

THE USE OF MOBILE DEVICES OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AMONG FEMALE EFL STUDENTS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

English language proficiency is an increasingly vital skill for employment in Saudi Arabia. However, compulsory English as a foreign language courses at all levels of education have only produced inadequate results. One of the issues consistently raised as a barrier to effective EFL learning is the use of passive learning pedagogies and the lack of self-directed or deep learning in the Saudi EFL curricula. Increasingly, educators globally are turning towards technology to engage their students in more effective learning and they acknowledge that, in order for technologically-enhanced pedagogies to be effective, it is important for them to be congruent with the ways in which learners actually use their devices. However, current research has failed to explore how students use technologies to learn outside of the classroom. Therefore, this research aims to identify how university students at Saudi University taking a compulsory preparatory EFL course use their mobile devices to practice and learn English outside of the classroom. To do this, three phases of data collection are used, one quantitative and two qualitative. Phase one is a quantitative online survey measuring what mobile devices students use for learning, and what English language learning activities they engage in with those devices. Phase two involves the collection of 25 multi-modal journals over a two-week period using the WhatsApp messaging platform to collect text and pictures of participants using their devices to learn in real time. Phase three uses both a focus group interview with the 25 journal participants and individual interviews with each in order to explore the recorded activities in more depth and relate them to models of self-directed learning. Thus, this research aims to collect rich data from multiple perspectives on how, where and why university students use mobile devices for learning outside the classroom in Saudi Arabia, in order to develop effective in-classroom pedagogies.

KEYWORDS

Self -Directed Learning, Mobile Learning, Outside of the Classroom

1. INTRODUCTION

This research explores the intersection between three dynamic and contemporary areas of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research: Mobile Learning (m-learning), Self-Directed Learning (SDL) and Learning outside the Classroom. Its primary aim is to explore how university level students use mobile devices to learn and practice English as a Foreign Language outside of the classroom in Saudi Arabia, how they perceive these activities and whether these activities can be accurately described as Self-Directed Learning according to current models of SDL. The results of this research are expected to contribute to both the development of new pedagogies in Saudi Arabia and new methodological and empirical knowledge to the field of EFL teaching and learning through its innovative use of multi-modal journals for data collection.

1.1 Background to Study

Despite being a compulsory part of intermediate, secondary and higher education in Saudi Arabia, EFL proficiency among young people in Saudi Arabia remains low, and courses are producing consistently inadequate results (Arabai 2016; Al-Nasser 2015; Khan 2011; Alrashidi & Phan 2015). English language proficiency has become vital to employability in Saudi Arabia, as a result of the economy's reliance on

Anglophone foreign oil companies (Al-Abed Al Haq & Smadi 1996; Alhaisoni 2013; Golum Faruk 2014). English language education, therefore, is a priority of the National Transformation Program, Vision 2030 (Vision 2030 2016).

One of the issues that is commonly raised by researchers and teachers in Saudi Arabia as a barrier to successful EFL learning is the over-reliance on passive learning strategies in Saudi Arabian classrooms, strategies that are teacher-led and only encourage surface learning (Al-Seghayer 2015; Al-Seghayer 2014). There has, therefore, been a push within Saudi Arabia to formally encourage pedagogical strategies that will encourage self-directed and deep learning, including the use of mobile and e-learning.

Mobile learning, in particular, is seen as an effective and engaging method of enhancing EFL teaching and learning and fostering SDL. It has been noted that mobile learning can be particularly effective for EFL teaching and learning in contexts where students have limited natural opportunities to use English outside of the classroom (Richards 2015). However, researchers have highlighted that, in order for a mobile learning initiative to be successful, it has to be congruent with the ways in which students already use their mobile devices (Lai & Gu 2011). Furthermore, as mobile learning is not currently formally embraced by the Saudi Arabian Ministry for Education, and is therefore not a part of the formal EFL curriculum, it is only possible to explore how students are using their devices for learning outside of the classroom.

