

GLOBALIZATION AND LOCALIZATION: THE USE OF MOBILE APPLICATION FOR TEACHING SPEAKING AMONG EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship. Learning a foreign language without learning the culture can only produce a “fluent fool,” that is someone who speaks the language well but does not understand the social or philosophical context in which it exists. In this era of technology, globalization, immigration and mass media, it is even more imperative for EFL teachers to equip students with high level of intercultural communicative competence. Two hundred and fifty Iranian EFL learners participated in research into their use of mobile devices. Drawing on questionnaire and interview data, the paper examines how far the devices were embedded in the personal and professional lives of these learners, most of whom were aged 25-36. All had experience of online and distance education, and most worked in education or training. The study revealed some innovative uses of mobile devices, a selection of which is reported in this paper. The paper links the findings to wider debates about the changing relationship between learners and educational institutions, and the role of mobile devices in enabling individuals to engage in learning conversations. Data are provided on which devices were used by the learners and for what purposes, and the paper explores the implications of these findings for educators.

KEY WORDS: Mobile devices, Mobile-assisted language learning, Informal learning, English as a foreign language, culture, EFL, intercultural communication



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INTRODUCTION

Along with economic globalization, English has increasingly become the medium of communication around the world both in local and global contexts. The realization of importance of English highlights the necessity of every country to have its people become better equipped with English performance. Inevitably, this necessity is also applicable to IRAN. In response to the demands for English skills, the Thai government has made constant efforts to improve Persian learners' English performance throughout the history of English language teaching in IRAN in order to improve Persian learners' competence in English, enabling them to obtain job opportunities, promotions or career advancement With the rise in the number of English users,

English language teaching professionals has increased worldwide. The importance of English has also sparked a growing interest in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). In IRAN, to meet the demands of global economics and to cope with the growing local and national demands for English skills, new initiatives have been launched in all aspects of the Persian educational system, including curriculum, materials, facilities, and professional development for teachers. However, a number of studies reported that the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are far from satisfactory. The results of these studies were repeatedly substantiated by Bolton's (2008) study which reported that Persian learners' English performance was somewhat limited, compared to that of other ASEAN country members. To improve Persian learners' English proficiency, among all the four macro language skills, speaking seems intuitively the most important because speaking includes all other skills of knowing that language (Ur, 1996). Given the role of speaking skills in learning a foreign language, teaching and learning English speaking in Iran is somewhat limited for a number of reasons. First, for Persian students, English speaking or oral communication in English is deemed to be difficult since English is not their native language (Khamkhien, 2010). Second, most of Persian learners need their English to sound as native-like as possible which is a prestige norm of spoken English even though English is widely used in the region of South East Asia, creating a great diversity of English e.g., This scenario seems to limit their choice of their exposure to English. Next, since English in Iran is a foreign language, the exposure of English to authentic language input of learners of English in Iran is limited. Lastly, another dimension which should be taken into account lies into English pronunciation of Persian teachers of English

It has long been recognized by linguists and anthropologists that the forms and uses of a given language mirror the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. Teaching language in isolation cannot make a learner of the language competent in that language (Krasner, 1999). They need to be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that the behaviors and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community may be considered otherwise by members of the target language speech community. They have to realize that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be in harmony with the culturally appropriate behavior. In this increasingly globalized and multicultural world, where English has got the status of the lingua franca or international language, EFL teachers cannot afford to ignore importance of teaching culture in developing what Byram (1997) calls „intercultural communicative competence“. Consequently, the question that comes up is which culture is the target culture in the EFL context: British or American? Thanks to British colonialism prior to mid-twentieth century and later emergence of the USA as the political, military and economic superpower, English has become the most widely spoken language in the world. However, it is no longer a universal and monolithic linguistic entity; the last century has witnessed proliferation of English to such an extent that there emerged the concept of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992), which consist of different varieties of English used in diverse sociolinguistic contexts. First, there is English from the USA, United Kingdom, and Australia, which Kachru (1992) placed in „inner circle“; it represents the traditional historical and sociolinguistic bases of English where English is now used as the primary language. Then there are emerging localized or indigenized varieties developed in British colonized nations like India, Nigeria, Caribbean island nations, etc. which belong to the „outer circle“. Finally, there is „expanding circle“, which includes China, Russia and Brazil. This paper first defines what culture is in the EFL context. Then it will focus on why it's important to incorporate target culture in EFL classroom. There is a discussion on why making a bridge between the learners' own culture and the target culture is so important. The paper will also discuss challenges faced by language teachers while teaching target culture in more traditional societies as some reactionaries consider it a disguise for imposing cultural hegemony or linguistic imperialism. Finally, the paper recommends different strategies to make learning culture meaningful for students, so that they develop intercultural communicative competence.

I. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Among all modern communication devices, mobile phones are the most powerful communication medium even richer than email or chat as it can act as a learning device despite its technical limitations. With such a learning device the learner controls the learning process and progress in his/her own space based on his/her cognitive state. There are some factors having key roles in the use of mobile devices in learning

environments. Physical characteristics of a mobile phone such as its size and weight as well as input and output capabilities such as keypad vs. touchpad and screen size and audio functions are among the factors which should be assessed in this respect. The learner skills and his/her prior knowledge and experience with mobile devices for learning, as well as the learner's attitude towards the learning through mobile phone play a crucial role in the output quality of such a mobile-based tasks (Koole,2009).Many researchers were so interested in Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL)approaches that they attempt to provide some strong supports to conduct further studies on this discipline. Today, mobile learning is easily possible by delivery of various learning materials or content to learners through the mobile devices. Various activities related to language learning are supported by mobile devices among which we can name SMS, internet access, camera, audio/video recording, and video messaging (MMS) (Kukulska-Hulme and Jones, 2011).There are different mobile devices in the market compatible to the needs of different users.

The basic activities can be performed by many mobile phones. However, for language learning, the cost and technologies related to the mobile devices should be taken into consideration. Such learners can use their customized mobile devices for language learning based on their own abilities(Kukulska-Hulme and Shield, 2008).Mobile devices have increasingly grown toward becoming tools for education and language learning, and all its users from teachers or students are getting used to this environment to make education as ubiquitous as possible. Moreover, the emerging of internet made open and distance learning a means of receiving education from all parts of the world. In a short period, the attractiveness of distance learning led to the realization that various mobile devices provide a very effective resource for education. This way, many researchers tried to make mobile devices a rich resource for teaching and learning. It was, in fact, a challenging affair to cover learning tasks by a mobile phone (Oberg and Daniels, 2012).Pachler, Bachmair& Cook (2010) state that MALL deals with the use of mobile technology in language learning Students do not always have to study a second language in a classroom they may have the opportunity to learn it using mobile devices when they desire and where they are. As learning English is considered a main factor for professional success and a criterion for being educated in many communities, providing more convenient environment for people to learn English is one of the strategic educational goals towards improving the students' achievement and supporting differentiation of learning needs.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Mobile devices have become integrated with daily lives through the process of domestication (Ling and Donner, 2009). Increasingly, educational provision must recognize that since the devices are a significant part of the grain of daily life, it means that they will be used for information access and learning, even if only informally. The ubiquity of mobile and wireless technologies suggest that patterns of use developed through informal learning will also have an impact on formal education through learners' growing expectation of mobile access. Uncovering emerging pattern of use, and trying to work with them rather than against them, is the current challenge (Pettit and Kukulska-Hulme, 2007).For many learners, the opportunity to use their personal mobile device to support an aspect of language learning is the starting point for an individual journey toward satisfying particular personal requirements with regard to content, type of practice needed or the circumstances of a person's work and life (Kukulska-Hulme and Arcos, 2011). The current research is to focus on these individuals who are forging ahead with developing their own ways of learning, using mobile devices and whatever materials, resources and human connections they decide are helpful in the course of building their ecology of resources for learning (see Luckin, 2010; Underwood, Luckin, and Winters, 2010).

As yet, few researchers appear to have considered how to use mobile devices to support pedagogical approach that is not teacher-led. Clearly, the ways in which different mobile technologies are employed by different language learners and in a variety of different contexts require further investigation (Kukulska-Hulme and Arcos, 2011).

We are interested to find out more about the ways in which those who are engaged in teaching and learning use mobile technologies, particularly in relation to spontaneous learning and teaching practices and the intersection with daily life and work (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012). We are also intrigued by anecdotal evidence that owning and carrying around one or more mobile devices may encourage users towards experimentation, which in turn could lead to innovative uses.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Mobile Technology-Assisted Language Learning*

