The Impact of Mobile Learning on ESL Listening Comprehension

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Abstract. The use of mobile technology in learning English has been increasing in China over the past few years. However, there have been only a small number of studies on the topic of mobile-assisted listening comprehension. The present study aimed to explore whether the use of mobile technology could better enhance students’ listening ability and motivation towards mobile-assisted language learning. A group of university students (n=120) were randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group (n=60), who worked on extensive listening practice on mobile phone, and the control group (n=60), who practiced listening via traditional ways. The results of the study indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group on their listening comprehension. Also, learners’ motivation to mobile-assisted learning was enhanced.

Introduction

Research on teaching and learning English as a foreign language suggests that listening and speaking are core elements of communication and facilitate language acquisition[1, 2]. In China, there are limited opportunities to speak English or listen to a speech in English outside the classroom[3]. Using mobile phones to give students access to English learning materials and authentic context, in particular for extensive listening practice, seemed a logical choice[4]. Furthermore, mobile technologies help learners develop linguistic knowledge and skills through online communication and immediate feedback. More exposure to foreign language and practice will be helpful for long-term success. Therefore, many language teachers have attempted to incorporate mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in teaching.

Although there has been research on how mobile devices can be utilized to enhance speaking learning [2, 5], vocabulary learning [6], and reading[7], there is literature on whether and how mobile devices can be better utilized to improve EFL listening in the Chinese context of foreign language learning. The main purpose of this study, thus, is to examine not only student motivations towards MALL, but also further investigate the impact of MALL on learners’ English listening skills.

Background Literature

Recent studies on mobile-assisted listening have reported on success in using mobile devices to develop L2 learners’ listening ability. A number of studies have shown that extensive listening has considerable benefits for vocabulary learning, listening comprehension, pronunciation and speaking [4]. Therefore, teachers have made attempt to encourage students to seek out ways of engaging with English language on their own. Compared to traditional computer devices, mobile technologies’ affordability, portability and accessibility enables learners to take advantages of segmented times to learn at any time, in any location. In addition, mobile devices can offer language learners with comprehensible input via pre-programmed software, give access to opportunities of negotiation of meaning through interacting with the software or teachers, and construct student-centered learning environment [8].

Nah, White [8] carried out an investigation into the use of mobile phone for practicing listening in Korean context. The study found that language learners’ positive attitude towards the use of website
learning resources was significantly enhanced. Furthermore, the WAP site was very effective for learning listening skills, since it offers great opportunities for students to obtain more tailored information and enhanced student-centered learning opportunities outside the classroom. Azar and Nasiri [9] conducted a comparison study to investigate the effectiveness of mobile technologies in Iranian EFL leaners’ attitudes towards MALL and their listening ability. The results suggested that the mobile learning is an effective way of improving listening comprehension. The study of Hwang, Shih [2] suggested that learning activities with a mobile system foster students to practice speaking in an authentic context, and thus enhance learners’ motivation levels and students’ speaking skills.

The above reviewed studies clearly stressed a research trend of intelligent recommendation for listening materials in mobile-assisted learning. Few attempts have been made to explore the usage of mobile learning applications in natural settings. Therefore, the present study aimed to provide empirical support for using mobile learning apps for extensive listening practice in natural settings, where users are free to choose materials to learn [10].

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects of using mobile learning apps for Chinese university EFL learners on their English listening ability and motivation towards MALL. The key research questions for this study were: 1) what is the impact of the mobile apps on students’ learning outcomes? 2) To what extent will the use of mobile devices improve students’ motivation to practice English listening?

Methodology

A total of 120 students from 2 classes in an university in Xi’an city were randomly assigned to two groups: experimental group (n=60, hereafter G1) and control group (n=60, hereafter G2). Pre-post test design was adopted in this study. The items of the pre-test were similar to the items of the post-test, yet different in content.

Before the experiment, all participants took a pre-test of listening comprehension and a preliminary questionnaire which asked them to describe their mobile usage for English learning. The questionnaire consisted of Likert scale questions and was developed by adapting Gardner’s[11] motivation test battery (AMTB). 2-hours EFL classes were conducted weekly over a 10-week period. Both groups were taught the same content by the same teacher.

