Use of Portable Devices to Teach English Language

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ABSTRACT

Portable MP3/MP4 players, e.g. iPod, are mostly used for entertainment purposes and very popular among the youth. The authors explore the possibility of using such devices as an aiding tool in the educational environment, and hypothesis that these devices would help improve learning, e.g. fluency in English. The authors report on a number of preliminary studies which suggest that the use of such devices helped students in English learning.

Keywords: Educational Environment, Educational Tool, Fluency, Portable Devices, Teaching English

1. INTRODUCTION

English is the medium of instruction in most disciplines at [University’s Name Suppressed for anonymity]. The English Language Centre at the University and the Faculty of Engineering are taking keen interest in providing students the facilities to improve their language skills. But despite the efforts made, the equipment available in the laboratories remains in the use of students for only few hours a week, making it unlikely to achieve the required goals.

In this research, we attempt to provide a 24-hours-a-day laboratory to students listening to English language and watching the realities of life in practice. The idea is that the students will be provided with MP4 players loaded with materials in English. The students will be expected to watch and listen to such materials at their free times, in a mobile fashion. We hope that such an approach will not only develop interests in students learning English as a foreign language, this will also help improve their English language skills, particularly fluency.

Mobile learning is an effective way of learning being outside the teaching campus [1, 2]. Most of the universities world-wise have access to the online resources, which are accessible to the students within the campus, but off-campus such resources are often restricted because of various security reasons, for example. The lectures or materials can be downloaded within the campus on mobile devices and learned any where any time. Mobile devices may include

DOI: 10.4018/jksr.2013040105
PDAs, smart phones, cellular phone, MP3/MP4 players, mini notebooks like i-PADs etc. Such devices are often used for entertainment purposes, but a few researchers have used them for educational purposes as well (Houser, Thornton, & Gakuin, 2002; Jackson, 2004).

We aim to use MP4 players as an aiding tool to help entry-level students improve their English language skills. We hypothesize that the proper utilization of these new devices (MP4 players) in education would improve the learning outcomes, especially in English as a foreign language. We report on a number of preliminary studies which suggest that the use of such devices have a positive impact on both levels: performance and attitudinal.

2. RELATED WORK

The idea of using mobile phones for English language teaching for Japanese college students has been tested by Throton and Houser (2003). In their work they utilized SMS capabilities to provide vocabulary instructions and mini lessons three times a day. Students participating in this project received much better grades than those who received paper lessons. This was an effective text based method. Liu (2007) used audio clips for English pronunciation lessons. Chartrand and Pellowe (n.d.) offered downloadable audio Podcasts that could be transferred to media players. The study showed successful learning material for teaching English for Japanese students. While there are many research works using SMS and Podcast, only little work has been reported on using video clips for language learning on cell phones or portable devices. This was due to the fact of the large file size of video files and the small size of common cell phone. Moreover, the small screen size of mobiles discouraged the use of video clips. Furthermore, transferring video clips as MMS have been costly and there is no standardization of MMS as compared to SMS. In our work, we use preloaded MP4 players that have large screens and huge memory.

3. OUR APPROACH

We use MP4 players as an aiding tool help entry-level students improve their English language skills, particularly fluency in English. We adapt the study support video material from Cambridge University Training Center, adding subtitles in Arabic and making some minor edits. The editing is made to meet the objectives of the course [Course Name Suppressed] at [University Name Suppressed]. The study materials are then loaded on MP4 players and a sample of fifteen (15) students are provided with these devices. The students were advised to watch and listen to such materials at their free times for a period of one month. The abilities of these students are then compared with a control group – details follow – to see if the use of MP4 players achieved the expected goals.

Both the control group and the experimental group were assessed at three stages: (1) before handing MP4 players to the students (Pre-Test), (2) after two weeks usage of the players (Mid-Test), and (3) after one month usage of the players (Final-Test). Finally, a small self-opinion study was administered with the experimental group to seek their opinion about the whole exercise.

We hypothesize that the experimental group will perform better than the control group, in the assessment(s). A confirmation of this hypothesis would mean that the English language abilities of those students who used MP4 players as an aiding tool were greatly improved as compared to those students who did not use MP4 players for the same purpose.

3.1. Empirical Evidence

We conducted a series of studies to test the viability of using entertainment technology devices to improve education, especially in teaching English. These studies were conducted on a sample of ca. sixty (60) students of the English Language course [Course Suppressed], taught by the same teacher. Fifteen (15) of these students were further selected voluntarily to
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