The potential of mobile technology to assist language learning was discussed in numerous studies (Huang & Chiu, 2014). Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) stated that m-learning (mobile learning) can offer language learning experience where students are able to enjoy learning anytime and anywhere. According to Chen, Hsieh and Kinshuk (2008), and Huang and Chiu (2014), m-learning can aid both formal learning in traditional classrooms and informal settings outside classes, thus increasing access to learning activities and engagement in learning tasks in and outside the classroom. Furthermore, mobile devices allow students to coordinate and interact more easily and thus enable them to carry out collaborative learning (Huang, Chiu, Liu, & Chen, 2011; Huang & Wu, 2011; Huang, Huang, Huang, & Lin, 2012). Recently, more and more language teachers have become interested in Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), and have considered how to employ mobile devices in their classes (Chen et al., 2008; Liang & Huang, 2014; Huang et al., 2012; Hwang & Chen, 2013; Hwang et al., 2012; Thornton & Houser, 2005; Wu et al., 2011). In their overview paper, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) noted that MALL uses personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning, emphasizing continuous and spontaneous access and interaction across different usage contexts. Furthermore, it was noted that mobile learning is student- rather than teacher-led because mobile devices are more closely related to individuals' specific contextual needs. Therefore, when designing activities or applications for mobile learning, how mobile devices can be used to meet individual and contextual needs is an issue to be considered (Huang et al., 2012; Hwang, & Chen, 2013; Hwang et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2011). Murray and Barnes (1998) suggested that technology applied to assist language learning needs to be evaluated on a pedagogical basis. Murray and Barnes (1998) have identified "ease of use" as a major factor in the adoption of a technology for foreign language learning. In this study, a mobile learning system is integrated to help English language learning with a focus on speaking and listening skills, applications of the system for language acquisition are evaluated, and important supporting evidence is provided, as shown in later sections.

B. *Developing Listening And Speaking Skills With The Assistance Of Mobile Technology*

Of particular interest in this study is our focus on listening and speaking skills, on which many researchers have conducted prior studies. For example, Nah et al. (2008) investigated the potential of using a mobile phone to browse wireless application protocol (WAP) sites for the purpose of developing EFL listening skills. One experiment was carried out with undergraduate students who took an intermediate EFL listening course. During the experiment students accessed WAP sites to participate in pre-listening, during-listening, and post-listening activities. During the activities, students listened to key vocabulary and audio files and then discussed activity questions. Results of the study showed that students expressed positive attitudes towards the use of the technology. Furthermore, results demonstrated that the technology was effective for students' development of listening skills. Wang et al. (2009) also studied the impact of mobile technology on EFL students' learning behaviors and performance in a large blended classroom. A mobile learning (m-Learning) system was developed in the study and it delivered live broadcasts of real-time classroom teaching to students with mobile devices. The system featured short text messaging and instant polls so that students could answer the teacher's questions in real time. For example, through the m-Learning system the instructor taught situational dialogues and showed exercises in live broadcast, and students replied within the given timeframe via text messages. This study found that m-learning activities encouraged students to engage in the learning process more. Furthermore, results of this study revealed that students turned out to become more active and truly engaged learners.

Moreover, Hwang and Chen (2013) developed a mobile listening and speaking practice system for EFL learning. One experiment was conducted by Hwang and Chen (2013) to compare the performance of the control group (i.e. students learned by using paper-based learning materials) and the experimental group (i.e. students learned by using learning materials with personal digital assistants). Results of the experiment revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in language proficiency. According to results of this study, students could repeatedly record their own voices and listen to themselves and others' recordings using personal digital assistant (PDA), thus obtaining more opportunities to practice and improve their language proficiency. Liu and Chu's study (2010) introduced games into an English listening and

speaking course and then investigated how games influence English learning achievement and motivation in a mobile learning environment. In the study, high school students participated in an experiment in which they were divided into two groups to learn with the same learning activities yet with different learning devices; the control group learned with CD/MP3 players and printed materials while the experimental group learned with mobile devices. The learning activities in this study were called Campus Environment, Campus Life, and Campus Story. To be involved in the learning activities, students used a campus map and moved the game character into or went to different learning zones on a map. When the character or students reached one of zones (e.g. library), the system generated a learning material related to that zone available for students to practice their language skills. For example, a student could watch an English movie clip to practice listening skills, or converse with a virtual learning tutor about a library-related topic to practice speaking skills. Furthermore, students created stories in relay and recorded stories using PDA phones. After the experiment, evaluation of learning outcomes and learning motivation demonstrated that incorporating learning games supported by the mobile technology into the English learning process could achieve better learning outcomes and motivation.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Drawing on the literature, three aspects of emergent practices used by Iranian mobile language learners were investigated. The following research questions were posed about groups of language learners who do well on the use of mobile devices to facilitate their own language learning experience.

- Are there any specific language skills and components which are more practiced by Iranian mobile language learners?
- Are there any specific mobile-enabled activities adopted by Iranian mobile language learners?
- What are the most and the least frequently used MALL activities among Iranian EFL learners?

