

Chapter 15

Smartphone-Assisted Language Learning and Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the advantages of using smartphones in an English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom from the perspective of motivation and autonomy among learners. The authors compared two groups of Japanese university students who were either prohibited from using their smartphones in the classroom or encouraged to use them for educational purposes, concentrating on whether those using smartphones in their EFL lessons would show tendencies toward being autonomous in their language studies. The results indicated that students who were encouraged to use their smartphones during class were inclined to study more in their free time as well as show signs of autonomy by taking charge of their learning and consider ways to improve their study habits and English proficiency. The conclusion is that language teachers and learners should be encouraged to use smartphones to create more productive classroom environments and as a means of fueling a desire to learn.

INTRODUCTION

The use of computers in the field of education has seen various changes and transitions in the past few decades. From language laboratories in the 1960s, the use of electronic devices has gradually increased in popularity. Morton (1960) reported on the then newly-available language laboratories and that they provided opportunities for students to take their learning beyond classroom time and study when it was convenient for them. Even in these early years of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), teachers recognized the advantages such machines would bring to students' education. Since the 1960s, the increas-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5140-9.ch015

ing availability of computers, mobile phones, and smartphones has been hugely influential to students' learning. Teachers' attitudes towards using mobile devices in language classes have been mixed in the past. However, it is now widely accepted, not only by those involved in English as a foreign language (EFL) education but in all streams of learning, that such devices create a classroom environment with added opportunities for learning (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Kukulksa-Hulme, 2005).

Research and discussions related to using smartphones and tablet computers in the classroom increased dramatically in the first decade of this century when the iPod Touch® and iPhone® were put on the market and later, in 2010, with the release of the iPad®. Studies have shown that a wide range of students from kindergarten (e.g., Dalrymple, 2012) through to graduate level age (e.g., Comstock, 2013) scored higher on examinations after using iPads than students who did not use the devices. The majority of applications adopted in classes that require students to use smartphones, such as those discussed in the present paper, can also be used on tablet computers. We have now reached an age where the smartphone, which provides capabilities far beyond the traditional flip-style mobile phone, has gone beyond the 'fun new toy' stage and moved into a necessary item for everyday life. Whereas in the past the smartphone may have brought various advantages to the user, now one is likely to be at a disadvantage without a smartphone or tablet connected to the Internet, not only in education but in most aspects of daily life. With a smartphone in their hand, students carry a device with the capabilities of a computer but the portability of a mobile phone, thus creating new opportunities for teachers to use these mobile devices in ways that would not have been imagined a decade ago.

This chapter aims to discuss practical ways of using smartphones in the language classroom and whether the utilization of these devices brings results in more highly autonomous students. As Reinders and White (2011) warn, in the past:

a common argument for the use of technology in the language classroom was that technology (e.g., the Internet) would give learners access to authentic examples of the target language and thus 'increase' their autonomy.' (p. 1)

Teachers are now, however, encouraged to practice scaffolding along with using technology to promote self-regulation among language students (Murray, 1999). Thus, this study aims to focus on autonomy by looking at how students using these devices under the teacher's guidance during class time showed significantly more effort when studying in their own time outside of the classroom than those students who were prohibited from using their smartphones during class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the proliferation of mobile devices in the classroom, it is no surprise that the amount of literature on mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) also has rapidly increased since the turn of the century (e.g., Gitsaki & Robby, 2014; Zou & Yan, 2014; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Stockwell, 2010; Ally, 2009; Kennedy & Levy, 2008; Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005). Many studies (e.g., Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Norbrook & Scott, 2003) have concentrated on methods using the mobile phone as a way to distribute content from teachers to students, rather than focus on the interaction between students or communication from the students to the teacher. In this section, the authors give summaries of various aspects of MALL and studies related to them.

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