

Tablets in English class: students' activities surrounding online dictionary work

Leona Bunting¹

Abstract. Tablets have become increasingly popular among young people in Sweden and this rapid increase also resonates in school, especially in classrooms for younger children. The aim of the present study is to analyze and describe how the students deal with the open instructions for a task of using online dictionaries on tablets. Specific focus is on how they act upon the teacher's instruction and how they collaborate with each other and the tablets and whether the teacher contributes to the solving of the task and if so, how. A video-recorded observation of ten minutes in which three students and the teacher interact was chosen for analysis. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and actions described in writing. The students in the sequence went beyond the teacher's instructions of becoming acquainted with online dictionaries and compared variations in search results. Also, the teacher could only see the activities she was directly involved in. Her interaction with the students interrupted and disturbed their focus. To conclude, open instructions demand more of the students and rely heavily on their ability to interpret and understand what is expected in school at the same time as the tablets supported the students' inquisitiveness and power of initiative.

Keywords: mobile assisted language learning, MALL, second language learning, classroom study.

1. Introduction

Tablets have become increasingly popular among young people in Sweden and in 2014, 95% of 9-12-year-olds used tablets for both recreational and school purposes (Alexandersson & Davidsson, 2014; Findahl, 2014). This rapid increase also resonates in school, especially in classrooms for younger children. Tablets are

1. University of Gothenburg, Sweden; leona.bunting@ait.gu.se

considered to be flexible and user-friendly (Huang, Huang, Huang, & Lin, 2012) as well as relatively cheap and simple to use (Alexandersson & Davidsson, 2014).

Several studies involving tablets regard upper secondary or university students. Some focus on students' perceived use and attitudes to mobile devices (Ott, Haglind, & Lindström, 2014; Pagel & Lambacher, 2014), while others point to their potential for higher education (Kaganer, Giordano, Brion, & Tortoriello, 2013) and particularly for learning English (Huang et al., 2012). A study of 13-14 year-old students in Spain revealed that they began using the tablets spontaneously to support their learning after having been prompted to come up with ideas of how to use them for practising English (Underwood, 2014).

A review of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) research specifically in the area of second language learning found that most studies have been small-scale, short-term and experimental (Viberg & Grönlund, 2012). While the design of the present study is similar concerning the first two aspects, it differs in the third as it is based on a task initiated by the teacher. It focuses the students' use of tablets during a classroom project in English.

The present study is part of a larger research project in which the relationship is examined between what Swedish pre-teens do with English out of school when they engage in interest-driven activities linked to media and what they do with English in school (Bunting, 2015; Bunting & Lindström, 2013). For this particular study, a classroom project was followed where the students used tablets for exploring online dictionaries. The aim of the present study is to analyze and describe how the students deal with the open instructions of the task. Specific focus is on how they act upon the teacher's instruction and how they collaborate with each other and the tablet. A further interest is whether the teacher contributes to the solving of the task and if so, how. This will be done by scrutinizing a filmed sequence in which three students and their teacher interact.

2. Method

2.1. Gathering data

The present study is an observation study with the researcher as observer as participant (cf. Cohen, Manion & Morriison, 2011). 28 12 year-old students and their English teacher in a Swedish comprehensive school participated in the study. Permission to video-record the lessons had been obtained from the school, the parents and the students themselves. The teacher informed the parents about the

research project and obtained written consent from all of them. The students were asked orally about their willingness to participate. One student declined and is thus not present in the material. The data consists of approximately forty hours of video-recordings from three different cameras; one stationary, one mounted to the teacher's head and one hand-held, operated by the researcher.

The teacher had designed a classroom project in which the students were to work with YouTube on tablets to further their understanding of authentic language, distinguish and learn new vocabulary and finally present their findings orally to their classmates. The whole classroom project, all of which was followed for research purposes, took nine lessons. The work with the online dictionaries assumed one lesson each with two groups. For the present study, a particular sequence was chosen involving three students and the teacher. This sequence lasted ten minutes.

2.2. Analyzing the data

The students engaged in a multitude of activities during the work with the online dictionaries. The sequence with the three students and the teacher that was singled out for closer scrutiny was chosen as it illustrates a learning situation involving a communication breakdown or possibly even a critical incident. The films from the three different cameras concerning this sequence were transcribed verbatim and non-verbal actions were described in writing. All was then merged into one document to obtain a comprehensive view of the material. To strengthen the validity of the analysis, the films and the transcriptions have been used in parallel. To strengthen the reliability of the analytical process, the transcription was studied first by the author and then also by a senior researcher. The data-driven research questions emerged in this process.

3. Discussion

The three students in the chosen sequence went well beyond the instructions given by the teacher of becoming acquainted with online dictionaries and compared variations in search results. The analyzed sequence demonstrates how students can learn together and from each other as they collaboratively work on the task the teacher has given them. Furthermore, the way they interacted with the devices, pointing and writing on each others' tablets, show that the affordances of the tablets also contribute to the learning situation.

