Exploring the Use of Mobile Instant Messaging for Facilitating English as a Lingua Franca Communication among University EFL Students

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Abstract: *This study explores the experiences of Chinese and Japanese university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who engaged in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) virtual exchanges through mobile instant messaging (MIM). Participants from universities in Japan and mainland China took part in a six-week online lingua franca exchange project using 'WeChat', a Chinese MIM application. Based on thematic analysis of post-project interviews, this study demonstrates the advantages and limitations of MIM for lingua franca exchanges from the perspective of university EFL students. The findings demonstrate students' positive perceptions and utilization of the flexibility of MIM communication, including synchronous and asynchronous options, along with various semiotic resources like images, emojis, and stickers. However, there were several challenges including concerns about intrusiveness caused by immediate responses and the platform's suitability for users from diverse regions. The study concludes by offering language educators practical guidelines for implementing MIM-based lingua franca exchanges.*

1. Introduction

English is widely used as a global contact language among speakers of English as an additional language, who are estimated to comprise more than 80 per cent of total English users today [1]. However, language learners residing in predominantly linguistically and culturally homogeneous environments, as often seen in EFL contexts, rarely encounter authentic opportunities to practice English for global communication. In such settings, English usage tends to remain confined to the language classroom and sporadic interactions with foreign teachers who are often from 'traditional' English-speaking countries.

In contexts where physical intercultural encounters are limited, internet technology offers a potential solution to increase English learners' chances of using and practising ELF. Various online communicative tools, including social network services and video conferencing applications, provide students with opportunities for ELF communication with speakers from diverse language and cultural backgrounds, overcoming geographical constraints. This online lingua franca exchange is known to offer pedagogic benefits akin to in-person ELF communication. Exposure to diverse discourse patterns and handling different communicative contexts can enhance learners' communicative competence and linguistic creativity [2, 3]. Additionally, online ELF communication can foster learners' confidence as global English users and heighten their sociolinguistic awareness of varied accents, syntactic structures, and vocabularies employed by English speakers from different language backgrounds, often diverging from standardized English varieties used in ELT [4, 5].

Recognizing the pedagogic merits of online lingua franca exchanges, previous studies have investigated the use of various online platforms and technologies for facilitating language learners' ELF communication with peers from other countries [2], [6]. As the specific type of online technology can influence learners' communicative experiences, their perceptions regarding the effectiveness and convenience of various online

platforms for lingua franca exchanges have been explored. However, there is a lack of research exploring learners' perception of using MIM for online lingua franca exchanges while much attention has been paid to lingua franca exchanges using e-mail, wikis, blogs, social networking tools, and video conferencing technology [7]. Considering that MIM is a ubiquitous online communication tool integrated into our daily lives, investigating its potential to provide English language learners with opportunities for ELF communication is of paramount importance.

This study aims to examine university EFL students' experiences with using MIM for ELF communication with peers abroad. By analyzing interviews conducted with participants of a small-scale online cultural exchange project in which English served as the main medium of communication, this case study seeks to explore the aspects of MIM that participating students perceived as affordances or constraints for engaging in lingua franca communication. The findings of this study can furnish valuable guidance for language educators on how to effectively employ this everyday communication tool to provide English language learners with opportunities for online lingua franca communication and intercultural encounters.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pedagogic Impacts of Lingua Franca Exchanges on Language Learners

Lingua franca virtual exchanges, also referred to as virtual exchanges or online intercultural exchanges, have been demonstrated as effective activities for enhancing language learners' intercultural competence and communicative skills in using an additional language to negotiate meaning with speakers from diverse language backgrounds [8, 9]. [9] administered a three-week lingua franca exchange project involving Russian EFL learners and students in the US utilizing a voice chat platform, and [9] reported positive feedback from Russian participants about the enhancement of their English oral communicative skills. Likewise, [8] reported that an online telecollaboration project facilitating discussions between Argentinian EFL learners and British peers on citizenship topics not only elevated the intercultural awareness of the Argentinian participants but also contributed to their linguistic growth, metalinguistic awareness, vocabulary expansion, and an improved grasp of linguistic forms.

