

Training learners to use Quizlet vocabulary activities on mobile phones in Vietnam with Facebook

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Mobile phone ownership among university students in Vietnam has reached almost 100%, exceeding that of Internet-capable desktop computers. This has made them increasingly popular to allow learners to carry out learning activities outside of the classroom, but some studies have suggested that learners are not always willing to engage in activities outside of the classroom (Kim et al., 2013). Recent research has suggested that providing training to learners that includes not only how but also why activities are important can improve learner engagement in mobile-based activities (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2014). In this presentation, Vietnamese learners of English engaged in vocabulary and grammar tasks using the Quizlet app on their mobile phones outside of class time. Learners were provided with technical training in class, while ongoing strategic and pedagogical training were provided through a combination of in-class activities and interactions through a dedicated Facebook page over a 5-week period. Usage patterns of the site were recorded through a learning journal and interactions on the Facebook page were analysed to determine the nature of the discussions that took place. Learner attitudes towards the tasks and the training were examined through pre- and post-questionnaires and a focus group discussion. The results are discussed in terms of the problems encountered, and some suggestions for providing appropriate training to learning through mobile phones outside of class through social networking.

Keywords: learner training, social networking, mobile learning, vocabulary learning

Introduction

The potential of mobile devices for language learning has been widely recognized over the past several years, and there is already a large body of research that shows the potential for learning through mobile tools (see Burston, 2013). Despite this potential, however, there is evidence to suggest, however, that learners are not always willing to engage in activities on mobile devices outside of class (Kim, Rueckert, Kim, & Seo, 2013), even though learners indicated that they saw the potential of using mobile devices outside of class time, this was not reflected in patterns of actual usage (Peterson, Divitini & Chabert, 2008; Stockwell, 2010). In other words, although learners can see that mobile devices can lead to learning opportunities outside of the classroom, they have difficulties in using them effectively without guidance and support.

Recent research has suggested that providing training can improve learner engagement in learning tasks that were related to learning English vocabulary (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). This study was based on work by Hubbard and Romeo (2012), who identified three main types of training: technical, strategic and pedagogical. Technical training deals with learning how to use a technology, strategic training with learning how to use it for learning purposes, and pedagogical with the reasons why to use it for learning purposes. Stockwell and Hubbard (2014) found that learners who received technical, strategic and pedagogical training showed improvement in how they engaged in the tasks and on scores achieved in weekly vocabulary quizzes when compared to learners who only received technical training.

One question that remains, however, is the way in which such training can be provided to learners. In Stockwell and Hubbard's study (2014), training was provided exclusively during class time, and this method enabled teachers to keep in close touch with the learners during the training process. However, they also point out that it took quite a considerable amount of class time in order to do this, and as such, when there is limited class time, there is a need to consider alternatives of supplementing the training process that can use less class time. Given the widespread popularity of social media in over the past several years and the increase in interest it is attracting second language teachers and researchers (Akbari, Pilot & Simons, 2015), it is possible that providing a discussion space to learners through social media may provide a means through which learners can discuss their learning experiences in a way that can supplement learner training that takes place in class.

Mobile learning

The potential for mobile phones for language learning is clearly evident in the volume of research which has appeared over the past several years. A snapshot of this research can be seen in an overview from 1994 through to 2012 by Burston (2013), who demonstrated that there has been an enormous range of research carried out that is as diverse in its focus as it is varied in the contexts in which it has been used. As alluded to above, however, a problem that has been pointed out is that until recently, much of the research that has taken place with mobile devices has focused either on their use in controlled classroom environments, or has tended to focus on learner attitudes to learning through mobile devices (Stockwell, 2016). Research that has looked at what happens outside the classroom, however, has shown that learners tend to be less willing to engage in activities than is indicated through responses collected from surveys and questionnaires taken prior to actual usage.

attributed to task design, as evidenced by Stockwell (2010) who showed that several learners who never tried to engage in vocabulary activities on their mobile phones despite showing that they thought that they would be useful and planned to use them in advance. This tendency has been seen in other studies as well (e.g., Huang & Lin, 2007; Kim *et al.*, 2013), and this suggests that other factors are at play. While of course the physical characteristics of the mobile device would be thought to play a role, as Wang and Higgins (2006) point out, the impact of the psychological and pedagogical factors are also likely contributing factors. Although we may have little control over the physical characteristics apart from making sure that activities are suited to the affordances of the devices (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013), as Stockwell (2008) argues, the teacher may be able to have an impact on psychological factors through adopting an appropriate pedagogy.

