Second Language Learning by Exchanging Cultural Contexts through the Mobile Group Blog

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Abstract

Although much attention has been devoted to learning a second language in the authentic language environment, learners still have limited opportunities to stay there for a longer time. The internet has opened up a gateway for learners to a virtual foreign world while mobile technology is bringing more features from the real world. In this study we explored the use of a mobile group, recording and sharing learners' real experiences in the target culture, and helping learners who are far away from the target language surroundings to enhance the understandings of 'real' language use in 'real' culture. Two studies were conducted separately with two different groups physically in the learners' own country and the target language country. The contexts of the real culture have been delivered and discussed within these two groups. Results show a spontaneous shift from using native language to second language in the target culture and students' learning motivation and language efficacy have been improved.

Keywords: mobile group blog, context transition, context socialising, second language learning.

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1. Introduction

From social-constructivist perspectives, language learning is regarded as the result of interactions between learners, teachers, and other sources of the target language in socio-educational contexts (Williams & Burden, 1997). The term context might have various implications in different specialties. In technology enhanced learning (TEL), it not only covers the physical space, social situations, learning resources, learning culture and technology-mediated learning environment but also embraces the learners' experience and history (Chalmers, 2004; Mercer, 1992; Smagorinsky & Fly, 1993). Issues of context have been particularly highlighted in encouraging learners' learning in the real world. Hymes (1972) pointed out that the key to understanding language in context is to start not with language but with context. Particularly for second language learners, one of the most significant current discussions is that the ideal situation of second language learning is in the real world. Learning in the real world indicates more autonomy and mobility of learners, which could fit in with the affordances of mobile technology. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) currently is found as a worthwhile solution to support second language acquisition and learning flexibility (Attewell & Savill-Smith, 2003; Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005).

1.1. Context and language learning

Atkinson (2002) contended that learning is a part of everyday life and argued that language is intertwined with and inseparable from experiences, cultural knowledge, emotions, and self-identity. Learning a language is the process of appropriating the cultural resources or voices of local communities in broad social contexts. It is impossible for language learners to be quarantined from the "real world" and considered as a set of asocial, amoral skills to be mastered; they are always shaped, produced, and consumed in relation to broader social and cultural conditions (Burr, 1995; Collentine & Freed, 2004; Wertsch, 1991). Herron's (1994) findings indicated that comprehension in a foreign language is facilitated by richness of context. The social context, especially time and space, are often incorporated into learning design and attract a growing number

of educators and learners to be involved in both the real and the virtual world (Hirst, 2004; Kelton, 2007). The conversations or dialogical exchanges should be conceived spatially or temporally, not only as meaningful texts or actions, but also in relation to the reproduction and production of different spaces and times (Leander, 2001). Kramsch (1993) also exhorted the reflection of the historical situatedness and local context of language in the learner's interlanguage when they encounter authentic interactions in the target culture. Tracing the context of using second language in the real language surroundings also invests learners' trajectories in new learning resources for remote learners.

1.2. Mobile technology and context

Mobile technology is one of the recent effective technologies to support learning in the real world. Mobile technology affords more accessibility to learning resources whenever and wherever learners are (Sharples, 2007). This indicated two significant advantages for learning in different contexts: flexibility of time and flexibility of locations. In reflecting these advantages educators have noted some outstanding features that mobile technology can offer for second language learning.

1.2.1. Flexible access to learning spaces

Günther, Winkler, Ilgner and Herczeg (2008) argued that there is no longer a fixed and well-defined space for learning, but multiple and intertwined learning scenarios and culture. Mobile technology then could support learning at the right time at the right place (Ogata & Yano, 2003), offering great opportunities of learning in the real world and linking with the virtual world. Access and exposure to engaging, authentic, and comprehensible contexts in the target language is essential for successful language learning (Zhao, 2003). Learner's autonomy and authentic problem solving are central to second language education (Meyer & Bo-Kristensen, 2009). Mobile technology offers learners free access to acquire linguistic phenomena not only in the present context but across contexts, retrieving and delivering information in everyday life. As Kukulska-Hulme (2006) noted:

Mobile learning promises to deliver closer integration of language learning with everyday communication needs and cultural experiences. Mobile devices may be used for learning at home, in a classroom, in a social space, on field trips, in museums and art galleries, in work contexts or as part of everyday learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006, p. 122).

