Young People's Use of Technology and Its Implication for Second Language Education in Formal Settings

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Abstract

This paper considers the opportunities and challenges posed to formal second language education given the penetration of digital technologies in young people's daily lives. This paper broadly discusses the issues of information technology (IT) infrastructure, classroom management and IT use restrictions in relations to language learning. The paper concludes by making suggestions for policy makers and language educators in terms of supporting technology-enhanced formal language education with more advanced IT educational programs and the development of virtual learning environment (VLE) system at school.

Keywords: information technology, young people, formal language education

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that language educators need to import appropriate learning recourses and maximize their uses accordingly in the scenarios of formal language education (Gao, 2010). At the same time, with the integration of technology into young people' everyday life, the Internet, computer, television, mobile phones and other new forms of information technologies have been brought to the attention of language educators and policy makers as these tools might have the potential to empower language education. In this context, the present paper aims to analyze the use of technology in young people's daily life and discuss opportunities, as well as the challenges the technology could pose to formal language education. As television and computers, mobile technologies, and the Internet are seen as the most popular technology among the young people today (Pacher et al., 2010), these technologies will be discussed separately in relation to their everyday practices. Suggestions will be made on the corresponding policies and practices that could be implemented by language teaching organizations.

2. Screen Media for Young People

The screen media discussed in this section encompass televisions and computers. Contemporary young people spend a considerable amount of time watching televisions everyday. Indeed, television is one of the most popular entertaining tools when a young person gets bored and the last device to gain academic information (Wayne et al., 2010). Therefore, televisions could hardly be used for educational purpose in formal learning unless functioned as a demonstration tool during class.

Young people also hold positive attitudes towards computers. In fact, the term 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) has stimulated discussions and debates in the field of educational technology. The notion of 'digital natives' has been brought into the spotlight in the Web 2.0 era. According to Helsper and Eynon (2010), proponents began to argue that 'digital natives' born after 1990 are grown up digital and thus seen as the latest generation of 'digital natives'. Such a belief lies in the proliferation and popularity of Web 2.0 technologies among young people. This is evident in their phenomenal adoption of social networking and media sharing sites or Apps such as Tik Tok and WeiChat. It follows that the current online technologies have become an integral part of young people's everyday life and arguably penetrated into the scenarios of informal learning (Zeng, 2018). Accordingly, the term 'digital native' has made a point that the emergence and intense use of technology have an impact on the ways young people interact with the world and even the ways they learn at school (Prensky, 2011). As Kent and Facert (2004, p. 444) observed earlier: "Looking up information on the Web, using charts and graphs and using

educational software, for example, are all more widely reported as having been experienced at school than at home."

Moreover, computer games are ubiquitous. The research on computer use at home indicates that the purpose of parents to purchase or upgrade a computer is to possess a tool of assisting children's learning in schools. However, when young people were asked why they wish to own a computer, many of them, especially young boys, responded that playing games was the prior aim (Prensky, 2005). Recent research showed that young people were learning while gaming. Yet, their learning behaviour with online games was not as groundbreaking as expected by educators. Rather, when given the autonomy to decide their learning, young people seemingly decided to go back to the classroom (Chik, 2018). That is, young people would replicate their classroom learning patterns when gaming, and thus were not able to fully exploit the educational affordances of gaming technologies.

To summarize, computers in schools could be used as an educational tool for language learning but might be less so at home. However, the information technology (IT) resources in schools are made unavailable to students most of the time due to issues exemplified by class management and learning distractions (Felix, 2008). In this context, policy makers and language educators should consider placing less limits on the school IT use. For example, language classrooms might agree to have fixed "free time" for students to make full use of IT resources, and one or two IT staff should be there for technical support and guidance. Further, gaming technologies deserve more attention from language educators as play could be a 'serious matter' (Roger & Sharapan, 1994). The popularity of online games among the young is undeniable but their potentials to stimulate innovative learning behaviour and effective learning experiences need further investigation. With the aim to expand learning possibilities, language educators could choose not to extensively use these tools but conduct learning experiments with gaming technologies.

