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MOBILE ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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Abstract:

This paper presents a mixed-methods approach to researching the viability of supplementing mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) apps focusing on receptive skills with a course curriculum that emphasizes meaningful communication, mitigation of error-aversion tendencies, cultural awareness, and presentation skills. Adult language learners working for a company were assigned fifty units of the online mobile assisted language learning application, ReallyEnglish, while concurrently taking weekly hour-long lessons that focused on meaningful communication, mitigation of error-aversion tendencies, cultural awareness, and presentation skills. Many researchers have lamented the fact that most MALL applications do not take full advantage of technological affordances to create opportunities for learners to use their devices as tools of interaction. Instead, apps that focus on receptive skills including vocabulary memorization and grammatical rules are more popular. This paper acknowledges that creating more apps focusing on productive skills is necessary but focuses on how to create a robust curriculum surrounding such receptive-skills apps. Learners improved as shown by standardized test scores, learner reflection, and surveys.

Keywords:

EFL, CALL, MALL, Communicative Language Teaching, Technology

Introduction

If you lived in the United States in the 1980s or 1990s, you probably remember cereal commercials that used the phrase “part of a complete breakfast.” The implication was that, while the cereal itself is not necessarily an adequate source of nutrition in isolation, it could be combined with other items to play a role in providing you with all of your nutritional needs. The key to ensuring that the overall diet is healthy, of course, is finding the correct foods to supplement the cereal with.

The research presented in this paper seeks to invoke a similar process of supplementing something that, in isolation, does not provide all of the necessary ingredients, but can still play a productive role in the overall experience of language learning. In this research, the cereal being advertised is an analogy for mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) apps that focus on receptive skills such as grammar instruction, vocabulary memorization, and listening. The focus of this research was to test the effectiveness of supplementing such programs with the types of language teaching that they lack, namely productive skills such as conversation skills, presentation skills, and the mitigation of learners' fear of making mistakes.

Literature Review

Mobile-assisted language learning provides many affordances to learners. They are readily available, portable, and empower the learner to choose their own time and place for learning (Chinnery, 2006, p. 13). In addition, modern mobile learning affords learners the opportunity to connect with peers and collaborate without physical existence as a barrier (Burston, 2014b). Not only can they connect with peers, but learners also have the chance to connect with people who share similar goals or interests. Thus, learners can join communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) with similarly-minded people. This can increase their motivation and sense of purpose in communicating in the target language or culture. Similarly, Gee (2004) defines an affinity space as "a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals, not shared race, class culture, or gender" (p. 67). Learners can more readily engage in these affinity spaces by gathering online with others who have shared activities, interests, or goals.

Rosell-Aguilar (2017) provides a framework for evaluating language learning applications. The questions are divided into four categories: language learning, pedagogy, user experience, and technology. For example:

Interaction: Does the app allow users to interact with each other?

Interactivity: Is engagement with the app content active or passive?

Sharing: Does the app allow or encourage sharing content?

Gamification: Does the app have game-like features to increase engagement? (ibid, p. 253)

Evaluation models such as these are intended to allow educators or researchers to gauge how many of the benefits of MALL are actually being achieved by the application in question. Despite the wealth of benefits ascribed to MALL, there is a common complaint that the applications created by developers and used by learners do not adequately take advantage of these potential positive aspects of technology. Kim & Kwon (2012) noted that "most language-learning mobile apps focus on cognitive processes such as recognition, recall and comprehension, as well as receptive learning skills, rather than socio-cognitive learning styles" (p. 41). Burston addresses the issue more pointedly, stating that the purported benefits of MALL, mobility, peer connectivity, oral interactions, and learner collaboration, are the features least getting exploited (2014b).

The problem, then, is that most MALL applications do not take advantage of the affordances of modern technology. While one obvious solution to this problem would be to encourage developers to create apps that do take advantage of modern technology and encourage learners to use them, this paper focuses on how a curriculum can be created that complements the types of apps that are readily available and are currently most often used by learners.

