 4-year program where everyone majors in English. Unlike the general situation described above, the students have chosen EFL, so intrinsic motives can be activated. The college encourages women's empowerment, so a teacher can promote technological empowerment. The integrated content-based curriculum, recognized as "Good Practice" by the Education Ministry, has the effect of integrating the faculty as well, Japanese and non-Japanese, full-time and part-time. Like most other private colleges in an ageing society,

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