Learner training

There is increasing evidence to suggest that learner training can be an important factor in learning through technology (Hubbard, 2013). In its broadest sense of learning a second language, learner training has predominantly been taken to mean strategy training, where learners are given specific techniques that they can employ in order to engage in to assist them with their language learning. These have been present in the non-technology literature now for many years (e.g., Oxford, 1990; Cohen & Macaro, 2007), but there are added complexities to the use of technology which would warrant a modified approach when compared to teaching without technology. The largest factor is that technology itself will often need to be explained in and demonstrated in order to understand the range of functions available, and teachers may also have to help learners to deal with issues such as logging in difficulties, connection problems, hardware problems, and so forth. The need for this type of technical training was pointed out by Hubbard (2004), who also advocated that it commonly only occurs at the beginning of a course, and that carrying it out on an ongoing basis had the potential to enhance learner engagement with a technology.

While impromptu learner training could be provided when using technology takes place in controlled conditions such as in the classroom, using technology outside of the classroom introduces new issues into the equation. Given the widespread ownership of mobile technologies, it is not surprising to see the increasing body of research investigating how they may also be used for learning purposes. The problem described above of the lack of learner engagement when using mobile technologies outside the classroom, however, has shown to be surprisingly difficult to overcome, and as Stockwell (2012) has suggested, this cannot simply be attributed to task or activity design, as many learners did not make any attempt to use their mobile phones to complete assigned activities. It could be concluded that this was largely due to the fact that the learners failed to see the value in completing the activities, and therefore did not feel it was worthwhile to look at them.

As a means of dealing with this lack of engagement in the mobile phone activities, Stockwell and Hubbard (2014) investigated how learner training to heighten awareness of the learning activities, and to provide specific instruction in how to use them. They used three types of training, technical, strategic and pedagogical training on an ongoing basis throughout the course, combined with in-class debriefings where learners could discuss and evaluate the various strategies that they used. Technical training referred to training how to use a technology and to understand its various features and functions, strategic training referred to training in how to use the technology for language learning, while

pedagogical training referred to training in evaluating the various strategies and being able to articulate the reasons to others. They showed that not only was there a massive increase in learner engagement in the online activities on mobile phones, but also that this was reflected in improved scores in assessment and in general attitudes towards learning, not only through mobile devices.

Social networking

Social networking as a means of promoting communication between learners and with the teacher is another area that has started to attract attention over the past few years, with a growing body of work appearing in the literature (Zourou & Lamy, 2013; Akbari, Pilot & Simons, 2015). As Lomicka and Lord (2009) point out, social networking creates an environment through which participants can engage in relationships, collaborate with others, and at the same time can maintain their own individual identities. As a learning resource, social networking can make it possible to create a community where learners can exchange opinions, thoughts and ideas, and thus may be used to complement activities that take place in class. It should be noted, however, learners must be provided with appropriate strategies in order for social networks to be integrated as a viable resource in a language learning environment (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012). In other words, in order to make an effective learner community to achieve the desired goals, learners will need to have a clear idea of how they are expected to use them.

There have been some studies emerging that have suggested learners have a positive view of using social networking as a part of their language study. Mok (2013), for example, describes a project where Singaporean students of English engaged actively in discussions related to their studies using Facebook, and learners indicated that they enjoyed the interactions and felt that they could share their views related to their study quite comfortably through their interactions with other students and with each other. The role of social networking as a means of promoting meta-awareness of the learning process, however, has remained extremely limited, but there have been some studies starting to emerge recently that do look at how learners may interact with both teachers and learners to reflect on their learning (Irwin, Ball, Desbrow & Leveritt, 2012). Much of this potential remains conjectural based on learner perceptions through survey data, however, thus there is a need to examine how learners both use and perceive social networking as a support tool in teaching and learning.

