

The Impact of Culture on the Usage of SNS for English-Language Learning in Japan

Megumi Kohyama, Doshisha University, Japan

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Abstract

Like many technologically proficient and wealthy countries, the usage of social-networking sites (SNSs) is becoming increasingly popular in Japan. This is especially true among young people who use these services not only for communication but also entertainment through the numerous features they provide like photo editing and adding character figures to video. While Japanese people enjoy using SNSs, some individuals struggle to share personal information due to cultural reasons. For example, many Japanese hesitate to share pictures of trips abroad or even posts written in English as it can be seen as flaunting. This can pose a problem for Japanese students of English, who want to utilize SNS for informal learning. In order to explore this phenomenon, the researcher examined the effect of Japanese culture on SNS usage and its impact on informal English-language study. The researcher collected data at two Japanese universities by means of a survey instrument. Four dimensions of culture and SNS usage were explored: (1) self-confidence and flaunting, (2) cultural contradictions and tensions, (3) perceived barriers to usage, and (4) perceived advantages of the platform for language learning. The goal of this research was to identify various aspects of cultural tension in SNS usage and utilize this information to reduce barriers to adoption of the medium for English-language study.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, Social networking sites, Culture, Japan,

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Introduction

As technology develops, access to the Internet increases and this has a large influence on our lives. In particular, social networking sites (SNSs) have become popular; this has changed how people make friends and how they connect with people. People can share their ideas or their experience on SNSs easily. The number of SNS users in Japan is increasing like it is in other countries. Globally popular SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter are used in Japan in addition to domestic SNSs such as LINE and MIXI. Since the growing popularity of SNSs is a global trend and these platforms allow users to access information or connect with people in other countries, they have a great potential for language learning. However, while users around the world use the same platforms, they might use them in different ways depending on their cultural tendencies. In this study, the researcher investigated cultural differences that exist among Japanese university students when using SNSs. In addition, the researcher explored whether these differences serve as a barrier of using SNSs in English. The researcher conducted a survey of Japanese university students and analyzed the data quantitatively and qualitatively. The result showed that there are several factors that act as barriers for Japanese university students when using SNSs in English.

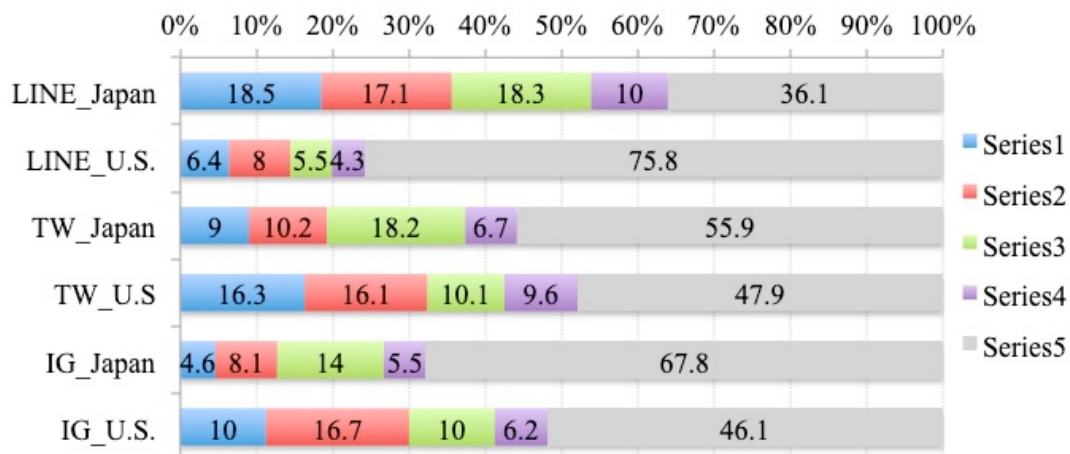
Literature Review

Japan is known throughout the world as a country with advanced technology. People use computers and smartphones regularly for work and daily life. In 2017, the adoption rate of cell phones reached 94.8% and the smartphone adoption rate was 75.1% (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), 2017). In the same year, the adoption rate of smartphones overtook the rate of computer adoption for the first time since smartphones were introduced in 2010 (MIC, 2017). As the smartphone adoption rate goes up, the platform for using the Internet has changed. Among the people who use the Internet, 59.0% of them use smartphones and 52.5% of them use computers (MIC, 2017). It shows that people have easy access to the Internet at any time and place.

