Research on the Dilemma and Countermeasures of English Vocabulary Mobile Learning for College Students

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 has set off a boom in online learning. While mobile learning has been widely used, it has also sparked a lot of controversies. Vocabulary-based mobile learning software has been welcomed by students as an online learning method because of its portability and fun nature[1].

Based on an interview, the author collected data about the usage of mobile learning apps in daily life by ten college students, among whom there are five English major students and five non-English major students, from Jiangsu Normal University. According to the interview results, almost all college students have used mobile learning software, and some of them use more than two software to help them learn English; there are many vocabulary mobile learning software on the market, but the quality is mixed, and college students concentrate on a few popular software; students have mixed opinions about vocabulary mobile learning software, and the existing software has limited effect on improving students' vocabulary; there is no difference between English majors and non-English majors in terms of attitude. Based on these findings, the paper put forward the following suggestions: For students, they should combine English vocabulary mobile learning with other materials, change their minds when choosing word books, and set reasonable mobile learning goals. For teachers, make certain selections of a large number of word software for students and guide in terms of students' learning strategies and methods. For developers, they can integrate word memorization and English learning in one software and publicize the importance of paying for knowledge.

Keywords: *Mobile learning, English vocabulary learning, dilemma, countermeasures*

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary Acquisition is of great importance to English learning but its learning effect is not optimistic [2]. College students face many difficulties in learning English vocabulary. Under the background of educational information, mobile learning, as an important learning form, is used in college learning gradually. And such modern teaching means can meet the learning needs of college students actively in this new area [3].

After reviewing a large amount of literature, it was found that studies on mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) have increased in the last decade. However, few of them are involved in the application of mobile learning in Chinese college English Vocabulary Acquisition. Therefore, mobile learning of English vocabulary for college students is a topic worth studying.

In the study, 5 English majors and 5 non-English majors were selected as the subjects of study. The present study proposes the following research questions: What is the status quo of college students' English vocabulary mobile learning? What are the problems of college students' English vocabulary mobile learning? How to solve these problems, especially how to use mobile learning to improve the efficiency of vocabulary learning for college students?

The study aims to investigate the usage of mobile learning apps among college students and give practical suggestions for English vocabulary learning from three perspectives, including students, English teachers, and software developers.

2. LITERATURE VIEW

2.1. *Empirical English Vocabulary Mobile Learning Studies in China*

The current research on the application of mobile learning in English vocabulary learning is on the rise in China, and its main research focuses on the following two directions.

Firstly, the research focuses on the effectiveness and general situation of mobile learning in English vocabulary learning. In analyzing the current state of mobile learning of English vocabulary, scholars have generally looked at the proportion of users of mobile learning software, the attitudes of users, and the effectiveness of the use of the software.

The proportion of users of vocabulary mobile learning software was an important reference in related studies. Some researchers argued that college students had not yet raised awareness and the concept of mobile learning, which was one of the key dilemmas they faced [4]. However, in recent years, with the popularity of mobile devices and the spread of vocabulary mobile learning software, few studies have been conducted with this premise, and all the subjects have used the relevant software before in most of the studies. As more and more people are using software to learn English words and people's attitudes to this way of learning vary. People's attitudes to software learning are both a result of technological developments and an important reference to the progress of software. As a new way of learning, it is inevitably used in comparison to traditional paper-printed learning. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of mobile learning has traditionally been a major concern of mobile learning researchers. There is a lot of research in this area, but many researchers are still following up on its latest results.

Numerous studies have been conducted accordingly. For example, Zhou et al. (2019) conducted a questionnaire survey on college students from ten universities in Xi'an and investigated the approaches, purposes, plans, and effects of English vocabulary mobile learning for English majors and non-English majors [5]. Li (2020) studied the effect of applying mobile learning apps on optimizing the English major's vocabulary memory strategies by taking the "Baicizhan" app as an example [6]. The research pointed out that the mobile learning apps for vocabulary memory strategy training can be effectively applied to college students' English vocabulary teaching.