Purpose of the study

Vietnam has seen a massive increase in access to technologies over the past several years. While this access has also included widespread use of desktop computers, mobile phone ownership among university students in Vietnam has reached almost 100%. Comparatively inexpensive access to 3G networks has meant that mobile technologies have become increasingly popular to enable learners to undertake learning activities outside of the classroom.

The study took place with Vietnamese university students who were enrolled in a TOEIC preparation course. The learners had a strong desire to achieve higher TOEIC scores as a means of enhancing their future employment opportunities, so they were quite motivated participants in the class. Class time was limited, and as a result, there was insufficient time in class to work on vocabulary activities, and it was thought that the class time could be

used more effectively if it were spent on other more interactive activities. It was also hoped that learners could be encouraged to engage in vocabulary learning more actively and systematically outside of class time, so technological means that took advantage of the widespread use of mobile phones by the learners was thought to be a means of facilitating this.

In the current study, the learners engaged in vocabulary tasks using the Quizlet app on their mobile phones outside of class time. Quizlet is a freely available app that enables teachers to choose from a wide range of existing vocabulary sets in a range of different languages as well as creating their own activities. It consists of flash cards and simple matching games which the learner can aim to complete in as short a time as possible. In the current study, an existing set of vocabulary for studying TOEIC was used, that was specifically designed for Vietnamese learners. The purpose of the study was to investigate the potential of using a combination of in-class technical training with a combination of online discussion using Facebook for strategic and pedagogical training. The reasons for opting to use Facebook for the study were twofold. Firstly, due to the strict requirements of the syllabus there was insufficient time to discuss the use of the Quizlet activities in class. Secondly, since learners were engaging in the activities outside of class on their mobile phones and were mostly active users of Facebook on their mobile phones, it was thought that the Facebook discussions might prompt users to engage in the Quizlet activities more actively.

Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate whether it was feasible for learner training in mobile-phone based vocabulary learning activities to be carried out through a combination of in-class discussion and social networking. It extends beyond the study by Stockwell and Hubbard (2014) in that it seeks to identify whether or not social networking tools such as Facebook can play a role in supporting the learner training process. Specifically, it aims at identifying the ways in which these social networking tools are used by learners, and, based on these ways, to devise a pedagogy that would enable learners to supplement their learning.

Method

The study was an exploratory study which took place over a five-week period at the University of Foreign Language Studies, University of Danang in Vietnam. Learners engaged in vocabulary activities using Quizlet on their mobile phones, and were provided with technical, strategic and pedagogical training based on the model provided by Stockwell and Hubbard (2014). Facebook was included as an additional element to provide a further forum for discussion of the strategies that were employed when undertaking the activities. Given the short term nature of the study and the lack of a control group, it was not intended to determine whether the training contributed to language development, but rather to examine how learners engaged in Facebook to determine its viability as a supplementary tool in learner training.

Participants

Subjects in the study were 21 Vietnamese learners enrolled in an intact second year English language class which was designed to help students to improve their TOEIC test scores. The class consisted of 18 males and three females. All of the students possessed smart phones, with Android phones making up 57.1% of phone ownership, followed by iPhones making with 38.1%, and Windows phones with 4.8%. A pre-survey was administered to determine

the demographics of the participants, revealing that 85.7% had some mobile learning experience for self study purposes, with almost half of these being dictionary apps (47.6%), and over a third using some kind of app for learning vocabulary apps (38.1%). It was interesting to note that 19.0% of the participants had experience in using Quizlet for self-study before starting the project.

Provision of training

The learners were provided with technical training in class, while ongoing strategic and pedagogical training were provided through a combination of interactions through a dedicated Facebook page over a five week period. Technical training was undertaken in detail in the first week, and included showing how to use the Quizlet app and how to control the privacy settings in Facebook. Further supplementary training was also carried out in class in subsequent weeks to ensure learners were familiar with the functions of Quizlet. Strategic training was conducted in class and consisted of showing learners specific strategies on how to use Quizlet to learn vocabulary, including, for example, what to do when encountering unknown words, how to recycle words more frequently, how to make smaller sub-lists to target specific words as required, and so forth. These strategies were not presented in one session, but in small chunks over the period of the study. Learners could also discuss their strategies through Facebook as well, and this was explained in class. Finally, pedagogical training was undertaken to facilitate learner understanding as to why they should use the technology to learn, in this case why they should use Quizlet to learn vocabulary. These discussions were intended to be carried out predominantly through Facebook, and supplemented in class as necessary.