SNS usage in Japan. As SNSs are getting popular in many countries, their popularity is also expanding in Japan. According to the MIC (2017), the percentage of people using SNSs in Japan increased about 30% from 2012 to 2017. Surprisingly, the percentage of people in their 20s who used SNSs in 2016 was 97.7 % (MIC, 2017). The most popular SNSs in the world are Facebook or Instagram, however, the most popular SNSs in Japan is LINE followed by Twitter and Instagram. LINE was created in 2000 as a subsidiary of a South Korean Internet content service company. It is mostly used in Japan and some other Asian countries. The functions are similar to other SNSs such as sending texts, as well as making phone and video calls. The unique function of LINE is that users can send animated character images called “stamps” in text messages. The variety of images as well as the design has attracted many Japanese users and it has become the most used SNS in Japan. There are several studies that explain the reason why Facebook or other prevalent SNSs in the world did not become as popular in Japan. Ishii (2008) found that the reason why Facebook was not popular among Japanese people is because of issues related to privacy. Japanese people tend to be highly concerned about sharing their personal information online. Facebook users are supposed to use their real name, on the other hand, LINE,

Twitter, and Instagram allow users to use pseudonym which is more appealing to a Japanese audience.

In addition, Japanese SNS users tend to use them passively, which means they prefer to view other user’s posts rather than posting their own content. This tendency can be seen clearly when comparing Japanese and American SNSs users. Figure 1 shows the survey result conducted by MIC (2018) that asked how people use SNSs. The original chart contained results from several countries but the researcher extracted the data for Japan and the U.S. The participants of the study ranged in age from 20 to 69. The results illustrated that the percentage of Japanese actively using SNSs was much lower than American users, especially Facebook. The percentage of Japanese LINE users who use it actively is also higher, however, the user environment of LINE and Facebook has an important difference. In Facebook, users can choose to share their information publicly or among friends who they have approved. On the other hand, on LINE, information is only shared with direct contacts. When users update their status, it is only made public to their friends, and users can choose specific friends who will see it. LINE users tend to friend people they already know in real life (Nishimura, 2017). This might be because there is no function to search for people unless you know specific personal information such as their phone number or user ID. Alternatively, you can ask the person you want to add to send a quick response code that can be scanned on your phone. Therefore, it makes it difficult to be friends with somebody you do not know. For these reasons, users can share information on LINE in an environment where they do not need to worry about their personal information getting in the hands of strangers. This might be the reason why LINE is used more actively than other SNSs in Japan.



Note.

Series 1: actively posting information

Series 2: view other users post more than actively posting information

Series 3: only view other users post, rarely post information

Series 4: almost not using it

Series 5: not using it at all

IG – Instagram

TW – Twitter

LINE – LINE

Figure 1: Comparison of SNSs usage between Japan and the U.S.
(Retrieved from MIC 2018)

SNS and language learning. There are a number of research studies that have been conducted related to language learning and SNSs. These studies show mixed results regarding the effectiveness of using the platform for language learning.

Alm (2015) investigated how students who were learning a language at a university in New Zealand used Facebook to improve their language skills outside of the classroom. The participants in the research were categorized as beginner, intermediate and advanced. Depending on the level of language skill, the participants used different functions and with different frequency. Advanced students frequently used Facebook in their target language to send messages and post updates. The frequency of use for beginners was lower compared to advanced students; however, the researcher found that beginners felt more comfortable communicating on Facebook in their target language because they were under less pressure. Participants stated that they had time to think before replying to questions. One of the positive effects is that for beginners, using SNSs to chat with friends or send messages produced less anxiety than communicating in the classroom. Also, they felt less time pressure compared to when they were in the classroom where they needed to answer questions quickly.

Another case using Facebook for language learning was a study conducted by Bailey, Park and Haji (2017). They used Facebook as one of the activities in an English-language class in a South Korean university. The students were assigned to participate in Facebook discussions to improve their writing skills. The researchers pointed out a positive effect in mixed-level classrooms where students learned from each other. In their study, they could see that lower-proficiency students borrowed sentence structures and vocabulary that higher-proficiency students were using in their Facebook comments. This environment encouraged lower-proficiency students to post comments.

