

The Research on the Application of Mobile Learning into College English Teaching

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Abstract

As more and more college students use smart phones in their daily lives, mobile learning which is based on smart phones is welcomed by increasing teachers and students owing to its mobility, portability and interactivity. Compared with the traditional classroom learning, one of the advantages of mobile learning is that it is not restricted by time and place. Due to so many merits, mobile learning brings a totally new experience for both the teacher and students. It gives prominence to learners' dominant roles in learning, can enhance their abilities of autonomous learning and realize their individualized developments. Mobile learning serves as a beneficial supplement of the traditional teaching. This paper analyzes the application of mobile learning into college English teaching. It first introduces mobile learning, the importance and feasibility of applying mobile learning into college English teaching, then it points out its definitions as well as its characteristics and the advantages of applying mobile learning into college English teaching, and finally it concludes that mobile learning can bring lots of benefits to college English teaching and learning.

Key words: mobile learning, smart phone, college English, English teaching

1. Introduction

The rapid developments of science and technology bring great changes to our lives in the 21st century. Also, the web-based courses mushroom with the development of multimedia technology and network communication, which provides new opportunities to college English teaching. College English teaching integrated with mobile learning can motivate learners' learning motivation and improve their language proficiency. Most contemporary college students were born in the 1990s, and hence, they know well about various kinds of electronic products and show high proficiency in using smart phones. According to the survey the author made in May, 2016, it shows that all the students (100%) in the four classes the author teaches have smart phones and they have downloaded QQ, WeChat, Youdao dictionary, Baidu translation or other learning

softwares. The decrease of the prices of smart phones, internet charges and wide WiFi coverage, along with the increasingly powerful functions of smart phones, all the above conditions lay a good foundation for the application of mobile learning into college English teaching.

In College English Curriculum Requirements, which is issued by the Department of Higher Education of Ministry of Education, it points out (2007:24): “In designing college English courses, requirements for cultivating competence in listening and speaking should be fully considered, and corresponding teaching hours and credits should be adequately allocated. Moreover, the extensive use of advanced information technology should be encouraged, computer- and Web-based courses should be developed, and students should be provided with favorable environment and facilities for language learning.” Therefore, teachers should reform the traditional teaching patterns and methods to give students more time and learning opportunities to enhance their language competence. With the implementation of the college English teaching reform, it is not rare to see that English teachers have made many changes and improvements in the traditional classroom teaching and given more in-class time to students to practice their listening and speaking skills. Still, the teacher has to complete the teaching tasks for each semester, and another fact is that college English teaching is generally carried out in big classes that often contain more than 40 students. So the in-class time allotted for each student is not adequate, which reduces the students’ participation and hinders their initiative and enthusiasm for learning English. Mobile learning based on smart phones can make up this limitation and create a new channel for both teaching and learning. Smart phones can be used as learning tools through downloading softwares in the APP and students can learn whenever and wherever they like. The application of learning softwares in smart phones can help build up harmonious relationships between the teacher and students as well as among students themselves. It is quite necessary to combine mobile learning with college English teaching since is a beneficial supplement of the classroom teaching.

2. The definitions and characteristics of mobile learning

Different learners give different definitions to mobile learning. According to Wikipedia, mobile learning (also called M-learning) is defined as (Crompton, 2013): “learning across multiple contexts, through social and content interactions, using personal electronic devices.” Sharples (2000) considers mobile learning as a kind of learning that can occur at any time and at any place with the help of a mobile computing device. From its definitions, it is obvious to see that mobile learning focuses on the mobility of the learner, interacting with portable technologies. At present, mobile learning technologies include PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), MP3 players, smart phones and tablet computers. One of the most outstanding features of mobile learning is the utilization of modern communication terminal and this papers mainly focuses on the application of mobile learning which is based on smart phones into college English teaching.

As for smart phone, Wikipedia defines it as: “a mobile phone with an advanced mobile operating system which combines features of a personal computer operating system with other features useful for mobile or handheld use.” Most smart phones are pocket-sized and have the following characteristics: wireless internet access, personalized operating system, fast running speed and powerful functions. Smart phones are so smart, portable and convenient that it is very suitable for mobile learning.

Compared with traditional classroom teaching and computer-assisted instruction (CAI), mobile learning has some distinct features. First, the mobility. The most significant characteristic of mobile learning is the

mobility. Owing to the development of wireless network technology, students can carry their smart phones with them and have an access to the internet very conveniently, which lays a good foundation for carrying out mobile learning. Second, smart phone's portability. Because of the small size and light weight of smart phones, they are easy to be carried and mobile learning can be carried out whenever and wherever the learner wants, that is, it is not restricted by time and space. Third, student-centeredness. Students can decide the time and contents of their study, therefore, they become the masters of their study. Fourth, rich learning materials. The diverse choices of learning materials can meet the learning needs of most students. These materials will stimulate their learning interests and broaden the students' horizons. Last, interactivity. Mobile learning brings more communicative opportunities for the teacher and students, and hence it can enhance the relationships between the teacher and students by setting up QQ or WeChat learning groups. Because of these features, mobile learning can be considered as a useful and beneficial extension of the classroom teaching.

3. The advantages of applying mobile learning into college English teaching

The combination of mobile learning with the traditional classroom teaching can enable students to learn English actively. The mobility and flexibility of mobile learning can make the learning process become more colorful and interesting. Mobile learning can bring many advantages to both college English teaching and learning.

