

***The Practice and Effects of Integrating Literature Circles and Mobile
Instant-messaging Technology in ELT***

Wan-lun Lee, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan

Asian Conference on Language Learning 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Research has found significant advantages of using classroom literature circles, where small groups of students read the same text and then take different role responsibilities in their fully face-to-face discussion around the text; however, more and more studies have shown that in today's technological world, virtual literature circles integrated with the Internet and various forms of communication technology are growing rapidly in popularity. LINE, the fastest growing mobile instant-messaging app, seems to have great potential to facilitate the role-based, peer-led discussions of virtual literature circles, but there is still little empirical research regarding the use of this mobile application as a communication tool to complete learning-related tasks. The present study describes a blended literature circle project implemented in my teaching of a *Freshman English* course, in which three face-to-face literature circles were conducted in the classroom to help the students get familiar with this new learning format, especially the discussion roles, before they had out-of-class, synchronous literature circle discussions via LINE. A questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the students' learning experiences of and responses to this project. It was found that the majority of the participants thought very positively of the integration of literature circles and LINE and agreed that such integration had increased their motivation to read the literary text and get engaged in the structured role-based discussion about it.

Keywords: literature circles, LINE, ELT

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The literature circle (LC), originating from the L1 classroom and used as a powerful and effective way to get L1 learners actively engaged in the process of interacting around literary books and ideas with their peers, has drawn a lot of attention in the ELT community and has been adapted, modified and implemented in different ESL/EFL contexts since its initial success in the field of L1 literacy education (Samway & Whang, 1996). According to Daniels, literature circles are “small, temporary discussion groups” who choose to read the same short story or novel and discuss it regularly, with “discussion roles” rotating each session and guiding the reading and discussion process (1994: 13). Traditionally, members of a literature circle meet face to face to have role-based structured discussion on the reading material; however, with the rapid development and application of technology in educational settings, a number of changes have been made to this traditional LC approach over the years. For example, the reading materials are not limited to paper-based ones only and it is now possible to have the discussion held synchronously or asynchronously by means of online communication tools or mobile-based applications (Cavanaugh, 2006; Whittingham, 2013; Sun *et al.*, 2018).

To motivate my students of non-English major to read and discuss in English, I have been using literature circles with these EFL learners for over ten years, first in the traditional classroom and then on the Internet. Although I enjoyed watching, listening to, and even participating in my students’ face-to-face LC discussions in class, I soon realized that it would take up too much of the class time and couldn’t help but ask the students to have the discussion face to face outside the classroom. However, a lot of complaints about how difficult it could be to gather group members majoring in different subjects and having very difficult schedules made me start to consider the possibility of allowing the students to have the discussion in an online environment, such as chat rooms, discussion forums and Skype.

Not feeling satisfied with the online communication tools mentioned above and noticing the popularity of using LINE, among Taiwanese university students, I decided to had this mobile instant-messaging application integrated into a blended literature circle project designed to help my students get familiar with the LC roles and tasks in their face-to-face discussion in class, so that they would have more confidence in performing their assigned role tasks in their out-of-class LC discussion via LINE. This paper describes how LINE was used in this blended LC project implemented in my teaching of an intermediate-level *Freshman English* course and reports how my Taiwanese students of non-English majors responded to the integration of literature circles and LINE.

Integrating LINE into the Blended LC Project

Based on my experience of using literature circles with my students, I found it problematic to have them discuss the reading material only in class or only out of class. When allowing all the LC discussions to be conducted face to face in class, I often ended up with not having enough class time for my teaching of the textbook or other language learning materials. However, having the students discuss what they had read out of class only, either face to face or online, sometimes made them feel confused or disoriented as they tried to perform their role tasks or interact with one

another in the discussion process. Thus, a blended literature circle project was designed and implemented to enable my students without any LC experience to get familiar with their group members and the discussion roles in the five face-to-face meetings in class, with the teacher's presence and guidance, before they started to have five out-of-class synchronous virtual LC discussions by sending instant text-based messages or making voice calls via LINE, which has been the most popular mobile instant-messaging application among my students in recent years but is seldom used for learning-related purposes. It was also expected that this blended approach would maximize the benefits of both face-to-face and online interactions in small groups.

Before this ten-week blended LC project was put into practice, a lot of preparation work had to be completed. First of all, thirty authentic English short stories had been carefully pre-selected and posted on a LC blog. Next, groups of five or six were formed, and the role-based LC discussion format, as well as the discussion roles, including Discussion Director, Summarizer, Investigator, Connector, Word Wizard and Passage Master, was introduced to the class. Then, each group would choose one of the stories to read and discuss each week, face to face in class in the first five weeks and then via LINE in the following five weeks, with the discussion roles rotated regularly among members of the group. After each discussion was finished, the students had to fill in an evaluation form to reflect on the LC reading and discussion experience and think about how to improve it the next time. In addition, the discussion record, either in the form of a video file recorded during face-to-face discussion or an MS Word document with all the text-based messages exchanged or an audio file recorded during the synchronous discussion via LINE, had to be submitted.

Researching into Students' Responses to the Integration of LINE and LCs

The participants were forty Taiwanese university students of non-English major taking my intermediate-level *Freshman English* course, and to explore and investigate the benefits and problems of integrating LCs and LINE from these students' perspectives, a questionnaire survey and semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted after the project was completed.

The questionnaire data showed that the majority of the participants thought positively of their experience of using LINE for their LC discussion, and agreed that the use of LINE had increased their motivation to participate in the out-of-class group discussions. The interview data further revealed the major benefits of such integration, including: having more time to think and respond to the others' words, having less trouble finding the right time for all the members to discuss the reading outside the classroom, feeling more confident and less embarrassed to share one's own thoughts of and responses to a literary text, making it easier to use English only during the discussion, understanding the others' words easily and fully, and making it possible to sharing images, files, and online information with group members quickly and easily.

On the other hand, the problems of integrating LINE and LCs were often mentioned by the interviewees. Most of the problems were time-related issues. For example, it was considered more time-consuming to have the LC discussion via LINE than face to face because some members typed slowly, failed to show up on time, were busy

dealing with something else at the same time, or suddenly disappeared for some reason. In addition, some interviewees complained that technical problems caused by someone's mobile phone or the Internet connection could interrupt the discussion process. It is worth noting that a few students mentioned that they would prefer to "talk" to their group members via LINE but it was easier to get discussion records ready for submission if they exchanged text-based instant messages rather than making voice calls, which had to be transcribed by the recorder.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the findings of the study will identify the major benefits and problems of using LINE for LC discussions from the participants' perspectives and thus provide empirical data to help instructors decide whether to use LINE for LC or the other kind of small-group discussion outside the classroom and how to do it effectively. However, there are limitations of the study, such as a small number of participants, one genre of literature used, and only ten-week implementation of the project, which make it hard to generalize a conclusion from the findings. It is suggested that further research might compare the effectiveness of sending text-based messages and making voice calls via LINE during LC discussions or compare the practice and outcomes of using LINE and the other mobile-based instant-messaging app for LC discussions.

References

Cavanaugh, T. W. (2006). *Literature Circles through Technology*. Worthington: Linworth Publishing, Inc.

Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse.

Samway, K. D. and G. Whang. (1996). *Literature study circles in a multicultural classroom*. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Sun, Z., Lin, C., Wu, M., Zhou, J., & Luo, L. (2018). A tale of two communication tools: Discussion-forum and mobile instant-messaging apps in collaborative learning. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 49, 248-261.

Whittingham, J. (2013). Literature Circles: A Perfect Match for Online Instruction. *TechTrends*, 57, 53-58.