As can be seen, none of the studies reviewed have focused on these aspects of Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL) altogether among Iranian EFL learners as they were analyzed in details here in this study. None of the studies paid enough attention to mobile-enabled resources and mobile learner strategies, especially among Iranian mobile language learners. As it was mentioned, there are a number of studies which focused on emergent practices in MALL used by mobile learners from a general perspective, but few studies were concerned about the specific areas addressed in the research questions listed above.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

There are 250 participants in our research which were drawn, from among those TEFL graduate students who are the members of Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran (TELLSI), to take the questionnaires. TELLSI aims at developing and promoting learners' knowledge base, improving the quality of experts' practice and advancing teaching and research.

Most participants have good or excellent levels of computer literacy since a large amount of interaction and communication in this society is done on-line, the programs are delivered on-line, and several of the modules proposed in the website of the society explicitly focus on aspects of e-Learning technologies. We therefore expected that the participants would include at least some who had interesting and innovative experience of using mobile devices. Since TELLSI programs are aimed largely at those practicing or intending to practice in education and training, it seemed likely that the participants would throw light on some of the ways in which mobile devices are being used in education and training, and would also reveal how practitioners were using such devices in other areas of their life – in their own learning, social interaction, and entertainment.

VI. RESULTS

A. Participants

About three-quarters of the respondents were aged 25-36 and a little over half (55%) were female. All the subjects were English major. Over half were studying TEFL (Teaching English as foreign Language), with most of the remainder studying English translation (30%) and 10% studying English literature. Nearly all described their profession as associated in some way with education or training. Around 80% of the

respondents evaluated their English as upper-intermediate and advanced. The other 20% perceived themselves as intermediate.

The usage of mobile devices Graph 1 indicates that, although all respondents reported that they had used a mobile phone, only less than 10% of the respondents had used a PDA or smart phone. Nearly all respondents reported that they had used an MP3 player. Therefore, Iranian EFL learners used mobile phones and MP3 players much more than other mobile devices. This picture in this area is continuously changing, and the data in the table are inevitably a snapshot. Having been asked about why they didn't use smart phones or PDAs, the respondents said that these gadgets have some applications to be used for the sake of language learning, but those applications were not available in Iran because of international sanctions. It was also mentioned that lots of these applications should have been bought but it was not possible for most of the respondents to afford it.

VII. CONCLUSION

Our research gives a national (Iran) account of mobile device use from learners' perspectives, in relation to learning; social interaction, entertainment and work, with a view to helping researchers and educators incorporate the emerging learner practices into their plans for further research, development and designs for learning. We agree with Kennedy et al. (2008) that "an evidence-based understanding of students' technological experiences is vital in informing higher education policy and practice" (p. 109) since, as they point out, this will have implications for student access, equity and transition. We believe the insights gained from looking at learners' accounts of authentic experience are essential in improving understanding between learners and teachers as well as helping to shape future plans for the use of technology in education.

Whatever their age, learners constitute a pool of valuable experience and expertise in the use of mobile technologies. As a collective body, they own, or have access to, some of the latest mobile devices and applications. Pressures of study and assignment deadlines lead them to seek effective solutions to immediate needs on the go. If they are studying in different university departments, they are also in a good position to share experience freely across discipline boundaries, which is something that educators may find much more challenging to do. Straub (2009) suggests that "the future of adoption research should focus not just on adoption and implementation of information technology in the formal organization but how individuals understand, adopt, and learn technology outside of the formal organization" (p. 646). We concur with this view, while also heeding his plea to avoid a 'pro-adoption bias', that is, the assumption that the goal is to disseminate information about innovations specifically so that they might be adopted by others (Rogers, 1995). Whilst some practices are worth adopting more widely, others may not merit it, but being better informed about evolving practices has to be a worthwhile goal. The present investigation leads to various hypotheses for future research, including possible differences in communication choices depending on gender and age. Given the wide-spread use of SMS demonstrated in our study, we would advocate more research on how language use is adapted for texting. Furthermore, since the use of a mobile device represents a new technological means of reading books, articles and comments, this might have an impact on how, and how much, students read, however further research would be needed. The landscape of mobile devices has changed since our survey with some devices (cellphones) becoming almost extinct and others (MP3 players) endangered. The functionality of these devices has been incorporated into smart mobile phones and tablet devices. Not only are mobile devices becoming more affordable and thus more widely used, they also have enhanced connectivity using Wi-Fi. Our study has considered the broad use of mobile devices amongst students; the next research step should be to examine the specific applications that students use for learning, especially those produced by universities. How, where and when do students make use of these applications? In what ways do the applications contribute to the students' overall learning? If mobile applications become a significant part of a university's offering, does this disadvantage some students and, if so, how? Furthermore, as mobile devices become more widespread there will be new types of applications and probably substantial changes in practice which cannot necessarily be foreseen but which will also provide interesting directions for further research.

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