1.2.2. Promoting synchronous interaction remotely

Since language learning is a social activity (Norbrook & Scott, 2003; Warschauer, 1999), it is impossible to perform successful language learning without interaction. Interactions exist between the learner and the technology, between the learner and the learning environment and between the learner and other learners. Several studies found that mobile technology could improve the interaction of teacher-to-learner and learner-to-learner (e.g., Collins, 2008; Dias, 2002; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Thornton & Houser, 2005). The mutual information channel via mobile technology, information delivering and information gathering succeeds in these supports. Thomas (2005, cited in Cobcroft, Towers, Smith, & Bruns, 2006) pointed out that mobile learning facilitated by mobile technologies offered great flexibility to learners, in terms of community, autonomy, location and relationship. Communication can be completed through mobile technology synchronously or asynchronously, which offers great flexibilities for language learners particularly.

1.2.3. Mobile technology eases learning trajectories tracing

Learners can make good use of high-tech mobile facilities to record information in the context at any time. Taking pictures, generating audio files, texting and filming with mobile devices as well as some automatic context-aware collections promise sufficient documentation. Their activities of learning language could be recorded by using mobile devices to deliver materials, albeit materials with which the learner could interact rather than receive passively (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2007). Learners' experiences and their learning contexts could be documented by these mobile devices for review, for sharing and for discussion later. Mobile Internet is a new trend to make distant synchronous discussion

about documented experiences and trajectories. Lam's (2000) work has explored how the Internet provides new transnational contexts for immigrant youth's English identity development and language socialisation. The interactions via the Internet move learners away from a sense of alienation from the foreign language to a newfound sense of expressivity and solidarity. MALL is not only taken as an aid for acquisition of language in a "piece" of time, but encourages continuous engagement in linguistic activities in diverse contexts (Ros i Solé, 2009).

1.3. Mobile web 2.0

Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., blogs, wikis, and social bookmarking) allow users to do more than just retrieve information with high levels of interactivity among people, allowing them to contribute, create and modify content collaboratively, share results and discover new and related content through informal relationships with others (Low, 2006; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). Mobile 2.0 refers to services that integrate the social web with the core aspects of mobility – personal, localised, always-on and ever-present (Jaokar, 2006). Mobile devices are deployed in Mobile 2.0 such as smartphones and multimedia feature phones that are capable of delivering rich, interactive services, as well as being able to provide access to the full range of mobile consumer touchpoints including talking, texting, capturing, sending, listening and viewing.

Among those web 2.0 services, blogs are commonly used by individuals for social purposes, the media, and organisations (Thorne & Payne, 2005). Blogging opens up the possibility of regular peer assessment, helping learning anytime anywhere with collaboration, inclusiveness, flexibility and bringing more relevance to learners. Blogs afford self-expression, creativity, moving from knowledge consumer to knowledge producer and encouraging learners' authorship and engagement relevant to a larger, interactive community (Du & Wagner 2006; Kim, 2008; McIntosh, 2006; Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008). Hanna and de Nooy (2003) believed that encouraging students to participate in non-educationally oriented online communities could develop

awareness of appropriate genres of language use and patterns. Some linguists suggest blogs as social software can be used to enhance students' reading and writing, to increase their reflection both in their native language and the target language(s) (Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Salaberry, 2001). Blogs are receiving increasingly more attention in CALL research and second language instruction (e.g., Bloch, 2007; Ducate & Lomicka, 2005; Elola & Oskoz, 2008; Fidalgo-Eick, 2006; Sykes et al., 2008). Blogging through mobile devices, which is called mobile blogging or moblogging, has started to draw our attention.

The mobile Internet gives its contribution to learning as mobile devices can be used to capture situations and helps the contextualisation of the learning resource (Rosenbloom, 2006). Moblogs offer the potential to expound these benefits by removing time and place boundaries and adding authentic and personal visual content (Chinnery, 2006). Language learning can be enhanced by moblogging with easier and expanded interaction with other people and with the contexts in the real world.

