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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

A Cell Phone in the Classroom: A Friend or a Foe?

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Abstract

Communication is getting increasingly mobile, with more than a third of the world's population using cellular phones. Recent statistics indicate that this proportion is much bigger among young people. Research has also registered significant predominance of short message exchange over other modes of interaction in youth culture, where e-mail is perceived as a tool for "old people," while voice calls are reserved for communication with parents and other adults.

Adapting to the changing world of mobile technology, many public institutions have welcomed the use of mobile phones for messaging, which is less disturbing than phone calls. However, schools, which are the principal abode of young people, are still struggling with this most common way of communication of their clients. While a growing number of schools across the world have worked cellular phones and text messaging into their curriculum, most of academia still bans phones from the classroom, if not the school campuses altogether.

The factors, which account for persistent resistance to the phone presence in the academic context, are of two kinds: linguistic and pedagogic. From the linguistic point of view, SMS shorthand writing, or texting, is a unique language phenomenon, which shares many linguistic features with other types of digital communication, such as email, chat, instant messaging, forums, interaction via Twitter, Facebook, blogs and so on. The common features of electronic discourse include extremely diverse and developed abbreviation, use of emoticons, contracted syntax and frequent negligence of spelling, capitalization and punctuation rules. In this way, texters achieve extremely compressed writing, adapted to the financial and technological requirements of the medium. While some researchers and practitioners consider mastering of the medium a part of digital literacy required for the citizens of the new millennium, others perceive nonstandard orthography and grammar perpetuated in texting as a threat to traditional literacy. The concern of the opponents of texting is supported by sufficient evidence that texting is progressively penetrating into the academic production of students, which testifies to the lack of code-switching skills and the growing preference towards nonstandard language.

From the pedagogic point of view, the attitude towards cell phones and texting is similarly ambiguous. On the one hand, research shows that with cell phones, youngsters are exposed to more reading and writing than ever before. Inclusion of texting in teaching practice increases motivation and makes learning more relevant to the needs and likes of students. Also, the evidence that non-native speakers increasingly borrow textisms testifies to a higher appropriation of the target language. On the other hand, many teachers view texting as disruptive for classroom atmosphere, as it leads to multitasking and certain inappropriate activities. Finally, spillover of texting into other modes of interaction may negatively affect communication and its participants.

This presentation will look into the main issues of the evolving discussion around cell phones and texting in the academic context and analyze the most recent research on and practice of using mobile technology in the field of teaching foreign languages.

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1. Introduction

Learning and communication are becoming increasingly mobile, and the advent of Web 2.0 technologies is actively dissolving the boundaries between "educational" and "real world technologies." The relationship between users of modern technologies and educational institutions is going through fundamental changes, and it becomes harder on the institutional level to ignore the impetus from the outside world. This is especially true of cell phones, which are used on a daily basis by more than a third of the world's population. The largest proportion of users is young people, for whom SMS exchanges are the preferable way of interaction. Schools, however, are still struggling with this most common way of

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communication of their clients. Though many teachers have worked cellular phones and text messaging into their curriculum, by and large, electronic mobile devices remain excluded from formal education.

The factors, which account for persistent resistance to the phone presence in academic context, are of two kinds: linguistic, i.e., connected with the use of texting, or shorthand writing, and pedagogic, i.e., related to inappropriate in the academic environment use of cell phones. This paper will look into various effects of using cell phones in education, as well as report on a survey of teacher-student attitudes towards mobile technology in one Japanese university.

2. Cell phones and Their Advantages

Mobile or cell phones have become a ubiquitous presence in our daily life. Lately, the advent of "smart phones," connected to the Internet, has added a number of general computing capabilities to the basic function of telephony. With these new functions, cell phones become powerful mobile learning devices, sharing many educational applications with computers. Moreover, for a number of reasons, cell phones are even more effective than computers in the new Web 2.0 context of creating, sharing and distributing knowledge.

First, cell phones currently are the most accessible electronic device that the majority of teachers and students possess. In less advantaged sections of the society, access to computers at schools, to say nothing of homes, still remains a "digital divide" between poorer and wealthier countries and social strata. At the same time, worldwide mobile phone subscriptions penetrate all economies and reach the bottom of the economic pyramid.

Second, with cell phones deeply integrated in their lifestyles, learners display immense familiarity with ever-increasing number of applications. Research shows that students surpass their teachers in harnessing the potential of mobile technology to their needs, as for them today cell phones are the technology of choice.

Of no less importance is the thorough appropriation of mobile technology by modern students for communication. Such communication, if engaged for educational purposes, can increase the relevance of learning and, thus, heighten students' motivation (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). The instances of how the cell phones can be used in learning are numerous: from short written assignments, quizzes, surveys, podcasts to blogs, e-books, electronic dictionary, vocabulary games, etc. In short, the incidental learning of various kinds that can take place anywhere and anytime with mobile technologies can effectively support direct language instruction.