3.1 More study time

For English learners, they need lots of practice to become fluent and proficient in English, and this kind of practice includes listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. Owing to the large class size of college English teaching, carrying out activities can be time-consuming and less controllable. In addition, the time for each class is very limited which usually lasts for 40 minutes and students have only four classes each week on average, therefore, it is insufficient for English learning. Students need to make the best use of their spare time if they want to improve their English. As mobile learning is not restricted by time, location and space, and as most students carry their smart phones with them whenever they go, they can study English at any spare time such as when they are traveling, waiting for the bus, airplane or meals. With a smart phone and a pair of headphones, they can learn English without being interfered by the outside world. Definitely, mobile learning can give students more study time, especially can help them utilize the fragments of time. With the help of smart phones and wireless network technology, students can have more spare time for English learning, and this will improve students' learning efficiency outcomes.

3.2 Rich learning resources and more flexible learning approaches

Learning materials in APP on the smart phones are very rich, so students can always find suitable materials according to their English level. Dictionaries, reading materials, translation software, softwares for practicing oral English and listening skills and so on. As for dictionaries, the most widely used ones by students are Youdao dictionary, Baidu translator and Youdao translator. Take Youdao dictionary for example. For a word, students can get as much information as they want since Collins English-Chinese dictionary, cognates, phrases, synonyms, bilingual examples and encyclopedic knowledge for that word from Wikipedia are all contained in Youdao dictionary. Besides, there are many example sentences for the word which makes students clearly and fully understand the meanings of the word.

Besides, softwares for listening and oral practice are too numerous to mention one by one such as New Concept English, Kekenet English, Hujiang English, VOA Special English, VOA Standard English, English Mofunshow and etc. Also, some softwares have a detailed classification for the learning materials. For Kekenet English, it has various listening materials for different learners, English stories for young learners, English songs, CET-4 or CET-6, TEM 8, beautiful passages, BBC news, CNN news, the IELTS, the TOEFL, GRE and so on. These materials bring a huge number of audio and video resources and can meet the learning needs of most students. This kind of learning is totally different from traditional learning and will motivate students' learning enthusiasm. Students can make progress in English learning and improve their comprehensive abilities of using English if they keep practicing regularly.

3.3 The improvement of students' autonomous learning

Autonomous learning is such a kind of educational idea that guides students to become the host of their study. Education does not mean "spoon-feeding" teaching, and passing on knowledge to students is not the only task for today's English teachers any more. The focus of present English teaching is how to facilitate students to shift from the passive receivers for knowledge into autonomous learners, that is to learn how to learn independently. One of the teaching responsibilities for the teacher is to cultivate students' autonomous learning abilities and help them become lifelong learners. Because of its flexibility and diversity of choice, mobile learning enriches students' learning styles. Mobile learning is a kind of active learning. Students can choose learning materials according to their learning needs, make study plans according to their spare time, study English by making best use of the fragments of time, control their learning process, involve into the learning activities through QQ or WeChat groups, and eventually, realize the individualized learning. Mobile learning not only changes the teacher's teaching concepts and methodologies, but also students' learning habits and styles. Students can choose and decide what, when and how to learn. Thanks to so many online learning materials, students can learn effectively and independently.

3.4 More communications between the teacher and students

In classroom setting, many English teachers still have to face a frustrating phenomenon, that is, some students are reluctant to open their mouths due to various reasons. Some students may be introverted, some are poor in English, and some may be afraid of making mistakes. However, by setting up QQ and WeChat learning groups, teachers can utilize mobile learning to encourage more students to take part in the interactions and open their mouths. Students will feel less nervous while exchanging ideas with others in mobile learning because the online communications can help them get rid of the embarrassment which may be brought by face-to-face communications in the classroom setting. More interactions will help build up a better relationship between the teacher and students. Students can send out short messages, voice and pictures, chat on the video, listen to what others say, share and exchange their ideas, discuss the latest news, and most important of all, they can learn from each other. What's more, students can communicate with the teacher, submit their homework and receive the teacher's evaluation via these groups. Definitely, all these activities will provide more opportunities for students to practice their listening and speaking skills, promote interpersonal interactions and enhance students' English communicative competence and their language proficiency.

4. Potential problems in the process of applying mobile learning into English learning and conclusions

Mobile learning based on smart phones can be very helpful in English learning. Yet, it is worth noting that some problems may exist in the learning process. First, mobile learning is a kind of beneficial supplement to the traditional classroom, therefore, it cannot and is impossible to replace the traditional face-to-face communications in the class. At present, classroom teaching based on textbooks is still the first and foremost teaching approach for college English. Second, smart phones bring not only the learning materials, but also the various games. As college students are still immature in their thoughts and behaviors, they will easily become addicted to games and this will do great harm to their study. Hence, teachers, even parents need to participate in the mobile learning process and guide students to realize the importance of reasonably using their smart phones. Last but not the least, the teacher need to make a study plan previously on how to use smart phones to facilitate students' learning. This plan can include the teaching objectives the teacher wants to achieve, the activities the teacher will carry out and the tasks the teacher will assign to students.

With the constant developments of mobile technology and internet industry, mobile learning will be more and more widely applied in English teaching. Mobile learning makes the learning time become flexible, enriches students' learning contents and arouses students' learning interests, especially the enthusiasm for listening and speaking. Mobile learning is a useful and beneficial supplement to the traditional classroom. Compared with traditional classroom teaching, mobile learning is a kind of breakthrough and innovation in teaching. To make mobile learning work for students' learning and to combine mobile learning with college English teaching better, both the teacher and students need to learn to utilize smart phones reasonably to enhance students' learning efficiency and improve their English proficiency.

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