The popular individual-centered moblogging activities can now be expanded to a group of people. Individuals in different geographical locations could apply what they get from one another to different dimensions of lives. If a mobile group blog is employed, individual mobile bloggers can collect and create their own contextual knowledge and share it with other members of a certain group. By exchanging stories or authentic experiences, members who are not in the same context, especially not in the same physical space, can probe deep comprehension about the real language use through the conveyance of context, which may be called "socialising the contexts". Learners would have open access to practical use of language in a real language context at the time when they are in the classroom or in a virtual world. Petersen, Chabert and Divitini (2006) described design considerations for the creation of a mobile community blog to support groups of language learners to promote contextual and sustainable learning, which is in line with Kukulska-Hulme and Shield, (2007). The mobile group blog as a mechanism to support language learning in a community is beneficial.

2. Case studies of second language context socialising

Our research is a trial of the application of mobile group blog in helping a group of Chinese students to get deep understandings of real language use in British culture by socialising the real context and exchanging contextual information. We recorded Chinese overseas students' adaptation in real British cultural environments by students' own contributions. Their experiences and contexts were delivered to remote students in China for better understanding of Englishness. Two studies were conducted: one in the UK for current overseas Chinese students, the other in China for prospective overseas students.

2.1. The mobile group blog

We designed and developed a mobile group blog, Nottsblog, by customising Wordpress 2.2 features, especially adding one plug-in for mobile devices. This web-based mobile application can be accessed from Internet-enabled mobile devices or PCs. The blog site is a collection of a group of international students' experiences and insights of Englishness in everyday life in the UK. There are four sections in the main web page: head bar, blog entry section, navigation and administration section, and blog description and help section. A blog entry contains the title and the content in the form of text and image. At the bottom of the entry is the date of blogging, the category to which this blog entry belongs, and the number of comments. Navigation and administration contains five key features: recent post, recent comments, categories, archives, and administration.

Recent post refers to the ten latest blog entries posted to the group blog. It lists the titles of these blog entries in reverse-chronological order. Recent comments refers to the five latest comments made by participants in reverse-chronological order, although it lists only the name of the person making the comment and the title of the blog entries. For the purpose of easier blog entry searching later, the categories entry lists the names of preset categories in alphabetical order: custom, conversation, events, life, buildings, food, shopping, traveling, and studies. The archives category gives archived blog entries by month to facilitate

search. *Administration* provides the links to the registration and login webpage. Blog statement and help displays a brief description of what the blog is for and what could be posted, together with a link to the help pages (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The mobile group blog site

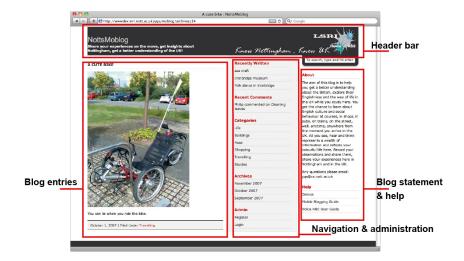


Figure 2. The interface of mobile blogging



Figure 2 above shows the mobile interface through which users first login with their username and password. Every blogger can input the title and texts of their post in the textboxes, choosing pictures that had previously been taken and stored in the mobile device. Categories were preset by the researcher in

the light of our pilot studies on overseas students' adaptation to the life in the UK (Shao, 2010). After categories and pictures are chosen, individual bloggers in this group can express what they see, what they experience and what they feel about their new life in the form of texts and images, in their favorite language straight to the mobile group blog site from mobile devices. All these blog entries were displayed in reverse-chronological order and visible for all bloggers.

2.2. Current overseas Chinese students in the UK

We first conducted a study for current overseas students in the UK. This study is not part of any institutional courses and was conducted informally in the real world in their everyday life. There was no curriculum and assessment syllabus for their contribution to the blog. Twelve newly arrived Chinese overseas students were recruited, aged from 19 to 25, who joined undergraduate or postgraduate programs of different subjects in the UK. All participants were from the Chinese Mainland and none had any experiences of mobile blogging before but all had their own personal blogs.

Each participant was loaned a Nokia N80 mobile phone for this study. They kept the Nokia phones for one month and were asked to do mobile group blogging as freely as they could, at any time and anywhere. Language learning was not emphasised in their activities and they were free to use their first or second language. They were encouraged to tell their own stories, feelings and capture any characteristics of British culture. All individual blog entries would be displayed in the blog site publicly.

