LEARNING THROUGH MOBILE: EXPLORING THE VIEWS OF POLYTECHNIC ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore how polytechnic English as Second Language Learning (ESL) learners perceived the use of mobile technology in supporting and enhancing their learning. Students from four selected polytechnics were requested to respond to two open-ended questions regarding the advantages and challenges of using mobile technology in learning ESL. A total of 194 students responded to the questions. The responses provided by the students showed that they agreed mobile technology could be a potential tool to support and enhance their learning. Nevertheless, majority of them stated concerns about not having internet access or connection, inaccurate information and high level of English used on the internet. This implies that in order for mobile technology to be employed or fully utilised for English as Second Language (ESL) learning, it is important for polytechnic institutions to overcome the challenges to ensure the affordances of mobile technology could be fully optimised, including the consideration of the pedagogical implications in ESL context.

INTRODUCTION

In English language teaching and learning, there is a documented research path, reflecting the adoption of technology to support English language learning. The two predominant areas of research are Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL). Both CALL and MALL have impacted language acquisition, distinguishing a modern language classroom and a traditional language classroom in language teaching and learning. Since technology holds great potential for significantly improving second language learning (Egbert, 2009), language educators have looked onto electronic technologies as a way to enhance second language development (Chapelle, 2001; Salaberry, 2001). Apparently, the use of mobile technology in learning has started to attract interest from educators (Rashidah Rahamat et al., 2011). Despite the wide use of computers in language learning, mobile devices are now seen as potential tools in this field. The fast growth of new generation of mobile devices, such as mobile phones and tablets, has increased the great potential of the use of mobile in becoming an effective tool for learning (Supyan et al., 2012).

Today, mobile technology is changing the landscape of language learning and is seen as the next frontier being researched for its potential in enhancing the teaching and learning of ESL. The portability of mobile devices is believed to bring new methods that can shape learning styles and pedagogies which could become more personalised and allow learners to learn on the move (Ros i Solé et al., 2010). Additionally, the personal nature of mobile phones and their portability suggest that learning through mobile may have even

bigger potential than e-learning.   Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how polytechnic ESL learners perceived the use of mobile technology in supporting and enhancing their learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, the reception of learning through mobile is seen as encouraging (Ismail et al. 2010; Norazah et al., 2010). Thus, it is proven that mobile technology is becoming widespread and research in this area is urgently needed.   While the decisions are made, technology continues to impact students' life inside and outside the classrooms to an extent that they use technology to enhance their classroom learning experiences.   Mobile technology has become an important tool in the teaching and learning process. Studies have shown that technology, especially the use of mobile devices, does bring positive impacts in English language learning.   Chinnery (2006) pointed out that mobile devices such as mobile phones, PDAs and iPods are all possible tools for enhancing language learning. ESL and other languages are also being taught using mobile devices (Ally, 2009).

There are studies which have successfully used mobile devices for teaching pronunciations and listening skills (e.g. Uther et al., 2005) and also for teaching English tenses to ESL learners which have shown significant positive outcomes. Kennedy et al. (2008) claimed that mobile devices are suitable for vocabulary learning and that the ubiquitous usage of mobile phones among college students also makes it a practical choice for research on mobile learning.   Additionally, mobile devices have the prospect of supporting the subject of English Language and would bring added value. Many innovative applications incorporating mobile technology have also been attempted in the subject of foreign language learning and English language learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005). Various studies (e.g. Ally, 2009) have shown an explosion of interest in using mobile devices for English language teaching and learning.   Research has shown that mobile devices have some characteristics which allow them to be suitable tools for modern education in terms of providing exploring and sharing learning contents, which characteristics can be summarised as portability, functionality, ubiquity, utility and connectivity. These characteristics have definitely a lot to offer for learners of English as Second Language (ESL).

The unique educational attributes of mobile devices are seen as the affordances that what mobile learning has to offer for ESL learners. Apart from that, mobile devices are designed to provide a lot of functionalities that can be used for supporting and enhancing teaching and learning methods, like messaging, games, internet access and multimedia convergence (Khaddage et al., 2009). Additionally, due to its portability characteristic, the use of mobile devices removes temporal and spatial limitations of learning and allows students and teachers to organise their time more effectively by extending access to course related information, communication, and collaboration (Naismith et al., 2004). Continual connectivity to information encourages more flexible access and engagement in learning and knowledge sharing (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2007).

Nevertheless, the most important characteristic in the use of mobile devices for learning ESL is mobility, which gives the students freedom to practice learning anytime. Using their mobile devices, they can extend learning environment beyond the classroom setting. Learning through mobile phones outside the classroom has the advantage of better exploiting the learner's free time; even the students on the move can improve their learning skills (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2007). Mobile devices provide learning materials with movable, flexible and independently controlled environments (Juniu, 2002). Mobility adds new options to the activities that can be enhanced regarding to the portability and the features of mobile devices (Naismith et al., 2004).   However, despite the potential affordances, issues have been raised continuously on the constraints which are considered barriers in implementing the use of mobile learning. The following section discusses the constraints that ESL learners could be facing in using mobile learning for learning English

language.

