

College English Learners' Beliefs and Awareness of Mobile Learning Based on Smart-phones

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Abstract. Mobile learning model has been developing for more than ten years in China and it is an active temptation of college English teaching reformation. Based on smart-phones, mobile learning provides a useful platform for students to fulfill autonomous learning. This paper attempts to investigate college learners' beliefs and awareness of mobile learning to find out the inhibitive factors, thus improving the effectiveness of mobile learning.

Introduction

Mobile learning turns into a trend and develops in China in recent years. By means of the techniques of telecommunications and internet, mobile learning is applied to English teaching and learning comprehensively. A widely accepted definition of mobile learning is "any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies" [1]. Based on the carrier of advanced PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), mobile phones, and smart-phones, it is expected to fulfill learners' autonomous learning, especially among college students. Mobile learning is quite attractive for many features like being convenient, potable, and free from constraints of time and space. More and more communication brands begin to research and develop mobile learning techniques and devices to seize more markets. Many smart-phones provide English resources which can help the owners enjoy mobile learning anytime and anywhere, such as Samsung, Motorola, Apple, Philips, etc.

In 1994, Carnegie Mellon University undertook a researching project on mobile learning and the project was named "Wire-Less Andrew". This project enabled the students and the staff at the campus to enjoy the convenience brought by mobile learning. With the highly development of the techniques of GPRS、WAP、UMTS, mobile learning is flourishing as never before. Although there isn't unified standard as for actualizing mobile learning, yet the trend of mobile learning and its combination with college English can never be stemmed.

The Present Status of Mobile Learning in College English

Mobile learning hasn't been widely adopted as a real educational model in China nowadays. Most universities are still practicing the traditional model of education although some colleges and educational institutes have already attempted and achieved positive results. This is also the reality in English teaching and learning environment. Many scholars are keen on developing some feasible programs because "until now there hasn't any model that can be taken as reference to facilitate college English teaching and learning" [2]. How can mobile learning be successfully carried out in college English at campus is a hot and key issue currently.

Now most ideas about mobile learning are fulfilled through mobile phones, especially smart-phones. He Mingxing made an investigation in 2009 and found mobile phones, among all the handheld terminals, are the closest friend of college students. And "the use of mobile phones is everywhere in their whole campus life" [3]. The popular ways of learning through smart-phones are to download some learning software from internet or make a use of the built-in learning programs. Autonomous learning is highly advocated among college students now, while learning by mobile

phones seems to be the best way to meet the demand. Researchers try different ways to make a good use of mobile phones to promote m-learning, such as the practice of FRAME model in China [4].

A Survey on College Students' Use of Smart-phones

Background. Smart-phones are popular among college students; they overcame many shortcomings of traditional mobile phones. The popular operational systems in modern smart-phones are Symbian, Linux, Windows, and PalmOS. Besides supporting the traditional way of voice communications and dealing with some simple data communications, smart-phones also embrace many other new functions. For example, it covers the basic functions of PDA, supports surfing on high-speed wireless internet, supports some services online like mobile streaming media and application download, etc.

Many investigations show that more and more students own smart-phones instead of traditional mobile phones. One of the investigations provides its result that almost 79% college students use smart-phones [5]. However, do all the college students make a good use of their phones to study English? Are they aware of the advantages of mobile learning to assist them to learn English autonomously? These questions lead to the necessity of investigating college English learners' beliefs and awareness of mobile learning based on smart-phones.

Methodology. A specifically designed questionnaire is adopted to investigate college students at Jilin University of Finance and Economics. The participants in the study are freshmen and sophomores. One of their study purposes is to pass CET4 and CET6 (College English Test Band 4 and Band 6). 240 participants involve in this investigation. The questionnaire is adapted according to the questionnaire in Wang Wei's dissertation [2]. Students are required to respond to such aspects as "time spent on mobile phones", "the purpose of use", "attitudes towards m-learning based on smart-phones", "beliefs of supporters and opponents", "ideal functions of smart-phones for m-learning", "linguistic abilities that they want to enhance through m-learning", and "factors that restrain m-learning". Numerical statements are analyzed and the results are expected to show some significant implications.