They were also asked to read through other people's blog entries and to give their comments. The researcher observed their activities online and gave some advice to individual bloggers, acting as a member of the group particularly at the beginning, by giving a few examples of blog entries as semi-scaffoldings to the bloggers. Regular monitoring of the blog site revealed that some bloggers deviated from the original blog topic so messages were sent to pull them back. Log files were collected, pre and post interview and focus groups

were conducted with all participants. They were asked about their experiences of blogging and their comments and suggestions for improving this mobile group blog system.

2.3. Prospective overseas students in China

The other one-day study was implemented in China. Twenty-three Chinese students of the Southwest University in Chongqing who intended to study abroad were recruited to be the mobile group blog readers. The purpose of this study was to find out how the contents on the group blog site contributed by mobloggers in the UK could benefit students in a completely different cultural and linguistic context. Thirteen participants were female and ten male. Ages ranged from 19 to 23.

Pre-reading focus groups and follow-up focus groups were conducted. Participants were then divided into six groups and asked to read through the group blog. Each group spent about thirty minutes on the reviews, during which time their conversations about the blog site were recorded by audio recorders. These students were then asked about their impressions of the blog, understandings about Britain and perceptions of using English.

3. Findings from the study in the UK

During the four weeks, 216 posts and 109 comments were submitted. The blog site received 1,126 hits. In this section, we list some findings of the mobile blogging activities. More findings are available in "mobile group blogging in learning" (Shao, 2010).

3.1. Time and space of moblogging

Figure 3 below reveals times when each moblogger submitted blog entries from their mobile phones during the study period of four weeks. These distributed moments for incidental observations, captures and collections of incidental

happenings and contextual information also indicate they continued learning out of school time in informal settings frequently.

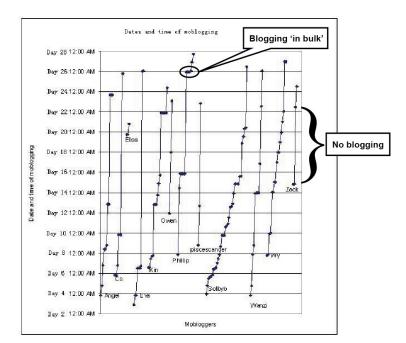


Figure 3. Frequency of mobile blogging

In Figure 3, the dots represent the time when blog entries were submitted and the lines between dots represent the duration when there was no moblogging activity. Those superimposed dots indicate bloggers posted several blog entries in bunches at one time. Figure 3 also implies that the majority of these participants did mobile blogging continuously though not regularly. Moblogging activity became intense in the second and third weeks. There is an interesting phenomenon that 'in bulk' moblogging often occurred in the evening. It was identified that 47% of bloggers posted blogs in the evening and during the night (after 7pm and before 2am); 39% blogged in the afternoon (after 12pm and before 7pm); and 14% in the morning (between 6am and 12pm). In the interviews, all participants claimed they often did moblogging in their dorm in the evening

after classes. Although photos could be taken at any time, texts required time to type. They reported they also did moblogging on trains and buses, in the park, cafe and some public places. Participants submitted blogs only when they had enough time either strolling or sitting down. They did moblogging during their leisure time out of class.

3.2. Underlying shift from Chinese to English

A further phenomenon in the group blog was the unconscious shift in language use from mother tongue to English. Some students took the mobile group blogging as a process of storytelling, in Chinese or in English. Figure 4 and Figure 5 show that these texts were in Chinese with some English words included. The earlier blog entry in Figure 4 (posted October 12th) had many Chinese characters while the blog entry in Figure 5 (posted November 2nd) had only three Chinese characters. This may indicate the author's adaptation to language, a potential transition from Chinese to English.