Data collection

Data in the current study consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data. A pre-treatment survey was administered to identify basic demographic information such as experience with learning through mobile devices and the technologies owned by the participants, and to determine learner attitudes towards the prospect of learning through their mobile phones. A post-survey was used to find out how learners felt about using Quizlet for vocabulary learning and Facebook as a forum for discussion about their learning. In addition, focus group discussions were held with six volunteers (one female and five male) to get better insights into learners' views of using their mobile phones for language learning and to find out why learners behaved as they did with both Quizlet and Facebook. Furthermore, learners' postings on Facebook were analysed to determine the nature of the discussions that took place, along with the access logs and scores that were recorded in Quizlet. The focus group discussions were based primarily on the content of the post-treatment survey, but the discussion was not restricted to this.

Procedure

The study was carried out over a five-week period, as follows:

- Week 1: Pre-treatment survey
- Technical training for mobile Quizlet & Facebook

- Week 2: Discussion of using Quizlet in class
Dealing with technical difficulties and problems
Introduction to using Facebook for discussing learning
- Weeks 3–5: Discussion of learning in class and on Facebook
- Week 6: Post-treatment survey
Focus group discussions

On completion of the project, all participants were asked if they would like to take part in the focus group discussion, but due to problems with scheduling a common meeting time, only six learners were able to participate. As an exploratory study, it was hoped that the project would shed some light onto the potential role of social networking in the learner training process. The results are presented forthwith.

Results

The background information of the participants, including mobile phone ownership, has been outlined in the methodology above, but briefly, they revealed that all learners owned a smart phone, and were interested in participating in the study. As Figure 1 shows, however, there was a discrepancy between learners' anticipated use of Quizlet and their actual use. According to the pre-treatment survey, the majority of learners indicated that they wanted to engage in the activities for at least 45 minutes per week, but the server logs demonstrated that usage was significantly less than anticipated, with four of the learners not completing any of the activities at all.

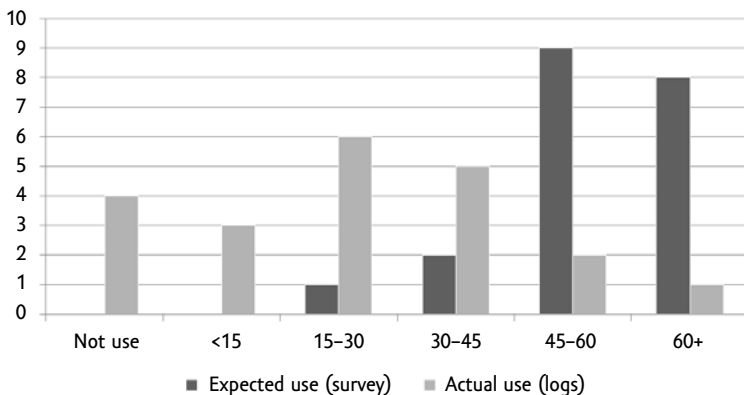


Figure 1. Number of minutes of expected and actual use of Quizlet

The Quizlet activities were not a compulsory part of the course, but rather were intended as a supplement to assist them with their study for the TOEIC test. As such, there was no requirement for the learners to complete all or even any of the activities. When taken in this light, it was considered as quite positive that many of the learners completed at least half of the activities, with four of the 21 learners completing more than 80% of them, as can be seen in Figure 2.