Second, there are studies on the resource design and development of English vocabulary learning systems to improve learners' acceptance and attitude toward mobile learning. It has been an important research direction for mobile learning, and since 2013, related research has been growing in spurts. Data from CNKI shows that the number of relevant papers published from 2014 to 2018 was above 200 per year. Although the number of studies has declined in the past two years, there is an abundance of relevant software available on the market, and resources for listening, reading and writing can all be easily found. For example, Wu (2020) has designed an intelligent recommendation system for English vocabulary, which can accurately recommend words for users with different needs, learning motivations, or learning abilities [7]. Wei (2020) investigated senior high school students' evaluation of the "Shanbei" app from three aspects by using experiments, questionnaires, and interviews [8]. The results showed that vocabulary learning apps can be a supporting tool for vocabulary teaching in class, which is not only beneficial to improve high school students' vocabulary learning efficiency, but also provides practical experience for the reform of English teaching in high school [8].

To sum up, the research on mobile learning of English vocabulary in China focuses on the proportion of users, their attitudes, the actual effectiveness of their use, and the resources for mobile learning of English vocabulary. In this paper, the research is based on these four dimensions. It will further investigate the results of previous studies which show that users have positive attitudes towards mobile learning of English vocabulary and that mobile learning is effective, and will also explore the completely contradictory results of studies on the quantity and quality of mobile learning resources.

3. METHODOLOGY

According to the study aim and the existing literature on mobile learning of English vocabulary, the author mainly adopts two research methods: the literature research method and the interview method.

3.1. *(1) Interviews*

To explore the interviewees' opinions and feelings about mobile learning in English vocabulary, the interviews adopted a self-compiled outline which mainly focused on the following five dimensions: college students' experience in using mobile devices to learn English vocabulary; existing resources of vocabulary mobile learning; college students' attitudes towards vocabulary mobile learning; the effect of mobile learning of English vocabulary on college students; existing problems and possible suggestions on vocabulary mobile learning[9].

A total of ten university students were involved in the interviews. 10 of the interviewees were junior students at Jiangsu Normal University. Five of them were English teacher training students and the other five were non-English majors. A total of eight female students and two male students participated in this interview.

The interviews were conducted in a classroom in the College of Foreign Languages at Jiangsu Normal University. The author interviewed ten university students individually to avoid interaction among the interviewees and to ensure the credibility of the interviews.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. The status quo of English vocabulary mobile learning

4.1.1. More and more college students used or are using vocabulary software to learn vocabulary.

All ten students interviewed said they had used relevant software, and eight of them said they had started using mobile learning tools to recite words at the secondary school level. In addition to using word memorization software, five respondents mentioned that they had used English listening and reading software, four of whom were English majors. The main reasons for using them were exam or teacher requirements, only one student said that he used them to improve his English skills.

In any case, using the vocabulary application of mobile phones to recite words is popular among college students nowadays.

4.1.2. Resources of vocabulary mobile learning are abundant but are uneven in quality.

According to the interview, all students interviewed said that there were plenty of resources for mobile learning of English vocabulary, but three students felt that there were not many apps to choose from. The interviews revealed that the apps used by the respondents were all popular software on the market. Three of them were using Shanbei app and two were using MoMo. Meanwhile, three of the students had used at least two different word memorization apps.

As to why they abandoned the software they had previously used, one student pointed out that the app only offers three to four versions of word books for different exams, and popular exam books are spread across several apps, so he had to switch to the new software that provided him with the word book he needed. Another said that the software had incomplete word meanings and too few example sentences. All three students mentioned that the software was charged later on. In this case, MoMo only provides 600 free vocabulary words, and subsequent vocabulary words need to be purchased separately for a fee. Taking a 5,000-word book as an example, it costs RMB 58 to memorize the entire book, which is far more than the

selling price of a physical vocabulary book, so students do not think it is worth it. Bubei adopts a lifetime membership fee system, members can only unlock vocabulary help, more word books, and other features through a one-time fee of 298 yuan. The students interviewed think that beyond the price that students can afford. Meanwhile, Baicizhan and Shanbei charge through relevant courses. Students said they could accept this type of fee, but there was too much advertising within the apps.

Therefore, although relevant software is abundant on the market, there are not many good ones and there is still a lot of room for improvement.

