

Using Online Learning Applications as a Tool to Improve Oral English among College Students

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Abstract: Due to globalization, having a good command of English has become essential in academic and professional areas. However, the current situation where China is listed among countries of low English proficiency seems not to be promising, which calls for the need to take measures in order to enhance Chinese people's English capacity, especially in the field of speaking. Fortunately, the development of digital technology has provided us with more opportunities and methods. In terms of this, this study aims to take mixed methods including both a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to analyze how smartphone applications affect college students' oral English proficiency as well as several online language learning applications' advantages and disadvantages in terms of their design. Results show that the positive effect on users' oral language proficiency is not certain and some amelioration can be made to further improve the functions of these applications.

Keywords: Online Learning Applications; Oral English.

1. Introduction

The 2023 results of the Education First's English Proficiency index showed that China ranked 82 out of 113 countries and regions, which signified a country of low English proficiency. This is in part due to the problem of imbalanced education resources as currently, there still exists some impoverished areas where people have little access to systematic English learning. Moreover, those living in cosmopolis who receive high-quality English education tend to attach more importance to listening, reading and writing---skills that are useful to them in college entrance exams. These factors result in the situation where people find it hard to express themselves properly in English even after more than a decade's learning.

With the advent of globalization, people in different countries are more closely connected, hence the need for a good command of oral English---a universal language, in order to fulfill tasks more conveniently in academic and professional fields.

Fortunately, the rapid development of mobile technology provides us with abundant opportunities, helping to support both curricular and extracurricular learning and teaching [1]. and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has gradually gained traction, attracting an increasing number of scholars to delve into this field. For students who learn foreign languages in distance and who have limited time to study while working, mobile learning is significant for them. Furthermore, under the situation where teachers and students or peers don't have enough chances to interact with each other, mobile learning appears as a tool of great importance [2]. Previous studies have already indicated numerous benefits that MALL can bring. For example, Making use of Skype could help people become more confident and more competent in communicating in English and cultivate intercultural awareness [3].

Many recent studies related to online language learning have paid heed to reading and listening [4]. However, few researchers investigated effects that online applications could exert on speaking and writing. Thus, these previous results are

inconclusive. The present paper is aimed to evaluate the effects of online applications on learning English as a foreign language and to give some suggestions on application design.

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Language Learning in China

Since the reform and opening-door policy was implemented in the 80s, China has placed emphasis on English learning. Today, against the backdrop of globalization, the value of learning English has been further stressed and China now possesses the largest population learning English [5]. As a result, many a research focuses on teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL), such as difficulties of learning English, motivations in learning English and flipped classroom in EFL teaching [5-7].

2.2. Mobile-assisted Language Learning and Web 2.0 Tools

People have witnessed enormous changes in the past several decades in L2 education. Since the late twentieth century, relying on computers and computer-based resources, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has been introduced as an effective tool in language learning[8]. Several decades later, as mobile devices and technology developed, an innovative approach to L2 learning--- MALL has occurred, featuring "accessibility, portability and functionality". Here, we define MALL in the way that Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) proposed : using personal, portable devices to promote new ways of learning, which puts emphasis on continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across divers context of use. Web 2.0 tools, referring to all those applications, tools and technology, serve as primary platforms for the organization of MALL. With the help of these tools, a network where users can interact and share information with each other is established, helping to gather people [9].

2.3. The Integration of Technology and Language Learning

The ability of technology to supply individualized language instruction and materials, allowing students to select a lesson catering to their needs constitutes one of the reasons of the integration [10]. Furthermore, as students are found to spend a large amount of time in digital environments out of class, chances are that students will easily accept the action of integrating technology into the curriculum, as in contrast to traditional ways of language teaching, nowadays, adolescents are more passionate about modern methods [11,12]. Under this circumstance, the combination of technology, especially mobile-assisted technology and language learning seems to be a practical and promising aspect to discover.

Over the past two decades, numerous researches focus on mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), including the efficacy and usability of different mobile devices and apps for the acquisition of various language skills and the learning of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and the use of social networks or mobile platforms for practicing language and communication [13,14].

2.4. The Effects of Online Applications on Second Language Acquisition

Most studies on MALL assumed that learners' second language acquisition, knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, listening and reading could be enhanced through the usage of mobile technology [4,15-17]. Also, as noted by Kukulska-Hulme, MALL supports multimedia, collaborative listening, and speaking activities and enables learners to co-construct knowledge in order to solve problems and fill information gaps.