However, it should be noted that facilitating lingua franca exchanges does not always yield ideal outcomes in terms of language learning and intercultural development. Beyond connecting language learners with participants, the facilitating teacher faces important decisions, such as exchange format and partner matching, that could significantly influence the pedagogical advantages of these exchanges [10]. One crucial decision is the choice of an online communication platform for facilitating lingua franca exchanges, which can substantially affect students' exchange experiences [7]. The following section reviews various online tools used in lingua franca exchanges, particularly focusing on their affordances and limitations as evidenced by previous research findings.

2.2 Various Communication Mediums for Lingua Franca Exchange

As the learners' experiences might vary depending on the use of a different online tool, the pros and cons of various Web 2.0 technologies in facilitating online intercultural exchanges have been frequently explored. Firstly, when it comes to asynchronous communication tools, it was reported that students perceived them as convenient for lingua franca exchanges since they grant them greater freedom to choose when to engage in communication [11]. Additionally, students who engaged in communication using an additional language found asynchronous online tools to be less linguistically challenging when contrasted with synchronous communication where they must employ pragmatic and sociolinguistic skills more spontaneously [12]. Meanwhile, students perceived that synchronous tools like Skype offer the advantage of instant feedback, potentially enhancing their engagement in lingua franca communication [12, 13]. Although synchronous online communication might pose a challenge since it requires students who may have different time zones and daily schedules to find the spare time that suits all participants and dedicate the time for lingua franca exchanges, [14] reports that the students participating in the lingua franca exchanges did not typically view synchronous online communication as burdensome. Lastly, the facilitation of lingua franca exchanges on more recent online platforms such as the online virtual world has also been explored. [15] investigated the impact of using Second Life, an internet-based multimedia platform in which users interact through personalized avatars. The study

suggests that students frequently engaged in spontaneous communication on Second Life, and the virtual environment that Second Life provides contributed to students feeling more at ease initiating conversations.

Despite the widespread integration of MIM in our everyday communication, MIM has not been adequately explored as a platform for facilitating lingua franca exchanges among English language learners. MIM enables real-time text transmission over the Internet, allowing students to engage in both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Additionally, it offers students a wide array of multimodal resources for communication, including text, audio, video, pictures, moving images, and emojis. Given the benefits that MIM provides, it is worthwhile to investigate students' experiences using MIM for lingua franca exchanges with peers from other countries. This study, therefore, seeks to answer the following research question: What are the benefits and constraints of using MIM for lingua franca exchanges that participating students perceive?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Setting

This small-scale study was conducted as a pilot study for lingua franca telecollaboration among Chinese and Japanese university EFL students. By exploring the participants' experiences with using MIM as a main medium of online intercultural communication, this study aims to provide insights into the benefits and constraints of using a MIM application as the main platform for online ELF communication and international collaboration among university EFL learners.

The participants of this study were recruited from two universities, one in Japan and one in mainland China. The author, who taught Applied Linguistics at a university in China, recruited Chinese participants, and the author sought the assistance of a lecturer who taught English language at a university in Japan to recruit Japanese participants. In the autumn 2021 semester, they briefly explained the purpose and duration of the lingua franca exchange project to the students who attended their classes. Seven Chinese students and three Japanese students showed interest and voluntarily participated in the project in the term time. The Chinese participants were all females majoring in English Language and Literature, and all three Japanese participants were also females, with two of them majoring in Business Administration and one majoring in Agriculture. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 22.

3.2 Using WeChat as a Communication Platform

Among many MIM applications, WeChat, a Chinese instant messaging app, was selected as the communication channel among participants. WeChat was chosen for a practical reason. Due to the legal measures and technological implementations mandated by the Chinese government to control and manage the domestic Internet space, it was not possible for Chinese participants to access most non-Chinese MIM applications, such as WhatsApp and LINE, despite their willingness to negotiate the most convenient MIM platform with international partners. This left WeChat, which is the Chinese MIM application widely used in mainland China, as the only option to be used for the lingua franca project. As Japanese participants were able to access the WeChat application without problems, they were asked to download it on their smartphones and register for the service to participate in the lingua franca exchange project. As all Chinese participants were already using WeChat on their smartphones for everyday communication, they were not given any special instructions regarding the use of the application.