Despite unique advantages, there are some constraints that limit the capability of mobile devices. In the aspect of usability, screen size, battery life, storage, and slow downloading are several constraints related to the use of mobile devices for learning (Franklin et al., 2007). Apart from that, limited storage and memory, and document editing capabilities may also limit mobile academic activities. This indicates that student learning activities via using mobile devices with limited typing requirements may be ideal (Huang, 2014). Furthermore, limited availability of broadband wireless access may also hinder the mobile learning implementation. The cost of mobile devices and services must also be considered. Some studies identified both the cost imposed by telecommunications for access and mobile devices to be primary cost barriers for students (DuVall et al., 2007). Apart from that, some studies (Park et al., 2011) indicated that students are more likely to use mobile devices for entertainment uses, such as listening to music, texting other friends and checking social networks rather than for educational purposes. Therefore, it is important to make the students aware of the advantages of using mobile device for learning particularly for ESL.

Pedagogically, some aspects should be taken into consideration while mobile devices integrated in learning (Park et al., 2011) especially for ESL. For example, using mobile devices in class might disturb students' concentration and impede the learning process. Despite unique advantages, undeniably, there are constraints that limit the capability of learning through mobile.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design using open-ended questions. ESL learners from four selected polytechnics were requested to respond to two open-ended questions regarding the advantages and challenges of using mobile technology in learning ESL. A total of 194 ESL learners responded to the questions. The feedback received from the learners were themed into two sections which are affordances and challenges.

RESULTS

The results are presented in the following 2 sections: affordances and challenges.

Affordances

The learners' comments on the affordances for learning ESL through mobile were analysed and grouped into the following themes;

Fast, flexible and easy

The majority of the polytechnic ESL learners stated: *"fast", "flexible"* and *"easy"*. This is reflected by one of the comments given which stated that, *"mobile is a new and modern learning method that can be assessed easily which helps a lot in terms of time management, student-lecturer communication and effectiveness"*. Most of them commented that they could learn English anywhere and anytime through mobile and that it could save their time. Many of them also agreed that it could help them to improve their language learning. In fact, one of the students commented that it was easy for them to refer to their mobile device when having problem understanding difficult words. One of the students also stated, *"easy to access anywhere"*.

Facilitate ESL learning

For the polytechnic ESL learners, they believed learning through mobile could facilitate their ESL learning. They commented that mobile devices ease them in looking for translation of words as well as learning new vocabularies. One interesting response gathered from the students was their concern on bringing thick and heavy dictionaries to classes to aid their learning. One student wrote, *"It makes it easier for students to find*

information and meaning of words without having to bring thick and heavy dictionaries.". In fact, they also commented that they could have more practices for learning English if using mobile. One of them wrote, *"Students will be able to access to more information to practice speaking English.".* Remarkably, another student wrote, *"Learning through mobile exposes students to many learning materials and make students able to remember what they have learnt.".* Many of them also commented that it would be easier for them to find information related to their English language course assignment via mobile devices. One of them wrote, *"able to access for information anywhere and faster without going to library.".* Apparently, they agreed that by using mobile devices, they could share information with their friends easier. Overall, majority of them agreed that learning through mobile should be introduced as it improves their language learning. For them, mobile devices could ease their language learning and could be used to improve speaking, reading, writing, grammar and pronunciation.

Increase interest in learning

From the comments provided by the polytechnic ESL learners, it was obvious that they like the idea of learning through mobile. This could be reflected by their feedbacks. Among the comments given were, *"learning through mobile increases interest in learning English and fun too!"*; *"I could understand better and it could be fun.".* One of the them even commented, *"it makes learning experience more fun and interesting!".*

Effective way for learning

Another affordance brought up by the learners was the effectiveness of learning through mobile. Many of them commented that their learning was more effective using mobile. It could be seen from their comments that learning through mobile could help them to enhance their ESL learning and in return, improve their proficiency. One of the comments was, *"it is effective because I will be exposed to many learning materials and I will be able to remember what I learn because I can do it many times.".*

Opportunity to communicate with native speakers or speakers from other countries

Apart from that, some of them felt that using mobile devices and getting connected to authentic materials would make it easier for them to communicate with people from other countries. They believed by communicating with people from other countries, they could somehow improve their skills in communication. It was stated in one of the comments, *"Students can communicate with people from other countries, so students can practice and become more confident to use English.".*

Challenges

Despite the affordances, many of the polytechnic ESL learners also expressed their concerns about learning through mobile. The challenges are presented according to the following themes;

Not having internet access or limited internet connection

The majority of the learners who commented stated concerns about not having internet access or limited internet connection. Many of them wrote, *"problem with internet connection"; "slow Wi-Fi connection which will slower down the information searching process".* In fact, they commented that it was difficult for them to get connected to the internet even though their polytechnic provided them with the Wi-Fi access. For them, it was easy to get disconnected due to slow internet connection and therefore led to frustration.

