Smartphone Assisted Language Learning and Autonomy

Adrian Leis, English Education Department, Miyagi University of Education, Sendai, Japan
Akihiko Tohei, Sakura no Seibo Junior College, Fukushima, Japan
Simon D. Cooke, Tohoku Institute of Technology, Sendai, Japan

ABSTRACT

In the present study we investigate the advantages of using smartphones in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom. We compared two groups of Japanese university students who were either prohibited from using their smartphones in the classroom, or encouraged to use them for academic purposes, examining whether those using smartphones in their EFL lessons would show a tendency toward being autonomous. The results indicated that students who were encouraged to use their smartphones during class were inclined to study more in their free time as well as show signs of autonomy by taking charge of their learning and consider ways to improve their own study habits and English proficiency. Our conclusion is that language teachers and learners should be encouraged to use smartphones in the classroom as a means of fueling the desire to learn.

Keywords: Autonomy, CALL, Educational Technology, Effort, L2 Learning Motivation, MALL, Metacognitive Skills, Smartphones, SPALL, University Students

INTRODUCTION

The use of computers in the field of education has seen various changes and transitions in the past few decades. From language laboratories in the 1960s the use of electronic devices has gradually increased in popularity, as eager students have been able to use their tireless mechanical teachers to guide them in their studies. The increasing availability of computers, mobile phones and, more recently, smartphones has been hugely influential to students’ learning. Regardless of whether teachers’ attitudes towards using mobile devices in language classes are positive or not, it is now widely accepted by those not only involved in English as a foreign language (EFL) education but all streams of learning, that such devices create a classroom environment with added opportunities for learning (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Kukulksa-Hulme, 2005).

Research and discussions related to using smartphones and tablet computers in the classroom have also increased dramatically since the first decade of this century when the iPod Touch® and iPhone® were put on the market and later, in 2010, with the release of the iPad®. Studies have shown that a wide range of students from kindergarten (e.g., Dalrymple, 2012) through to graduate level age (e.g., Comstock, 2013) scored higher on examinations after using

DOI: 10.4018/IJCALLT.2015070105
iPads than students who did not use the devices. In the present paper, we refer to Smartphone Assisted Language Learning using the acronym SPALL. We include computer tablets, most of which have phone-calling capabilities using video chat applications, in the SPALL definition. The majority of applications adopted in a class that requires students to use smartphones, such as those discussed in the present paper, can also be used on tablet computers. Although there are acronyms to describe computer assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile assisted language learning (MALL), in an age where the smartphone, which provides capabilities far beyond the traditional mobile phone, has gone beyond the ‘fun new toy’ stage and moved into a necessary item for everyday life, we feel a need to create a new acronym to describe this more modern way of learning. With a smartphone in their hand, students carry a device with the capabilities of a computer but the portability of a mobile phone, thus creating new opportunities for teachers to use these mobile devices in ways that would not have been imagined a decade ago.

In this paper, we discuss how students using SPALL showed significantly more effort when studying in their own time outside of the classroom than those students who were prohibited from using their smartphones during class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The effect of using mobile devices in the language classroom has received much attention in recent years (e.g., Gitsaki & Robby, 2014; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Stockwell, 2010; Ally, 2009; Kennedy & Levy, 2008; Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005). Many studies (e.g., Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Norbrook & Scott, 2003) have concentrated on methods using the mobile phone as a way to distribute content from teachers to students, rather than focus on interaction between students or communication from the students to the teacher. Levy and Kennedy (2005), for example, created a program for learners of Italian in Australia, using phones to regularly send vocabulary items, idioms and example sentences. Because messages related to content being studied in class were being sent to students in the Italian language, teachers were easily able to provide input for students outside of their usual lesson time. Such input, not readily available in a foreign language environment, received extremely positive reactions from students. In other studies with similar designs, Thornton and Houser (2002; 2003; 2005) sent short emails in English to students studying EFL at a Japanese university with results indicating significantly higher scores on tests. Furthermore, these students displayed a higher preference for vocabulary shared via the short emails sent to their mobile phones than students studying the same vocabulary by computer or on paper.

In an attempt to study the effects of drawing student output via their smartphones, Leis (2014) used a social networking system (SNS) as part of a foreign cultures class to encourage students studying EFL to continue discussions held during the class outside of the lesson time. The findings suggested that only those who had high second language learning motivation and linguistic self-confidence showed positive attitudes towards using the SNS in English for academic purposes. Students with lower linguistic self-confidence commented that they felt uncomfortable leaving messages in English for others on the discussion page, as it would be embarrassing if there were grammatical errors in their writing. Furthermore, similar to the conclusions of Stockwell’s (2008) investigation with similar aged students to those in the present study, and in which he stated that students tended to prefer to use computers for learning and their mobile phones for entertainment, Leis (2014) suggests that students lacking self-confidence in their English ability stated that they viewed their mobile phones as items for enjoyment, and not as educational tools.
Blogging in Foreign Language Education
www.igi-global.com/chapter/blogging-foreign-language-education/21950?camid=4v1a

A Systematic Review of Using Discipline-Specific Corpora for Lexico-Grammatical Pattern Learning: A Case Study for Computer Science Postgraduates
www.igi-global.com/article/a-systematic-review-of-using-discipline-specific-corpora-for-lexico-grammatical-pattern-learning/198346?camid=4v1a