College Students’ Perceptions of Cell Phone Integration in Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Cell phone integration in education has been widely discussed and explored, especially in the field of foreign language study. Compared with other countries, cell phone educational integration in China is in its infancy. This article examined Chinese college students’ perceptions of cell phone usage in three aspects: interaction, course construction, and flexibility. Though students generally demonstrated great interest for the cell phone integration in English language study, no significant difference was found between students’ characteristics and perceptions of interaction, course construction, and flexibility in their use of cell phones. However, researchers did find that course constructions are a significant predictor of students’ senses of course flexibility issues. This study also found that many students hold neutral attitudes towards the integration of cell phones, therefore initial stage of cell phone usage is of great importance in order to attract and motivate more students.

Keywords: Cell Phone, Course Construction, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning, Flexibility, Interaction

INTRODUCTION

Cell phones have been popular and widely adopted around the world at a rapid rate because of its effectiveness in interpersonal communication as well as the development of communication infrastructure (Cole-Lewist & Kershawt, 2010). Besides their usage as effective communications devices, cell phones are also useful and powerful personal computers with sport color screens, games, internet access, email and advanced 3G feature (Auter, 2006), which can easily fit into people’s pockets and purses and are nearly always on (Prensky, 2005).
The features of cell phones, including voice, short text messages, graphic displays, downloadable programs, Internet browsers, cameras and video clips, global positioning systems (GPS), etc., have given cell phones educational potential and opened the possibility for people to learn almost anything via cell phone access (Prensky, 2005). The past several years have witnessed cell phones' widespread experimental practices in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education (Thornton & Houser, 2001; Thornton & Houser, 2003; Joseph, Binsted, & Suthers, 2005; Levy & Kennedy, 2005; McNicol, 2005).

Though the educational use of cell phones have been widely discussed in many countries, Chinese users did not adequately explore functions of cell phones and apply it in education (Cui & Wang, 2008). With an astonishing number of cell phone subscribers nationally, it is of significant importance to study Chinese EFL students, especially college students' perceived usefulness of cell phone integration in their EFL Learning. Factors that could contribute to students' perceived effectiveness of their EFL learning should be intensively studied including interaction via cell phone learning, course construction and flexibility.

**Interaction**

Moore (1989) identified three kinds of interactions that significantly influence learning: learner-content interaction, learner-instruction, and learner-learner interactions. A wide range of interaction opportunities, encompassing all these three components, are created and enhanced by varies functions embedded in cell phones, including text messaging, digital cameras, Internet access, dictionaries, calculators, and etc.

Cell phones are excellent small devices that are easily carried (Prensky, 2005). Instructional contents stored in a cell phone can be accessible almost at anytime anywhere, greatly enhancing the learner-content interactions. The web feature of mobile phones means increased potential for immediate interactions between the instructor and students. It was reported that teachers answered questions and provided feedback about assignments through e-mail or short messages via cell phones (Docksaì, 2009). Students are able to set communication with the instructor personally (Librero, Ramos, Ranga, Tríñona, & Lamber, 2007). Teachers can also send reminders of assignments for students periodically (Docksaì, 2009). As a daily tool, students get used to using mobile phones to set up new friendships as well as keep touch with old friends, increasing “intimacy at a distance” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 83). Brown (2001) mentioned that making friends with whom students felt comfortable communicating is one stage for social interactions.

**Course Construction**

Instead of simply collecting materials and arranging activities, a course construction should be a systematic instructional design process involving diverse and interrelated components and steps. As introduced by Quin (2000), mobile learning is “e-learning through mobile computational devices” (p. 1). Among all the mobile devices, cell phone is currently the most popular and pervasive device; therefore, to examine cell phone’s effectiveness in EFL study within the mobile learning field is significant. Several approaches have been proposed for instructional design in the mobile learning contexts.

Melzer et al. (2007) suggested that mobile learning would benefit most from an iterative design and should be developed within a holistic, socio-technical system view. Interactions should be maintained between teachers, students, researchers, contexts, mobile devices and the related applications (Melzer et al., 2007). Parsons, Ryuand, and Cranshaw (2006) proposed that a systematic mobile learning design framework should include both the cinematic and gaming factors, which means the representation of narrative content and engaging elements (Parsons, Ryu, & Cranshaw, 2006).

**Flexibility**

The increasing emphasis is now placed on the contribution of mobile technologies in flexible
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