After class, both groups practice listening, but using different methods: the control group used a traditional CD–Room based method, while the experimental groups used mobile devices. The students of G1 were asked to install two mobile apps for English listening practice on their smart phone, “Keke English” and “Easy IELTS”. The apps present users with the great variety of online listening resources, including a great variety of listening materials and online tests. The students of G1 were encouraged to use the apps to practice listening anytime, anyplace through mobile devices. After the experiment, all participants took a post-test, while G1 also completed a motivation questionnaire and also participate in a semi-structured interview.

Results and Discussion

Impact of MALL on EFL Learners’ Listening Comprehension

The scores of control and experimental groups in the pre-test are illustrated in Table 1. An independent t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the two groups. The results indicated no significant difference between the two groups (P=.231>0.05). Therefore, we are about to come to the point that the two groups were homogenous regarding the listening comprehension before the experiment.
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the two groups on the pre-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening comprehension</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>54.24</td>
<td>10.65</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>52.35</td>
<td>10.71</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to investigate the impact of mobile apps on Chinese EFL learners’ listening comprehension, the post-test was conducted. The results of the post-test are illustrated in Table 2. The mean of experimental group (G1) was higher than that of the control group (G2). The results of t-test indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on the post-test (p=.021<0.05).

The results suggest that the participants in experimental group improving listening comprehension through the implementation of MALL had increased significantly more than those in the control group. This result is consistent with Azar and Nasiri [9].

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the two groups on the post-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening comprehension</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69.43</td>
<td>8.76</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>54.35</td>
<td>8.93</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ Motivation

The participants’ responses regarding their motivation to using the mobile apps for extensive listening practice were obtained from the questionnaire and interviews.

In the questionnaire, 88% of the participants agreed that mobile-assisted listening learning were very convenient. More than half of the participants strongly agreed that their filler time could be better fulfilled by mobile learning activities. The interview responses indicated that the students could carry their mobile phones with them, and learn via apps at any time, in any places at their convenience. About 10% students reported that they did not enjoy practicing listening tasks on mobile phones. Some students indicated that the materials and listening tasks on apps were not suited to their study habits, since they preferred a quite place for extended periods instead of segmented time.

85% participants stated that the use of mobile apps indeed motivated them to learn English and to do more practice (74%). In addition, they reported that the use of mobile apps kindled their interests in English, changed their attitude towards learning. The majority of participants reported that the use of apps improved their skills for listening skills (77%), developed their confidence to do listening tasks (85%) and facilitated them to manage their study (75%). The respondents showed that they made more effort to learning listening skills. In addition, respondents mentioned that the MALL enabled them to control their learning process better. A number of research indicated that second language learning could be more effective if language learners feel free to control their own study[8].

Previous research[11, 12] have shown that motivation positively correlates with success in second language acquisition. “Highly motivated learners tend to spend more time in their learning process, are attentive during a given learning task”[6]. Motivation is regarded as one of the key components to determine the rate and success of L2 learning. G1 participants have some characteristics of highly-motivated learners.

Conclusion

The study was an attempt to examine the effectiveness of mobile learning application in Chinese learners’ L2 listening comprehension, and their motivations towards the use of mobile apps for
English learning. The results in the study suggested that the mobile learning mobile learning is an effective way to improve listening comprehension. This is in line with the findings of a recent study by Azar and Nasiri [9], which explored the Iranian ESL learners’ listening comprehension and found that the use of audiobooks benefited the listening comprehension. Furthermore, the results in motivation questionnaire and interviews indicated that the use of mobile learning apps has a strong impact on students’ motivation in English learning. Most participants said that MALL has significant impact in language learning.

There are two major limitations of the study: the small sample size and the technical limitations. As such, it is difficult to say with certainty how much the added listening practice in the learning apps contributed to the achievement in language learning. Furthermore, the technical limitations, such as the absence of electronic records connected to use of mobile apps and resources, made it difficult to precisely quantify activities and time on task with apps and learning resources.

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**References**


