

The use of smartphones to enhance language learning

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Abstract

The advancement of mobile technology and the growing population owning a smartphone have caused smartphones to be language-learning tools that are equipped with sound multimedia function. This fact has promoted the conduction of research and projects about language learning and mobile technology (Lee, Hsu & Shih, 2014). The findings presented in this mixed methods research are part of a study investigating students' perceptions regarding the use of smartphones to enhance English language learning at a public university in East Mexico. Data reveals that there is great acceptance of smartphones for English language learning at this Mexican public institution. Participants in this research answered that they generally use smartphones for school work, social networks, communication, entertainment and business. They also indicated that by recording a conversation between a doctor and a patient with their smartphone, they mainly learnt how to pronounce some English words, new vocabulary in English and how to use their smartphone for an educational purpose.

EFL, mobile learning, smartphone

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Introduction

Nowadays the advancement of mobile technology has promoted the use of smartphones as language-learning tools in many parts of the world. For this reason, many learning materials have been designed in the form of Podcast, widget, and APPs and are being used in some language courses. Smartphones also support the amount of learning that takes place naturally in settings outside the classroom which causes learners to be more responsible for their learning experience because they do not only inactively receive information provided by a teacher, but they also make decisions in their learning process. Therefore, mobiles make learning become “personalized, learner-centred, situated, collaborative, global, and lifelong” (Valk, Rashid & Elder, 2010, p. 121).

The present research aimed at discovering students’ perceptions regarding the use of smartphones to enhance English language learning at a public university in East Mexico. Data shows that the majority of participants in this study have a positive attitude towards the use of smartphones in their English class.

Literature review

The advancement of mobile technology and the growing population owning a smartphone have caused smartphones to be language-learning tools that are equipped with sound multimedia function.

This fact has motivated the conduction of some research and projects about language learning and mobile technology. Some researchers have made their subjects to develop language teaching programs through cell phones, to learn vocabulary and English idioms by using their cell phones, to take quizzes, and to submit surveys.

That was also possible because Apps for language learning are accessible for learners to study autonomously any time and everywhere. Facer in 2004 stated that most teachers and students in the U.K. had taken mobile technology as a familiar part in their daily lives (as cited in Lee, Hsu & Shih, 2014). Due to the fact that information technology is useful for language learning, students’ success may depend on their openness to use a mobile device for language learning. Agnes Kukulska-Hulme and Shield in 2008 claimed that mobile learning is normally expected to involve mobile phones, palmtop computers, and other mobile handhelds (as cited in Lee, Hsu & Shih, 2014). This confirms the present trend of the application of mobile devices to support language learning.

A smartphone is defined as a mobile phone that is able to perform many of the functions of a computer, typically having a relatively large screen and an operating system capable of running general-purpose applications (Lee, Hsu & Shih, 2014). Due to the trends in mobile learning, many learning materials have been designed in the form of Podcast, widget, and APPs, while others contain the features of interactions and communication to increase the efficiency of language learning by using mobile devices.

Cho (2009) studied the advantages and limitations of mobile language learning. She presented broadly used mobile applications for language learning, categorized them based on language skills and outlined major characteristics of their content and functions. Yang (2012) analyzed and evaluated ELT (English Language Teaching smart-phone applications).

This study categorizes different types of ELT mobile applications based on the target users' age and learning area. The research results showed that a majority of ELT applications were concentrated in vocabulary and activities set were simple and had to be more varied. Park (2013) researched on the effect of a smart-phone vocabulary application on Korean university students' vocabulary learning. The study discovered that the competitive game-based application was successful at vocabulary learning. H. S. Kim (2013) also conducted research on mobile applications for developing university students' listening skills. The study revealed that using applications was discovered to be effective and useful.

Mobile learning (mLearning), on the other hand, benefits those who cannot physically attend learning institutions due to work restrictions, home activities, or other demands on their time. MLearning makes education more available because it allows learners to study according to their own schedule. MLearning, as Visser and West (2005) propose, may also improve those situations where cost is a significant obstacle to learning. For those distant areas where environmental and infrastructure challenges impede other learning modalities, mLearning offers great opportunities. Furthermore, mobile technology is much less expensive than other technologies like personal computers that are necessary for eLearning.

