

Chapter 51

Investigating Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Using the iPad in an Italian English as a Foreign Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Recent research indicates that mobile technologies can support second language learning. However, studies focused on the use of the iPad and teaching in schools is still scarce. This study reports on an action research project that investigated the use of the iPad in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context in an Italian school. The study sought to investigate learners' and teachers' perceptions of mobile learning through the use of the iPad. The data was collected through a survey (N=41), classroom observations (N=4), interviews (N=20), and recorded teacher meetings (N=5). Results show a positive impact on student motivation and on the approach to second language learning tasks. We found that within the duration of the study students and teachers became increasingly independent in the use of the iPad for English language learning and teaching. This study provides educators with hints on how to start integrating mobile devices to perform specific language learning/teaching tasks.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile devices, such as the iPad, are increasing in popularity and many schools are adopting them as an educational technology (Keene, 2012; Richmond, 2011). Over the last ten years mobile technologies, and the iPad in particular, have rapidly attracted new users, providing new affordances in and outside the classroom. This has influenced educational practices and, most importantly, it is creating new con-

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texts for learning (Pachler, Bachmair & Cook, 2010). Educators still need to understand how mobile technologies can be effectively used in the language classroom to support various kinds of learning and thus the integration of such technologies has been more gradual (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Therefore, there is a clear need to investigate students' and teachers' perceptions and effective methods for exploiting mobile technologies for language learning.

Educational technology enthusiasts frequently claim that technology use in schools can transform teaching and learning (Murray & Olcese, 2011). Nevertheless, the reality of how technology is used in authentic learning situations is quite often less innovative than imagined (see, for example, Cuban et al., 2001). Against this backdrop, this study aimed at investigating the use of the iPad in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom from the teacher's and the learner's perspectives in a secondary school in Italy. The iPad had been chosen among other tablets, as it was distributed massively to lower and upper secondary schools in the north of Italy as a result of a 'technology for schools' project funded by Regione Lombardia in 2014.

Before proceeding, it is essential to clarify what Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is and why it is important for this study. Taylor (2006) has defined mobile learning as "learning mediated by mobile devices, or mobility of learners (regardless of their devices), or mobility of content or resources in the sense that it can be accessed from anywhere" (cited in Traxler, 2009, p. 10). Following Godwin-Jones (2011), this study considers devices such as iPods, new smartphones and iPads that have enhanced hardware and Operating System capacities as mobile technologies. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) research has started to explore the potentialities of these technologies for MALL to support second language learning and teaching (Traxler, 2013).

Despite the fact that perceptions of MALL have been investigated quite widely in the latest research, studies in EFL secondary school contexts are still scarce, in particular in Italy. Hence, the need for studies like the current one is warranted. This study aimed to address the following research questions:

- What are students' and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the iPad for learning EFL listening, speaking and writing skills?
- Can specific attitudes and uses of the iPad in the secondary English Language classroom be detected?

Below we provide a brief overview of Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching, a version of which was followed in the school where the current study was conducted. This is followed by a review of key studies within MALL and the use of iPads. We then describe our research methodology, present key findings and discuss them for any implications for MALL.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching

For the last three decades, researchers of second language acquisition have recognized that the modality of learners' engagement in communicative classroom activities is important for their development (Kahn, 2012). In reading and assessing second language activities in the classroom, we considered the recent changes in language teaching methodologies and their impact on the classroom teaching and learning contexts including the role of teachers and learners.

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