On the other hand, there is some research that did not find a positive effect regarding SNS usage for language learning. Colpitts (2017) tried to use LINE in his English as a foreign language classroom in a Japanese university in addition to or as a replacement of an existing learning management system (LMS). The researcher found that students did not like using their LINE in class because they preferred to separate their learning environment and their daily life. They liked to use LMSs for learning and LINE only for contacting their friends or family. This result indicated that they might not want to share their personal information, not only to strangers, but also with their classmates.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research is to identify various aspects of cultural tension in SNS usage and utilize this information to reduce barriers to adoption of the platform for informal English-language study.

The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. What are participants' overall perceptions regarding cultural tensions and SNS usage as measured by a quantitative scale?

2. What do participants perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of using SNSs for informal English-language learning?
3. How do participants use SNSs in English?

Methodology

This research was conducted using a quantitative approach, though some qualitative analysis was used for the open-ended question responses. The data was collected through a paper-based questionnaire at two universities in Japan. The survey was conducted in five classes in two universities where the researcher teaches. A letter about their rights as a research subjects as well as an explanation of the survey was provided to participants before they answered the questionnaire. All the materials were written in Japanese. The number of participants was 121 and there was a 100% response rate. The participants were first-year undergraduates and they majored in environmental science, human cultures, medical and social studies, nursing, and child education. There were no students who majored in the English language.

The survey instrument that was used in this research was created by Kitano, Mills and Kohyama (2018). The survey was created based on several previous instruments that examined perceptions of SNSs among university students (Toland, Mills, & Kohyama, 2016; Vasilopoulos, 2015). The survey had 4 dimensions, (1) self-confidence and flaunting (2) cultural contradictions and tensions (3) perceived barriers to usage (4) perceived advantages. Open-ended questions were also included.

Results and Discussion

Figure 2 shows the mean value of each dimension. The sub-scale of barriers had the highest mean value among the four dimensions. Some items in barriers were highly rated, for instance, 81.8% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with, “I worry about sharing personal information when using SNS.” This result matched previous research conducted by Ishii (2008) that showed that Japanese students preferred not to share their personal information online. Another item with a high rating was, “I don’t have non-Japanese friends on SNSs,” to which 66.9% of the participant agreed or strongly agreed. This is understandable because the participants are not English majors, therefore, they might not have many opportunities to be friends with non-Japanese. Also, 65.3 % of participants agreed or strongly agreed with, “I don’t use SNSs in English because I lack the language ability to do so.” Their lack of English-language skills was also significant barrier on using SNSs in English.

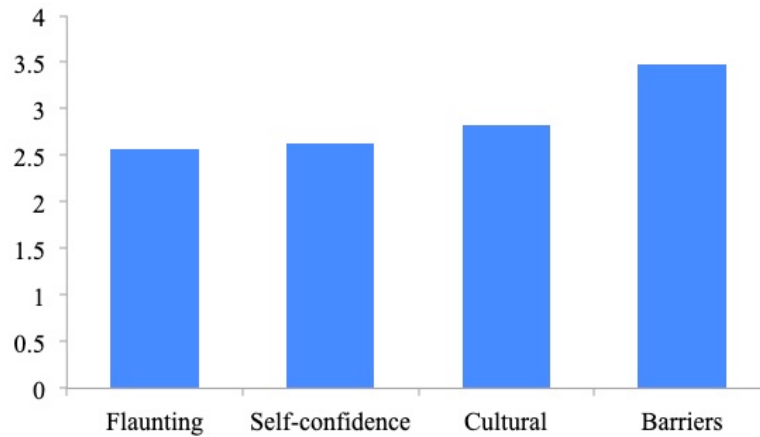


Figure 2: Mean value of each dimension

Figure 3 shows the mean value of the advantages and disadvantages of using English on SNSs. There were no significant differences between the advantage and disadvantage, which means that the participants experienced both when using SNSs in English. The item that the participants mostly agreed or strongly agreed with was, “Using SNSs in English will improve my ability to communication in the language,” which received 67.8%. They found SNSs are a good platform to improve their communication skill. On the other hand, as a disadvantage, 56.2% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “The English used on SNSs is not proper.” Some participants clarified the meaning of “not proper” in the open-ended questions, which they states was slang and net abbreviations. They believed that slang and net abbreviations were not proper English, so they did not want to learn them.

