The effect of iPad assisted language learning on developing EFL students' autonomous language learning

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Abstract. This paper will present the experience of using iPads with a group of 21 students in a Saudi university over a period of one semester. The purpose of this ongoing study is to explore how students learn to collaborate and interact in English by participating in a teacher-designed English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course. The course aimed at teaching students to work together by using a wide range of activities supported by the use of iPad devices. Data were gathered through a questionnaire, focus group interviews and learners' diaries. The findings indicate that the use of the iPad when integrated carefully into a language course, and with the teacher's instruction, can have positive effects on students' motivation and learning. There is evidence that this form of learning provides students with opportunities to collaborate with their peers, develop relationships and build bonds. Based on these findings, there seem to be clear benefits of integrating mobile devices into language courses.

Keywords: iPad, mobile assisted language learning, collaboration, motivation, learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

The expansion in mobile computing technology has increased its potential benefits as tools to assist learning, and a new form of learning has consequently developed, based on the concept of learners' mobility. Hulme and Shield (2008) defined Mobile Learning (ML) as "learning mediated via handheld devices and potentially

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available anytime, anywhere. Such learning may be formal or informal" (p. 273). According to this definition, ML has four essential characteristics, which have to be considered when implementing it in teaching and learning contexts: Firstly, learning is ubiquitous; due to the mobility of these handheld devices, learners have the ability to move physically and virtually between multiple contexts and content (Kinash & Brand, 2012). Secondly, learning is not restricted to face-to face-interaction but rather it can also provide learners with opportunities for asynchronous and synchronous interaction (Hall & Smith, 2011). Thirdly, ML defies the three principles of conventional instruction, namely the fixed time, location and pace, as learning can become a continuous and spontaneous process (Hall & Smith, 2011).

ML differs significantly from the typical use of technology provided by occasional visits to computer labs or the supplement of desktop computers in the classroom, in its portability, durability, affordability and personalised nature. Compared to fixed desktops, mobile devices allow for "face-to-face collaboration" which positively affects students' interaction (Meurant, 2010). In addition, these handheld tools do not require fixed arrangement, which computer labs do, in order to incorporate technology into the classroom. Therefore, the range of activities which usually occur in the English for Foreign Learners' (EFL) classroom can easily be altered i.e. students can work individually, in pairs, groups or as a class (Meurant, 2010). There is therefore a growing interest in investigating the attitudes of learners and teachers towards this form of learning, as well as the learning outcomes and the everyday practicalities of incorporating the use of such technology into a language course.

Recently, many instructors and researchers have joined the experience of ML (Li & Li, 2011). Various studies, as a consequence, have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of ML at enhancing collaboration and interaction (Alvarez, Brown, & Nussbaum, 2011; Bowman & Benson, 2009); student engagement (Dualde, Buendia, & Cano, 2010); fostering self-study and self-regulated learning and improving creativity and critical thinking skills (Cavus & Usunboylu, 2009); and raising students' motivation (Rau, Gao, & Wub, 2008). However, other studies have suggested that the ambitious aims of ML are falling short due to the limitations of the mobile devices being used, i.e. smart phones, iPods, laptops, netbooks and PDAs (Wang & Wang, 2009).

This situation has started to change with the emergence of a recent advance in mobile technology, the iPad, which has the potential to provide easy access to efficient pedagogy (Manuguerra & Petocz, 2011). The iPad has a large multi-touch

display screen (7.7 inch) which resembles the size of a textbook. According to Henderson and Yeow (2012), such features maximise students' learning experience as they feel more involved, motivated and engaged. Other unique characteristics include its lightweight, long battery life (about ten hours), built-in microphone and camera, built-in App Store which enables learners to access a wide range of educational applications and a page layout which can be altered from portrait to landscape. In addition, the iPad has a streamlined design with no peripheral attachments, such as cabling, mouse or keyboard; and no distracting buttons having just a virtual on-screen keyboard and a single control button. In fact, the highly usable and simple platform of the iPad reduces the learning curve that typically occurs when using technology (Demski, 2011).The combinations of these features makes such devices stand out amongst previous generations of mobile technology due to their unique design which combines laptop functionality with smartphone portability (Murphy, 2011).

This ongoing study proposes to introduce mobile language learning in a Saudi context where classrooms are dominated by teacher-centred instruction, which has deprived students of opportunities to engage in an active learning. Rather, many learners tend to participate in an educational system that focuses on fulfilling the requirements of the course in an artificial environment. In such an approach, learners expect their teacher to impart knowledge to them, which has reduced them to passive recipients and demotivated learners. Therefore, the rationale of this project stems from the writer's assumption that using an iPad device or any similar technology could enhance EFL learning by offering unlimited opportunities to facilitate and enrich language learning. It also seeks to shift the current conventional teacher-centred classroom to a more dynamic one by involving students in an active and independent approach to learning. However, this is to be achieved not by leaving students to themselves but by guiding and giving them a reason to work as an active agent and to take responsibility of their own learning.

The study was guided by the main research question: Can a teacher-guided EFL course, delivered via the iPad device, enhance learners' autonomous language learning?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were a group of 21 female students majoring in Computer Sciences at the College of Community in Qatif, Dammam University, Saudi Arabia. Their

ages ranged from 19 to 24 years. Students were classified by the coordinator of the English department and by their teacher as at a beginner level in English, based on their first semester exam. Their educational background in learning English varied from six years to 12 years.