2007 October : NottsMoblog + http://wwwdev.mrl.nott.ac.uk/yqs/moblog/archives/date/2007/10/page/12 RSS € Q+ Google Categories Mobile Blogging Guide SAY SOMETHING ABOUT UK Nokia N80 User Guide Conversation 到英国还不到 1 个月,生活还在适应中,到这里最大的感受就是现实和理想的差距,来之前想的满满的,我要干什么去,我要学到什么,感受什么,但是现在好象什么都没有着边. Events 也许我们都把英国艇的太好了,把出国毁炼自己规的太简单了,来之朝学姐就告诉我们说。 你们一定金 shock,当时觉得用这个词也太夸张了呢,现在想来。shock 还是不对,就 我感觉,那不是一刹那的震撼什么的,是一种更深,更长久的感觉,不能对别人说清,但太 Buildings Food 家都有感受到。 Shopping 我们对这种感觉的解释都是归类于 culture issue. 从了解 比较、接受了排斥,到客观的 认识,最后到自信的享受着自己生活的方式。无法说清到最后当我们从新回到家乡会是处在 Travelling 哪个阶段,说不清,我要说的是什么,只是想到了回去的那个时候 Studies October 12, 2007 | Filed Under Life | 2 Comments Archives October 2008 November 2007 October 2007 香港是国籍吗???? September 2007 昨天晚上宿舍突然警笛大鸣,被迫下楼避难。大家都站在楼门口,闲得无聊就随便聊天。我 听到两个女牛在聊天。其中一个是北京的。问另一个是哪里人。会不会说国语(另外一个女 生一看就是中国人).那个女生很吊拽地说: I come from Hong Kong, I can't speak Admin mandarin. 我在一旁看得就很郁闷,很想上去问她说: Are you proud of that? 我知道自 Register 工要名其約的数国情节又上字7,可我不能验试。 我想,中国还是将对我发展,此时有一天,有人问一个香港人的国籍时,ta能够自豪地说:我是中国人、我来自香港(就像我们中的任何一个被问到国籍都只会说中国而不会去说自己那个省的名字一样)...好想快点看到那一天 Login October 12 2007 | Filed Under Life | 5 Comments

Figure 4. Blog example of mixed-language

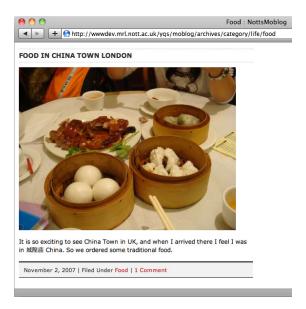


Figure 5. Blog example of language transition

When we have a closer insight of their activities, in the first week, many blog entries were written in Chinese, but gradually we saw some English and Chinese mixed sentences by the end of the first week. Later, when more moblog entries were found, fewer and fewer blogs were written in Chinese. From the beginning of the third week, English texts started replacing Chinese texts, even for those who wrote traditional blogs using desktops/laptops.

In interviews and focus groups participants indicated that they had not been aware of this shift in language use. Some explained that they had started to adapt to life in Nottingham as language is one form of the adaptation, as stated in the following example:

Perhaps because now we have to write coursework in English. And everyday we have lectures in English, talking in English. We are gradually getting used to speaking, reading and listening to English. Then unconsciously, we start writing blogs in English. (Wanzi, postgraduate, female)

It can be assumed that speaking and writing more in English promoted their adjustment to new situations. They admitted their adaptation was spontaneous and was affected by the local culture and living environment.

3.3. Interactions in this mobile group blog community

The mobile group blog formed an online virtual community for the Chinese students, most of whom were previously unknown to one another. In this community these 'strangers' started conversation in contexts very similar to social life. Everything they shared and discussed was about what happened in everyday life, about their authentic collections and creations coming from the social contexts where they were currently in. Within the group blog, each participant shared their experiences, encouraged people who encountered problems, answered questions and discussed phenomena observed. They had communication through the mobile group blog, which afforded an online communicative context.

The findings of the interviews show that in this relative extended context, these overseas Chinese students found it comfortable and less stressful to talk about their authentic lives and true feelings. This mobile group blog therefore can easily record their real experiences, keep their trajectories in the real English culture and maintain these documents for later review or reflections. The following example shown in Figure 6 gives responses to a blog entry posted by Eva. Her blog conveys how she felt heart-broken about her uncle's death.

Three other people and the blog author were engaged in free interactions, expressing their experiences in everyday life either in Chinese or in English. The current overseas students studying in the UK in this group obviously owned a sense of belonging to a community. In this virtual community, they could have good conversations either synchronously on the move anytime with mobile devices or asynchronously with PCs.

