Chapter 85

Business English Vocabulary Learning With Mobile Phone:
A Chinese Students' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore whether the use of mobile technology could better enhance students' business English vocabulary learning than the employment of traditional print material. A group of sophomores (N=43) from a Chinese university in North China were randomly assigned to two groups: the experimental group (N=23), who worked on a given list of business vocabulary via SMS, and the control group (N=20), who studied the same list of vocabulary via paper print material. The results of the posttest reveal that the experimental group did significantly better than the control group. However, the results of the delayed test show that the two groups were not significantly different from each other in term of vocabulary retention rates. The study concludes that a blended use of mobile technology such as SMS and paper print material could better give rise to students' business English vocabulary learning. The limitations and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The number of mobile phones in China exceeded the number of landlines in 2004 (BBC News, 2004). China boasts both the largest mobile phone users and the near-ubiquitous SMS users in the world, with the number of mobile phones hitting 680 million by the end of May 2009 (Shen & Feng, 2009) and the number of SMS messages reaching 195.89 billion by the end of November 2009 (Feng, 2009). With such near-ubiquitous market penetration, media providers and learning technology solution providers push the ride of learners' mobile technology adoption for a novel

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way of learning. Mobile learning in China is also beginning to gain ground. People who travel on the subway train, on the bus, or in the air are often found reading e-books and daily mobile news delivered by China Mobile as well as watching movies and listening to aural materials on their mobile devices. For the younger generation, especially the "digital natives," mobile devices such as mobile phones have become something within their reach on a daily basis. These devices have become part of their everyday life and a thing that they live with 24 hours around the clock.

Moreover, the number of English language learners in China's formal education system reached 175 million in 2007 and it is estimated that the number will amount to 2 billion by 2010 (Adams & Hirsch, 2007). So far in China, there are more than 400 million people who are learning the language (Zhan, Sun, Yao, Li, Meng, Duan, et al., 2010). Apparently, China has become the largest country in terms of the substantial number of English language learners in mainstream educational institutions. The learners range from students at elementary schools to those at universities. It has become a phenomenon that Chinese foreign language learners use their mobile devices, such as mobile phones, PDA's, MP4 players, etc. not only as a tool for communication and for entertainment like game playing but also as one for language learning. Specifically, these devices are employed to improve their English reading and vocabulary building by reading English news on the phone and to enhance their listening skills by watching movie clips and listening to digital media in English while they are on the go. However, the field of inquiry on mobile language learning still remains a burgeoning area of research. Although there has been research on how mobile devices can be utilized to enhance vocabulary learning (e.g., Lu, 2008), there is relatively little literature on whether and how such devices can be better pedagogically utilized to enhance business English vocabulary learning in the Chinese context of foreign language learning.

The goal of this study was to examine the effectiveness of technology-based (SMS) and traditionally paper-based business English vocabulary learning, in the hope of informing the existing body of related literature as well as offering pedagogical implications for practitioners in the field of mobile language learning. To better fulfill this research goal, the following questions were addressed to guide this inquiry:

1. Is technology-based business English vocabulary learning more effective than traditional paper-based learning?
2. How is the effectiveness of technology-based learning related to students' meta-cognitive strategies in terms of time management, effort regulation, and monitoring?
3. What are the students' perceived advantages and disadvantages of learning with the mobile technology?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Business English Vocabulary

Vocabulary is "the words we know and use to communicate with others" (Diller, 2007, p. 140). Generally speaking, there are two kinds of vocabulary: oral and written. Oral vocabulary is comprised of "speaking and listening vocabulary" while written vocabulary consists of "reading and writing vocabulary" (p. 140). Such a classification is made mainly based on where vocabulary appears, namely, orally or in print. When we look at it from the point of view of areas of specialization, vocabulary can be also classified into the other two categories: general vocabulary and specialist vocabulary.

General vocabulary refers to "words that are common to a wide range of academic texts and are not as common in nonacademic texts" (Scarcella & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 126). In contrast, specialist vocabulary is an umbrella term, which

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