

The Role of M-Learning in Decreasing Speaking Anxiety for EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of m-learning in decreasing speaking anxiety for EFL learners. The researchers believe there is a relationship between Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and anxiety. In other words, using mobiles to learn speaking can decrease the amount of anxiety the learners have and motivates them to speak in public. The study included 9 participants (6 females and 3 males); they are either students or graduates of different departments at Aleppo University. First, the learners took a FLCAS pretest. Then, they joined a group on WhatsApp for four weeks, where they had to respond to three tasks a week. At the end of the course, the learners took the FLCAS posttest. Then, 4 participants were interviewed to see their opinions, feedback, and notes about the experience they underwent. The results show that m-learning has significantly decreased the learners' anxiety in speaking English as a foreign language.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile assisted language learning MALL is wide-spreading approach and considered one of the 21st century skills. The need for having new methods for teaching, which implement the latest technology, has made the recent literature full of studies about the effectiveness of MALL in teaching English as a foreign language. The use of m-learning to facilitate learning English can decrease the boredom, which usually arise from the traditional ways of teaching, as well as the time and place limitations. As technology is used more in the world and people use it everywhere, there is a need to make use of such tools for learning, rather than restricting it to the leisure activities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mobile Assisted Language Learning MALL

Mobile Assisted Language Learning MALL is a recent field that came up with the technological developments. Its old definition was early mobile projects which tend to use “formally-designed activities” in teaching (Kukulshak-Hulme & Shield, 2008). This means that the programs on the mobile phones which can be used to teach languages. However, with the development of the wireless technologies, such as smartphones, tablets, etc., the new definition is “any device that is small, autonomous and unobtrusive enough to accompany

us in every moment”. (Trifanova et al. (2004:3). This definition enlarges the MALL field to cover any small device that can have some programs installed for the sake of learning. Sharples (2006) defines it as the mobility of the learner. Traxler, (2005) defines m-learning as “any educational provision where the sole or dominant technologies are handheld or palmtop devices”. Kukulshak-Hulme (2012) states that “the anytime, anywhere learning slogan has since been very successful and continues to inspire in the 21st century”. This flexibility in place and time of learning motivates the learners to practice the EFL activities. Although there is no limited time or place for the m-learning, Kukulshak-Hulme confirms that when the appropriate activity is done in a suitable time at the right place, learning can be effective and results become better. Kukulshak-Hulme & Shield (2008) consider that it is the learners who take the responsibility for their own learning, while teachers' part is restricted to facilitate and direct this learning. Teachers are not the only source of knowledge, controllers of the learning process, or the ones to initiate and end the learning process. This means that m-learning is a learner-centered, where learners are the ones to control their learning and the teachers become monitors, facilitators, or models. The use of learner-centered approach collaborates with m-learning in achieving the goal of practicing the language out of the traditional class.

Xu, et al. (2017) conducted a study about learners' perceptions about the role of mobile feedback for oral production of English as a foreign language. The results showed that the learners are positive towards receiving feedback about their speaking via mobile applications. The learners who experienced the mobile feedback had more self-confidence when speaking. Although the results of this study show that the use of m-learning is efficient in receiving feedback for oral production in a foreign language, the literature doesn't have a lot of studies that examined the role of MALL in learning the communication skills. Few studies deal with teaching listening or speaking via MALL (Kim, H. & Kwon, Y., 2012; Altun, A., 2005). On the other hand, many studies have been done about teaching language skills via MALL. They proved to be efficient in improving learners' performance and attitudes. Furthermore, m-learning motivated the learners to practice more, as they have the freedom to do the activity the time they want in any place they find to be appropriate for them. However, most of them concentrate on teaching vocabulary (Basoglu, E.B., & Akdemir, Ö., 2010; Çakmak, F., & Erçetin, G., 2017; Lu, M., 2008; Kassem, M. A., 2018; Wu, Q., 2015) and grammar (Li, Z., & Hegelheimer, V., 2013; Wang, S., & Smith, S., 2013; Baleghizadeh, S., & Oladrostam, E., 2010).