4.1.3. Attitudes towards vocabulary mobile learning vary.

Eight respondents preferred mobile learning for the following three main reasons. Firstly, mobile learning is more convenient and people can study whenever they want. Secondly, the word software's punch card sign-in function allows you to monitor the memorization of words. Finally, the word software uses a scientific approach to help review and recite words. Two of them also mentioned that app-based vocabulary learning was only superficial and easy to forget. They would be easily distracted by using mobile devices too.

The other two students thought that paper-based learning was better. They said that by using paper books, they could memorize them as they wrote them down. However, they also acknowledged the usefulness of the word software as a good aid for subsequent revision.

The interviews can reveal that students hold different views towards mobile learning of English vocabulary. However, most of them have already accepted this new learning method and are willing to use mobile devices to learn English. Moreover, English majors and non-English majors have no clear preference in their attitudes towards mobile learning of English vocabulary.

4.1.4. Limited effects of vocabulary mobile learning

All ten university students interviewed by the author reported an increase in vocabulary through mobile learning of English vocabulary. However, four of the interviewees noted that when using the app to memorize words, they could only remember one or two meanings of the words and could not grasp the specific usage of the words. Three of these four were English majors. One of the students was even more pointed in suggesting that word apps are suitable for short-term memorization or training, and non-English-orientated professionals, but that English majors cannot rely entirely on this mode of learning.

The above findings suggest that mobile learning of English vocabulary can improve vocabulary but has a limited effect. Vocabulary software can help students to know more words, but other supplementary materials are still needed to master the specific usage of words. Mobile English learning software as an aid to learning should be viewed objectively by users. They should look for other ways actively to help them learn, rather than hoping to rely on one software to solve all their problems.

4.2. The problems of English vocabulary mobile learning

Based on the results of the interviews, the author summarizes the problems encountered by university students in mobile learning of English vocabulary.

At first, students do not develop the habit of memorizing words and are always distracted by using mobile devices. This is the most important factor affecting students' vocabulary. The interviewees all said that words are the basis of English learning and recognized the importance of word learning, but as soon as they turned on their mobile phones they opened software such as games, social networking, and videos, putting word memorization to the back of their minds.

Moreover, some software word books charge later or implement a membership system. With the continuous development of mobile learning, some popular software has also started a payment system, but as far as the results of the interviews are concerned, most university students do not buy into paying for knowledge. Software fees are one of the main reasons why university students give up on a particular word software, with only three students saying they had charged for word software and one student said he did not mind word software fees. This shows that the current concept of paying for knowledge is not yet popular among social groups, while popular software has already introduced a payment system, which may cause some hindrances to the development of vocabulary mobile learning.

Furthermore, vocabulary mobile learning is superficial and cannot be fully mastered. Vocabulary software only provides partial meanings of words, and there are too few examples of sentences, a common problem reported by the students interviewed. University students, especially those majoring in English, pointed out that such a method of memorizing words could not meet the requirements of article reading and professional examinations.

In addition, the number of word books available in the software is small. The inability of the software to provide the wordbooks that students need and the lack of support for external importing were also important problems that university students encountered when

using the word software. Three interviewees said they had encountered this problem, with some of the most popular vocabulary books on the market being spread across different word software, forcing them to use multiple word software. The interviewees showed the author the software they were using and the vast majority of vocabulary books offered were for the current mainstream exams and there were only two or three versions to choose from. One interviewee said that after encountering this problem, he chose to return to paper-based vocabulary books.

What is more, the software reward mechanism is not attractive enough. To better monitor students' vocabulary memorization and to promote their software, some vocabulary software currently offers activities such as daily vocabulary punch cards and team competitions, with corresponding rewards. Four respondents indicated that they had participated in similar activities and only one had completed the punch card activity. Apart from their own reasons, students indicated that the reward mechanism was not attractive enough, which was one of the reasons for the low motivation to participate. The prizes set for the campaign were too small, and the money given away for the campaign's gold rebate could only be used as top-up credits, so some students gave up after a day or two of clocking in.

Finally, the offline thesaurus is not big enough and emerging Internet words cannot be looked up. Two respondents complained that as the Internet became more popular, word software gradually neglected its offline function, which was inconvenient to use and slow to update. The difficulty of searching for emerging Internet words is also a problem for university students. Students are open to learning and accepting new vocabulary, but these words are difficult to find in electronic dictionaries, let alone in word apps. Resources for mobile vocabulary learning need to be further improved.