These are not binary choices, but rather two things that ought to be focused on simultaneously. The two choices look at the same problem from different perspectives. The first reflects an idealistic approach to the problem while the second reflects a practical approach. To return to the cereal analogy, the first approach asserts that the cereal being eaten is not healthy. Therefore, we must work on a societal change that encourages people to eschew their favorite breakfast cereals and find foods that have more robust nutritional benefits. The second option accepts the fact that, at this moment in time, cereal is a staple of breakfast tables and that the best thing we can do for consumers now is to think about how to surround the cereal with foods that will best complement the limited nutritional benefits the cereal does provide.

Method

The primary research goals of the study were to engage in a preliminary exploration of learner benefits from using 1) a MALL application focusing on receptive skills, coupled with 2) classroom instruction focusing on productive skills. The participants were adult language learners ages 27-44. All members work for the same business located in Osaka. The fifteen members of the class were all male with CEFR levels ranging from A2 (basic user) to B1 (independent user). Initial TOEIC scores ranged from 285 to 715. The average score was 460.

The MALL application used for this research is called ReallyEnglish. This application was accessible to learners via computer, tablet, or smartphone. The learners had one hundred units available to them for a period of six months; however, they were only required to finish fifty of the units during the 15-week span of the research. The program begins with a diagnostic test to analyze and display learner strengths and weaknesses. To complete a unit and proceed to the next, learners must achieve a score of 80% or higher on the unit quiz. The initial five lessons are determined by the results of the diagnostic test and the order of following lessons is determined by the results of the previous five lessons. The program includes exercises such as listening cloze activities, pictures and video to memorize vocabulary, vocabulary quizzes, grammatical explanations, listening and reading that mimic real-life situations, test-style reading passages, and comprehension questions.

Learners were asked to complete the units outside of the weekly hour-long classroom instruction sessions. The instructor could not view their work but monitored the students' success rates and number of lessons completed by logging into the app. A majority of participants reported engaging with the app during their commute to work on the train or after arriving home in the evening. ReallyEnglish was chosen because it is the type of application focusing on receptive skills that is both common in the language learning landscape today and often viewed in a negative light by researchers and evaluation models for not fully realizing the potential of MALL applications.

Because the MALL application focused on receptive skills, the researchers designed a class that emphasized more productive skills. Learners had 15 weekly hour-long lessons. The course stressed meaningful communication, mitigation of learners' error-aversion tendencies, cultural awareness, and presentation skills.

Meaningful Communication

Learners begin each class with 10 minutes of free conversation time with a partner. This allows them to have a deep and meaningful conversation where the focus is on function over form. The conversations have ranged from family life to restaurant and bar recommendations to work

gossip involving their departments. The intent of this time was to give learners the space to reap the benefits of interaction outlined in 1) the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996) that focus on the learners' ability to develop and implement communicative strategies when working with an interlocutor to develop meaning, 2) the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985), acknowledging that learners can test linguistic hypotheses, reflect on their use of language, and notice gaps in knowledge, and 3) the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990), which asserts that learning happens only when learners notice their gaps in knowledge and consequently attend to them.

There was also an emphasis on allowing learners to use the language of various grammatical patterns freely. For instance, learners developed their own research questions and graphs based on questions they constructed using the comparative and superlative forms. They practiced various ways to make suggestions or give advice to problems they wanted to discuss. In this way, learners were able to become the authors of their own conversation rather than relying on decontextualized grammar drills.

Mitigation of Error-Aversion Tendencies

Especially in the Japanese context, it is important to develop language learners who are not so afraid of making mistakes that they refrain from hypothesis-testing by sticking to the most simple language forms. Many adult learners in Japan had the experience of learning English in junior high school and high school for the purpose of passing entrance exams. A review of university entrance exam question types by Brown & Yamashita (1995a) showed that more than 83% of test questions on private university entrance exams were comprised of discrete-point questions for 9 out of 10 universities. Similarly, 9 out of the 10 private universities' tests were more than 95% receptive and less than 5% productive (it should be noted that public universities were more varied in their entrance examination question types). A second look at the same universities 13 years later showed little improvement (Kikuchi, 2006). It is then fair to say that most adult learners experienced a similar educational landscape. Such test-preparatory language learning tends to focus on teaching learners to solve questions highlighting grammatical rules, putting jumbled sentences in the correct order, memorizing long lists of vocabulary words, and answering reading comprehension questions. Thus, errors are considered not part of the learners' interlanguage, not opportunities for growth and learning, but rather the source of red marks and minus points. Consequently, learners in such contexts may become reticent to speak and feel pressure for their utterances to be perfect (error-free).