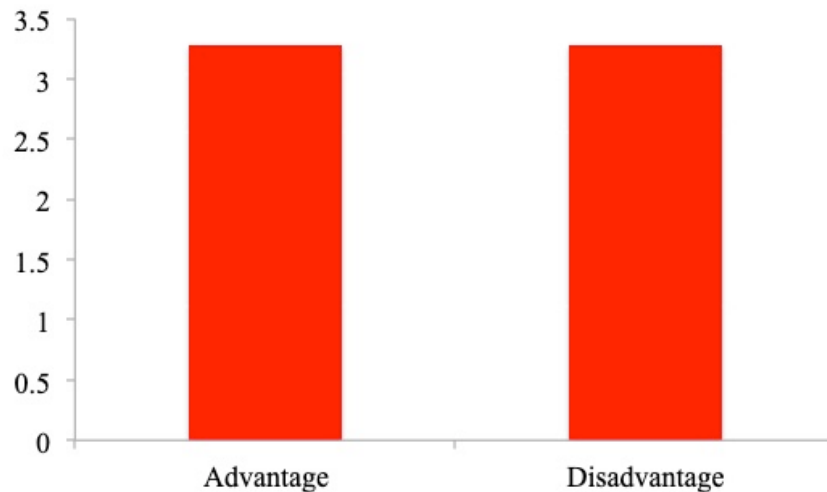


Figure 3: Mean value of advantage and disadvantage

Figure 4 shows the mean values of active usage and passive usage. Active usage is defined as using SNSs by posting or sharing contents that are written or spoken in English and uploading original status updates in English. Passive usage is defined as using SNSs by viewing other user’s posts that are written or spoken in English. The results showed that most of the participants did not use SNS in English, either actively or passively. Among the participants who used SNSs in English, they predominantly used the sites passively. This result corresponds with MIC (2018) research, which demonstrated that Japanese tend to use SNSs passively, even in their own language. It showed that the usage of SNSs in Japanese and English have a similar tendency. In

addition, the most passively used SNS was Instagram, followed by Twitter and LINE. The most actively used SNS was LINE, followed by Twitter, and Instagram. These results also matched to the MIC (2018) survey result.

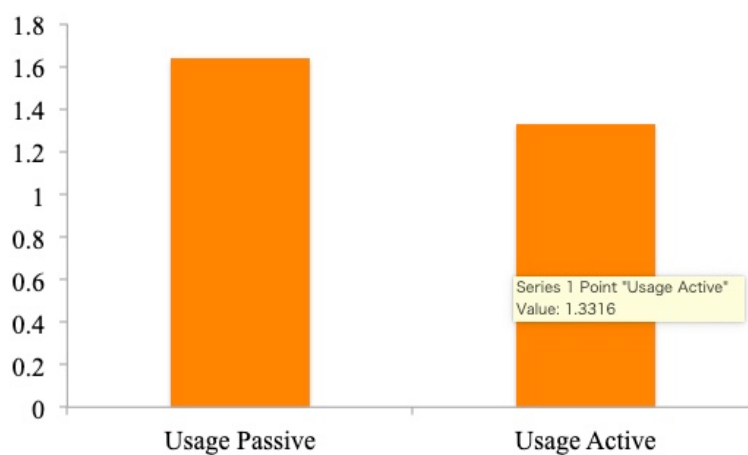


Figure 4: Mean value of passive and active usage

Open-ended questions

The open-ended questions asked what were the advantages and disadvantages of using SNSs in English. The results were mixed with participants' identifying both advantages and disadvantages, similar to what was found on the quantitative questionnaire. For example, many of the participants believed using SNSs in English provided an opportunity to learn about culture in other countries. Also, it allowed them to communicate with people around the world and through these experiences, they could improve their language skill. Even though there were not so many participants who were actually using SNSs in English, they had a positive image of the practice.

In contrast, participants identified several disadvantages. Many were concerned with misunderstandings between other users due to their poor language skills. They were afraid of making grammatical mistakes and that their statements might be offensive to other people or might not accurately represent what they wanted to say. They were concerned that misunderstandings might lead to trouble between them and other users. Furthermore, many students worried about criticism regarding their language skills that they might receive from other users.