Like other MIM applications, WeChat provides a range of communication and interactive features encompassing text communication, voice messages, real-time voice chats, video conferencing, and media sharing in the form of photos and videos. Within WeChat, various instant messaging options are available, including not only text or voice messages but also stickers that are small-sized Portable Network Graphics (PNG) or Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) files that can be directly shared from the keyboard within the WeChat messaging interface. WeChat users have the capability to share images and videos, and WeChat stickers are comparable to those found in LINE and KakaoTalk, messaging applications originating from Japan and South Korea.

3.3 Design of the Lingua Franca Exchange Project

[16] suggests three categories of virtual exchanges: 1) information exchange tasks, 2) comparison and analysis tasks, and 3) collaborative tasks. The lingua franca exchange project of this study largely falls into the

first category. The participants were asked to casually share and ask for information about cultural practices and lifestyles they were interested in during the project. Culture was chosen as the central topic since most participants expressed a curiosity about the cultural and lifestyle practices of their counterparts.

The lingua franca exchange took place during the term time and lasted for six weeks. Firstly, the participants were invited to join a group chat in which the author acted as a facilitator. In the first week, students were asked to introduce themselves, and from the second week onward, students were offered the opportunity to choose a weekly topic related to their own interests and were encouraged to discuss it. To encourage vibrant communication, a weekly topic was presented to students. A total of five weekly topics discussed among participants are listed in chronological order: traditional culture, local weather, favorite dishes, daily life on campus, and popular culture. Participants were asked to communicate as frequently as they wished in their free time. As appropriate guidance by a facilitator to support student engagement is an important element contributing to the success of lingua franca exchanges [10], the facilitator also took part in the conversation to encourage student interactions when deemed necessary.

3.4   Data Collection and Analysis

This study mainly draws on semi-structured interviews conducted after the project ended. The participants were invited to individual interviews to share their perceptions of their overall experiences with the project. They were asked about general opinions of the project and any benefits and shortcomings of using MIM as the communication platform. The participants chose either English or their first language as a medium of the interview, and parts of interviews in languages other than English were translated to be presented in this paper. As a supplementary data source, exchanged chats and messages among the participants on WeChat were collected. After the project ended, informed consent was obtained from all participants regarding the use of chat data. They were asked to provide screenshots of their chats and messages exchanged in the WeChat group chat and the data were stored on the author's computer. The chat data includes not only textual but also visual messages such as pictures, emojis, and WeChat stickers. Participants all agreed that the data could be used for research purposes.

Inductive qualitative content analysis [17] of the interview data was conducted to find salient patterns in the way participants utilized the MIM application for lingua franca exchanges and their perceptions of the MIM application as the communicative platform for the exchanges. First, codes that indicate participants' perceptions of the MIM were generated through open coding. Then, they were compared and grouped under higher-order categories based on the characteristics of MIM that participants perceived as beneficial or challenging when engaging in ELF exchanges. A total of four categories emerged from this process: the multisemiotic system, the versatility of communication modes, intrusive features of MIM, and the culturally sensitive nature of a MIM platform. The former two characteristics were mainly associated with the benefits that participants perceived and the latter two were more related to challenges that participants reported. The collected chat data were referred to where relevant in order to triangulate and contextualize the interview data.

4. Findings

The analysis reveals two salient benefits and two constraints of using MIM for the lingua franca exchange project from the participants' perspectives. This section first discusses the perceived benefits of using MIM for intercultural exchanges then constraints participants perceived.