2.5. Gap Identification

While lots of previous studies have found potential benefits that mobile technology could bring to second language acquisition, few researchers investigated effects that mobile technology could exert on speaking and writing. Moreover, the efforts made to investigate a specific Web 2.0 tool or application is rare. Therefore, there is a gap in the field on the effects of online language learning applications (which refer to those designed specifically as a support in language acquisition, thus excluding those apps that could be used to support language learning, but have other main functions, like Wechat) on students' speaking skills, which proves the necessity of the design and the implementation of the present study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

The goal of our study is to investigate the effects of smartphone applications on learners' speaking skills and advantages and disadvantages of these applications, with two specific research questions:

RQ1: What are the effects of online language learning applications on speaking skills of college students in China in learning English as a foreign language?

RQ2: What are the strengths and weaknesses of these online applications in helping learners to improve their English communication skills?

3.2. Research Design

The research adopted a short-term survey using mixed methods, prioritizing the collection and analysis of quantitative data and qualitative ones. First, a questionnaire was handed out to college students to gain basic information, including their demographic characteristics, their habits of using online English learning applications, etc. After that, a semi-structured interview was carried out to further explore how these online English learning applications benefit students' speaking skill and to gain students' more detailed opinions concerning strengths and weaknesses of the applications that they use.

3.3. Quantitative Research Design

The quantitative research was completed in the form of a questionnaire, which was prepared in Chinese and divided into two parts (14 questions). The first part of the questionnaire aimed to gain participants' demographic information, including their age, gender and qualifications. The formulation of some questions in the second part referred to those presented in Demouy et al.'s study and was guided by the conceptual framework proposed by Kukulska-Hulme for language learning mobile apps' design in regard to the temporal and spatial characteristics of mobile learning situations [18,19].

109 college students in China aged between 18 and 29 were invited to fill in the questionnaire. According to the statistics of the questionnaire, the two genders of the participants were relatively evenly divided, with female and male students accounting for 54% and 46% respectively of the whole population. As for their qualifications, the majority of them had bachelor degree, representing more than 70% of the participants, whereas those had master or doctor degree achieving respectively 18.35% and 10.09%. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants

Gender	Male	45.87%
	Female	54.13%
Age	18-21	53.21%
	22-25	40.37%
	26-29	6.42%
Qualifications	Bachelor degree	71.56%
	Master degree	18.35%
	Doctor degree	10.09%

For analyzing closed questions, the investigator adopted the quantitative descriptive analysis to have an overall understanding of participants' attitudes towards online English learning applications utilization. First, the app "SoJump" collected the statistics and provided simple charts. After that, the investigator integrated the data to present the general tendencies.

3.4. Qualitative Research Design

The qualitative research was completed in the form of a semi-structured interview comprising open-ended questions written in Chinese with the objective of gaining a more profound understanding of participants' views concerning these apps. For instance, which function do they prefer/dislike and reasons, effects of these apps on users' speaking skill and the way in which these apps affect users. Four students who had already submitted the previous questionnaire were recruited in this interview. One participant mentioned in the

questionnaire that he didn't use any online language learning applications to practice his speaking skill, while the other three participants all had related experience. Among the three participants that made use of online apps, one felt that her English speaking skill has considerably improved, one witnessed the improvement of willingness to communicate in English, and one saw the increase in confidence in interacting in English.

During the process, The investigator conducted in-depth, one-on-one and face-to-face interviews.

After the interview, the collected data were analyzed thematically.

4. Results

Research results were reported in the order of the two research questions.

4.1. Effects on Learners' Speaking Skill

The questionnaire data demonstrated that among the 89 participants who reported that they used online learning applications, the majority of them (65.17%) tapped into these apps at least a few times a week (33.71%), with 14 people (15.73%) making use of these apps several times a day and 14 participants (15.73%) once a day. The statistic corresponded to participants' self-evaluation, in which 61 people (68.54%) reported that thanks to online applications, they had the feeling of spending more time practicing speaking skill, which is crucial to language learning as naturally, learners' language proficiency is positively correlated to the time they spend on learning.

The positive effects of these online language learning applications on users were also indicated in the questionnaire where 65 participants (73.03%) reckoned that with the help of these apps, their performance in speaking has improved. To be more precise, 46 participants (70.77%) witnessed the improvement of willingness to communicate (WTC), 46 (70.77%) saw the increase in L2 speaking motivation (L2SM)

and 1 (1.54%) felt that her oral English proficiency (OEP) has considerably improved, which was manifested in her IELTS speaking score. (As mentioned in another study, WTC, L2SM, and OEP are three important variables to be detected in L2 studies [20].)

I feel that by using online language learning applications, my ability in these three aspects has improved, particularly in the field of the willingness to communicate (WTC). (Student 1, data source: interview)

4.2. Users' Opinions Towards the Design of Online English Learning Applications

According to the questionnaire data, among 109 participants, 20 of them never used online English learning applications to practice their speaking skill. As for the reason, 4 people (20%) said that they had not heard of these applications, while 16 people (80%) expressed that they were not used to using these applications.