2.2. Data collection

In order to provide a holistic investigation of the issues raised in this study, a mixed methods case study research design was adopted, in which a combination of various data collection instruments were used: a) SILL Questionnaires (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning, adopted from Oxford, 1990) which was administered to the students at three separate time points (prior to the study, after 12 weeks, and six months after the end of the study); b) focus group interviews, twenty-one students were divided into three groups of seven each (the interviews were audiotaped to ensure accurate transcription and were performed in Arabic); and c) students' diaries which were submitted weekly subject to students' agreement. By the end of the course, there were 70 entries ranging from four pages to five lines.

2.3. Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analysed statistically through SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). In regards to the data obtained from learners' diaries and focus group interviews, an inductive thematic analysis was carried out based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach.

2.4. Materials

The project was self-funded, thus, 21 iPads along with the preloaded applications, the ibooks (electronic version of Q Skills for Success Listening and Speaking Book provided by Oxford University Press), the iTune U course management system that was used in the project to supplement the course materials, and the online tracker software were purchased at the researcher's personal expense.

3. Results and discussion

From the data analysis, the potential of the iPad device and the mobile-assisted language learning approach appear to have enhanced some forms of learner autonomy, such as collaborating with others, motivation, and change of attitude as can be seen in the following sections.

3.1. Collaboration

One of the advantages of the iPad-assisted language learning course was that it facilitates the collaborative learning. By using the different applications such as Voice thread and Ask3, students were able to participate more in group work activities. Such Apps have facilitated 'anytime' or 'non-real-time' communication either among students or with the teacher.

> "There are some programmes on the iPad which have made it possible to connect with my classmates outside of class; especially 'Fuze' programme which I began using in class to complete homework tasks and for speaking practice".

It seems that the new learning environment allowed students to form emotional bonds and build bridges with other members of their class, who they previously did not have the chance to get to know. Such optimal conditions, created by the course (which was carefully designed by the researcher to blend the different applications provided via the iPads with the English syllabus) were especially relevant in a situation where face to face interaction was not typically possible.

> "I like the collaborative task of working in a group because it has helped build my communication with my classmates; some of whom I had limited communication with in class only. But now I can communicate with them".

In addition, some reluctant students reported that seeing others' posted answers motivated them to improve their performance and complete the task. The availability of their peers' assignments worked as a model, on which slow students were able to base their own work. Such peer teaching and learning would not have been possible without the affordances provided by the iPad device and the new learning approach.

3.2. Motivation: results from questionnaires

In the SILL questionnaire, learners were asked how using their iPads could impact their engagement with, attitude to, and motivation toward English language learning inside and outside the classroom. Learners indicated their attitude on a five-point Likert scale. Frequencies and percentiles were calculated for eight items specifically designed to elicit learners' responses in relation to their attitude and motivation toward learning English. In this study, the Friedman test was used

to determine if there were any differences in students' responses to the SILL questionnaire relevant to their motivation and attitude toward English learning.

Table 1. Results of Friedman test

N	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
21	13.488	2	.001

The application of the Friedman test indicated that there was a significant change (p=.001) in the students' response in terms of their attitude and motivation towards English language learning over the three time points (Table 1).

The iPad-assisted language course appeared to be highly motivating for students. Several students reported their attempts to improve their English skills. They were motivated enough to do extra work on their own either by seeking opportunities to practise English language, or by interacting with other language users. Most comments showed that they had found the course to be fun, novel, and challenging.

> "This type of programme has made studying more enjoyable and a person can develop herself just by learning to use it in a way they didn't know before".

The majority of students were fond of the new teaching method to the extent that they hoped it would be extended for a longer period.

> "Overall, the course has been enjoyable and beneficial but it is not enough and I wish it was longer".

In addition, evidence from students' interviews provided additional insights into their experience and behaviour after the integration of the iPad device into the course. Indeed, a broadly positive picture emerged in which a remarkable shift from being passive learners to active learners has been shown. Many students emphasised that the iPad-assisted language learning course offered them something different from what they used to have before. For example, one student expressed her enthusiasm to attend the English class which reflects change in her motivation and behaviour after the course.

> "I started to try more, I love trying to work through with the VoiceThred app. for example, I loved working on the topic and discussing it with my friends… because the iPad made it easier for me to communicate. I mean

> ...mm I felt that studying became exciting and not boring like before, now I like collaborating and communicating".

Overall, comments from students indicate that the majority of students experienced a shift in their behaviour after the intervention. They started to appreciate the new learning experience, which opens the door for new ways of learning and improving their English.

4. Conclusions

The preliminary results of the study suggest considerable potential for the iPad to facilitate students' collaboration as it enabled peer-to-peer interaction, and as a means to increase students' engagement and motivation to learn the target language. Further analysis of the data is expected to offer new insights into the how iPad technology or similar devices can be incorporated into a course, and to help educational institutions and EFL teachers how such devices can facilitate students' collaborative learning and motivation beyond the classroom. Overall, this study demonstrates the potential of mobile-devices in enriching the EFL experience through enabling opportunities that cannot be found in traditional classroom environments.

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