

EFFECTIVENESS OF MOBILE APPLICATIONS IN VOCABULARY TEACHING

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Abstract: *Mobile devices are considered as the most widely used information and communication technologies. This study reports a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of using mobile devices on vocabulary learning. A meta-analysis was conducted on research that compared the outcomes from students learning vocabulary using mobile devices to those learning vocabulary using traditional ways of learning. The meta-analysis examined how effect sizes varied based on learners' age, type of vocabulary learning (receptive or productive), and aspects of vocabulary used (form, meaning, and use).*

Keywords: *English language teaching; figurative idioms; mobile learning; mobile applications; vocabulary teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Emerging technologies have brought about major changes in the teaching and learning processes. Mobile phones, one of these technologies, have led to a proliferation of studies that explore their use in education. Language teaching studies and practices have also been affected from this tide of change, as.²⁶ By providing flexible, practical, and personalized opportunities of use in and outside the classroom, mobile learning challenges the conventional ways of teaching remarkably. Especially with smartphones that come with both powerful hardware and software, which makes them as capable as a computer, learning on the go becomes more and more convenient.

Vocabulary teaching is at the heart of developing proficiency and achieving competence in the target language. There has been constant effort in search of the best technique to teach vocabulary. In this context, although vocabulary is a core of foreign language learning, idiomatic expressions are the most frequently used non-literal expressions, and building blocks of daily conversations in a language, so lack of ability to use them competently can cause communication problems for the language learner such as sounding unnatural and inauthentic.²⁷ These expressions are particularly important to become proficient in the target language. Moreover, good command of idiomatic expressions is generally considered as becoming closer to the fluency of native speakers of the target language. Therefore, as Irujo emphasized, teaching idioms should be an integral part of language teaching programs from

²⁶ Stockwell, G. (2010). Using mobile phones for vocabulary activities: Examining the effect of the platform. *Language Learning & Technology*, 14(2), 95-110.

²⁷ Cooper, T. C. (1998). Teaching idioms. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31(2), 255-266. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1998.tb00572.x>

beginning levels and taught in naturalistic contexts with ample chances of practice. However, while teaching idioms, difficulties arise.²⁸

Mobile devices could open new doors with their unique qualities such as “accessibility, personalizability, and portability”, and “the physical characteristics (e.g., size and weight), input capabilities (e.g., keypad or touchpad), output capabilities (e.g., screen size and audio functions), file storage and retrieval, processor speed, and the *low+ error rates”²⁹ in the teaching and learning processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The past decade has seen the rapid development in using mobiles phones in vocabulary teaching and the focus has been on the role of these devices in teaching vocabulary to L2 learners. A feature of mobile phones that was initially widely used in the studies was the SMS (Short Message Service). Several experimental studies compared SMS-based vocabulary instruction to different types of more traditional instruction. For example, Lu and Zhang et al. both attempted to investigate the effect of SMS messages compared to printed materials. Results of their studies showed that SMS groups outperformed the control groups who were given printed materials in the posttest; however, there was no significant difference in the delayed posttests.

To the best knowledge of the researchers, few studies on idiom teaching through mobile devices were found in the literature. One of them is an experiment in Thornton and Houser which was the evaluation of a website that the authors, together with their students, developed to teach idioms. Vidioms included idioms with explanations, and examples through multimedia (sounds, images, and videos). The authors asked a group of students to evaluate the website as they used it on mobile devices such as phones and PDAs. Students found the website significantly ‘effective and enjoyable’ to use on mobile devices. Another study is by Hayati et al. who investigated the teaching of idioms to a group of 80 Iranian English learners. Students were divided into 3 groups, each of which received a different type of instruction to learn 80 idioms. The first group was the self-study group that received the idioms with their definitions and examples through printed material. The second group received 4 SMS messages that covered 4 idioms along with meanings and example sentences, while the last group was taught through short texts rather than definitions for a more contextualized instruction, and in the classroom. The post-test results showed that scores in all groups were significantly different, with SMS group being the highest, and the self-study group the lowest. Furthermore, responses to the post-experiment survey indicated that students mostly found use of mobile phones and SMS messages effective and preferable as a teaching method. As can be seen, both studies attempted to use mobile devices , however, neither of them was able to fully

²⁸ Zhang, L. (2009). The effect of etymological elaboration on L2 idiom acquisition and retention in an online environment (WebCT) (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Retrieved on 15 June 2015 from Graduate College at Digital Repository @ Iowa State University (Paper 11126). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1504/IJMC.2015.070060>

²⁹ Alzu’bi M.A.M. & Sabha, M. R. N. (2013). Using mobile-based email for English foreign language learners. Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET, 12(1), 178- 186.

utilize what smartphones offers today with various free and easy-to-use applications that learners can easily reach.

Participants

The number of participants who took part in the study was 50 first-year students from an English Language Teaching Department of a state university in Turkey. Convenience sampling was employed while selecting the participants. Their level could be defined as upper intermediate since they are accepted to the department with Foreign Language Exam (YDS) scores. The participants were enrolled in the course called Lexical Competence in the spring semester of the academic year 2013-2014, a compulsory course aiming to expand the vocabulary knowledge of the students. The participants were divided into two groups randomly; control group consisted of 6 males and 19 females (n=25) and experimental group (n=25) consisted of 20 females and 5 and had an average of 20 in terms of their age. The control group was taught with traditional activities whereas the experimental group was taught with the use of mobile application.

PROCEDURES

At the start of the study, the participants of the two groups were tested on their knowledge of the selected 40 figurative idioms. Based on this pretest results, there were no significant difference between the two groups, indicating that their knowledge level was similar on the selected idioms. The following week, the study and its focus on idioms were introduced to both groups. However, it is also important to consider the technology usage of the learners, and create the learning environments accordingly.³⁰ As an indication of how quickly Turkish users have adopted mobile devices in recent years, Connected Customer Survey by Google indicated that smartphone usage reached 39% and had tripled since 2012. Considering all these, teaching idioms through smartphones may be an effective way of integrating teaching into real life contexts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Vocabulary learning is one of the most important aspects of language teaching. Idioms, an essential part of vocabulary knowledge, and idiomatic knowledge can help learners to become proficient in the target language. However, learning idioms is a major difficulty for many language learners in achieving a more natural sounding target language competence. When it comes to teaching idioms, it becomes more difficult since it is hard to predict their meaning with the first look.³¹

Results of this study indicate that both the participants in the control and the experimental group significantly improved their knowledge of the target idioms independent of the activity type used in their respective groups. However, based on the posttest results, participants in the experimental group who learned idioms

³⁰Liu, C. C. & Milrad, M. (2010). Guest editorial-one-to-one learning in the mobile and ubiquitous computing age. *Educational Technology & Society*, 13(4), 1-3.

³¹Zhang, H., Song, W., & Burstson, J. (2011). Reexamining the Effectiveness of Vocabulary Learning via Mobile Phones. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology-TOJET*, 10(3), 203-214.

through the use of the mobile application achieved significantly better than their counterparts in the control group with traditional activities, indicating that use of the mobile application was more effective in teaching idioms than the traditional activities.

This study has some limitations regarding the limited number of the participants. Large-scale studies need to be done in order to understand its strengths and weaknesses in teaching specific aspects of language. Moreover, more research needs to be undertaken in order to confirm the strength of the association between mobile applications and their effectiveness in teaching vocabulary.

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