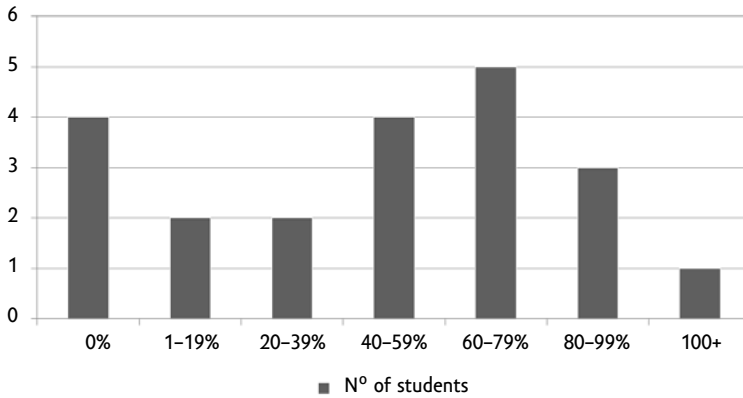


Figure 2. Percentage of the Quizlet vocabulary activities completed

In an attempt to determine whether engagement in the Quizlet activities could be prompted by conducting the in-class training or by messages posted on Facebook, the time between the finishing the class and using Quizlet (Figure 3), and the time between a message being posted to Facebook and using Quizlet (Figure 4) were recorded. The results suggested that when messages were posted to Facebook, there was a greater tendency for learners to engage in activities using Quizlet than they were immediately finishing the class. It should be noted, however, that previous experience with Quizlet appeared to have very little impact on engagement in the vocabulary activities. Of the four students that completed more than 80% of the activities, only one had had previous experience with Quizlet. Similarly, gender also did not seem to affect activity engagement, with the three female students fairly evenly distributed in the percentages. It is difficult to come to any conclusions, however, with the small number of female students, meaning that it may be attributed to individual differences rather than gender differences.

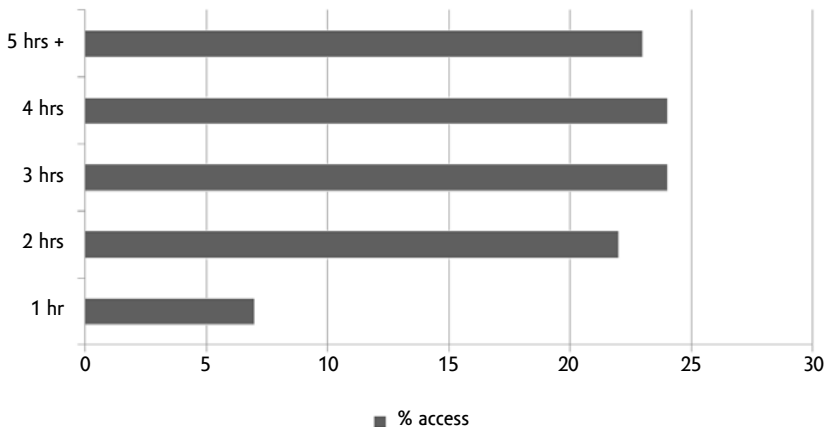


Figure 3: Time between finishing classes and accessing Quizlet

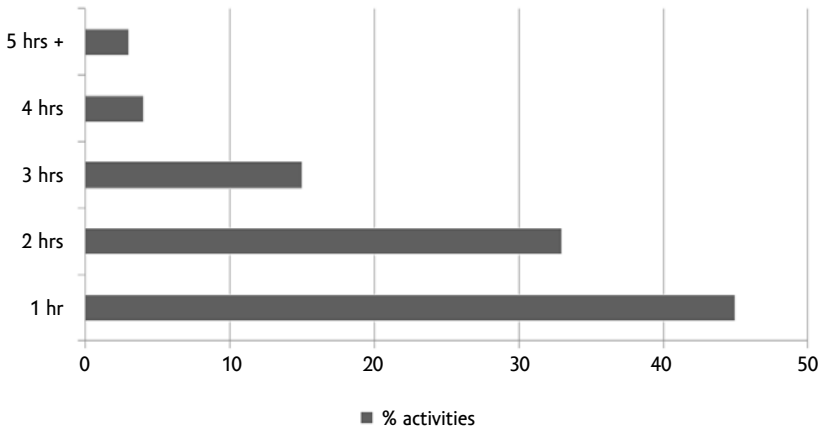


Figure 4: Time between messages posted on Facebook and accessing Quizlet

Finally, the nature of the postings on Facebook were also examined, and are summarized briefly in Table 1. There was a total of nine postings from the teacher, and nine postings from the learners to Facebook.