4.1 Benefits of Using MIM for lingua franca exchange

One of the main benefits frequently mentioned regarding the use of MIM for communicating with international partners is the availability of various modes of communication from written to oral and from synchronous to asynchronous. Such versatility of MIM provided participants with autonomy of choosing the most convenient and comfortable mode of communication based on their preference and contexts of communication, rather than having to resort to solely one or another. For instance, the participants who were less confident about communicating in English appreciated the option for the written communication which helped to reduce speaking anxiety in English. They further mentioned that the written mode allowed them to feel at ease due to the playful features of MIM texts characterized by short sentences and emojis. These participants preferred the written mode also because it allowed them more time to think about composing a

message in English and to look up words and expressions in reference resources such as online English dictionaries. For instance, S9 and S4 mentioned,

"We've got time to think in text messaging and we can look up new vocabulary" (S9, Interview)

"Typing text for communication was nice. It makes the conversation more natural and more relaxed, so it didn't make us too anxious." (S4, Interview)

Similarly, MIM, which offers both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication, allows participants to feel less burdened when engaging in lingua franca exchanges during busy term times. The participants had tight schedules with many classes during the term, and some even had to juggle studying with part-time jobs. In this regard, participants appreciated having the choice to reply to partner students with a delay when they were busy with other tasks, while still having the freedom to engage in synchronous communications and provide instant feedback when they had the time to do so. As S8 mentioned, the participants appreciated the option to easily switch between communication modes depending on their situations:

"You know, we don't have to reply when we're too busy as well. But I like texting and having fun in my free time." (S8, Interview)

The analysis of exchanged messages further revealed that the variety of semiotic resources that MIM provides might have helped participants engage in more effective and enriched conversations. They frequently used various multimodal resources available on WeChat or that could be shared through functions of WeChat, for instance, emojis, images, and GIF stickers. Participants often shared pictures and screenshots to supplement textual explanations of cultural topics they were introducing to their partner students. As seen in (a) of Figure 1, when introducing traditional Japanese costumes, a Japanese student shared a picture of herself and her friends wearing one of the traditional costumes using the image-sharing function. Providing such a visual image helped enrich communication as it prompted further questions from Chinese participants. For instance, one of the Chinese participants used the quote function in WeChat to ask whether the costume in the picture shared by the Japanese participant a Kimono or Yukata was, both of which are traditional female costumes in Japan: "I'm curious is that a kind of Yukata or Kimono?" In addition to sharing real-life pictures to illustrate cultural practices, students also took and shared screenshots of web images of cultural products as visual aids to help their partner students' understanding. For instance, when explaining tea culture among the Chinese, as seen in (b) of Figure 1, one of the Chinese participants shared a screenshot of a website showcasing popular milk tea products in China to supplement her explanation of the trendy tea products consumed by young Chinese.

While the participants shared their pictures and screenshots to supplement textual explanations of the cultural object and their lifestyles, emojis and PNG or GIF stickers were frequently used to provide feedback to each other and construct rapport, adding friendliness and playfulness to the conversations. As seen in (a) of Figure 1, for example, a Chinese participant used the emoji '☺' to indicate her lack of knowledge regarding the cultural product introduced by the Japanese participant and politely asked for a further explanation, and another Chinese participant used the emoji '☺' to signal her interest in the traditional costume introduced by the Japanese student. In a similar vein, as shown in (c) of Figure 1, a Chinese student posted a GIF—a short video image of a man giving a thumbs-up—as a response to the picture of the school farm that the Japanese student who studies agriculture posted. Using the GIF, the participant effectively demonstrated her positive appraisal of the campus life that the Japanese student shared.
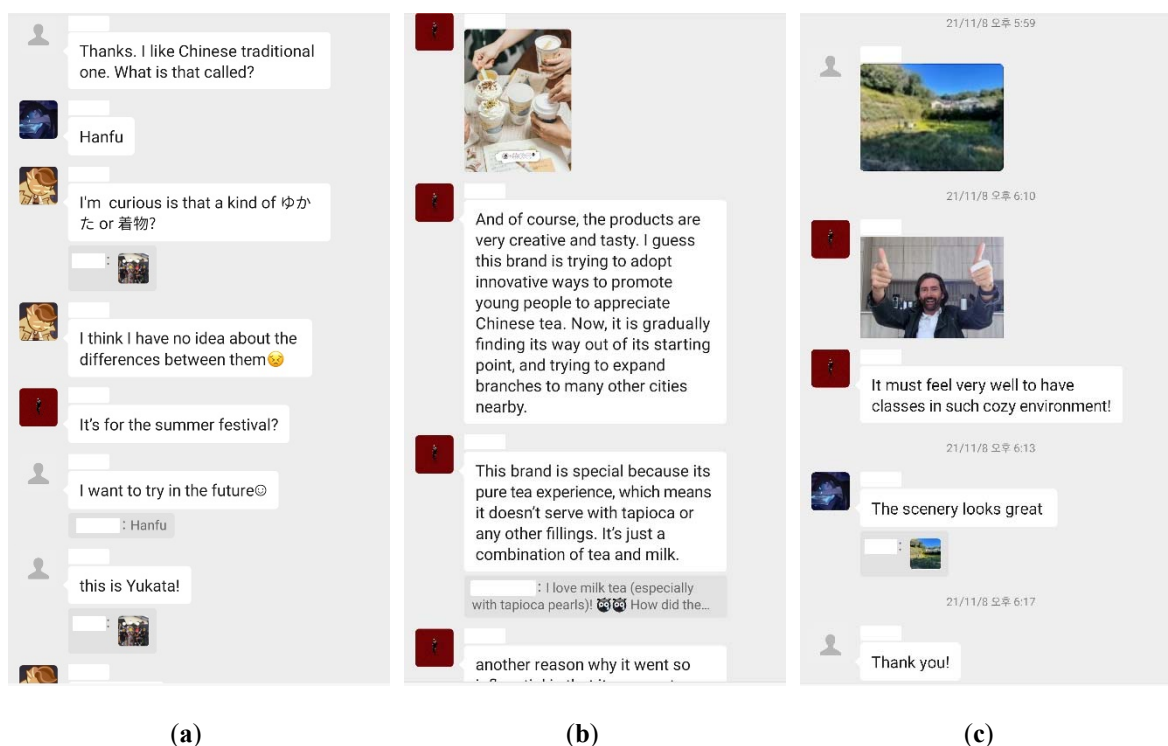
Figure 1. Screenshots of examples of the messages that students exchanged