To combat this, learners were given meta-linguistic instruction on the value of learning from errors. On the first day of class, learners read and received an explanation of Rubin's (1975) seven characteristics of language learners. Many of these characteristics include actions that exhibit the importance of testing one's inner taxonomy of language learning and not having a fear of making mistakes. Additionally, learners intermittently received short PowerPoint presentations that showed stories emphasizing the importance of making mistakes in language learning. Learners also played Lebo Lebo Game (Author, 2018), an activity where learners use a nonsense language together with gestures, facial expressions, and intonation to communicate with a partner. This game is meant to shift learner perception from language as a static grammatical system to a tool that prioritizes meaning making.

Cultural Awareness

Authentic texts were used, when possible, to give learners glimpses into different aspects of American culture. For example, learners were given the opportunity to perform restaurant role

plays using actual restaurant menus from the American chain, Cheddars, rather than using simplified realia. This gives learners the chance to work in groups to pool their knowledge and try to understand the contents of the menu. It also affords them the opportunity to use technology such as their smartphones to interact with the menu to enhance their understanding by looking at pictures of the foods they don't understand.

Learners also were given a presentation based on Michael Pollan's (2009) book, *Food Rules*. This book contains various suggestions for how the reader can become healthier. Learners were presented with this after studying various ways to make their own suggestions. After this, they made presentations concerning their own suggestions for how to become healthier.

One more authentic text used was portions of Michio Kaku's (2009) speech, *The World in 2030*. This speech was used to help learners discuss the future and led into their final presentation.

Presentation Skills

Presentation skills are essential for employees of an international company where workers often go abroad or receive foreign guests and need to introduce new products or designs. Much business is attended to through presentations, thus it is important for learners to practice using English in the type of presentation settings they are likely to find themselves in. Each of the presentations was loosely based on one of the authentic texts used. The first presentation involved learners developing their own suggestions for improving health. The latter presentation asked learners to design a future product based on new technology to be implemented by the year 2030. The audience was to act as the board of directors who would ask questions about viability and ultimately make the final decision as to which ideas get funded by the company.

These four areas of focus - meaningful communication, mitigation of error-aversion tendencies, cultural awareness and presentation skills – were chosen because they are features commonly excluded from the types of MALL applications often used by learners, such as ReallyEnglish. This research shed light on the viability of creating a well-balanced curriculum to supplement the applications commonly being used by learners.

Results

Results were measured in three ways: 1) pre- and post-tests using the TOEIC test, 2) observed classroom performance by the instructor, and 3) learner reflection via surveys conducted throughout and after the course.

TOEIC Results

Of the 15 members who took part in the study, one was transferred midway through and could not take the post-test. Therefore, only the data of the 14 members who took both tests was used. The group's average listening score increased by over twenty points and the average reading score increased by over thirty points (see Table 1). As we found (Author & Yoshida, 2018), a paired sample t-test showed the learners achieved a significant increase from their pre-test scores ($M = 440.4$, $SD = 113.25$) to their post-test scores ($M = 493.5$, $SD = 132.47$); $t(13) = 2.49$, $p = 0.027$. Learners, therefore, received tangible benefits from the combination of the ReallyEnglish application and the curriculum built around it.

Table 1: TOEIC Results

TOEIC	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Change
Listening Section	233.2	254.3	+21.1
Reading Section	207.1	239.3	+32.2
Total	440.4	493.6	+53.2

Table 1: Average TOEIC pre- and post-test scores

Observed Classroom Performance

The instructor of the weekly classroom English course (one of the authors of this study) observed the learners' growth throughout the duration of the 15-week study. According to those subjective observations, learners at the beginning of the course were timid and reticent to speak. They spoke with fairly good grammar but with long pauses and they clung to simple grammatical forms and vocabulary that they were more comfortable using.

By the end of the course, learners were much more apt to take risks and focus on transmission of meaning over perfection of grammar. In post-course surveys, many learners attributed this change in mindset to the notion that making mistakes is natural in communication that was emphasized in the class. One learner, who echoed the sentiments of many of the other participants, wrote, "because of the teacher's stance that making mistakes was fine as long as communication was happening, even when I made mistakes I could speak with my level of nuance and use gestures to speak with confidence." Learners spoke with more confidence and were more apt to use various methods to express their point to an interlocuter.

