Informal Language Learning Through Mobile Instant Messaging Among University Students in Korea

Aaron William Pooley, Soonchunhyang University, Cheonan-si, Republic of Korea
Warren Midgley, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia
Helen Farley, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia

ABSTRACT

Mobile technologies and platforms that facilitate communication across different languages are increasingly relevant in a world characterised by the global flows of diverse populations and disparate digital environments. This qualitative study explores communication between native and non-native speakers of Korean, mediated through mobile instant messaging in the sophisticated digital environment of South Korea. This article reports on two studies that examined the experiences of English-speaking language instructors (Study 1) and international students (Study 2) in a private university situated in South Korea during 2012 and 2015, respectively. This is done by focusing on face-to-face and screen-to-screen communication, and the co-dependencies arising between language instructors and international students. Between 2012 and 2015, large upgrades in the local digital environment saw the emergence of ubiquitous low cost or free high-speed Wi-Fi coverage and a near universal national adoption of a local mobile instant messaging service. The participants in Study 2 were widely found to be digitally literate and demonstrated an acuity with mobile instant messaging. They developed creative solutions for communication and language learning by blending sociolinguistic and linguistic competencies within mobile instant messaging chat rooms. This article highlights the changes that have occurred between 2012 and 2015 and demonstrates the need for further research into how mobile instant messaging services support communication between people from different language and culture backgrounds, particularly for people without access to formal language instruction.

KEYWORDS
Chat Room, Digital Environment, Digital Literacy, Global Mobility, Higher Education, Informal Learning, Mobile Learning, Sociolinguistic Competencies

INTRODUCTION

Increasing global mobility brings large numbers of people into contact with speakers of other languages. Often, this contact is temporary and people from different language backgrounds need to find ways of communicating without the advantage of formal language instruction. Globally mobile populations can experience challenges completing even simple tasks independently, such as ordering

DOI: 10.4018/IJMBL.2019040103

Copyright © 2019, IGI Global. Copying or distributing in print or electronic forms without written permission of IGI Global is prohibited.
food, going shopping and taking public transportation. Changes in digital technologies, however, are bringing new ways for globally mobile populations to overcome everyday language and cross-cultural communication challenges.

In South Korea (hereafter Korea), the setting for this research, a growing number of English speakers from countries such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America are arriving for work and study on a short-term basis, often staying one year or less. Usually these English speakers arrive in Korea without prior knowledge of the Korean language or its culture and do not stay long enough to benefit from Korean language courses.

This paper explores changes in cross-cultural communication strategies among English speakers in Korea that occurred over a three-year period, by examining the findings of two separate studies: one in 2012, the other in 2015. In Study 1, participants struggled to learn and use the Korean language while also adjusting to the unfamiliar Korean culture. They discovered that by joining in leisure activities of mutual interest with Korean speakers, they could improve their cross-cultural communication skills. In Study 2, large upgrades in digital technologies and infrastructure offered participants options for cross-cultural communication and cultural understanding differing from the participants in Study 1. Above all, the participants in Study 2 found mobile instant messaging a key resource for placing them in contact with Korean speakers. Mobile instant messaging enabled them to observe, use and innovate with the Korean language, blending in-person and mobile instant messaging chat rooms for communication during their stay.

**BACKGROUND**

In Korea, mobile technologies are widely used, are supported by sophisticated infrastructure and are largely responsible for that country’s manufacturing sector’s export strength (Park, Kim, Shon & Shim, 2013; Park & Lo, 2012). The export success in mobile technologies and manufacturing is dependent on transnational business partnerships in which English is the *lingua franca*, creating an urgent need for English language skills in professional contexts (Goerne, 2013; Tange, 2009). In response, the Korean government has developed strategies to recruit English speakers from around the world to assist in preparing the future Korean workforce by providing English language communication opportunities in primary, secondary and tertiary education settings (Collins, 2014; Collins & Shubin, 2015). These strategies have created flows of English speakers into East Asia as language workers and as sojourning students.

Recently, researchers have examined these global mobilities evidenced by the increase in transnational employment opportunities and international student programmes in higher education institutions (Canagarajah, 2013; Mok, 2016; Mok & Han, 2016). Studies on long-term transnational employment opportunities have investigated the intercultural adaptation of migrant workers settling into new social and cultural environments (for example, see Faez, 2012; Stodolska & Santos, 2006). Studies on short-term transnational language employment opportunities have looked at temporary work programmes, particularly those involving working tourists who are often in their early twenties and using their income to finance their travel and leisure (Chen, 2016; Goerne, 2013). While working tourists often engage in part-time, unskilled labour in their destination country, they often also pursue temporary language teaching contracts (Collins & Shubin, 2015). The growing use of English as a *lingua franca* means that many working tourists are English speakers employed as language workers and travelling to non-English-speaking countries in Central and South America, the Middle East and throughout Asia (Tange, 2009).

Shifting student mobilities within the higher education sector have increased international student populations in ‘traditional’ destination countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia (Baker, 2016). In those traditional destination countries, international students enter English language-only educational, social and cultural settings. Their academic experiences are
A Robust and Scalable RESTful Web Service for Collecting Student Responses: Student Response System (SRS)
www.igi-global.com/chapter/robust-scalable-restful-web-service/65362?camid=4v1a

Empirical Research on Learners’ Thoughts About the Impact of Mobile Technology on Learning
Gábor Kismihók and Réka Vas (2011). International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning (pp. 73-88).
www.igi-global.com/article/empirical-research-learners-thoughts-impact/52067?camid=4v1a