3. Mobile Technology in Everyday Life

The use of the mobile technology is highly individualized among the young as it has penetrated into their personal lives. The social media in particular are essential for young people's social life (Pachler et al., 2010). Young people use mobile phones to contact people, maintain friendship, participate in group activities and so forth. Moreover, phone and social networking sites messaging are preferred ways of communication than emailing or instant messaging among young people (CNNIC, 2020). Moreover, the function of a mobile phone as a social tool is gradually transforming into a lifestyle organizer. For example, a mobile phone is frequently utilized as a dairy keeper, a digital notebook for time table, a memory stick for keeping details such as a fax file number, bank account and so on (Naismith et al., 2006). Entertainment has also become an intriguing feature of a mobile phone. Research shows that when come across classroom boredom, young people tend to message people around to share their feelings (Naismith et al., 2006). Young people also use mobile phones to take pictures and make videos. As mobile phones have been widely adopted and integrated into young people's life, those who fail to equip themselves with a mobile phone have a strong impulse to purchase one. Recent report from China Internet Network Information Centre (CINIC, 2020) showed that by 2019, 63.6% of the young people in China own at least one type of mobile device.

From the perspective of language education, however, mobile phones are far less integrated into formal language teaching and learning. The modest uses of mobile phones include building chat groups, sending alerts to parents, notifying students of classroom changes and upcoming visitors, etc. In other words, if necessary, mobile phones are often used as a digital notice board. In many occasions, mobile phones have been banned from classroom learning. The limitation of contemporary use of mobile phones for language educational purpose has not affected the passion of language educators to explore the learning possibilities of this prevailing technology. Some language educators believe that the use of mobile technologies could fit into a range of second language acquisition (SLA) scenarios, such as collaborative language learning, situated language learning etc., and that its potential to benefit formal language education is enormous.

In this context, policy makers and educators might set their eyes on the possibilities that mobile technologies could bring to formal language education. It is true that mobile technology brings challenge to formal education, such as the disturbance of the class order and the issue of learning distractions. However, its potential for language education still worth further experiment and investigation. After all, mobile phones are utilized by the young as tools to make conversations, which is in line with the latest second language acquisition (SLA) theory that the process of language learning is conversational (Ellis, 2005). Classroom teachers could conduct some initial trials which involve certain teaching methods empowered by mobile technologies. As such, innovative projects and research on mobile learning should be encouraged by policy makers and language educators.

Reports of these projects should be circulated among language teachers. The school, for example, might place concerning materials in teachers' pigeonholes as references for new pedagogies. The same political strategies might be applicable to hand-held video game consoles, laptops and tablet PCs, all of which could provide possibilities for innovative learning in formal language education. In the meantime, however, classroom management will become more difficult with the use of mobile technologies in class.

4. The Adoption and Use of the Internet

Research in the U.K. shows that most young people (9-19) have the access to the Internet. In many cases, socio-economic differences account for the inequality of home Internet access as a study pointed out that 88% of students from middle class family enjoyed the network at home whereas it fell to 61% among working-class students. The home access percentage even fluctuates in different parts of the U. K. as the level of economic development varies (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). Though inequalities in the access to the Internet exist at home, this situation is not reproduced at school. Evidently, students receive broadly similar levels of exposure to the Internet at school, regardless of their family background and gender (Livingstone & Bovill, 2004). Similar patterns of Internet access are shared with their counterparts in China. According to a more up-to-date report released by CNNIC (2020), By 2019, 93.1% of the young people in China have the access to the Internet. When asked, 66.1% of the young people claimed that they used Internet for educational purposes. 93.9% of the young people access the Internet through mobile phones, 45% through desktops, 31.5% through laptops, 56.7% through televisions and 28.9% through mobile devices such as iPads.

