Exploring mobile apps for English language teaching and learning

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Abstract. Many recent studies have shown that mobile learning can provide potential possibilities for foreign language learners to practice language skills on their smart mobile phones and tablet PCs (e.g. Chang & Hsu, 2011; Egbert, Akasha, Huff, & Lee, 2011; Hoven & Palalas, 2011; Stockwell, 2010). A number of apps have been created and used for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. However, few studies have given effective examples of tasks for mobile learning. The majority of the existing apps have not yet been very pedagogically useful, due to the possible knowledge gap between the app developers and language teachers (Sweeney & Moore, 2012). Therefore, this study aimed to investigate how mobile apps can be integrated into English language teaching and learning and what sorts of tasks can be employed to enhance learners' EFL learning. A class app was created by the researchers and integrated into English teaching and learning in and out of class. Questionnaires and interviews were conducted so as to explore students' perceptions about the app. The results indicated that mobile learning can be adopted in English lessons and students' self-study. The app which provided sources related to lessons offered extra support to students to practice English in and after class. Participating students expressed positive attitude towards mobile learning.

Keywords: mobile learning, apps, English language teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Mobile devices, which can be in the form of iPods, mobile phones and tablet PCs, have been an integral part of English learning. During the past decades, technology

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has developed at an impressive rate, making portable devices equipped with WIFI access, and enabling the third/fourth generation (3G/4G) service to pave the way for the technology-oriented teaching model as well. Mobile learning has been a key issue in the investigation of e-learning (Jeng et al, 2010). It can be seen that enhancement in the mobility and connectivity of mobile devices helps to create a new way for students across different cultures to learn English (Kim, Rueckert, Kim, & Seo, 2013).

Students at Xi'an jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) normally obtain English sources from Moodle-based internal virtual learning environments during their study. The rapid evolution of handheld devices is changing this via the use of 3G and even 4G. A substantial amount of apps for English learning is also being designed to follow the tendency. Although learning by portable devices has tremendous potential, developing new teaching and learning methods could still be a barrier for educators to put this into practice (Kim et al, 2013). Meanwhile, students' ability of self-control could be another obstruction for mobile learning. For most students, mobile devices are mainly used for entertainment and communication. This study reports on an attempt to design an app to help students access class materials conveniently at anytime and anywhere and investigate students' perceptions about the app. It aims to explore the user experience of the designed app and whether the app is beneficial for academic English learning inside and outside the class. Our research questions included:

- What are students' motivations in mobile-learning tasks on apps?
- What are students' perceptions of features in the English for Academic Purpose (EAP) apps?

2. Method

There were two stages in this study: phase 1 and phase 2. All participants were sophomores majoring in economics or marketing at XJTLU, China, and the age ranged from 18 to 21. All the respondents were from mainland China and were taking an EAP class at the Language Centre at XJTLU, and volunteered to participate in this study.

2.1. Phase 1

40 students from two classes participated in phase 1. The data sources included a questionnaire, interviews and observations. All 40 students completed the

questionnaire and 18 students were randomly involved in interviews. One of the researchers, the English tutor, assigned tasks for mobile learning in class and observed students' usage of apps for English learning. At this stage, the tutor provided some existing apps for English learning including listening, reading, speaking and vocabulary practice both in and outside the class. The tutor adopted blended learning strategies in class, i.e. reading on mobile devices and doing exercises on paper or searching for relevant sources online on mobile devices in class for pair and group discussions. In addition, a class forum on a communication app used on mobile devices (QQ or Wechat) was set up for interaction after class.

2.2. Phase 2

44 students participated in the second phase. Data were gathered through a questionnaire and interviews. All 44 students completed the questionnaire and 19 students were randomly interviewed. Unlike the first stage, the tutor created an EAP app and uploaded some class materials in this app. Apart from resources related to the class, general resources which can help students practice general language skills were also provided in the app including reading, listening, writing and speaking.

3. Discussion

3.1. Students' motivation in various learning tasks on apps

In the first phase, students were asked to complete four types of English learning tasks on suggested apps including listening, reading, speaking and vocabulary practice both within and outside of the class. The results show that participants had high motivation to practice English on these apps. 70 percent of the respondents perceived that they regularly did vocabulary activities outside of the classroom. All students reported that they did reading tasks both in and after class. Despite the fact that some of the respondents prefer reading on paper, the average reading tasks they did via mobile devices rose considerably from seldom to twice a day. Regarding listening practice, more than 70% of the participants felt apps such as BBC, TED Speech and VOA as beneficial for developing their listening skills. The majority of the students practiced listening on those apps several times a day due to their easy access. With respect to speaking tasks, 70 percent of the students stated they were useful, particularly for improving pronunciation. In terms of the communication tool QQ/WeChat (similar to The Line or ICQ), the

students contended that it was easy and comfortable for them to communicate in class through the forum on the app with the teacher and the other students. Students felt more confident to discuss lessons in the class forum on their mobile devices. This indicates that it could be one of the good ways/channels for EFL learners to practice English.

3.2. Students' perceptions of features in the EAP app

In the second phase, the results demonstrated students' positive perceptions of features in the EAP app. 80 percent of the students strongly agreed that they enjoyed using the app, which proved that using mobile devices as a learning tool can motivate students' enthusiasm. Furthermore, 87 percent of the respondents valued time-saving and convenient features via the mobiles. Convenience and high-quality contents were considered as the top two significant features for a good app. The majority of the students revealed that learning via handheld devices had become an indispensable part of their lives. Moreover, resources for general English are believed to be beneficial to academic study by the majority of the subjects. For a successful EAP app, therefore, it is important to enhance its convenience and its function to save time, and to ensure high-quality and relevant resources for the learning context.

4. Conclusions

This research aimed to investigate the impact of mobile technologies on college students' English learning activities, in order to understand the current and future situation of mobile learning in general, and the design criteria for good English learning apps in particular. The findings suggested that the majority of the participants held a positive attitude towards mobile learning, and many of them frequently conducted a variety of learning practices on their mobile devices. Then, we explored the efficiency of those existing English learning apps, so as to distinguish the elementary frame of creating our own app. The results indicated that the majority of the subjects enjoyed mobile learning, which can be revealed by their significantly high motivation in carrying out the relevant activities on the apps.

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