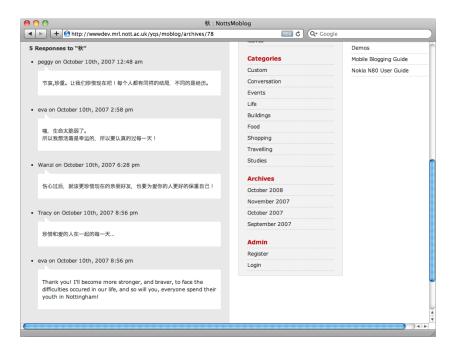


Figure 6. Example of discussion through comments

4. Findings from the study in China

Participants found that the information on the mobile group blog site supplemented traditional supports for understanding British life. The result of pre-reading conversation showed that they had some doubts and fear of language use and predicted some difficulties.

I guess there could be some barriers for me to get into the local community, such as language, culture, aloneness, new situations and so on. (Wei, postgraduate, female)

It indicates that the prospective overseas students were quite aware and uncertain about the use of language in the target cultural contexts. They

were not confident to apply what they learned in the classroom in China to the real target language context. The collection of authentic first-hand experiences afforded by learners in the real language surroundings seems to be a fundamental resource.

4.1. Context socialised through the mobile group blog

The mobile group blog brought the vivid contexts far away in the UK in front of them. The contextual information in the form of texts and images was delivered from the students in the UK to those in China. Below are some examples of comments on the studying abroad contexts that the bloggers stayed in.

Beautiful environment, clean and tidy. (Guo, undergraduate, female)

We also have buildings of European styles, but not harmony with its environment. (Zhang, undergraduate, male)

These blog readers far away in China could get an overall impression about the contexts they would be in, such as food, shopping, transportation, study and communication with local people. For example, Figure 7 illustrates how students in the UK handled their coursework. Students in China learned about the future learning context by reading this blog entry, which may not be easily imagined only through texts.

The coursework box looks interesting. The method of handing in coursework is special. (Bao, Undergraduate, female)

More examples could be found on the mobile group blog site delivering information about contexts in the UK by the mobloggers in the UK to the readers in China in the second study. The authentic information collected and submitted by current overseas students in the UK provided contextual information for students in China to better understand about studying abroad, British culture and therefore promote their sense of learning English.

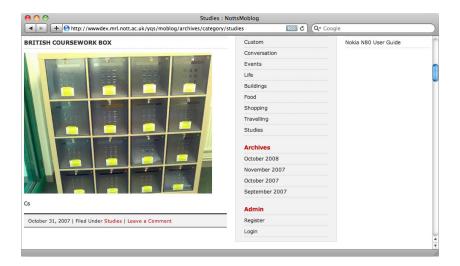


Figure 7. Blog entry of 'the coursework box'

4.2. Language capability and confidence

For the prospective overseas students in China, language is also a barrier for some of them in understanding the contents of the blog site. Some participants complained about their difficulties in understanding English.

I am not good at English thus I can't understand some sentences, especially the name of some places they mentioned in the blog. Really don't know what they are talking about. Could you force them to write in Chinese? (Chen, postgraduate, male)

It implied that compared to the students in China, the bloggers in the UK were much more confident to talk and write in English. From the quote above we can conclude that more contextual information was requested by these blog readers. Obviously, the lack of contextual information would hamper learners' understandings of the target contexts and the use of language. The missing contextual information obviously brought difficulties to the students in China to understand the communicative and social contexts.

On the other hand, it would be reasonable to start the language transition from learners' mother tongue by joining in the online mobile community to develop their understanding despite their low proficiency in the English language. As we found in the study in the UK, the gradual transitions from Chinese to English also indicated an informal way of improving overseas students' language efficacy by using social software.

4.3. Interaction with the mobile bloggers

One solution to solve the problem of missing contextual information is to increase the interactions between the students in the UK and students in China via the mobile group blog. Students in China in this study asked for more bloggers in the UK to take part in the mobile blogging. They became motivated and enthusiastic to learn a second language in the context as bloggers do. Those bloggers' continuous engagement and contributions were in great demand.

It's better if we can join the group blog and have direct interactions with people who are now there. In this way we can have more doubts clarified and problems solved.

