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Application of Smart-Phone Apps by Chinese College Students in Learning English

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Currently, there is an increasing trend in the shift from the use of traditional technologies, such as a desktop computer towards the use of mobile technologies, such as a mobile phone. Therefore, students are nowadays well equipped for mobile learning. The aim of this review is to explore the use of mobile phones and/or smart phones and their apps for learning English as a foreign language, and highlight their benefits and limitations for their use in the learning of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: mobile learning (m-learning), Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), smart-phone apps, learning English as a foreign language

Introduction

Smart phone use in China has been considerably growing in recent years and smart phones have become an integral part of students' life there. Being affordable, portable and increasingly capable of various daily tasks, smart phones are beneficial to language learning if used effectively. With fast connectivity speed, big screen size, advanced audio output and visual features of modern mobile technology, smart phones and other mobile devices are promisingly bringing a paradigm shift in language education (Kukulska-Hulme, 2015).

Mobile technology will create positive impacts on language learning. Offering a new way of transferring knowledge that is not confined by time and place, mobile learning can effectively engage learners in learning activities as well as improve their comprehension and retention of learning materials (Kukulska-Hulme, 2015). Due to the popularity of advanced mobile devices and convenience of accessible Wi-Fi, Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) could be applied widely on university campus. Both teachers and students find it more usable and attractive (Jin, 2017). Researchers have found that mobile technologies have the potential to provide new learning experiences for students in teacher education (Lekawael, 2017). Previously mobile phones were simply used as an electronic dictionary in language learning. However, smart phones are now found attractive learning tools for language learners, and therefore may result in positive language learning experiences (Xue & Churchill, 2019).

This study is to explore the application of smart-phone apps for learning English as a foreign language and highlight their benefits and limitations.

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Literature Review

Mobile Learning (M-Learning)

Mobile learning or m-learning is an extended version of e-learning by using mobile technology. E-learning is defined as learning experiences to support individual learning with various types of computer technologies (Clark & Mayer, 2008). Thus, m-learning embraces many features of e-learning, such as multimedia contents and communications with other students, but it is unique in terms of flexibility of time and location (Peters, 2007). The characteristics of mobile devices can be categorized into three categories as:

(a) Portability: Mobile devices can be taken to different locations;

(b) Instant connectivity: Mobile devices can be used to access a variety of information anytime and anywhere with instant connectivity facility;

(c) Context sensitivity: Mobile devices can be used to find and gather real or simulated data (D. Churchill & N. Churchill, 2008).

Based on the above mentioned features of m-learning, four types of learning approaches can be supported by mobile devices. First, m-learning supports individualized learning by allowing students to pace learning at their own speed, convenience, and place. Second, the situated learning is realized as students use mobile devices to learn within a real context. Third, m-learning enables collaborative learning when students use mobile devices to easily interact and communicate with other students and teachers. Finally, it supports informal learning and allows students to learn out of class at their convenience.

Nevertheless, the present versatility and prevalence of smart phones do not guarantee that language learners are willing to accept using these devices for learning purposes (Stockwell, 2008). Students are the center of all learning activities, and the current lack of understanding of their perceptions of this newly introduced learning tool can result in their resistance to the implementation of smart phone-based language learning. Therefore, it is essential to identify factors that drive the smart phone adoption for language learning from the perspectives of students themselves.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

To account for technology adoption, Davis (1989) originally proposed and tested the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) which identifies perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use as key determinants of this complicated process. According to Davis (1989), perceived usefulness is “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance” (p. 320), and perceived ease of use is “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort” (p. 320). Accordingly, a new technology is suggested to be useful and easy to use and to learn in order for its users to have a positive attitude, a high intention to use and frequent actual usage of that technology. However, the attitude and actual usage variable in the original TAM were later removed due to their weak significance in the model (Venkatesh, Moris, F. D. Davis, & G. B. Davis, 2003).

In the study by Doan (2018), two factors, i.e., perceived playfulness and self-management of learning, were added to TAM, the newly-proposed model is presented in Figure 1.

In Doan Hang’s study, self-management of learning had the strongest influence on students’ intention to use despite being a newly introduced factor in MALL research. The second strongest factor is perceived usefulness and the third is perceived playfulness.

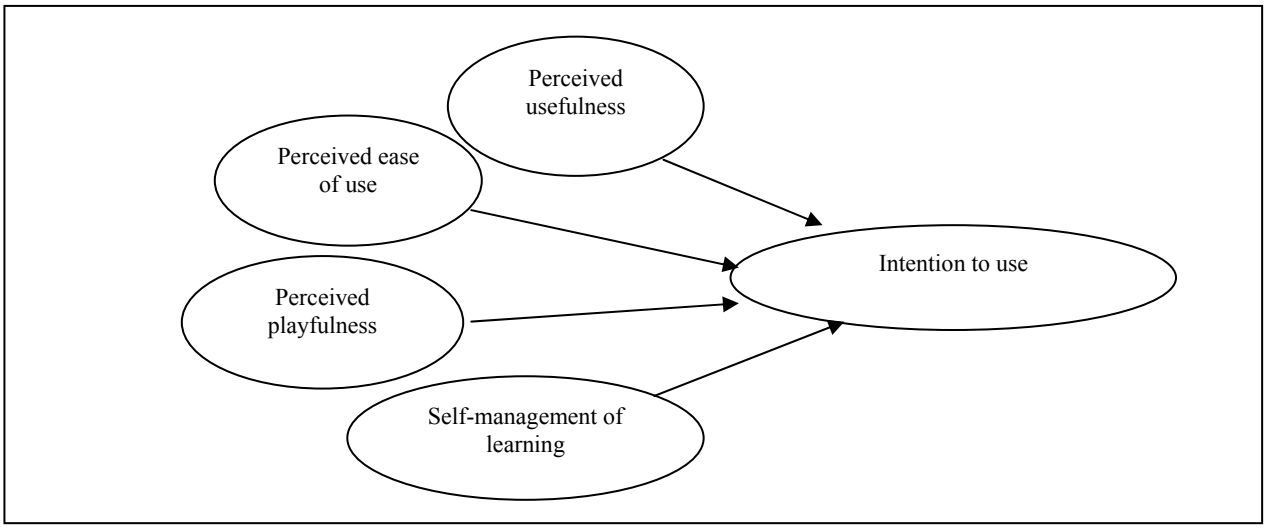

Figure 1. The Newly-Proposed Model (TAM) by Doan (2018).