Learners also displayed improvement from one presentation to the next. 80% of the members of the study strictly adhered to the contents of a written script during their first presentation, which occurred midway through the program. Many presenters were visibly uncomfortable and avoided eye contact or engagement with the audience. However, 14 out of the 15 members refrained from using a script (the member who was transferred to London participated via video). Presenters were more confident, used more dynamic voices, and spoke to the audience rather than down at a piece of paper.

Learner Reflection

The third mode of interpretation into the success of the course involved analyzing the surveys written by learners reflecting on both the ReallyEnglish app and the classroom course. In response to an open-ended question asking the learners if they felt they had improved their English and if so, in what areas, 12 members (80%) stated that they felt they had improved either their speaking ability or communicative confidence.

A number of learners also appreciated the combination of the two styles. Overall, two-thirds of the survey respondents referred to both the ReallyEnglish program and the classroom when answering open-ended questions regarding their own improvement or the positive aspects of the program. One member of the study said, "the combination of the classroom English and e-learning was good. I can't say that I studied every day, but it helped me develop consistent study habits. ...I learned from Lebo Lebo game that my communication doesn't have to be perfect and I should develop the stance to try to communicate my message." Another member of the group stated "through Justin's native English and the e-learning program, my listening ability improved. I could feel this when I listened to news or watched videos in English."

Discussion

This research shows that MALL applications focusing on receptive skills can result in significant learning outcomes when supplemented with a course that focuses on production. Benefits could be seen via standardized tests, teacher observation, and learner reflection. These benefits include improved listening, grammar, and reading comprehension as measured by the TOEIC test, improved presentation and willingness to engage in English conversation as observed by the teacher, and increased speaking confidence and willingness to make errors, as reported by the learners themselves. While the scope of this study did not include finding out how much of an effect each separate aspect of the course influenced the learners' language growth, a subsequent study looking at the data from this group and two others showed that learners who engage in the requisite 50 units of ReallyEnglish performed significantly better on the TOEIC test in both the listening and reading sections than those who completed less than 80% of the program.

The results of this research should not dissuade researchers and developers from exploring the possibilities of increased peer connectivity, gamification, and opportunities to join affinity spaces brought about by burgeoning technology. The creation of applications that engage learners directly with the language and integrates it into their daily life should be welcomed and vigorously strived for. However, these results should serve as a reminder that MALL applications need not be evaluated in isolation. Rather, it is prudent to view how they can be used in conjunction with a supplementary curriculum to produce positive learning outcomes. To return to the cereal analogy, we cannot merely evaluate the nutritional facts of the cereal itself but must instead look at how it is integrated into a larger diet to become part of a complete breakfast.

Limitations and Future Research

It must be noted, however, that there are numerous limitations associated with this research. First of all, while this research established a significant increase in the learners' test scores, there was no comparison with learners who only used the online app or who only took the course. Therefore, we cannot know for sure if it was the balance of the two modes of study that led to increased TOEIC scores. Comparative studies need to be done to determine if one or the other accounted for most of the improvement in isolation. The research should also be repeated with a larger sample size than the 15 learners who took part in this study.

It is also worth reviewing and expanding on current MALL evaluation models, such as Rosell-Aguilar's (2017) model to include the view that the apps themselves are rarely used in isolation but rather as part of a language-learning eco-system. Finally, as has been mentioned previously in this paper, we must not only look at how to supplement language learning apps that focus on receptive skills, but also work to create more engaging language learning tools through technology that allow learners direct access to authentic linguistic and cultural experiences.

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Appendix A

Classroom Observation Criteria

Frequency of speech

Content of speech

Grammaticality of speech

Grammatical complexity of speech

Learner Confidence

Presentation Performance

Appendix B

Open-Ended Survey Questions

(Translated from Japanese)

How much time did you spend studying English for the face-to-face class, the e-learning course, and other self-study?

In what ways did you improve throughout the course?

Describe the positive and negative aspects of this course.

What are your plans for English study from now?

Additional Comments