

Examining student perceptions about smartphones to understand lack of acceptance of mobile-assisted language learning

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Abstract. Problematic smartphone usage has been widely recognized (e.g. Al-Barashidi, Bouazza, & Jabur, 2015; Chóliz, 2012). However, few researchers have investigated the relationship between students' feelings towards their smartphones and their acceptance of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). This exploratory study of thirty-six Japanese high-school students sought to understand their overwhelming reluctance to use the popular language-learning application, Duolingo. Fewer than half of the students used the application, with several failing to even install it on their device. Small group interview discussions were conducted to clarify and gain insight into the participants' feelings and motivations about the use of their smartphones.

Keywords: technology acceptance, MALL, mobile-assisted language learning, smartphones.

1. Introduction

Smartphones present enormous difficulties for the teachers of the 36 Japanese high school students at the center of this study. All participants have had a smartphone for between one and seven years ($M=3.39$ years), as do some 81.4% of Japanese teenagers (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2017). Rather than fight against the students' desire to keep their phones turned on and within easy reach during lessons, it was decided instead to integrate smartphone usage into classes. Duolingo, a popular free language-learning application, was carefully

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introduced to the students. Often successfully adopted due to its accessibility via smartphone, gamified interface, and variety of activities available (Munday, 2016), it seemed ideal for these students. Duolingo has been criticized due to its lack of pragmatic content, but has been shown to be effective if used in addition to classroom learning for beginners (Ahmed, 2016). In the present study, however, engagement was minimal with some participants simply pretending to install Duolingo in the two class periods that were set aside for the purpose, and more than half not using it at all in the following eight weeks. This article describes the qualitative study that was undertaken to explore whether students' relationship with their phones could account for this failure.

2. Methods

Six randomly assigned group interviews were held, audio-recorded, and later transcribed. Gender balance was maintained between groups of six members. All participants (36 Japanese high school students) were given the option to not take part in this study, and privacy was carefully maintained. Discussions were in the participants' native Japanese, and every effort was made not to influence their responses. It should be noted that Duolingo was intentionally not mentioned by the researcher so as to be able to judge whether it emerged as an important theme. Similarly, discussions were not guided by the researcher unless the participants were off-topic. Only the following very general prompts were used to start the discussion and to get participants back on-topic, or when conversation stalled:

- When did you get your smartphone?
- What do you like about your smartphone?
- What don't you like about your smartphone?

3. Results

Four major themes emerged: convenience, information, contact, and overuse.

3.1. Convenience

The most common theme mentioned by participants was how convenient life with a smartphone has become. 'Convenient' occurred 30 times in interviews with

23 individual speakers. Approximately a third of the total discussion time was dedicated to this topic. Four of the six groups (A, C, D, E) talked about how easy it is to listen to music using the website YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>) when they are able to connect to wifi. Another conversation thread in Groups A, D, and E was the convenience of being able to listen to music on their smartphones, rather than a dedicated player.

Another example raised in five of the six groups (A, B, D, E, F) that many students agreed with was about how having a smartphone has made commuting easier because they can check up-to-date train schedules. This allows them more flexibility in planning.

3.2. Information

This theme is also connected with the smartphone's ability to provide information and was raised by nine individuals, representing all groups. These participants described using their smartphones to understand the content of lessons or what people around them are discussing, to (1) check what was said on a television program the previous evening so as to be able to join a conversation, (2) explore song lyrics so as not to appear foolish when discussing the meaning of a song, or (3) verify the closing time of a particular store. Only one participant raised the idea that the smartphone is a useful tool when finding information to complete homework. The other members of his group teased him about this, perhaps showing their own disregard for academic study and the importance of doing homework.

3.3. Contact

All groups discussed how their smartphones meant that they could readily contact parents, siblings, friends, coaches, teammates, and after-school employers. One male participant in Group C raised how he could comfortably send text messages to his father. Another member of the group said that his father lived apart from the family, too. The first speaker said that this was not the case, but that it was somehow easier to talk to his father by text than face-to-face. His comments were acknowledged by the group with comments of affirmation. A female participant further added that it is always a good plan to prepare her mother for truly difficult topics by sending a text before she wants to talk to her about something important. In line with Christensen's (2009) research, these three examples illustrate the role that the mobile phone plays as an interface between the participants and their parents in allowing for easier communication.

Four participants (in Groups A, C, F) mentioned that they had finally managed to persuade their parent/s to purchase them a smartphone as it would allow for easier communication. In Groups C and F, the discussion then turned to how some parents had purchased devices for the participants without being requested to for this very reason.

3.4. Overuse

The final theme that emerged in the group discussions was about smartphone overuse and the impact that such overuse could have. One male participant described lying in bed using various applications and websites until he drifts into sleep. When his smartphone buzzes with a new notification, he wakes to read it and uses his device until he drifts off to sleep again. The other five students in his group listened carefully, nodding in agreement. It should be noted that this participant did not identify himself as having an issue with overuse.

A full 25% talked about problems controlling their own smartphone use:

“I use it more than I need to, and I don’t really like that”.

“Once I touch it, I can’t stop, and that’s a problem for me”.

“I have to study, but I use my phone. At that time, having a phone is a problem for me”.

In three separate groups a participant used the word “addicted” or “addictive”, and other members of those groups nodded. Whether this was in agreement or sympathy, is unclear.

“I’m afraid that I’m getting addicted”.

“It’s highly addictive and I can’t resist”.

“I’m so addicted that it’s like one of my organs”.

4. Discussion

Despite a total of 32 ten-minute sessions of lesson time having been allocated to Duolingo, neither the application or its usage in class was mentioned by a single participant in the group interviews. Very few students used the application throughout the semester, and several did not even install it. There are numerous possible interpretations, but perhaps most pertinent here is not that the students

did not value Duolingo, or that they did not recognize the importance of the time given in each class to work on it. Rather, for these students, smartphones are not a tool to be used for formal education, but a personal helpmeet that they control and administer themselves, as shown by three of the four themes – convenience, information, and contact – that emerged in their interviews. The fourth theme, about overuse of smartphones, was a problem expressed by 25% of the class. All but one of the students who did not install Duolingo fall into this group. Perhaps it can be seen that because they already feel that their phones are too addictive, they do not want to increase their smartphone usage. Future research will explore this hypothesis, with a survey and further group discussion interviews planned for early in the next school semester that will probe the specific issues of overuse and addiction.

5. Conclusions

By examining the participants' largely unprompted small group discussions about their smartphones, the present study offers a glimpse into how Japanese teenagers feel about their ever-present devices. The picture that has emerged – that participants view their phones as personal helpmeets – allows for a much more targeted selection of an application for language learning in the future. It is therefore recommended that rather than choose applications based on popularity or availability, educators select materials that answer not only the academic goals of the institution, but also the learning needs of the students who will use them.

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