Chapter 82
Chinese Students' Perceptions of Using Mobile Devices for English Learning

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ABSTRACT

The advance of mobile technology has turned portable, handheld devices into an integral part of students' daily life, and also paved the way for the rise of mobile assisted language learning. This study focused on how Chinese students perceive the use of using mobile devices for English practice in and out of class, in order to see whether they are interested in mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and how they construct the technology with regard to English learning. One hundred and one students from eighteen universities in mainland China participated in this study. All of them completed an anonymous questionnaire and 20 randomly selected students were interviewed. The results illuminate a strong motivation among students for learning English via mobiles, and diverse types of m-learning activities were discovered. The results also revealed that students' attitudes toward mobile learning can be impacted by their regions or more specifically their surroundings.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile learning,a medium of learning suggested for distance education, is mainly facilitated by handheld devices which can take the form of smartphones, tablet PCs, PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) and audio players. Those devices usually can be connected wirelessly to each other and to networks, thus ensuring mobility and flexibility. The pervasive availability of mobile technology and 3rd generation (3G) service have paved the way for this emerging learning form (Zawacki et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2013). In most of the world, the technology has been widely applied and the ownership of mobile devices among college students has also increased at an impressive rate. The mobile media consumption among youths is believed to be the most rapid widespread adoption of com-

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munication technology in recent history (Squire and Dikkers, 2011). For instance, in China, so far 85 percent of the younger urban residents (age from 18 to 30) own smart phones (Netease News, 2013). With regard to college students, around 80.8 percent have at least one smart phone with internet connected service, which means virtually all higher education students carry some form of mobile devices (People's Daily Online, 2013).

The widespread ownership and increasing demand of mobile devices among Chinese students implicates their strong awareness of mobile technology. However,it is known that mobile devices are commonly used by students as tools for communication and entertainment, for instance accessing music, games, websites and for social networking. Although mobiles have been widely acknowledged in delivering learning by researchers, it is still unclear how students perceive them as learning tools and in what way they employ technology for learning. This study seeks to explore Chinese students' perceptions of using mobile devices for English practices. It aims to understand whether they are interested in mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and how they use such devices for English practice both inside and outside class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid development of mobile technologies and various mobile products have enabled people to access information anytime and anywhere without limitations. Just as pencil and paper changed the means of learning, researchers saw signs of how mobile devices could enhance the existing learning approaches, both within the classroom (Viswanathan, 2012; Wagner, 2005) and outside school (Squire & Dikker, 2011; Kukulska-Hulme, 2006; Wang, Zou & Xing, 2014). As an extension of e-learning (Conole, 2004), mobile learning can be regarded as "the intersection of mobile computing and e-learning" (Quinn, 2008, p.1), which shares the principal aim in bridging the long distance between students and teachers. Mobile devices offer users "accessible recourses wherever you are, strong search capabilities, rich interaction and powerful support of learning" (Robson, 2003, p.1). On the one hand, it renders learning to be more learner-centered rather than teacher-led, which could challenge some traditional modes of teaching. While, on the other hand it is also reported that students will become more enthused and motivated in engaging classroom learning (Bibby, 2011).

For today's university students who are widely known as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2007), technology can be easily mastered and then exploited into learning. Based on such features of the new generation, relevant shifts of education approaches are expressly needed by many educators for producing higher learning efficiency (Alexander, 2004; Prensky, 2007; Wagner, 2005). In order to promote the use of mobile devices in language learning, clear understanding about what learners' perceptions about MALL and how they use such technologies appear to be the most essential. A survey done by Kim et al (2013) investigated 53 students' perceptions of mobile learning who graduated in three TESOL classes at a U.S university. The findings from the study showed students' positive reactions to the use of mobile technologies in language. It also suggested the potential capability of mobile devices to "provide students new learning experiences" and "more learning opportunities" for them outside the class (Kim et al., 2013, p.64). However, a general description of students' attitudes appeared not enough to represent the whole group of students in the world. Hsu (2011) conducted similar study about how EFL international students perceive the MALL across different cultures. Although the responses were mainly positive as Kim et al (2013) also demon-