Set up a big community and ask more people to join in, for more discussions.

The overseas students' real trajectories of studying and living in the second language cultural contexts were good resources for second-language learners in their home country. They could also learn from the trajectories by observations on the blog site and interactions with those learners already in the target country.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

Successful language transition and promotion of second language efficacy were found as students in the UK submitted blog entries in Chinese and then

in English. Students in China became more motivated and enthusiastic to learn English. The need raised for more communication within these two groups indicated the opportunities for learning a second language in a mobile online community, in and across the contexts in the physical and online world. The mobile group blog was found to be a feasible mechanism to assist informal language learning, especially keeping learning trajectories and socialisation of learning contexts. This could be verified from our research in the aspects approached below.

5.1. Mobile group blog forms an on-the-move online community

Students in the two studies were found actively engaged in the mobile group blogging. Students admitted they had the sense of belonging to the online community by sharing their experiences and having discussion with blog users. Although most participants stayed indoors to do their moblogs (Figure 3) or even submitted blogs in bulks and were still in the habit of writing blogs as a diary, about one-third of the participants tried blogging outdoors on the spot. The flexible submitting and getting information through the mobile group blog on-the-go brought the form of on-the-move online community. From the interviews, bloggers in the UK unfolded the desire of having local native speakers as experts, talking and learning more from them. In a further sense, scaling up this study to more international students would open up more beneficial interactions.

5.2. Mobile group blog as the carrier of learning trajectories

The mobile group blog not only records individual experiences in the real world, but also tracks their communications with other people on the mobile group blog community. Reflection could be done by both individual learner and the group of blog users. That means, individual mobloggers can do self-reflection on their own productions via their mobile devices any time anywhere and members in this group can do peer/group reflection on the community productions remotely. This mobile online community pushes learners back to the real world, searching and generating authentic artifacts

and evidence through their own understanding of the real context, which could be shared instantly and globally (Shao, Deng, Crook, & Rodden, 2009).

5.3. Mobile group blog as the medium of context transition

Based on the interactions and communication among different roles in the mobile group blog community, the contexts of the overseas students in the UK were transferred to students in China for better understanding of English cultural environment. The mobile bloggers and their readers socialised the contexts, exchanging mutual learning contexts for their linguistic development remotely. By expressing and discussing about their respective own contexts, adding more cultural features in second language environments would help learners have better understanding of second language use and consequently improve their language efficacy.

5.4. Instant transnational communication

One of the limitations of this study is that we did not manage the real crossnational immediate communication within those students in the UK and in China. From the feedback of the students in China we can conclude that communication is strongly demanded and necessary. It is beneficial for second language learners in their home country to get useful authentic information about the target cultural contexts. By socialising the context, this cross-border community could benefit not only their present life but also their learning in the future.

We argue it would be more effective that learners in the home country can get immediate feedback and interactions with people in the second-language cultural context, to answer questions and remove doubts in good time. This is applicable either for adults or for adolescents learning second language informally in or out of school. For example, students in exchange programs studying in the target language country could play the role of mobloggers while those students in their own countries could learn through the mobile group blog site.

5.5. Scaffolding in mobile online community

In informal learning, there is a great risk that learners would get lost if they were put in a purely social context without any guidance. Learning will only be effective if the students are given educational scaffolding on "how to create a good post, what information to include in a good post, how to give feedback and respond to a feedback" (Huann, John, & Yuen, 2005, p. 6). In our research, the researcher acted as the facilitator and guide. Learners came to rely upon one another, as much or more than the guide or facilitator, in the production of messages, expression of their experiences and exchange of knowledge and contexts. The scaffolding could also be supported by senior learners or native speakers at times, producing authentic contexts and assistance for learning. Chances are that we promote this informal language learning to more structured and formal learning by establishing an adaptive-curriculum in this kind of mobile online community. We may have 'teacher-determined' topics at the very beginning and gradually hand over the control to learners themselves gearing their learning progress.

This research has taken only an initial step towards the application of the mobile group blog in assisting overseas study. This is small-scale mobile group blogging, where limited amount of information was generated. Further research or practices can include the exploration of application in informal learning, formal learning, or the transitions between formal and informal settings for language learning.

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