Conclusion

This study investigated Japanese university students' perception of using SNSs in English and what prevents them from engaging in this form of informal learning. The questionnaire consisted of four dimensions; (1) self-confidence and flaunting, (2) cultural contradictions and tensions, (3) perceived barriers to usage, (4) perceived advantages. Barriers had the highest mean value among the subscales and one of the most strongly agreed or agreed with items was their anxiety regarding posting their personal information. This phenomenon was explained by previous researchers, which showed that Japanese people have a higher level of anxiety than many others with regards to sharing personal information on the Internet (Ishii, 2008). Therefore, this question is not just about writing English on SNSs. Other significant items were

associated with having a lack of non-Japanese friends and a lack of English-language ability to properly use SNSs.

Among the participants who used English on SNSs, they tended to be more passive and engage in activities such as viewing other user's comments or posts. This also matched previous research regarding the Japanese tendency of using SNSs in a more passive manner, even in their native language (MIC, 2018).

In the open-ended questions, there were many opinions regarding flaunting. Participants were worried about showing off their English skills and afraid that other users would make hurtful comment about it. In addition, they were worried about misunderstandings between other users, so they believed that they should use correct English. This tendency creates a negative spiral where they do not want conflicts with other users, so they need to use correct English, but they do not have the language ability to do so. For this reason, they do not use SNSs in English.

Despite the effort to conduct a valid study of this subject, there are some limitations. The researcher collected data on how Japanese university students use SNSs in English. However, it would be better if there were data on how they use SNSs in Japanese and then a comparison of the results. In a future study, both of these data will be collected. In addition, some students stated that they were using LINE in English. LINE is mainly used in Japan and some other Asian countries; therefore, it would be interesting to find out with whom they are communicating on this application. In future projects, adding interviews with participants might also expand the understanding of students' usage of SNSs. Lastly, the data collection was conducted in the classroom where the researcher teaches. The purpose of the study, their rights as participant, and the irrelevance between participation and their grade were explained to the students, however, there is a possibility of the unequal power relationship effecting the results. This should be acknowledged, and ideally, corrected in a future study.

SNSs are a useful platform for language learning; however, there are many barriers to its use. The result of this research and previous research on the subject showed that students are concerned about privacy. When using SNSs for language learning with Japanese students, lecturers need to be aware of this behavior and provide an environment where students can use a pseudonym or make a group page where only invited people can join. These privacy protections might make students more comfortable to use SNSs for language learning. Also, explaining the cultural differences present in SNS usage to students might ease their fear of misunderstanding between other SNSs users. For example, teaching students some useful phrases that can be used to make comments to other user's posts would be helpful. Lastly, instructors could introduce current trends with SNSs in other countries. For example, lecturers could SNS influencers and trending topics. This information might be difficult to find for students, especially lower proficiency learners. In this way, students might get interested in using SNSs in English and experience greater exposure to the target language through informal learning.

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Appendix

Survey questions

1. I feel great when my English ability is better than other non-native speakers when using SNS.
2. I use English on SNS sites in order to show off my ability.
3. I worry that people will think I am showing off when I use English on SNS.
4. When I have trouble using English on SNS, I doubt my proficiency.
5. It is easy for me to interact in English on SNS.
6. I am nervous when I use English on SNS.
7. I feel embarrassed to use English on SNSs.
8. Japanese people use SNS in a different way than people from other countries.
9. The purpose of using SNS sites in Japan is different than from other countries.
10. I have experienced difficulties when using SNS in English due to cultural misunderstandings.
11. I have trouble understanding some of my non-Japanese friends' posts because of cultural differences.
12. I don't use SNS in English because I lack the language ability to do so.
13. I worry about sharing personal information when using SNS.
14. My use of SNS is limited by my lack of technical knowledge.
15. I get upset when I see certain types of posts on SNS.
16. I don't have non-Japanese friends on SNSs.
17. Using SNS in English will improve my ability to communication in the language.
18. SNS are a distraction to studying.
19. The English used on SNSs is not proper.
20. SNS gives me the opportunity to communicate naturally with native speakers of English.
21. I can make friends with native or advanced speakers of English on SNS.

			Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
22	Facebook	Passive					
		Active					
23	LINE	Passive					
		Active					
24	Instagram	Passive					
		Active					
25	Pintarest	Passive					
		Active					
26	Snapchat	Passive					
		Active					
27	Twitter	Passive					
		Active					
28	Other (_____)	Passive					
		Active					

29. How many hours each week do you use SNS in English passively?
30. How many hours each week do you use SNS in English actively?
31. What is the advantage of using SNS in English?
32. What is the disadvantage of using SNS in English?