3. Linguistic Reasons for Resistance to Cell phones

Of all modern cell phone functions, young people give priority to SMS exchanges. Research shows that young people do much more writing and reading with their cell phones than ever before (Goldberg, 2010). As youngsters are using their phones to share their daily experiences, they display more diversity in their writing than in their school assignments. Grabill's research (2011) found that students ranked texting as the primary form of writing and cell phones as the top writing platform.

Teachers are concerned, however, that quantity does not necessarily bring quality, as all this writing is done in texting shorthand characterized by extremely developed abbreviation, use of emoticons, contracted syntax and frequent negligence of spelling and punctuation rules. While some researchers and practitioners consider such mastering of the medium a part of digital literacy required for citizens of the new millennium, others perceive nonstandard orthography and grammar as a threat to traditional literacy.

The concern of the opponents of texting is supported by sufficient evidence that texting often penetrates into academic writing, which testifies to the lack of code-switching skills and the growing preference towards nonstandard language (Averianova, 2009). These instances, however, are not overwhelming, and code-switching skills can be easily taught. Grabill (2011) found that most students use different languages with different audiences, which is a remarkable evidence for the management of writing. Moreover, they do a lot of revising and editing (Taylor & Harper, 2010), especially when communicating with adults. Thus, with more positive than negative outcomes of texting, it is evident that linguistic considerations do not hold much value in the cell phone discussion.

4. Pedagogic Problems with Cell phones

Pedagogic concerns about the use of cell phones are also ambiguous. On the one hand, there is a well-recognized need to address the learning styles and educational needs of students, as shaped by the influence of technology on their lives. Mobile technologies offer new ways of creating and disseminating knowledge, which overcome the "digital divide" and the gap between real, socio-cultural and

professional, life and formal education. Of no less importance, among many others aspects, is the ecological, "paperless," opportunity for note- and test-taking.

On the other hand, cell phone calls are disruptive to the classroom atmosphere, as interruption interferes with concentration on the initial or major task, and performance on that task degrades (Baron, 2008). In a similar way, text messaging during class time leads to multitasking and poorer performance on the main task (ibid.). The literature is also full of reports about cheating with cell phones on exams, harassment, bullying, gossip and other antisocial activity. Lately, misuse of the built-in cameras of cell phones in such public facilities as restrooms, swimming pools, locker rooms, etc. provoked further restrictions on mobile phones in schools.

5. Evidence from the Field

So, is the cell phone friend or foe? With the above considerations in mind, a blitz survey of cell phone use and attitudes towards phones as learning tools was conducted among 40 faculty and 64 third-year students in one Japanese business university. A questionnaire of 12 questions addressed such issues as perceived usefulness, familiarity of use, use preferences, as well as acceptance, experience or intention of using cell phones as teaching and learning tools.

The survey found that most teachers and all students possess cell phones. A surprising finding was that 17% of students, most of whom are 20-years old, have been using cell phones for 10 years, and half of them for more than 5 years. Students also showed a much higher index on perceived ease of use of the device than did teachers (90% vs. 55.2%).

The two groups also differed in the way they use cell phones: while 96% of students regularly exchange text messages, 48% of teachers almost never send such and 32% never receive such; 64% of students vs. 17% teachers listen to sound files, 96% students vs. 30% of teachers access the Internet with their phones. Thus, this part of the survey clearly indicates that teachers are less active than students in deploying the various functions of cell phones, especially those particularly valuable for learning foreign languages, such as Internet access, message communication, and ability to listen to sound files.

Following Nichols' (2008) argument, that the success of technology-facilitated-learning depends on teacher acceptance, the survey also made an inquiry into the respondents' propensity to innovate with a cell phone. Thus, the question regarding if there is a need to use cell phones for teaching was answered positively by only 2.8% of teachers, with 42.9% being unsure and 54.3% disagreeing. The students' results were completely opposite: 47% agree, 50% not sure. Also, 60% of teachers had never seen, heard or read about successful innovative uses of cell phones in educational practice, while 60% of students had. Furthermore, only 28% of teachers agreed to experiment with cell phones. With such attitudes, it is not surprising that 78% of teachers support the policy forbidding the use of cell phones at school. Moreover, and quite surprisingly, 60% of students were in agreement with teachers on this issue. This finding seems inconsistent with the positive stance of the student population towards the use of cell phones in education. A feasible explanation may be the over-regulatory wording of the question, which invoked a common perception of mobile technology as an "outlaw" in the academic context. After all, some beliefs die hard, even in the age of the digital revolution.

6. Conclusions

Mobile technology has become the tool-of-choice of modern students. Stockwell (2008) predicted that mobile learning would be the way of learning of the next generation. While there are numerous accounts of the beneficial experience of learning with cell phones, the majority of educational institutions still struggle with legitimizing such practice. There are some objective reasons for this resistance, but they are outnumbered by the positive outcomes of mobile learning. Since cell phones have firmly established themselves as students' "friends," schools need to stop treating them as "foes," and teachers need to find effective ways of capitalizing on the rich potential of mobile technologies.

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