MLearning allows a method of educational delivery that could be more cost-effective than eLearning methods, not to mention that the universality of mobile phones means that many people are already familiar with mobile phone applications (Motlik, 2008). Consequently, mLearning increases the access to quality education materials by means of reduced cost and better-quality flexibility as it also develops the efficiency and effectiveness of education administration.

Some experts suggest that mLearning is more than an extension of traditional practices of education. They advocate that mLearning promotes alternative learning procedures and instructional methods that the theories of new learning recognize as effective for learning. Exponents of new learning claim that mobiles help to design materials for personalized learning because designers of these materials take into consideration the difference and diversity in the way learning occurs. In this way, as Kukulska and Traxler (2007) state, mLearning also promotes authentic learning as it involves real-world problems and projects relevant to the learner.

Mobiles also support the amount of learning that takes place naturally in settings outside the classroom and the usual environment of home and office. Hence, mLearning promotes a change in the learning process as learners take more responsibility for their learning experience as they do not only passively receive information provided by an instructor. In traditional environments of education the goal is generally the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student whereas mLearning allows students to actively participate in the learning process to make it a process. Furthermore, mobiles allow collaborative learning and continued conversation despite physical location. In this way, mobiles make learning become "personalized, learner-centred, situated, collaborative, global, and lifelong" (Valk, Rashid & Elder, 2010, p. 121).

Smartphones are tools that promote Self Access Language Learning (SALL). According to Gardner & Miller (1999), SALL is "an approach to learning where the focus is on the promotion of learner autonomy by moving students away from dependence on the teacher and towards independence in managing one's own learning" (as cited in Barrs, 2011, p. 229).

Smartphones allow students to have mobile and independent access to materials and resources. Furthermore, nowadays, smartphones are regularly being brought to classes as a support in language learning. Through Barrs' (2011) own experience with a smartphone, this author has come to "recognise their potential language-learning applications such as their usefulness as voice recorders, the ability to photograph and store digital pictures of board work, and the proliferation in specific language learning applications" (p.229). This author also claims that in a study that he developed, it appeared that in his classes smartphones "had the best potential to become a normalised language learning technology, both inside and outside the classroom." This normalisation would promote language-learning activities that could be achieved beyond the classroom. All this would surely foster learner autonomy.

Research shows that in many countries and among certain people in Canada and the United States, the smartphone is often a person's unique communication and computing platform. Moreover, smartphones are generally familiar and easy to use, personal, private and carried everywhere. They represent a natural environment for speaking and listening, equipped with microphone, speakers, and special speech processing hardware and software network connected; fully-capable computing devices, and becoming global. In this way, smartphones should be regarded by ESL and EFL teachers, as really valuable materials to be brought and used in class so as to facilitate English language learning as they were considered in this study (Zilber, 2013).

Furthermore, smartphones tend to be connected to the Internet, which helps students to do different tasks easily. By using their smartphone, students can check emails, surf the web and communicate through social networks.

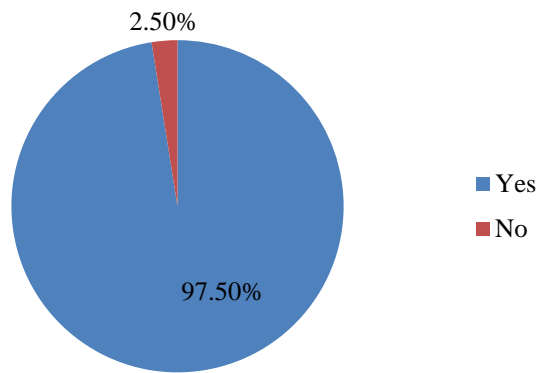
However, there are also many students who access on-line teaching materials, do teamwork and share knowledge and information by using their smartphone. This shows that smartphones can be excellent learning tools for students (Anshari, Almunawar, Shahrill, Wicaksono & Huda 2017).

Finally, using innovations in the classroom, such as smartphones, can help the teaching and learning process, make the process of communication easier, enhance creativity, imagination, vision and other language skills among learners. Learning in general becomes more convenient especially with modern smartphones that have up-to-date hardware and software, which makes them as helpful learning tools as computers (Shahbaz & Khan 2017).

Methods

The findings presented here are part of a study investigating students' perceptions regarding the use of smartphones to enhance English language learning. The study reported here used a mixed-method approach to gather data. A mixed methods research study involves the use of quantitative and qualitative methods as elements of a research design or a research program. Both methods were combined in this research so as to better approach the research question (Poce and Pagán 2015).