M-Learning and Speaking

Hwang et al. (2014) conducted a study about the effects of mobile devices in teaching listening and speaking for elementary students. The study showed that the learners' performance in speaking and listening improved. The study even found that m-learning positively affected the learners' perceptions and intentions towards the mobile activities. Hwang et al. (2016) carried out a study to explore the role of m-learning in promoting listening and speaking through games. The study contained two groups: control group, which had traditional methods, and an experimental group, which used the mobile system. The results showed that the experimental group did better in the posttest than the control group in the speaking activities. However, the listening posttest showed that the two groups were equal. Lee (2016) did a study about the junior school students' attitudes about the use of mobile applications in learning speaking. The program equipped with automatic speech recognition feature (ASR), which interacts with the learners' speaking and gives the learners' comments about their performance. The 60 participants expressed positive attitudes towards the use of this program in improving their speaking skill.

Saran et al. (2009) conducted a study about the role of mobile phones in improving pronunciation for EFL learners in Turkey. The study divided the learners into three groups according to the method they learn pronunciation through: mobile phones, web pages, and handouts. The mobile phone group received multimedia messages for learning and practicing pronunciation. The results showed that the mobile group has improved pronunciation better than the two other groups. The qualitative and quantitative data collected gave positive feedback about the role of mobile phones in promoting pronunciation.

Foreign language Anxiety

Anxiety is defined as "an uncomfortable emotional state in which one perceives danger, feels powerless, and experiences tensions in the face of an expected danger (Blau, 1955). Tanveer (2007) defines anxiety as "a state of apprehension a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object". Horwitz, et al. (1986) consider that anxiety in foreign language classrooms is similar to anxiety in any math or science class; it is mainly related to the classroom situations.

Anxiety has three main types. The first one is trait anxiety, which is the one that is related to the personality of the learner. Some people feel anxious by nature. In other words, their anxiety is internal rather than external. The second type of anxiety is state anxiety. This refers to the anxiety which arises as a response to a definite situation (Spielberger, 1983). The last type of anxiety is situation-specific anxiety, which is a kind of apprehension comes out in a specific situation (Ellis, 1994). This means that when a learner of a foreign or second language, who is not professional in that language, needs to speak in a certain situation (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993).

Current studies confirm the existence of foreign language learning anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Horwitz, et al. (1986) conducted a study about anxiety in foreign language learning classes. The study stated that there are three main varieties for anxiety. The first one is communication. Learners feel anxious when speaking a foreign language in front of others, and this makes some of them decide not to speak to avoid that feeling. The second variable is test anxiety, which refers to the tests they may take, being oral or written, in a foreign language. The last variable is the fear of negative evaluation. Learners double think before speaking in front of others, if they don't have a good command of the foreign language they speak. The study designed a scale for measuring the

classroom anxiety for foreign language learners. This scale consists of 33 questions.

Yan & Horwitz (2008) conducted a study to examine the English language classroom anxiety. The study covered 532 students in a Chinese university. The results revealed 12 major variables related to anxiety. One of these variables is foreign language anxiety. In other words, foreign language is a source of anxiety; yet, it is not the only reason for anxiety in learning. The other variables included: regional differences, language aptitude, gender, language learning interest and motivation, class arrangements, teacher characteristics, language learning strategies, test types, parental influence, comparison with peers, and achievement learning outcomes. A very interesting result from this study is that anxiety plays a role, similar to motivation, in achieving the main goal of learning a foreign language.

Young (1991) conducted a study about the effect of foreign language anxiety. The study shows that there are three main sources of FL anxiety. The first source is 'learners' and teachers' beliefs about foreign language learning'; in other words, when teachers and/or learners have positive beliefs about the language they learn, the level of anxiety decreases, and vice versa. The second source of anxiety is classroom procedures; the classroom rules, techniques, etc. affect the level of anxiety. This coincides with Yan's results about 'class arrangements' as a variable of English classroom anxiety. The third source is tests; learners feel more anxious when taking a foreign language test due to the feeling of not understanding the instructions, questions, or procedures.