1.2 Study Rationale

English is the *lingua franca* of business in Saudi Arabia as a result of the predominance of the foreign oil industry in the Saudi Arabian economy. At this time, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a national transformation which explicitly aims to increase the size of the private sector in the country and increase the number of Saudi Arabian nationals employed by the private sector (Vision 2030 2016). This includes plans to provide “citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the needs of the future labor market” (Vision 2030 2016, p.57). A core necessary skill is English language proficiency. As a result, it is a key aim of the Saudi Arabian government to improve EFL education at all levels.

Notably, however, almost the entire body of current research has explored EFL teaching and learning only from the personal experiences of EFL teachers or general cultural commentators (Alrabai 2016; Al-Nasser 2015; Khan 2011; Alrashidi & Phan 2015). Very little has explored the perspectives of students, or considered their current attempts to learn or practice English outside of the classroom.

These conversations around EFL learning and the importance of English in Saudi Arabia have occurred at the same time as the worldwide digital revolution. Saudi Arabia is becoming a nation connected by mobile devices (IPSOS, 2012). Social media and messaging application usage is rising across the Arab world, and most users interact with social media on their smartphones (Dubai School of Government, 2015). In Saudi Arabia, 75% of smartphone owners use them to access social networks, while the social messaging network WhatsApp is used by 41% of social media users (IPSOS, 2012; Dubai School of Government, 2015). Initial studies on the use of mobile learning in Saudi Arabian classrooms have been positive and are likely to increase (Abu-al-aish & Love 2013; Al-Fahad 2009; Chanchary & Islam 2011; Alsaleem 2013).

Understanding how students are currently using their mobile devices for learning and practicing English as a Foreign Language is important for the successful development of effective mobile learning pedagogies in the classroom (Lai & Gu 2011). At the same time, however, it is equally important to understand how far their current practices align with models of SDL in order to understand the effectiveness of these activities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study takes place in Saudi Arabia, which has a unique political, cultural and historical context. Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 but did not encourage the learning of EFL for many decades as a result of the rigid religious culture that rejected the Western world, including their languages. The first EFL curriculum was developed in 1980 and is still controlled by the Ministry of Education, which ensures that EFL teaching meets the moral, cultural and religious concerns of Saudi Arabia (Al-Seghayer 2014). Among the strategies implemented by the Ministry of Education to improve EFL outcomes at all levels of education is the use of information technologies in the classroom (Golum Faruk 2014). Implementation has, however, been inconsistent and hampered by lack of teacher training and lack of access to ICT resources (Al Gamdi

& Samarji 2016). Therefore, it is learning outside the classroom that has been primarily transformed by advances in information technologies. (Rashid & Asghar 2016; Candy 2004). Indeed studies in Hong Kong and Australia have demonstrated that significant numbers of students are using their mobile and internet devices for SDL outside of the classroom to regulate and facilitate their learning both inside and outside the classroom (Lai & Gu 2011; Farley et al. 2015). This is particularly the case in language learning, the purpose of which is to use the target language in natural contexts. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that solely classroom-based learning of languages is likely to be ineffective (Benson & Reinders 2011). Many students globally, however, have found ways to use the internet to use and practice English in natural contexts (Benson & Reinders 2011; Kuure 2011; Beatty 2015; Richards 2015). Notably, however, students do not always conceptualize their use of English online as EFL learning, a phenomenon which highlights the complexities of learning outside the classroom (Benson & Reinders 2011; Kuure 2011).

Mobile learning is strongly related to learning outside the classroom. Mobile learning refers exclusively to learning that occurs while the learner is not in a classroom or fixed location, using a mobile device (Kukulka-Hulme 2009; Kukulka-Hulme & Shield 2008). It is therefore dislodged from formal locations or specific times, flexible and self-regulated. However, it remains almost entirely unstudied within a Saudi Arabian, or Gulf, context.