40 students of two basic English courses (MEIF 203 and 209) at the Language Center Xalapa of the University of Veracruz, Mexico were asked to write, practice, role-play and record a simulated conversation in English between a doctor and a patient. The student participants used a smartphone to look new vocabulary, phrases, pronunciation of words and model conversations up in online dictionaries, to communicate with their partner and to record the conversation that was carried out by the students. Then, the learners were asked to answer an online questionnaire that was designed using Google Docs and which contained 31 questions in total. 14 of these questions were open and 17 were closed. The questionnaire was developed based on the research question and research objective. Some authors have stated that standardized questions in a questionnaire provide the best results because they tend to be interpreted in one way by participants. Furthermore, the design of the questions is extremely important because there is generally only one opportunity of collecting data when carrying out research. (Zahran, Mad & Jusoh 2016).



Graphic 1 Online questionnaire

The answers to the closed questions were analyzed statistically whereas the answers to the open questions were read (and re-read) to find the more relevant participants' opinions.

Findings

In this section, the findings of the study are described. They are introduced with a question from the questionnaire used in the research, and then they are followed by a description and an interpretation.

1. Do you use smartphones? *

Yes

No

2. How long do you spend on smartphones daily? *

3. What do you usually use your smartphones for? You can have more than one answer in this question. *

School work (e.g. reading books, blogs)

Communication (e.g. e-mail, chatrooms)

Entertainment

Social Networks (e.g. twitter, Facebook)

Business use

Other uses?

Yes

No

Which ones?

4. Where do you usually use your smartphones? You can have more than one answer in this question. *

School

Home

Work place

Transportation

Other places?

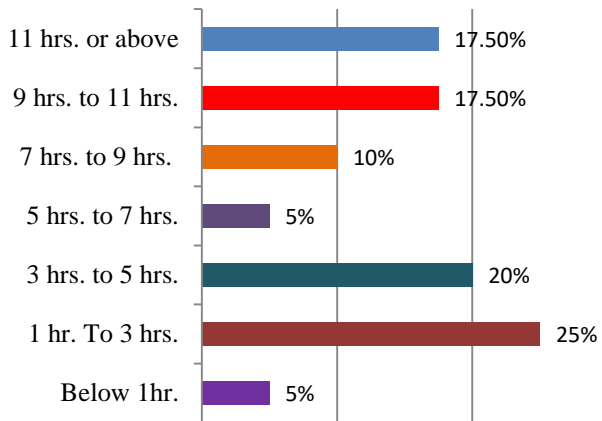
Yes

No

Table 1 Use of smartphones

Do you use smartphones?

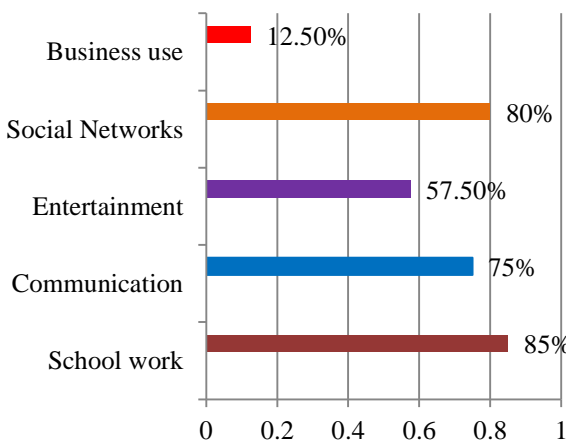
As we can see, almost all the students (97.50%) answered that they use smartphones, which may be because all of them are digital natives. All of them were born after 1980.



Graphic 2 Time spent on smartphones

How long do you spend on smartphones daily?