As demonstrated in this section, the prominent advantages of using MIM that students perceived for participating in intercultural exchanges were the options to select various modes of communication and the availability of a diverse range of multisemiotic resources to utilize. These distinctive features of MIM appeared to contribute to the creation of more dynamic and vibrant conversations with international partners, reducing the apprehension associated with English language communication and alleviating the demands of engaging in extra communication activities during the busy term.

4.2 Challenges of Using MIM for Lingua Franca Exchange

While the ubiquity that enables users to communicate without spatial and temporal constraints is generally considered a benefit of MIM utilizing smartphone technology, the participants also voiced concerns that such characteristics of MIM hindered their communication with international partners. On the one hand, students appreciated using MIM for the lingua franca exchange project because it allowed them easier and more frequent access to communication compared to other communication platforms like email which they used less frequently: "If this project was based on the email exchange, we would not have checked them frequently." (S4, Interview) On the other hand, MIM's immediate receipt of acknowledgements or replies raised concerns among some participants about intrusiveness in their lives. This concern sometimes made them hesitant to initiate active interactions with partner students. As each input on MIM could trigger a notification alarm on the recipients' smartphones, some participants worried about overwhelming their partner students with excessive notifications from frequent messages. The anxiety surrounding notification alarms led some participants to express themselves through longer messages rather than frequent short messages, and this concern was exacerbated by the group setting in which all participants participated in the same group chat. As two Chinese participants mentioned,

"Since we are in a group, it is a bit difficult to text a sentence by sentence because everyone will get alarmed too frequently. So, I had to write more like a paragraph." (S6, Interview)

"The biggest problem was that our conversation was not really like conversation. It was more like you post your ideas then the next one posts her ideas." (S4, Interview)

Another prominent challenge with MIM for lingua franca exchanges was selecting the most suitable MIM platform for all participants. While participants agreed that the advantage of MIM was its flexibility and informality, there was a lack of consensus on whether WeChat was an effective communicative platform. Although WeChat is integrated into a variety of spheres of everyday life in mainland China, from paying for items in stores to choosing dishes in restaurants, it is barely known or used in Japan where the MIM service 'LINE' is much more widespread. Choosing a platform that was unfamiliar to Japanese participants seemed to discourage their participation despite their initial agreement to use WeChat as the communicative channel. The Japanese participants mentioned they were confused about WeChat functions and some of the Chinese participants raised the privacy policies of WeChat that Japanese partner students might have been uncomfortable about.

