Chapter 63

Mobile Assisted Vocabulary Acquisition and Wikis to Enhance Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

This project examined how a group of advanced-level EFL students read articles on their smartphone to acquire new vocabulary which they later inserted in their essays on wikis. The aim of the study was (a) to explore the students' perceptions regarding learning vocabulary from their smartphone followed by the use of wikis to improve their writing skills; (b) to analyse how peer editing and feedback can help students towards grammar and vocabulary accuracy with a view to enhancing their writing skills. The twenty-one participants used a Google application on their smartphone to perform reading and vocabulary exercises before writing essays on the wikis, followed by peer editing and feedback. Data were gathered from two questionnaires, interviews and 168 essays. The findings suggested that positive learning took place throughout the development of the study. The smartphone was considered a convenient tool for reading and performing vocabulary exercises. Peer editing and feedback were deemed crucial towards grammar and vocabulary accuracy to enhance writing skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the application of wikis in the educational context is considered to be fairly recent (Parker & Chao, 2007), research into EFL/ESL teaching and learning has started to examine their pedagogical potentials in that field (Li, 2012; Li & Zhu, 2011). As a form of computer-mediated communication, wikis have increased in popularity to support writing instruction (Lamb, 2004), collaborative learning (Richardson, 2006) and the joint construction of texts and meaning making (Kessler & Bikowski, 2010; Li & Zhu, 2011). Lund (2008) highlights in her ESL study that wikis provide a collaborative approach to language production and development. Students work in pairs or small groups to construct written texts, such as a narrative or a class wiki (Li, 2012), once the various stages of drafting, revising, edit-

ing and publishing have been accomplished. Other wiki-based studies have concentrated on students' perception of teamwork (Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Li & Zhu, 2011) and its impact on their writing (Chao & Lo, 2009); students appreciate the opportunity to work collaboratively since they learn from each other (Laughton, 2011). Another advantage, as reported by Chen and Brown (2012), is that students can assess and comment on their peers' writing, thereby providing feedback, an aspect which may not be possible in face-to-face classroom settings on account of time and space constraints (Carr, 2008; Matthew & Callaway, 2009). Recently, peer feedback has become an important pedagogical tool in EFL writing (Hansen & Liu, 2005), and wikis make this possible for students through peer interaction, fostering communication and discussion.

Despite the considerable amount of research conducted in the use of wikis in second language classes, further investigation to fully examine the affordances of these tools to develop language learning would be beneficial (Li, 2012). Research involving reviewing via wikis "has just begun to scratch the surface" (Ducate *et al*., 2011, p. 515). Consequently, in an attempt to contribute to wiki-based research, the present paper describes a cross-platform blended learning approach, involving the application of smartphones and a wiki, in an EFL class project conducted in a private language school for one semester. The students read newspaper articles and completed vocabulary tasks on their smartphones prior to writing essays on wikis, which were then explored. The purpose of this research is to give some insight into the use of wikis to enhance students' learning in an EFL context by investigating students' perceptions of learning from smartphones and wikis, as well as considering whether peer editing and feedback can help towards grammar and vocabulary accuracy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Mobile-Assisted Vocabulary Learning

Mobile phones are regarded as "…particularly useful computers that fit in a (student's) pocket, are always with (students), and are nearly always on…" (Prensky, 2005, p.2). Their portability (Chen & Denoyelles, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme, 2013) and immediacy permit ubiquitous learning (Darmi & Albion, 2014; Dashtestani, 2015); students can access, share and retrieve information at their preferred time and place (Chen & Denoyelles, 2013), thus facilitating exposure to the target content (Thornton & Houser, 2003, 2005; Chinnery, 2006).

Thornton and Houser (2003, 2005) examined the effectiveness of learning vocabulary via the mobile phone in different studies at a Japanese university. In one experiment, the participants who learned vocabulary through email messages on their mobile devices enhanced their language acquisition more significantly than those who learned via the Web on their computer. Similarly, the results in another study showed that the students' knowledge of vocabulary whilst learning via the mobile phone had improved more notably than that of students using paper materials. The same authors concluded that sending regular messages by mobile phone could generate the spacing effect (studying is spread out over time) (Greene, 1989), which enabled vocabulary retrieval. Consequently, this technical device further improved the quality of regular study, with greater exposure to target words and larger acquisition of vocabulary than in detailed lessons (Thornton & Houser, 2005). Additionally, Lu (2008), who explored the effectiveness of SMS vocabulary lessons on mobile phones in an EFL class in Taiwan, found that, generally speaking, the students adopted positive attitudes towards such learning. Correspondingly,

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