The Application of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) in Developing Early English Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Mobile-assisted language learning is the newest method of language learning, which involves the use of online websites or mobile applications to facilitate English education. The question of whether mobile-assisted language learning improves students' language learning skills has become a popular topic, despite the little study on a specific piece of software. Using a questionnaire, the author explored the attitudes of students at a public primary school in Hangzhou towards an app they regularly use to practice speaking English. The study found that students were generally positive about using the app to improve their English skills, and that they did not experience the expected problems with the internet link during use, but rather found the phone too expensive, which may be related to the fact that they come from remote rural areas.

Keywords：Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, Early English Acquisition, Rural Areas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since young people nowadays can hardly imagine living a life without their mobile phones, the use of mobile devices seems to be an indispensable and prominent part in teaching and learning. With the key to the effective incorporation lying in the way mobile devices are used, it is crucial to understand the potential advantages and shortcomings of mobile learning in education. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), as a branch of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), has received extensive attention in recent years because of its unique benefits, such as interactivity, universality, and portability. However, less research on exploring the functions of a particular app was found in the previous literature. In Hangzhou, every student in the fifth grade of primary school will take a speaking test, which they will prepare for mostly using the *Kouyu 100 App*. As a result, this paper focuses on the positive and negative effects the *Kouyu 100 App* has exerted on early English acquisition.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the above argument, the study is designed to answer the following questions:

What are students' perceptions of using Kouyu 100 App to improve their English speaking?

What potential problems do students encounter when using Kouyu 100 App?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 The importance of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

MALL is distinguished and outperformed by its interaction and mobility, which allows pupils to learn whenever and wherever they choose. Accordingly, students cannot learn a foreign language in a formal classroom; they can also use their mobile phones to search the learning resources in unconfined places [5]. Unlike CALL, MALL is far less expensive and more accessible as it merely requires the purchase of a mobile phone with internet access which enables users to be immersed in abundant learning resources [1]. In addition, MALL also allows students to receive encouragement and feedback immediately from their professors. And teachers can approach students at any time to keep track of their learning progress and give corresponding tutorials when necessary. Therefore, MALL is, to some extent, considered to be the optimum solution for overcoming the temporal and geographical barriers to language learning [4].

3.2 The weakness of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

Despite the unique advantages of MALL, its multitasking functions may inevitably cause learners to lose concentration in its use [3]. In addition, much of the mobile software was not created by language specialists, so there is currently a scarcity of software suitable for specific purposes in English learning and for learners at different levels of proficiency. Furthermore, MALL seems to be limited in terms of learning features as it focuses more on the acquisition of individual words rather than learning in a community, thereby neglecting the development of students' pragmatic abilities in English listening, reading, writing, and speaking [6]. Klimova mentioned that MALL also has shortcomings such as small screens, poor internet connections, out-of-order devices, and a lack of face-to-face communication [2].

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participants

This study was conducted in a public primary school in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province. As the author is the teacher responsible for the fifth graders, it is convenient to randomly select students from a fifth-grade class as participants. All the research subjects have been studying English since the first grade and thus had a certain solid level of English learning. However, as most of students comes from rural areas, their English foundation was much weaker than that of their counterparts in the city due to a lack of family education as their parents are mostly from the lower class. Kouyu 100 was fully explored in this study as it is suggested as the app that students would normally use for practicing their speaking competence. It is an artificially intelligent software supported by the national and local governments, which is available on both computers and mobile phones.

4.2 Method

The quantitative method was primarily used in this empirical study by applying a questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire investigated students' perceptions of the MALL App *Kouyu 100*, while the second part concentrated on the problems that students encountered when using the app. An open-ended question was also provided respectively in the last section of the first and second parts to encourage students to contribute their thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of the *Kouyu 100* App. The participants were also required to provide their fundamental demographic information, such as age, gender, and how long they have been using the *Kouyu 100* App. This is placed in the last section because it helps to alleviate

students' fear and nervousness of being judged when they reveal their actual feelings.