"I'm sort of techno-ignoramus, and I was a little irritated to find [WeChat] difficult to join … I did expect something like the LINE app." (S10, Interview)

"From my side, WeChat was effective, but I am not sure whether it worked for the Japanese side as well. … I guess they had to fill in the phone number but they didn't want to give private information or so." (S2, Interview)

As both sides of participants mentioned, choosing the most efficient MIM platform for participants from different countries seemed to pose a challenge when facilitating ELF communication among individuals from various locations. Participants might find it inconvenient to join a foreign MIM platform they are unfamiliar with and could be reluctant to provide personal information, such as phone numbers and email addresses, which are sometimes required for platform registration. For participants in mainland China, the issue of selecting a suitable MIM platform for lingua franca exchanges appeared to be an even bigger challenge due to the government's current restrictions on accessing non-domestic smartphone applications. As one of the Chinese participants stated,

"In China there are some restrictions [on the Internet], and so maybe other students in China may have difficulty in accessing some applications on their phones. So, it is either inconvenient for us or others. It is difficult to find a balanced platform." (S3, Interview)

To sum up, the participants raised concerns that using MIM integrated in smartphone technology for lingua franca exchanges can sometimes be too intrusive and that selecting a MIM platform familiar and convenient to both groups of participants might be challenging. This indicates that, despite the widespread recognition of MIM as a useful communicative medium integrated into our everyday communication, careful planning is needed for choosing the MIM platform and designing communication activities to address the aforementioned challenges.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrated the nuanced benefits and challenges associated with utilizing MIM for lingua franca exchanges from the perspectives of university EFL students. The findings unveil that the adaptability of MIM's communication modes and availability of the array of semiotic resources contributed to more engaging and relaxed interactions among EFL learners. Notably, students valued the flexibility to choose between synchronous and asynchronous communication based on their circumstances. Students perceived that MIM effectively combines the advantages of both synchronous tools, offering instant feedback and engaging communication, and asynchronous tools, providing a relaxed communicative environment. This contrasts with email or video conferencing, which offers only one facet of communicative benefits as demonstrated [11-14].

However, the findings also underscore concerns about intrusiveness and platform suitability, emphasizing the importance of thoughtful planning when implementing MIM-based lingua franca exchanges. For language educators planning to facilitate lingua franca exchanges using MIM, this study suggests practical guidelines that can help navigate these challenges. Firstly, it is crucial to select a MIM platform that is accessible and widely used by participants, considering regional preferences and familiarity. Although this might be challenging, careful consideration must be taken to reach a consensus among all the participants on the most appropriate communication tool. Also, facilitators should offer preparatory guidance to unfamiliar platform

users through an introductory session explaining its communicative functions. Secondly, clear guidelines about frequency and modes of communication might be required to address concerns of intrusion and notification overload. As the project proceeds, the facilitator can encourage participants to find a balance between asynchronous and synchronous modes based on their schedules. Moreover, in order to optimize the use of semiotic resources, the facilitator can provide guidance on employing visuals, emojis, stickers, and multimedia elements to enhance understanding and rapport. Lastly, the facilitator can incorporate reflection sessions where participants can discuss their experiences, challenges, and strategies, promoting a collaborative learning environment and enriching the lingua franca exchange journey. Understanding these dynamics empowers educators to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of MIM-based lingua franca exchanges, ultimately enriching students' experiences as ELF speakers.

While this study sheds light on the underexplored role of MIM in lingua franca exchanges, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The findings derive from a relatively small group of participants in the specific East Asian region, limiting generalizability to other contexts. Future research could involve a larger, more diverse participant pool to investigate MIM-based lingua franca exchange across various cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, while this study focused on the benefits and challenges of using MIM for lingua franca exchange mainly based on interview data, future research could involve discourse analysis based on chat data or adopt a pre- and post-design to examine the impacts of the exchange on EFL students. Despite these limitations, this study offers new insights into leveraging everyday communication tools for effective online intercultural exchanges.

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