Further, the widespread use of the Internet does not suggest a free exploration of Internet. Young people are frequently questioned about their online activities or even be accompanied by their parents during online exploration. Statistics showed that 49.2% of Chinese parents often restrain their children in terms of Internet use (CNNIC, 2020). In the meantime, a considerable number of websites bearing rich information are blocked by the Internet security system in schools. Research also indicates a distinction in the Internet use patterns among the young according to their different frequencies of using Internet (Zeng & Zhang, 2020). It is pointed out that Internet users who use the Internet less often visit the same two or three familiar sites linked to their favourite television programmes, sports websites, and conduct quick searches. They also play online games and check messages. On the other hand, a quantitative amount of time is spent by heavy users on socializing, playing games, searching information, self-studying, seeking expertise online, or drowning themselves in the Internet to escape the real world. The heavy users are more likely to take the most out of online experience. Indeed, when asked what they do on the Internet, according to the statistics of CNNIC (2020), 89.6% of young people often use the Internet for learning purposes. Of course, young people also use the Internet for entertainment, such as listening to the music (65.9%), playing games (61%), chatting (58%), watching short video clips (46.2%) and so forth. However, Chinese young people also use the Internet to expand their learning horizons, such as reading books (14.3%) and news (14.8%).

To sum up, we can conclude from the statistics shown above that although the opportunities of Internet access for young people exist, they are not always available to them. Internet is often used for the purpose of academic study and information searching. Online communication and gaming enjoy much popularity. As such, parents, language educators and young people unanimously hold concern for Internet use. Currently, the issues prompted by the Internet have been partially addressed by educational organizations through blocking websites.

Admittedly, the Internet produces challenge for language educators. The risks of exposing young people to unexpected materials, dangerous persons and unfiltered entertainments have been noticed and blocked out to a large extent in schools. For example, many Internet systems in secondary schools identify video sharing platforms as unauthorized websites. Inappropriate video materials thus have been excluded from the language classroom. However, the other side of coin indicates that the opportunity for language education might have been undermined. For example, the earth science teacher may intend to demonstrate the cause of global warming by playing a video clip on YouTube and disappointedly find that this website is inaccessible in the classroom. Another example would be that the language teacher makes efforts to upload students' audio files so that collaborative learning could take place. In this case, the teacher might find that either the platform website for holding these files has been blocked or the school does not take the risk of exposing the work of the students to a wide audience online. Further, the restriction placed on online exploration might discourage young people from using Internet. Consequently, the balance between the challenges and opportunities the Internet has posed to formal language education becomes critical.

The discussion above aims to inspire the policy maker or language educators to seek a risk-proof platform that could provide abundant teaching and learning resources, as well as opportunities of creation, sharing and

communication. The development of virtual learning environment (VLE), therefore, is crucial. Indeed, the importance of VLE has been recognized by many. A large number of schools have taken the efforts to establish their own VLE systems. Yet, their existence and functions have long been neglected by classroom teachers and students. Though information technology has been integrated into the secondary school curriculum, few sessions are available on how to make use of existing resources and Internet security guidance. Students are primarily instructed on computer skills, such as Microsoft application, website construction etc. in schools. It is true that IT skills are of great importance for the young. However, language educators should also raise the awareness of students in making use of resources that have been offered online. Furthermore, the policy makers might consider integrating into the curriculum the knowledge on school VLE system and providing guidance on the Internet use and IT skills to young people.

One the other hand, sufficient skepticism has been cast upon on the Internet use for language educational purpose as some believe that the Internet is more entertaining to the young than educational. However, the existing findings on Internet use have evidently shown that the online technologies have been supportive to young people's language learning. Thus, policy makers should continue supporting the use of Internet in language classrooms.

5. Limitations and Conclusion

The present paper bears two major limitations: firstly, the discussion of this paper is based on the secondary data and reasoning, and thus empirical research is needed for future investigations; secondly, this paper has broadly discussed young people's use of digital technologies and thus the corresponding suggestions for policy makers and language educators are broad-brush. More in-depth research is needed in terms of the use of digital technologies for formal language education. Yet, this paper is an initial attempt to inform policy makers and language educators the possible connections between the online phenomenon today and formal language education. In particular, school use of computers and Internet should be encouraged among the students of second languages. After all, technology innovations are frequently used for academic purposes in schools by young people. Further, school VLE needs to be well-developed and made familiar with students. Relating knowledge and 'know-how' should be involved in IT education. Moreover, language teachers should widely read the research results on e-learning which might lead to innovative pedagogies. Perhaps, a broader lesson drawn from the discussion in this paper suggests that by asking young people what they do with the technologies at hand, we can start to think how their adoption and use patterns of those technologies could influence the possible revolution of formal language education.

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