5. Findings and results

5.1 RQ1: What are students' perceptions of using Kouyu 100 App to improve their English speaking?

After categorizing and classifying the results, the author found some interesting outcomes that diverged from the expectations and pointed out problems in the study. The results of the questionnaire concerning students' perceptions of using the *Kouyu 100* App are presented below.

Based on the questionnaire, it can be concluded that students mostly have a strong positive perception of using the *Kouyu 100* app, which is evidenced by a high percentage of agreeing and strongly agreeing. Compared with the traditional teaching approaches, the *Kouyu 100* app is so portable that it breaks the boundaries of time and space, thereby allowing students to speak English at any time in anywhere. As shown in Table 1 below, 52% of students strongly agree, and 30% agree with item 1; and 46% strongly agree and 36% agree with item 7.

Table 1: students' perceptions of using the *Kouyu 100* App

Survey content	Options	Responses: No. (%)
1. By using the *Kouyu 100* App, I can learn English at any time, in anywhere	A. Strongly agree	52%
	B. Agree	30%
	C. Strongly disagree	9%
	D. disagree	9%
7. You can study in anywhere at any time using your mobile phone with an internet connection	A. Strongly agree	46%
	B. Agree	36%
	C. Strongly disagree	9%
	D. disagree	9%

Table 2: "Learning English through the *Kouyu 100* App makes me feel time-efficient"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
35%	39%	4%	22%

Table 3: "Mobile phones provide learners with the opportunity to learn English regardless of location and time"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
43%	43%	4%	0%

Table 4: "The Kouyu 100 App is very portable, and the most important factor for mobile devices is portability"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
57%	26%	8%	9%

Tables 2,3 and 4 reveal that students highly agree that as a learning medium, *Kouyu 100* app is quite portable and it allows them to be more flexible in their learning both inside and outside of the classroom since they can access learning materials at any time in anywhere.

Table 5: "By using the *Kouyu 100* App, you feel that your English has improved"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
52%	22%	4%	22%

Table 6: "Different English language skills (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are enhanced when using the *Kouyu 100* App"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
52%	30%	13%	4%

As indicated in Tables 4 and 5, students believed that using the *Kouyu 100* app not only helped them enhance their language abilities, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing but also developed their independent learning skills. This is because the *Kouyu 100* app functions as an artificial teacher offering one-on-one guided demonstrations, and it also assists students in dictating vocabularies and completing sentences, thus training learners' comprehensive and integrated English skills.

Table 7: "The *Kouyu 100* App supports interactive English learning activities"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
22%	27%	9%	42%

Table 8: "Only a mobile phone is required, and the cost of using it is very low"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
38%	26%	22%	14%

Despite the fact that almost half of the students do not think that the *Kouyu 100* app creates interactive English learning activities, adopting effective learning software is becoming an alternative for students in today's digital age. However, using mobile phones for learning can also be considered unaffordable and expensive for young children from remote areas.

5.2 RQ2: What potential problems do students encounter when using Kouyu 100 App?

Table 9: "Unstable network links and slow internet speed"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
17%	17%	39%	26%

Table 10: "Mobile phones are too expensive"

Strongly agree	agree	Strongly disagree	disagree
36%	14%	27%	23%

According to previous literature, the most common problem with students' usage of MALL is unstable internet links; but in this study, over half of the students denied that they experience unstable internet connections and slow internet speeds when using the *Kouyu 100* App. They indicated that the greatest obstacle was their parents' unwillingness or inability to afford them a phone due to its high cost.

6. CONCLUSION

Through using a quantitative questionnaire, this study explored students' perceptions of using the *Kouyu 100* App to improve their English learning skills and address the challenges they encountered in using it. As a result, students generally uphold a favorable attitude towards the *Kouyu 100* App as it helped them develop and enhance their English learning skills; but this software could only create a relatively limited number of engaging activities. With regard to the second research question, students did not encounter any problems with the network connection but were rather concerned that the mobile phones were too expensive to afford. This is primarily because the study was conducted in a remote area with a limited level of economic development. MALL, on the other hand, has undeniably been employed throughout the teaching and learning process. Also, it posed limitations to this study that the research participants were all from the same class, and only questionnaires were used.

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