Application of Smart-Phone Apps for English Learning by Chinese College Students

Chinese students face many challenges in attaining English proficiency. Some of the biggest challenges are limited language instruction and limited exposure to the English. It is therefore important to find innovative ways to support English learners by extending language learning and instruction outside the classroom and providing opportunities for more exposure to English. One of the ways that can be done is via mobile-assisted language learning. Mobile technologies have the potential to support English learning, by providing autonomous learning opportunities and access to learning materials. Smart phones in particular are capable of opening many possibilities for English learners, and their rapid adoption makes it easier to make these possibilities real.

One of the more popular functions of smart phones is their ability to support mobile applications (apps). The use of smart-phone apps for language learning seems ideal for Chinese learners, as the rate of smart phone use is fast increasing in China. In China, various smart-phone learning apps, such as Baicizhan, Hujiang Happy Words, Youdao Dictionary, Listening to English Everyday, and China Daily, are employed to learn English as a foreign language by Chinese college students. Students with mobile devices can access videos, audios, or images that help them improve English listening, speaking, or vocabulary in a more engaging way; some mobile apps, such as WeChat and QQ, characterize group chat or information sharing, allow students to discuss interesting topics in English or share useful resources with just a click.

Discussions

Merits of Smart-Phone Learning Apps

Portability and easy access. Smart phones are much smaller and lighter than laptops or desktop computers. In addition, many useful apps can be downloaded and installed easily as operating systems for smart phone adopt the plug and play method. As a result, they become multi-function devices that can be used to perform many useful operations easily, including learning.

Smart phone and learning apps installed in smart phones are very convenient and there are digital materials available instead of using paper books. The use of smart phones have made a student's life easy as with just a

touch a student can get access to almost everything, including things related to their studies. Smart phones can be good devices to receive rich teaching contents and nowadays, smart phones are capable to handle multimedia contents. The students can easily and freely access these English learning apps based on their own interests. In addition, these apps are built in terms of the specific objectives of the learners. The use of apps on mobile devices to learn English also breaks time and place restrictions. It means that students can learn English at any time and in any place. Mobile devices are becoming a kind of important tools for students to learn English.

Comprehensive learning experience. Smart phones and learning apps improve learning experiences and they are useful for online activity. For instance, students can search for videos of the subject to make learning easier. Visual learning or videos can be an interesting and engaging way of learning, as it can be interactive for the students. Videos can show images that cannot be explained in words, and for some students, video can be better than reading a book (Anshari, Almunawar, Shahrill, Wicaksono, & Huda, 2017).

All in all, being free to get these online resources and the accessibility that students can download resources into mobile devices and study without the restrictions in time and place are two main advantages.

Demerits of Smart-Phone Learning Apps

Distraction. Smart phone is easy to use, effective and fast; however, the entertainment apps, such as watching videos or playing games can distract or even procrastinate the students' learning progress. As most students view their mobile device as a tool for socializing and entertainment, and therefore it provides too many easily-available distractions and temptations, potentially damaging their learning concentration and pace. Lekawael (2017) confirmed the disadvantage and the data in his study revealed that only 14% students used their smart phone for educational purpose, so study by means of smart phones can be easily distracted by other applications, such as a phone call or incoming messages from social networks, video and entertainment apps. In the study by Doan (2018), self-management of learning is the strongest influence on the students' use smart phones as learning tool. Therefore, it can be said that students with a higher sense of self-management of learning will have a firmer intention to use smart phones for language learning. That explains why most students turn on the smart phone to learn something, but end up chatting, posting photos, playing video games or using social media websites.

Dependency and health problem. Students can potentially be too dependent on their smart phones. Losing a smart phone may interfere with the school activities. In addition, having a smart phone in the classroom can lead to obsession. Ameri (2020) mentioned that some students do not use mobile phone seriously and they play video or music in the classroom, which interrupts others seriously. Dependency on a smart device that somehow damages or becomes dysfunctional, the risk of a personal computer being stolen and hacked when left attended, lecture notes and working assignment lost due to software problem or being reformatted. Moreover, health effect may be problematic in the long run for some people, such as problems with eye sight.

Conclusion

It is clear that smart phone and internet has important role in the teaching and learning of English. English language learning can be made more effective by the integration of smart phones and learning apps; this potential device also ensures self-assessed language learning (SALL). The self assessed language learning provides the learner with autonomy and encourages him/her to do things in his/her way and reflect on the work critically and assume greater responsibility towards their own learning.

As most students spend much time to access the social network and other, some students access Internet for dictionary and games, and only a few students access internet for education purposes. In short, the students were rather to use smart phone for other thing than education.

Pedagogically, there is an urgent need for teachers to implement smart phone-based language learning in order to engage students to be critics with material and its content. Due to the students' low level of self-management of learning, teachers' guidance and supervision cannot be neglected.

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