Table 1: Type of postings on Facebook by the teacher and students.

	Teacher		Learner
Administration	2	Replies to Teacher	2
Strategies	5	Screen shots	4
Word lists	2	Comments	3
Total	9	Total	9
Likes	3	Likes	63

The teacher primarily posted strategies for the learners to use when they engaged in the Quizlet activities (along with calls for students to discuss the strategies they used), but two administrative messages were posted to check if there were any problems with using Quizlet, and two messages each showing a list of words in the one of the units in the Quizlet activities were posted. On two occasions there were responses to a posting made by the teacher, but both times the message was very short and simply acknowledged the content. An interesting phenomenon was that some learners posted screen shots from Quizlet when they achieved a good score, which, as described below, seemed to serve as motivation to some of the other learners. There were also three comments made by learners on the screen shot postings.

One other point of interest was the use of the “Like” function in Facebook. While the teacher “liked” the good scores from the students, the students “liked” not only the screen shots, but also most of the postings made by the teacher. There was a high tendency to “like” the strategies, but there was no further discussion regarding the strategies, thus the

“like” function seemed to serve as a means of acknowledging that they had read the posting about the strategy.

Table 2: The number of postings by students on Facebook

Number of Postings	Learners
0	15
1	4
2	1
3	1
Total	21

It was hoped that the learners would participate actively in the Facebook discussions, but as Table 2 shows, the majority (15 of the 21 participants) of the learners did not post anything to Facebook at all. One learner was the most active, posting three of the nine contributions to Facebook, while another learner posted twice, and four learners posted once each.

In general, learners seemed to provide quite positive feedback about using Facebook and about learning through mobile devices. While learners may not have posted to Facebook as much as had been hoped, it is still possible that there was some effect from reading the postings from others, as the comments from students during the focus group discussions below suggested (translated from Vietnamese by the author):

It was good when someone posted words from Quizlet, because I could study them in Facebook.

I liked competing with my friends' scores on Facebook.

I got reminded to study because of the feeds.

With regards to learning through mobile devices, learners exhibited a rather practical view of both the strengths and limitations of learning through their mobile phones.

The short activities meant I could do them when I had a small amount of free time.

I got distracted sometimes during activities when I got a message.

I needed a better phone to do the activities.

Learners both acknowledged the potential benefits of learning through mobile phones and had an idea of how they could be best framed for effective usage, but at the same time, they also recognized the practical problems such as the potential distractions and the problems with having devices of lower functionality.

Discussion

The current study was designed as an exploratory study to examine how social networking might be used as a supplement to in-class learner training in order to assist learners to engage actively in vocabulary activities on their mobile phones. The results showed that while the use of Quizlet was not particularly high, it could not be considered as being

disappointing either, given the fact that in the current study it was an added element to the course. The use of Facebook, however, was somewhat lower than expected, but it is possible that the number of postings to Facebook might not be an accurate indicator of its impact. Some evidence for this lies in the fact that Quizlet usage highest directly after the teacher provided strategy training on Facebook, meaning that while learners did not comment on the postings, they may well have attempted to use the strategies upon reading about them.

General views of Facebook for learning

There did not appear to be any great resistance from students to using Facebook as a supplementary resource for their learning in the current study, and the general perceptions were positive. Many students commented that the feeds motivated them as they were using Facebook daily anyway. Learners indicated that the strategies provided by the teacher were helpful, and that they did attempt to incorporate them at least once. Furthermore, learners also felt that seeing scores of other students also promoted a sense of competition as well. There has been an increased interest in the potential for competition within a community recently (e.g., Chik, 2014), and this is certainly an area worthy of further exploration.