If students in Saudi Arabia are using mobile devices outside of the classroom for EFL learning then a question arises concerning whether these activities can be conceptualized as effective Self-Directed Learning. Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is defined as a “process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources or learning, choosing and implementing and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles 1975, p.18). The most commonly used model of SDL is Garrison’s (1997), which conceptualized three necessary dimensions for effective SDL: self-monitoring (responsibility), motivation (entering/task) and self-management (control) (Garrison 1997, p.22). SDL is therefore conceptualized as a complex interplay between cognitive, metacognitive and behavioral processes where multiple dimensions are necessary for effective and useful learning (Navarro & Thornton 2011; Bonyadi et al. 2012; Loyens et al. 2008)

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This primary aim of this research project is to identify how EFL students in higher education are currently using mobile devices for EFL learning outside of the classroom. To meet this aim, it will answer the following research questions:

1. In what specific activities do students engage to learn EFL on their mobile devices outside of the classroom?
2. How do the activities identified by the participants relate to models of SDL?
3. What potential drivers of and challenges to using mobile devices outside of the classroom for EFL learning are identified by participants?
4. How do the activities identified by the participants as being used to learn English outside of the classroom relate to the participants’ in-class EFL experiences?

To answer these questions, this research uses a mixed methods design with three phases of data collection, one quantitative and two qualitative. Data will be collected from students in their preparatory year at Saudi University taking the two compulsory English language modules. The overall cohort is approximately 4,000 preparatory year students. Only female students will be eligible for this research because of the cultural norms of Saudi Arabia which prevent personal contact with male participants.

Phase one of the research will be a quantitative online survey, which will aim for 450 respondents. The survey consists of 45 questions, the majority of which use a 7-point Likert scale to measure the frequency with which participants use different mobile devices (such as smart phones, tablets and e-readers) to engage in specific learning activities such as watching videos in English, using social media in English, reading English articles and so on.

Phase two will involve 25 participants, drawn from the survey respondents, who will complete multi-modal journals using the WhatsApp messaging platform for a period of two weeks, documenting their use of mobile devices for English learning in real time using pictures and text. Participants will be asked to

screenshot or photograph their activity and record it in a WhatsApp message along with a small piece of text explaining the activity and describing the location of the activity. Multi-modal journaling has been chosen here instead of online journaling because this phase of research will require participants to capture and upload their activities as they are doing them, taking advantage of the flexibility and mobility of mobile devices, rather than waiting until they are at a desktop computer to write formal journal entries (Gourlay et al. 2015; Gourlay 2010). The aim of the multi-modal journals is to collect rich, thick qualitative data about the precise EFL learning activities that participants engage in using mobile devices, how often each activity occurs and what these activities mean to the participants.

In phase three, these 25 participants will be invited to participate in both a focus group interview and individual semi-structured interviews. These interviews will focus on the contents of the multi-modal journals and will aim to relate the activities recorded in the journals to models of SDL in order to explore their effectiveness and explore the meaning and purpose of the activities in more depth. The focus group interview will be used as the basis for the development of interview schedules for the individual interviews.

The data in each phase will be analyzed before the next phase begins. At the end of the data collection phases, all the data will be collated and analyzed as a whole in order to comprehensively answer the research questions and produce useful and appropriate recommendations for a Saudi Arabian context.

4. CONCLUSION

This research both contributes to ongoing theoretical conversations about SDL, mobile learning and learning outside of the classroom, and to policy priorities within Saudi Arabia. It is also methodologically innovative, both in its focus on students' learning activities outside of the classroom and in the use of multi-modal journals, which have not been used before. It is anticipated that this project will produce data that will contribute to the development of new and innovative EFL pedagogies in Saudi Arabia at a time of national transformation when English learning is a national priority. At the same time, it is anticipated that the results of this research will contribute valuable methodological, empirical and theoretical findings to the field of EFL teaching and learning globally, across multiple areas of research.

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