AIM OF THE STUDY

As it removes the time and place limitations of learning, m-learning has proved its efficacy in motivating learning a foreign language, especially vocabulary and grammar. However, very few studies examined the efficacy of m-learning in motivating speaking. As Horwitz et al. (1986) state that one main source of anxiety is communication, foreign language learners can experience higher levels of anxiety when speaking. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the role of m-learning in decreasing the anxiety sourcing from speaking for EFL learners. As speaking is one of the main sources of anxiety, and m-learning has proved improving the attitudes and performance in many different competences of English as a foreign language, there may be a role of m-learning in decreasing anxiety when speaking English as a foreign language. Furthermore, m-

learning is expected to provide the learners with more practice time as the lecture time doesn't allow for practicing speaking in class.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the triangulation of tools of research, which refers to the use of "a variety of techniques in combination...so that information obtained in different ways and from different sources can be compared" (Johnson, 1992, p. 146). The use of different methods, techniques, or tools makes the integration of many views related to the same phenomenon as much as possible. (Bailey & Nunan, 1996). This strengthens the validity and reliability of the data collected.

Therefore, this study had a mixed mood method, qualitative and quantitative. The students had a pretest and posttest of FLCAS, to measure the difference in the learners' anxiety before and after practicing speaking. The researchers then examined the learners' performances during the practice.

Participants

The study included 15 participants, 6 males and 9 females. They either do or obtained a BA from different departments (Math, Education, and Civil Engineering) at Aleppo University, Syria. The participants took an English placement test to decide on their level of English, and this group was chosen from 50 candidates who failed to reach the minimum level required for the course, intermediate. Then, the participants had an interview to see their speaking abilities in order not to have a multi-level class. They were divided into two groups on WhatsApp, male group and female group for some cultural concerns. This is because females feel shy speaking in front of strange males and vice versa. In the middle of the course, 3 males and 3 females withdrew due to time limitations. Thus, the total number of the participants is 9.

Data Collection

The learners first responded to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale FLCAS designed by Horwitz et al. (1986). Then, they had a course for one month. Every week, the learners had three speaking tasks. The learners recorded their voice and listened to it before sending it in the group. The recordings lasted between 3 and 15 minutes. The learners then received feedback about their strengths and weaknesses in their performance in terms of

grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. Then, the researchers commented on their ideas expressed in the responses. To personalize the topic the participants talk about, the researchers asked them some reflective questions based on their responses. This increased the time allocated for speaking and made the participants more comfortable to talk as they feel the question is for them and touches on their answers. At the end of the course, the learners took the FLCAS survey again. Then, the researchers chose four learners for a semi-structured interview.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

The researchers divided the results of the foreign language classroom anxiety scale FLCAS into three main parts as they were in Horwitz's study (1986): Communication comprehension, fear of feedback by peers or teachers, and fear of language tests. In the pretest, the participants were all in the medium anxiety range (between 85 and 126) except participant 3, who had a high level of anxiety (Table 1).

Communication Comprehension

The pretest results show that there is a level of anxiety in communication comprehension for nearly all the participants. The lowest average is 2.81 while the highest is 3.72. The mean of the pretest changed from 3.27 in the pretest to 2.89 in the post test with a

standard deviation of 0.38 and 0.42 respectively (Table 1). The results show that anxiety decreased for all the participants except P7 and P9 who reported to have more anxiety in their communication comprehension (2.81 to 3.09 and 3.45 to 3.72 respectively). On the other hand, participants 2, 3, 4, and 8, who had the highest levels of anxiety reported a significant decrease in the posttest.

Fear of Feedback by Peers or Teachers

The level of anxiety was the highest in this category compared to the other categories for all the participants except participant 6. The pretest has 3.52 which changed to 2.98 for the posttest with a standard deviation of 0.8 and 0.65 respectively. The highest result in the pretest is for P2, P3, and P9 (4.57, 4.57, 4 respectively). Participant 6, on the other hand, had a low level of anxiety (2.14). The results significantly changed for the participants, except P5 and P7 who reported an increase in the level of anxiety and P8 who has no change (Table 2).

Fear of Language Tests

This category didn't have significant change in the results between pretest and posttest. The results are the same for P1 and P5 while the level of anxiety increased after the course for P7, P8, and P9. The mean of the pretest is 2.97 while it was 2.76 for the posttest. The standard deviation was 0.34 and 0.21 respectively.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of the pretest and posttest of FLCAS.

