WeChat: Leveraging Cell Phone Technology in the English Language Classroom
by Caroline Webb

This article focuses on WeChat (WēiXìn), a social media/messaging app used daily by 650 million people around the world (Smith, 2016), and its pedagogical implications for language learners. While primarily used in China, 100 million people in countries outside of China are using the app as well (Merz, 2013). It is free, and you communicate with others without giving out phone numbers, as WhatsApp requires.

There is continued debate on the benefits and drawbacks of cell phone usage in the classroom. On the one hand, cell phones can be used as dictionaries and translators. On the other hand, cell phones may create distractions that can lower academic performance (Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014), cause academic honesty violations, and present a classroom management nightmare for teachers (Tindell & Bohlander, 2012).

This debate is further heightened when social media and mobile messaging are added to the equation. Although access to cell phones and social media platforms can create distractions in the classroom, there are sound pedagogical reasons to encourage use of this technology. For example, instead of always raising their hand and speaking in class, students can post comments and questions in a WeChat class group.

Social media applications like WeChat can also be used for language learning and relationship building outside the classroom. For instance, students who find it difficult to talk to classmates about coursework can use social media applications to communicate with their peers.

At the Applied Linguistics Winter Conference (ALWC) workshop, we downloaded WeChat and learned how to use it for several pedagogical purposes. While this article does not go into the actual instructions (readily available online), it will provide an overview of how WeChat can be used for rapport building, pronunciation practice, and class announcements.

Practical Uses for WeChat

Building rapport. On WeChat you can connect with people on a one-to-one or group basis by messaging, calling, or recording and sending audio and video to each other. WeChat groups are particularly useful for enabling communication among many people simultaneously. In my classes, we create a class group where we post comments and questions to class materials and share resources and pictures, and the students chat to each other on class and campus topics. At the beginning of the semester, when we are all just getting to know each other, I will have my students post a picture of an object that identifies them or something new they found on campus, and write a short message to the class group about it. In my experience, those students who are more reticent in class may be the ones most active in the WeChat group.

In the class group, I also post homework and updates, as this is the fastest way to communicate with my students. If class is held in a new location, I can use the location feature to tell the class where we are meeting. Furthermore, when students do group projects and presentations, they can set up their own WeChat group and delegate responsibilities and talk about their progress.

Practicing pronunciation and getting feedback. Students can record audio or video of themselves speaking and send the recording to the instructor or to classmates. One assignment I often set is asking students to make a reflective video after attending an on-campus cultural

event. This type of assignment works well for students who may not have the confidence to present in class or for those who struggle more with written assignments, and allows these students to fully express themselves in a nontraditional medium that still rigorously tests their comprehension and speaking skills. An additional, but equally important, benefit is that I can easily and quickly deliver feedback on prosodic features, such as phonemes, syllable stress, rhythm, and intonation, in a written, audio, or video format. To send comments on individual phonemes or words, I usually text and use ipa.typeit.org to type in the phonetic alphabet. Using the audio feature can sometimes be faster, and students will get to practice their listening skills. Video is useful when showing how your mouth moves to make a sound or to use gestures to show stress and intonation.

References

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