The head-mounted camera showed that the teacher could only see the student she was interacting with at any given time; the other activities in the classroom were

merely peripheral to her. It thus became impossible for her to see all the activities that went on in the classroom. For example, the teacher did not see that student A and B compared search results for the same word from different online dictionaries, something which she later gave as a task to the whole class. Furthermore, when the teacher asked the group what they were doing and questioned A's choice of word, 'katt' (Swedish for cat), her acting disturbed and interrupted their work. "If you are to use a dictionary, you obviously should look up words you don't know to learn how to use these dictionaries. Right?". She instructed and disciplined at the same time. After the teacher left, A suggested to look up the word 'dagis' (Swedish for kindergarten). He was willing to follow the teacher's instructions to look up something he did not know. B questioned his choice of word and said that they should look up something they needed instead. A interpreted the teacher's instruction verbatim and B interpreted the instruction to contain more than the explicit words. The teacher thus contributed to a shift in focus of the students' work.

Regarding the students' collaboration, it is apparent that B had the preferential right of interpretation while A and C followed his lead. For example, in the aforementioned exchange, B corrected A. Student C sat on his own until he heard A and B laugh. He then moved to sit next to B. A and B both contributed to solving the task while C was peripheral.

4. Conclusions

The filmed sequence of the students and the teacher shows that twelve-year-olds can cope with open instructions, but that such instructions demand more of the students and rely heavily on their ability to interpret and understand what is expected in school. There is thus a risk that open instructions, which leave room for interpretation, are less accessible to students who do not understand the teachers' unvoiced expectations. However, the work with the tablets supported the students' inquisitiveness and power of initiative which are important parts of the learning process.

References

- Alexandersson, K., & Davidsson, P. (2014). *Eleverna och internet [Students and the internet]*. Stockholm: .SE (Stiftelsen för internetinfrastruktur).
- Bunting, L., & Lindström, B. (2013). Framing English learning at the intersection of school and out-of-school practices. *Journal of International Scientific Publications: Language, Individual & Society*, 7, part 1, 205-221.

- Bunting, L. (2015). Teaching English to boundary crossers - A subject in change. *13th Annual Hawaii Conference on Education, Honolulu, USA, January 5-8, 2015, Proceedings*.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Findahl, O. (2014). *Svenskarna och internet [Swedes and the internet]*. Stockholm: .SE (Stiftelsen för internetinfrastruktur).
- Huang, Y.-M., Huang, Y.-M., Huang, S.-H. & Lin, Y.-T. (2012). A ubiquitous English vocabulary learning system: evidence of active/passive attitudes vs. usefulness/ease-of-use. *Computers & Education, 58*, 273-282. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2011.08.008
- Kaganer, E., Giordano, G.A., Brion, S. & Tortoriello, M. (2013). Media tablets for mobile learning. *Communications of the ACM, 56*(11), 68-75.
- Ott, T., Haglind, T., & Lindström, B. (2014) Students' use of mobile phones for school work. In M. Kalz, Y. Bayyurt, & M. Specht (Eds.), *Mobile as mainstream – Towards future challenges in mobile learning: 13th World Conference on Mobile and Contextual Learning, mLearn 2014, Istanbul, Turkey, November 3-5, 2014, Proceedings* (pp. 69-80). doi:10.1007/978-3-319-13416-1_8
- Pagel, J. W., & Lambacher S. G. (2014). Patterns and effectiveness of mobile device usage by Japanese undergraduates for L2 acquisition purposes. In S. Jager, L. Bradley, E. J. Meima, & S. Thouésny (Eds.), *CALL Design: Principles and Practice, Proceedings of the 2014 EUROCALL Conference, Groningen, The Netherlands* (pp. 284-289). Dublin Ireland: Research-publishing.net. doi:10.14705/rpnet.2014.000232
- Underwood, J. (2014). Using iPads to help teens design their own activities. In S. Jager, L. Bradley, E. J. Meima, & S. Thouésny (Eds.), *CALL Design: Principles and Practice, Proceedings of the 2014 EUROCALL Conference, Groningen, The Netherlands* (pp. 385-390). Dublin Ireland: Research-publishing.net. doi:10.14705/rpnet.2014.000250
- Viberg, O., & Grönlund, Å. (2012). Mobile assisted language learning: a literature review. *mLearn, CEUR Workshop Proceedings* (pp. 9-16).

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; info@research-publishing.net

© 2015 by Research-publishing.net (collective work)
© 2015 by Author (individual work)

Critical CALL – Proceedings of the 2015 EUROCALL Conference, Padova, Italy
Edited by Francesca Helm, Linda Bradley, Marta Guarda, and Sylvie Thouéšny

Rights: All articles in this collection are published under the Attribution-NonCommercial -NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Under this licence, the contents are freely available online (as PDF files) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.



Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-28-5 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-29-2 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-30-8 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2015.