I think that finishing the tasks that the teacher assigns is enough for me and spending spare time to make use of these applications seems not be really beneficial to me. I'm just not accustomed to that kind of way of learning. (Student 3, data source: interview)

Among the applications available on the market, we could infer from question 6 (Which application do you use to practice your speaking skill?) and question 7 (Which is your favorite online English learning application?) that "Fun dubbing" was the most popular one, representing 50 (56.18%) users and 28 (31.46%) likers in this study, which was followed by "LAIX", "Shanbay Speak", "HelloTalk" and "Tomato English". Users' preference of applications is shown in Chart 1.

"Fun dubbing" attracts me most because I can improve my English pronunciation and intonation through the interesting process of dubbing instead of doing mechanical exercise all the time. (Student 2, data source: interview)

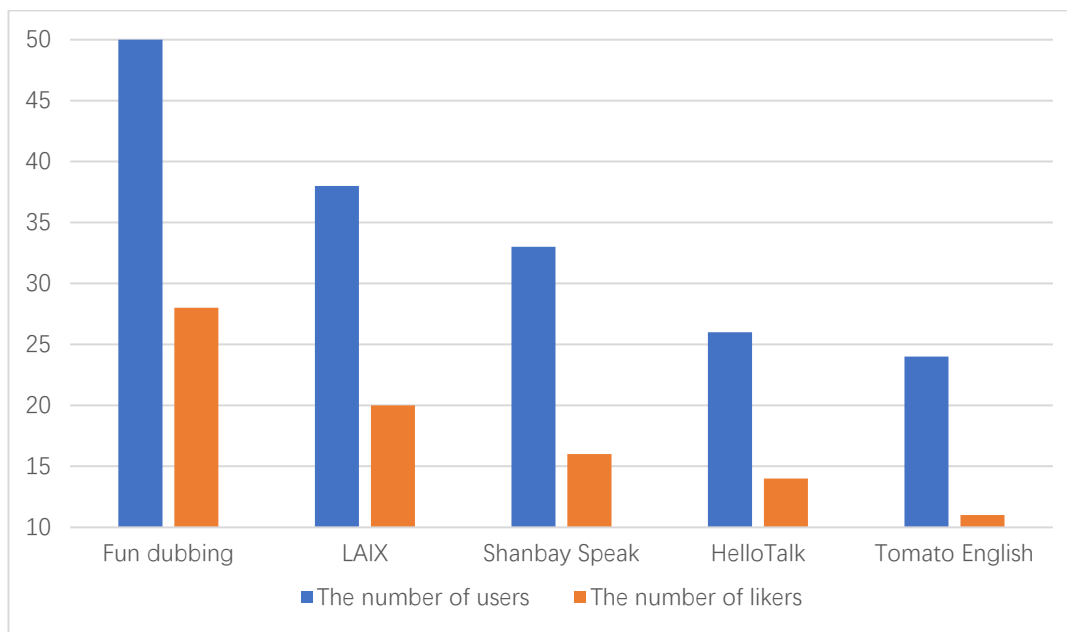


Figure 1. Users' preference of applications

When asked about their habits of tapping into these applications, the number of participants preferring using alone and the number of those using in groups were nearly

evenly divided, accounting for 44 (49.44%) and 45 (50.56%) people respectively. To explore further, we could find that for those using applications with others, 26 (57.78%) people were

keen on reciting words together, whereas the rest of them—19 (42.22%) people enjoyed dubbing together.

5. Discussion

Firstly, it was revealed in the study that with the help of online language learning applications, users could principally develop their willingness to communicate (WTC), and L2 speaking motivation (L2SM). However, the effects of these applications on users' oral English proficiency (OEP) were not obvious enough, which contrasts the previous finding that Web 2.0 applications have positive effects on speaking skill [21]. Therefore, concerning the positive impacts of online learning applications on users' oral English proficiency (OEP), a critical attitude should be held.

The results also demonstrated that on the one hand, promotion and a more elaborated instruction should be made concerning these applications for the reason that a large majority of participants making no use of these applications was that they were not accustomed to this new way of practicing speaking skill. Moreover, as was shown in the questionnaire, slightly more people preferred practicing speaking skill with other partners, indicating the need to develop more functions allowing people to study online together, such as the functions of dubbing and reciting words, which, as mentioned in interview, were considered as interesting and useful for users and served as a factor contributing to the popularity of apps like "Fun dubbing".

The investigator suggests that from the above key findings of this study, significant prospective implications for MALL use for oral English learning process could be drawn. However, the small sample size of the study constitutes the main limitation. Because of this, the investigator failed to generalize the findings to a larger population. Also, as this is a short-term study, some factors might not have been examined thoroughly. In this regard, a long-term investigation is required to further discover impacts of online learning applications on users' oral English proficiency.

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