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication Pre-test	3.2767	0.38984
Communication Posttest	2.8944	0.42015
Fear of Feedback Pretest	3.5211	0.80275
Fear of Feedback Posttest	2.98	0.65355
Fear of Tests Pretest	2.9744	0.34239
Fear of Tests Posttest	2.7667	0.21225

Table 2. Results of FLCAS of the Participants

Name	Communication Comprehension		Fear of Feedback by Peers or Teachers		Fear of Language Tests		Total	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
P1	3	2.81	3	2.71	2.73	2.73	2.87	2.75
P2	3.54	2.45	4.57	2.28	3.53	2.66	3.75	2.51
P3	3.72	2.54	4.57	3.28	3.6	2.6	3.84	2.72
P4	3.54	3.09	3.71	2.57	2.86	2.46	3.27	2.69

P5	2.81	2.36	2.85	3.28	2.73	2.73	2.78	2.72
P6	2.9	2.90	2.14	1.85	2.86	2.66	2.72	2.57
P7	2.81	3.09	3.28	3.71	2.93	3.13	2.96	3.24
P8	3.72	3.09	3.57	3.57	2.73	2.93	3.24	3.12
P9	3.45	3.72	4	3.57	2.8	3	3.27	3.36

Qualitative Results

The researchers interviewed four participants, two males and two females, based on their results to find out their views about the course and whether it decreased their level of anxiety or not (P2 and P3 for the high difference between the pretest and posttest, and P7 and P9 for the increase in their anxiety).

P2: "I can't express my happiness of the development I achieved in the course. I really feel confident now and I can speak without feeling afraid."

Participant 2 considers that the course helped him a lot to improve his language skills. For him, his anxiety was really high before participating in the course. Later, he started feeling that he is eager to speak fearlessly. This development was of a great effect over his personality as he considers that speaking is not an obstacle any more.

P3: "I used to feel embarrassed when speaking in English. I used to think a lot before saying the sentence... I mean the ideas are in my mind, but I can't say them".

Participant three confirmed the improvement in her speaking is great. Before the course, she used to know how to write well, and she was able to organize the ideas she wants to say in her mind. Yet, she feels anxious once she tries to speak them out. Yet, her results changed significantly, and she is able now to speak fluently.

P7: "I think that I need more practice. The time allocated for speaking in this course is not enough.... And the feedback we receive...mm.. needs to be more about our grammar and vocabulary."

Participant 7, on the other hand, stated that she still has a problem when speaking despite the improvement she has. For her, the feedback she receives is not enough; when feedback is more focused on grammar and vocabulary more than fluency and pronunciation, For her, there is a need for more time to practice in order to have better results.

P9: "I really enjoyed everything in the course. I had the chance to practice my English and receive feedback.... I even listened to the responses of the

others in order to improve my listening skills and get different points of view about the same question."

Participant 9 stated that the course was really good for him to improve his speaking skills and decrease his level of anxiety. When the interviewer asked him why the results in the FLCAS posttest doesn't reflect his response here, he confessed that he didn't answer the posttest with much concentration. He preferred to be "on time rather than late but accurate". Thus, he answered the test haphazardly.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examines the role of m-learning in decreasing the learners' anxiety when speaking English by foreign language learners. The results show that the course designed for this purpose significantly decreased the level of anxiety for the participants. Only two participants reported an increase in their level of anxiety. Furthermore, the interview showed that one of the participants who reported an increase in their level of anxiety had positive stance towards the course considering it to improve his language skills. He confessed answering the posttest haphazardly due to lack of time.

The use of WhatsApp to decrease the language anxiety of the EFL learners was successful in the first two categories "communication comprehension and fear of feedback by peers or teachers". The difference in the results between the pretest and posttest show that the learners decreased the mean of the participants' anxiety from 105.44 to 94.33. Although the learners are still considered in the medium group of anxiety, their mean is nearer to the low anxiety group rather than the high group. The study even shows that m-learning didn't significantly decrease the level of anxiety in the third category "fear of test". This could be due to the fact that the course didn't have any real test for the participants. In fact, this point suggests having future courses which include real tests rather than interviews only.

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