High level of English used

Another concern brought up by the learners was about the high level of English used in many of the online materials. One of the them wrote, *"it is difficult to understand if the*

activities/materials use high level of English.". Due to that, some of these learners were concerned about not being able to understand instructions without the presence of their ESL lecturers. They believed that the presence of their lecturer was still needed and that they needed guidance from their lecturer mostly when trying to understand the instructions, as well as understanding difficult words, phrases or even sentences.

Misuse and distractions

Some of the learners also showed their concern on the misuse of the mobile devices and distractions such as social media and games. One of them wrote, *"easy to off focus; e.g. play video games and surfing internet.".* Therefore, they believed that it was important for them to stay focus and to avoid distractions when learning using mobile devices.

Choosing and selecting suitable learning materials

Another concern related to the constraint of learning through mobile was it could be difficult for them to find suitable websites for English language learning and choosing the right learning materials. One of the comments was, *"I need to learn to search information.".* Others have also commented that there is too many information on the internet, thus, they should know how to choose the right materials and what is suitable for them to learn ESL.

Cost of mobile devices

Of students that provided comments, very little expressed concerns about cost of having a device. Very little concern was also given on the physical attributes of the device. One of the students wrote, *"not everybody affords to buy high tech devices".*

Capability of mobile devices

Among all comments related to the challenges, only one student commented that it would be difficult for them to continue using the mobile devices when running out of battery. Another student also wrote, *"need to control pop up which are not appropriate".* The overused of mobile data and storage was also another concerned among the learners.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it is clearly shown that learning through mobile could have some impacts on the polytechnic ESL learners. Apparently, the characteristic of the mobile devices itself creates a "mobile learning environment" which gives them freedom to practise learning anytime, anywhere and maintains contact between the learners and lecturers outside the class. This suggests that using their mobile devices for learning ESL at polytechnic can extend the learning environment beyond the classroom setting as these devices provide learning materials in movable, flexible and independently controlled environments. The findings of this study are in line with the findings of Tick (2006), who posited mobile phone technology may lead to positive effects in learning environments because of its widespread use and functions such as mobility, reachability, localisation, and personalisation.

However, the polytechnic ESL learners showed concern about the challenges using mobile devices for learning. Majority of them who commented stated concern about not having internet access or connection, inaccurate information and high level of English. This implies that in order for mobile learning to be employed or fully utilised for ESL learning, it is important for the polytechnic ESL learners to have excellent network connectivity. Even though the mobile devices can be used for learning ESL without the internet connection, it is emphasised in the findings that it would be preferred if they could have good access to internet for the learning purposes. Thus, the management and administration of polytechnics need to upgrade and enhance their infrastructure and facilities in order to support successful implementation of mobile learning. It is important to ensure excellent network connectivity so that the learners can use their mobile devices to download and

store what is needed for most of the learning processes. It is also important to ensure that the mobile devices are able to function with minimal or no connection for long periods of time.

Remarkably, learning ESL through mobile eases the polytechnic ESL learners in looking for translation of words as well as learning new vocabularies. It is believed that this may be due to the ease of access to the mobile device, which results in their repeated exposures to and frequent practice of the vocabulary items on a daily basis. Thus, it is found that mobile devices are suitable for vocabulary learning. In fact, the learners also commented that they could have more practices for learning English if using mobile learning. Apart from that, some of them were also concerned about not being able to understand instructions without the presence of their ESL lecturers. It is therefore important for the lecturers to be available all the time whenever their students need any guidance. It implies that instructions from the lecturers are very important in order to avoid frustration in learning the English language. This is probably due to the proficiency level of the polytechnic students. Some learners also showed their concern on the misuse on the mobile devices and distractions, such as social media. Similar to the findings of other studies (Park et al., 2011), it is indicated that they are more likely to use mobile devices for entertainment uses such as listening to music, texting other friends and checking social networks rather than for educational purposes. Therefore, it is important to make the polytechnic ESL learners aware of the advantages of using mobile device for learning, particularly for ESL.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, mobile devices have the potential for supporting the learning of ESL and would bring added value. Many innovative applications incorporating mobile technology have also been attempted in the subject of ESL. Various studies have shown an explosion of interest in using mobile devices for English language teaching and learning. Research have shown that mobile devices have some characteristics which allow them to be suitable tools for modern education in terms of providing exploring and sharing learning contents, which characteristics can be summarised as portability, functionality, ubiquity, utility and connectivity and these characteristics have definitely a lot to offer for learners of English as Second Language (ESL).

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