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A New Perspective on an Old Subject: Mobile-assisted Language Learning in English Academic Writing in Hong Kong Universities

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this short paper is to bring English academic writing (EAW) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) together to examine to what degree the latter can be effectively employed to support the former in the Hong Kong higher education context. It utilizes the perspectives generated from the literature, together with professional interpretation, to illustrate the affordances of MALL in EAW in the community. It is suggested that MALL can be employed to integrate academic English into the students' daily lives, through which they can implicitly build the knowledge of academic register outside of the classroom and ultimately use it in the classroom.

1. Introduction

This short paper aims at exploring the potential of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in teaching and learning English academic writing (EAW) in Hong Kong. Since the late 2000s, applied research on MALL has gathered increasing momentum[1]. Research of this kind tends to use an experimental design mixed with qualitative methods to examine the perceptions of MALL[2] or the intended outcomes of MALL [3]. Alongside this discipline are studies on EAW, which traditionally focus on pedagogy[4] or error analysis[5]. In a well-developed society like Hong Kong, almost all university freshmen have a smartphone, and in normal circumstances, they have to learn to write an academic essay in their first academic year in university. Nonetheless, scarce discussions have touched on the potential roles of MALL in this particular subject, which is often a compulsory course in the general education (GE) curriculum. Probably, what has caught the attention of frontline practitioners is only the phenomenon of phubbing in EAW classes, which may be more boring and less appealing than other GE courses from the perspectives of students, especially struggling students whose general English proficiency is low.

In view of the abovementioned situation, this short paper is intended to draw insights from specific articles to illustrate how MALL may play a role in EAW in out-of-class contexts in Hong Kong. It will not go into details about development of the academic discourse of MALL or EAW. Instead, the discussion will go with references to the scholarly literature and from perspectives as an academic professional, in order to support the conceptualization of using MALL in an EAW course.

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2. Learning English Academic Writing in Hong Kong

Hong Kong, a metropolis on the east of South China, used to be a colony of the British Empire during the period from August 29, 1842 and June 30, 1997. Owing to this historical reality, English has become an important language in every official domain in the city[6]. Nevertheless, the actual linguistic situation of English in Hong Kong is more complicated than imagined or expected.

2.1 The Linguistic Situation of English in Hong Kong

While Hong Kong people meet with English every day, only the upper middle class of them (or above) will often speak the language in daily conversation. Simply put, English is rarely used as a lingua franca among Hong Kong locals themselves, who prefer their mother tongue, Cantonese, in different oral settings[7]. This phenomenon makes English distinct from a typical second language to Hong Kong people[8]. As they lack a favorable environment to master English, their English standards (especially in terms of grammar and pronunciation) are continuously criticized by commentators or purists in the mass media[9]. On the other hand, English enjoys official prestige in governmental, administrative, commercial, and educational domains[10]. It is always the language by default in critical documents; it is the desirable medium of instruction (MoI) in the eyes of parents[11]. All these render English similar to a second language to Hong Kong people. It should be learnt and mastered, though it may not be used frequently in their life worlds. Although their English is non-native or non-standard, none of them can run away from the international language. So to speak, most Hong Kong locals suffer from this situation in their studies or career development.

It is still not easy to determine whether English is a second language or not in Hong Kong, but it is not difficult to notice its paramount importance in tertiary education. Nowadays, a "level 3" in the English subject of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) is one of the minimum entrance requirements for all government-funded bachelor degree programs in Hong Kong universities, whose MoI is normally English (i.e. English as the medium of instruction; EMI)[12]. Even after HKDSE graduates enter a university, they still need to take several English courses to increase their abilities to use English for academic purposes (EAP). These courses, however, can be nightmares for a large number of freshmen who have only marginally passed the subject in the public examination[13].

2.2 English Academic Writing as General Education in Hong Kong

In theory, senior secondary school leavers in Hong Kong who are offered a place in a local university are supposed to have gained a certain degree of proficiency in English. Yet, proficiency of this kind does not include the academic register. In other words, they have possessed little knowledge of how to write and speak English in academic settings. Therefore, the GE curriculum requires all year one students (regardless of their majors) to take several courses about academic writing, reading, and speaking. These courses will cover topics like plagiarism and referencing, academic vocabulary and sentence structure, the annotated bibliography and literature review, as well as analytical reasoning and academic argument. Students need to pass these courses before they are allowed to continue their studies.

