

Chapter 7

A Probe into the Effectiveness of Non-English Majors’ SMS-Based English Idiom Acquisition in China

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ABSTRACT

Idioms, an indispensable part of English vocabulary acquisition, play an important role in second language learning. Mobile learning has broken through the constraints of time, space in learning. The present study explored the effectiveness of English idiom instructing and learning based on one form of mobile learning—SMS (Short Message Service). Compared with context-based approach and self-study approach, SMS-based approach was more effective in teaching English idioms for non-English majors in China. The findings of the study showed that students who regularly received short mini-lessons of English idioms via SMS on their mobile phones were more interested in learning and gained more in acquiring English idioms than their peers on pamphlets or context.

INTRODUCTION

Idioms, an indispensable part of English vocabulary acquisition, play an important role in second language learning (Fernando, 1996; Wu, 2008). Since Chinese college students have mastered the basic knowledge of grammar, as one of the factors which influence students’ language learning, the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition is a critical benchmark to judge whether students have made progress in English learning in universities and the

successful vocabulary acquisition is also a stimulus to trigger students’ motivation for English learning (Yang, 2012). But, acquiring English idiom meanings has always been a troublesome issue among English learners, for, to acquire idioms effectively, learners have to go beyond the strategy of understanding their meanings word-by-word and to comprehend their figurative meanings on the basis of context (Cornoldi & Colpo, 1998). However, most Chinese learners’ language acquisition is conditioned in an unreal and teacher-centered

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context (Yang, 2012). Furthermore, classroom language learning is a main educational resource to college non-English majors, which does not attach much importance to the acquisition of idioms, because idioms are labeled as language chunks which are to a great extent contextually-situated (Cooper, 1998).

In 2004, in order to make English teaching and learning become more flexible and make students' learning become more individual and more autonomous, Ministry of Education in China suggests that language teachers should base the mode of modern college English teaching on information technology, such as mobile technology (Li, 2007; Sarker *et al.*, 2010), for Mobile Learning (m-learning) has gone beyond the constraints of space, time and conditions in learning (Chapelle, 2010). Large amounts of evidence from researches suggests that m-learning has the greatest potential to provide EFL learners with much exposure to the target content because language learners can practice self-learning at any time and in any place. (Norbrook & Scott 2003; Thornton & Houser 2003, 2004, 2005; Bratitsis *et al.* 2012) With the guidance of this suggestion, the present study explored the effectiveness of English idiom instructing and learning based on one form of mobile learning—Short Message Service(SMS).

SMS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Since the start of mobile technologies made their presence felt in the field of education, M-learning has been regarded as a new generation of e-learning due to the typical features of mobile devices, that is, practicality, effectiveness, high availability (Stockwell, 2010). It is reported that now mobile phones has outnumbered people in many countries across the world (Thornton & Houser, 2003). And a growing number of people have mobile phones or other similar mobile devices on them daily. Therefore, m-learning has emerged as an important potential instrument for lifelong

learning (Stockwell, 2010). As one of the technologies used to aid learners in foreign language learning, mobile phones are also dominant in most Chinese university students' life. They are not just communication devices but also learning instruments. Thus, this technology has become a new approach to language learning, called Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) (Thornton & Houser, 2005).

The scope of studies on the application of mobile phones to language learning has been various. Stockwell (2010) argued that each of the studies on mobile learning “capitalizes on different features of mobile phones (e-mail, web browsers and SMS) and illustrates the broad potential of the phone as a learning tool” (p.94). And from the existing studies, it is clearly seen that the appearance of any new language teaching and learning method has always been companied by the application of some diverse technologies (Salaberry, 2001; Lin, *et al.*, 2009) and the act of instruction should meet the requirement of the application of a certain sort of technology (Warschaur & Meskill, 2000; Munkvold & Zigurs, 2005). According to Thornton & Houser (2004), MALL is a learning that is progressed at any time and in any place, that is to say, it makes teaching and learning go beyond the confinement of the classroom walls. And via this way of learning, students develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning. Thus, due to the practical, effective, and high available features of mobile phones, the technologies derived from mobile devices like short message service (SMS) and recording have been employed to assist language students to acquire foreign languages.

As one of the most frequently used approaches in MALL, the main character of SMS is to draw message receivers' quick attention to words (Nation, 2001; Camacho, *et al.*, 2008), for L1 definitions, synonyms and examples can be provided for the given words at the same time through one edited text message. Besides, SMS can focus on limited amount of information, now that too much information can be boring, discouraging

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