Chapter 8
Evaluating Mobile Instant Messaging for L2 Development: A Longitudinal Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a longitudinal investigation of the use of mobile instant messaging (MIM) to develop second language skills in the foreign language classroom. A three-year investigation is presented where the author attempted to analyze the potential of the application to provide language opportunities and foster interaction in the target language. WhatsApp application is used as a virtual platform where its multimodal characteristics are exploited in order to expand students’ in-class time. Thus, one text-based and two voice-based WhatsApp groups are analyzed through an experimental design with control and experimental groups. Statistical analysis as well as a systematic tracking of the messages sent throughout the interaction were implemented to observe any potential language benefit in the participants. Results indicated that students experienced an improvement in terms of accuracy as well as different speaking skills; nevertheless, task design was found to be fundamental to encourage participation and interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

The tremendous potential that mobile devices offer has been a matter of discussion within the scientific community during the last years. In this respect, retrospective works such as Burston (2014) emphasize the lack of curricular integration, even in the case of those studies that have been proved to have a positive impact on students’ development through different approaches and perspectives. While mobile phone companies compete to release the latest technological devices, educational institutions continue to provide syllabuses and curriculums that do not incorporate, and in some cases ban, the use of mobile devices in a classroom environment. Due to this fact, most of the studies in this field tackle the possibilities these devices offer out of the classroom, exploiting its ubiquitous characteristics (Koole, 2009; Kukulska-Hulme, 2012).

In today’s society, people are constantly exchanging messages whether visual or aural within seconds with friends and family, and for that purpose, a wide range of mobile chat-based applications is used (Han & Keskin, 2016). Depending on the country, a different kind of mobile chat application can be found, as could be the case of Wechat in Asia or WhatsApp in some parts of Europe and the USA. Nevertheless, similar characteristics are found within the different chat-based applications used worldwide, all of them providing text messaging, image and voice-sharing, and internet calls without any charge for the user. As Tang and Hew (2017) pointed out, Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) was found among the most used apps in the market in line with Anderson (2015) who indicated that MIM apps are the most widespread among young adults who are between 18-29 years old.

During the last years, this mobile application has been explored in terms of its potential for second language learning as shown by the growing number of research making use of its characteristics for second language development. In this sense, in the field of language learning, the possibilities for interaction second language learners have in class are very scarce due to the constraints of a traditional classroom environment such as number of students, limited time or amount of contents to cover during a course. Thus, in this chapter, the author presents MIM as tool that allows the teacher to expand students’ time, providing learners with a constant thread of conversation that favors L2 interaction. By increasing the interaction through the use of mobile chat-based conversation within a group, students have the opportunity to put into practice their second language as well as reflect on their language productions and possible errors throughout the exchange. Nevertheless, and as claimed by researchers in the field, the latest and most used mobile applications for language learning have failed to reflect everyday communication as well as a communicative language approach (Kukulska-Hulme, Lee & Norris, 2017), using language methodologies that little have to do with recent approaches to language
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