Results. All the reclaimed questionnaires are valid. The analyzed results are listed in table 1. Among the eight aspects, no. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 are all multiple choice items.

Table 1. Students' beliefs and awareness of mobile learning

1. time spent on mobile phones (per day)	less than 1 hour (12%)	1—2 hours (61%)	2—3hours (23%)	more than 3 hours (5%)
2. purpose of use	communications (100%)	entertainment (79%)	study (26%)	web browsing (75%)
3. attitudes towards m-learning based on smart-phones	best way to learn (10%)	only complementary (70%)	infeasible (8%)	I can't judge. (12%)
4. beliefs of supporters	effective (34%)	simple operation (68%)	unrestricted (56%)	portable (91%)
5. beliefs of opponents	ineffective (43%)	The screen's small. (82%)	unprofessional (62%)	resource-limitation (70%)
6. linguistic abilities that they want to enhance through m-learning	vocabulary (60%)	listening, speaking (95%)	reading (45%)	grammar (20%)
7. ideal functions of smart-phones as for m-learning	text, picture (51%)	audio, video (89%)	flash, cartoon (69%)	others (24%)
8. factors that restrain m-learning	unfamiliar with (35%)	lack of resources (65%)	poor hardware (46%)	doubtful effect (44%)

Findings of the Survey

It's not difficult to find out students' beliefs and awareness of mobile learning based on smart-phones according to the investigation which comprises eight aspects. The first aspect is about the time students spent on mobile phones. The results show that most students spend one to two hours on mobile phones everyday. More than a quarter of students even spend more than two hours a day. Students spend so much time on the phone, and then the next question would be "what do they do with their phones?" All the students think communications are the first purpose. The second one is entertainment, such as listening to music, playing games. There are also many students like to use phones to browse webs. However, compared to the above purposes, only a small part of students use mobile phones to study. As for the attitudes towards m-learning based on smart-phones, most students think that this new way of study is only complementary. Even a small part of them consider it infeasible. Among the supporters, most students think the outstanding advantage of mobile learning is that the phones are portable, and more than half supporters speak highly of mobile learning for its feature of simple operation and being unrestricted or convenient. Less students show their confidence in its effect. The opponents also present their reasons. The reason that "the screen is small" ranks the first. Many others are also against it for its limited resources. That the design of the learning model in smart phones is not professional is another conspicuous reason. And it is worth mentioning that less than a half of students believe that the new model of learning is ineffective. Here comes an important issue as to what students want to learn through mobile learning. Most students want to enhance their listening and speaking. The second preference is to enlarge vocabulary. Most students welcome the design with more audio and video programs or at least some flash and cartoon. Students also acknowledge that many factors restrain the development of mobile learning. Lack of resources and poor hardware are the prominent problems. Still some people doubt the effect of mobile learning and even some are unfamiliar with it.

Conclusion

Some problems stand out from the feedback. They would provide significant implications to mobile learning designers and manufactures of the software and hardware of smart-phones.

Students lack of awareness. Students spend more time on smart-phones but less time on study with it. Many students hold the belief that mobile learning is only complementary but not the mainstream learning model until now. Students support mobile learning for the convenience of using smart-phones instead of the real effects of mobile learning. Even some students are unfamiliar with this learning model.

The disadvantages of smart-phones. Although manufactures had developed the bigger touch screen, yet it is still a barrier for students to practice real English learning. It may cause eye strain. The curricula downloaded or built in the smart-phones still can not meet the demands. The resources are limited. Most curricula only provide texts, pictures but less video and flash cartoon materials. Besides the neglecting from curricula designers, the technological support of smart-phones is also crucial. All these reasons lead to the discounted effects of mobile learning.

Mobile learning is a trend in China and it should develop swiftly by relying on the widespread use of smart-phones. If the inhibitive factors can be attached great importance and revised, mobile learning would receive a new round of development and greatly facilitate college English teaching and learning.

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