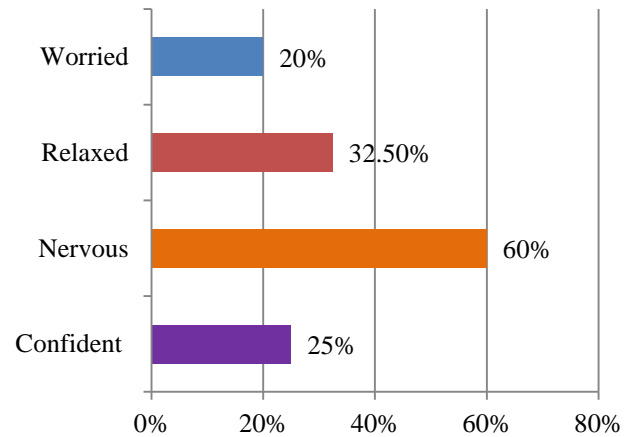
When the students were asked the period of time they spend on smartphones every day, a fairly large majority (25%) answered that they spend on these phones from 1 hour to 3 hours daily. Another large majority (20%) answered that they use their smartphone from 3 to 5 hours daily. As we can see the students in this research do not seem to use their smartphone for a long time daily, which may be because most of them take classes in morning, afternoon and evening shifts.



Graphic 3 Use of smartphones

What do you usually use your smartphone for?

Regarding what the students normally use their smartphone for, the majority (85%) answered that they use it for school work, which suggests that they use it out of class taking into account their answer in the previous chart. In this question, the students were able to choose more than one answer and we can see that another vast majority (80%) answered that they use their smartphone for social networking (e.g. twitter, Facebook). These two answers suggest that the students in this research use their smartphone mainly for doing activities related to school and for being in touch and sharing information with other people.



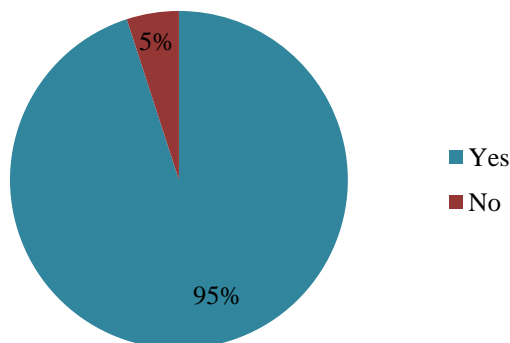
Graphic 4 Feelings when recording conversation

How did you feel when you recorded a video of a conversation between a doctor and a patient in English with your smartphone?

When the students were asked how they felt when they recorded a video of a conversation between a doctor and a patient in English with their smartphone, a relative majority (60%) answered that they felt nervous.

Although in chart 1 most of the learners responded that they use smartphones, it can be seen that in this question most of the learners answered that they felt nervous when using it for an activity in their English class. This implies that students should use their smartphones to be recorded while speaking English, which may lower their anxiety level when speaking English in front of other people.

A large number of students (90%) answered that they learned how to pronounce some English words when they recorded a conversation between a doctor and a patient with their smartphone. Some students also answered that they learned new vocabulary in English (65%), how to use their smartphone for an educational purpose (45%) as well as new structures in English (42.50%).



Graphic 5 Smartphones and English learning Do you think that smartphones are helpful for learning English?

Finally, when the students were asked if they thought that smartphones are useful tools for learning English, the majority of them (95%) gave an affirmative answer.

When the learners were asked why, some of them answered: “because with some applications from the phone we can investigate any doubt you have” (Student E); “because there are applications for learning English” (Student F); “because we practice what has been learned” (Student G); “because we have an easy way to get information” (Student H); “because they have access to information anywhere” (Student I); “because it helps us better understand English with translators and dictionaries” (Student J). The previous information suggests that the participants in this research have a positive attitude towards the use of smartphones as tools for learning English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the majority of the students in this research are familiar with smartphones. Most of them also use their smartphones up to three hours a day and they use it mainly for schoolwork. When the student participants were asked how they felt when they recorded a video of a conversation between a doctor and a patient in English with their smartphone, the majority of them answered that they felt nervous. However, when they were asked if they thought that it was useful to record a video of a conversation between a doctor and a patient with their smartphone, most of the students gave an affirmative answer and they also gave their reason(s) why they thought so. Such reasons supported the use of smartphones for learning English.

The data presented in this study suggest that the participants in this research regard smartphones as useful tools for learning a foreign language and therefore teachers should promote the use of such tools in their classes.

Since nowadays the majority of students all over the world are digital natives, it is urgent that teachers incorporate technology in their classes and one way of integrating technology in class is by promoting the use of smartphones for learning a language or any other content. Thus, teachers in the 21st century should learn to use smartphones and encourage their students to use them for educational purposes.

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