5. SUGGESTIONS ON ENGLISH VOCABULARY MOBILE LEARNING

5.1. From the perspective of college students

Firstly, university students can use English vocabulary mobile learning to improve their vocabulary, but they need to combine it with other materials such as listening and reading to put the words in context and master their specific usage. As it stands, word software is better suited to building reading vocabulary and is difficult to improve writing and speaking vocabulary. Therefore, to completely master the usage of words, students need the support of other materials.

Secondly, students should change their minds a little. Students in the interviews gave feedback that there

were not enough word books. Word books are only for mainstream exams, and it's hard for them to learn something other than the exams. Whatever the word book is, GRE or Grade 4 or 6, it contains some vocabulary that is used in life. Whichever book you use, it will help to improve your vocabulary as long as you memorize it in a practical manner. So students don't need to get hung up on which word book they use.

Finally, university students should set reasonable mobile learning goals, both short-term and long-term. Although students have established the concept of mobile learning, only a few of them have a plan to memorize words on their mobile devices every day. The reason for this is that most students do not have clear learning goals and learning plans, and they are always "improvising", even giving up on themselves because it is difficult to achieve a sense of learning achievement, and easily thinking that they cannot do it. Mobile learning is a way for students to improve themselves outside the classroom, and without the supervision of their teachers, it requires students to learn independently and discipline themselves. Therefore, it is very necessary to formulate systematic, scientific, and reasonable learning objectives and learning plans.

5.2. From the perspective of teachers

Firstly, teachers, as educators, can make certain selections for students in the face of a large number of word software available on the market, which is of varying quality. Some university students are not able to select mobile learning resources according to their own preferences, and teachers' advice can effectively prevent students from learning less efficiently due to unsuitable mobile learning software. Interviews showed that most of the learning software chosen by university students was recommended by their teachers and classmates, and two students who switched to the software recommended by their teachers thought it was more effective for learning.

Secondly, teachers can provide guidance in terms of students' learning strategies and methods. Although independent learning is an important way of learning for university students, it is not possible without the help of teachers. Most university students are used to a teacher-centered learning model in secondary school and feel overwhelmed when they enter university. Teachers can provide guidance on strategies and methods for independent mobile learning, helping students to make the transition from teacher-centered to independent learning and to make the most of mobile learning resources.

5.3. From the perspective of software developers

Firstly, software developers can integrate word

memorization and English learning such as listening and reading in the same software, avoiding the need for students to download a lot of software in order to achieve mobile learning. Integration requires simplicity, and some software on the market is getting more and more complex and bloated in one direction. Therefore, finding a streamlined mobile learning software is not easy.

Secondly, developers can gradually make people aware of the importance of paying for knowledge by adding punching in with cash rewards, for example, to popularize it and attract people to use it through events. Interviews revealed that software fees were an important reason for students abandoning the use of the original word software, with only three students indicating that they had only three students said they had charged money for word apps, and one student approved of charging for software. Students' attitudes towards paying for knowledge are overall averse.

However, the upgrade of software features will inevitably result in an increase in costs. Only by making it acceptable to pay for knowledge can achieve the balance between commission costs and expanding sales be fundamentally achieved. At the same time, as the audience of word software to students as the main, developers because of the combination of student income, the introduction of monthly membership, quarterly membership, or division of authority levels and other functions, to provide a small fee for the choice, while according to the membership level open more features and resources.

6. CONCLUSION

In recent years, mobile learning of English vocabulary has received a great deal of attention from researchers. As an emerging learning method, mobile vocabulary learning has been widely accepted by Chinese university students. At the same time, the unevenness and lack of functionality of the learning software available in the market have become a roadblock to the further development of English vocabulary mobile learning.

Although this paper has drawn some conclusions based on literature and interviews, there are still some shortcomings. The sample is too small to reflect the current situation of mobile English vocabulary learning, with only 10 university students. In addition, English vocabulary mobile learning has been developed for a short period of time, and the literature review is not sufficient. Therefore, in future studies, the researcher should choose a wider range of subjects, covering students, teachers, and software developers in different grades, to make the findings more authoritative and credible.

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