Posting by students on Facebook was minimal, with only six students of the 21 learners posting anything. In contrast, “Likes” were far more common, with almost all participating students “liking” postings by both the teacher and the learner. It is possible, however, that a cultural element may have been at play in the current study, as many of the students felt that they did not feel comfortable in responding to what the teacher posted as it may have been seen as a sign of disrespect, rather opting to use the “Like” as a means of indicating that they saw and agreed with what the teacher wrote. The cultural aspect of social networking is indeed an important one, as there have also been rather negative responses from learners who felt that using social networking tools for learning was an imposition of their personal space. An example of this may be seen in comparing Liu (2013) who found quite conflicting results with her Taiwanese learners and Mok (2012) with Singaporean learners in with a comparable learning activity using Facebook. Whereas the Taiwanese learners felt uncomfortable in responding to the teacher in a public forum (particularly in English), the Singaporean had little objection to holding discussions through Facebook and viewed it quite positively. Given the strong perception of the teacher as an absolute authority in Vietnamese contexts, it is possible that the outcomes of the current study were influenced in part by the view held by learners of the relationship between themselves and the teacher.

Providing training through Facebook

From the current study at least, it was evident that providing training through Facebook was not an easy undertaking. While learners were quite receptive of the idea, there were barriers that meant that it was not used in the way that had been anticipated. Certainly, the short time-frame of the current study is likely to have had some impact, as the learners had little time to get used to using Facebook before the project concluded, and having a longer-term study may have contributed to more active discussion over time.

Although training was provided in class using a combination of Vietnamese and English, but postings made to Facebook by the teacher were in English, as it was thought that if the learners had time to read through them at their leisure outside of class, then it would be acceptable to use English. However, due to using the fact that English was used, longer

posts were avoided as it was thought learners wouldn't read them. It was also evident that learners were not ready to discuss their learning over Facebook, but the reasons for this are not entirely clear. As stated above, part of it may have been cultural, and, if the learners felt compelled to use English for the discussions, it is also possible that they did not feel confident to post to Facebook for fear of losing face with making mistakes. A final key aspect is that it seemed that the learners needed to have more training in using Facebook itself as a means of discussing their learning. In other words, as technology was being used as a medium of discussion, it is likely that they needed to be better equipped to use Facebook and to have a better understanding of what they were required to do. It was explained to learners from the outset of the project that Facebook would be used for training, but it became evident as the semester went on that this could and should have been made clearer to the learners regarding the specific role that it would play in the overall picture of the learning context. As a result, it was only towards the end of the project that the learners appeared to understand what was expected of them when using Facebook, which was pointed out by the learners during the focus group discussions.

There was a higher degree of enthusiasm exhibited by the learners than was reflected in the relatively low participation the Facebook discussions. Despite the limited usage in the current study, learners indicated that they felt social networking provided the potential to act as a support for learner training. The relatively quick engagement in the Quizlet activities after a posting to Facebook suggested that it may have played a role in getting the mobile devices into learners' hands with a view to learning. It became evident that there is a need to consider the content of the posts, however, and using a combination of the L1 and the L2 may have resulted in a slightly different outcome with regards to how the learners interacted over Facebook. The pedagogical aspect of evaluating and discussing strategies was not present at all in the Facebook discussions, but retrospectively, this may have been due to the fact that the learners were not entirely sure how to respond to the teacher, and some learners did indicate that they were not confident to discuss their learning in English. Prompting discussion more explicitly through Facebook and/or allowing learners to use Vietnamese for their discussions might be considered as a way of ensuring that learners engaged in discussion more actively. At the same time, understanding how learners use Facebook for non-learning purposes may also be helpful, as it would be thought that some learners would naturally be more likely to post to Facebook than others, and this could also be reflected in how they engaged in using Facebook for learning as well.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that learners had a positive view towards mobile learning and towards using social networking to support their learning, although the ways in which the learners used Facebook did differ from the expectations at the outset. In the current study, at least, it appeared that Facebook had the potential to assist participation more as a reminder role or motivating role than as a means of providing direct training or facilitating discussion. There is a need to consider the cultural implications of using Facebook and the relationships between the teacher and the students, as well as consider how learners use Facebook in their everyday lives to make it a better "fit" to their normal activities using it.

Despite the rather limited usage by learners in the current study, the results did shed some light on the possibilities of using social networking for supporting training in language learning. There remains a need to develop a methodology for delivering messages to

learners that could enable the most to be made of the potential of social networking which includes more explicit training in using it to achieve the desired purposes. An important outcome of the study is that it provided some preliminary evidence that social networking act as a supplement for other activities carried out through mobile devices, but how to capitalize upon this remains an area for further research.

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