Before the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, bachelor degree programs offered by the universities in Hong Kong were mostly reserved for a very small number of secondary seven graduates with a good result in the high-stakes examination: Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE), which was far more challenging than HKDSE. These high achievers, whose English was already up to standard, could learn actively and effectively in the stressful full English environment. Otherwise, they would not have passed the English examination, Use of English, in HKALE. Nevertheless, mass higher education in the city since the early 2000s has enabled a large number of "mediocre" students to enter a bachelor degree program (or at least an associate degree program) with an "ordinary" HKDSE result[14]. These students, who have more or less lost interest and confidence in mastering the language, tend to be unmotivated or struggling in those GE English courses. The fundamental problems are their low proficiency, low confidence, and low motivation. They may even find it difficult to use an appropriate verb to write a grammatically correct sentence, let alone using the academic register to argue properly. This often results in a lamentable state in which they fail to acquire or apply the basic skills at EAP – but are still allowed to be promoted to year two upon a marginal pass in these courses. With the prosperity of mobile information technology, however, it seems that MALL is a possible gateway to help these students to rebuild the knowledge of academic English.

3. Mobile-assisted Language Learning for English Academic Writing

Except those from the upper middle class (or above) who have everyday access to English since childhood, Hong Kong university freshmen nowadays usually have a hard time in the EAP courses. The one on EAW appears to be particularly challenging in that writing has limited tolerance to grammatical and stylistic flaws. On top of that, just like other youngsters across the globe, these year-one students tend to "phub" their teachers (i.e. snub their teachers by playing with the smartphone) when they find that the contents are so boring or that the learning goals look unachievable. From an alternative viewpoint, the smartphone, which has caught their attention for long, can be turned to a tool for learning EAP out of the classroom.

3.1 The Functions of Mobile-assisted Language Learning in English Education

Generally speaking, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) refers to "the use of various mobile devices for people to engage in human developments in various areas and disciplines in educational settings and beyond, with or without teacher/peer supports."[15] Thanks to the flexibility and portability of the smartphone, learners need not sit at a desktop or notebook computer to access digitalized learning materials[16]. The scholarly literature has demonstrated various potential benefits of MALL in teaching and learning English, including allowing students to discuss contents freely[17], incorporating games in learning[18], extending learning activities outside the classroom[19], and promoting self-regulated learning[20]. Most importantly, many studies have indicated a generally positive attitude to MALL among language teachers and students who learn English as a second or foreign language[21][22]. Such a positive perception suggests the possible use of MALL in EAW courses in the Hong Kong higher education setting.

3.2 Possible Methods of MALL for Learning EAW

This paper puts forward the idea that MALL can be applied in EAW courses. In the Hong Kong context, EAW courses in universities are designed for non-native English speaking students, and EAW teachers are expected to apply their knowledge of teaching English as a second / foreign language in the courses. If a Hong Kong university decides to include MALL in the EAW courses, they should take into consideration second language learning approaches before outlining the teaching and learning plan. Among the mainstream approaches, it seems that digital devices favor the direct, audiolingual, and humanistic approaches[23]. Below are descriptions of an example of how MALL can be used in consideration of these three approaches.

The direct approach concentrates on spoken language, but it addresses grammar as well. For the grammar domain, it does not encourage the use of grammar-translation, which supports memorization of rules and the application of them in translating sentences between the native and target languages. Instead, it proposes the learning of grammar implicitly through exposure to naturally occurring input. EAW course designers can call for external funding to develop an app which can be installed on multiple mobile operating systems, so that it can be run in cross-platform environments (e.g., on Android and iOS). This app affords academic vocabulary to pop up (as a push notification at the top of their smartphones) every morning (e.g., at 8:00am). Each word or phrase comes with an explanation of its meaning and an example of use on sentential level in EAW in a particular referencing style (e.g., APA). As the target users are weak in English, the explanation should be brief and written in simple English; as the goal is to draw their attention to the use of vocabulary in academic writing, the example should be adapted from scholarly articles. After the example will be a multiple-choice question to test whether the student has learnt the use of the word or phrase. Through daily exposure to academic vocabulary and the examples on sentential level, together with the close-ended question, it is hoped that students will learn the academic language gradually and use them in their college assignments correctly.

The audiolingual approach, simply speaking, emphasizes the need for repetitive drills and hands-on practices, especially in the acquisition of grammar rules. Limited by the small screen and small keyboard of smartphones[24], the app may not create a user-friendly environment for practices of EAW, but it is a good platform for stylistic drills. Other than academic vocabulary, rules or hints for academic referencing can also pop up on their smartphone every day. To avoid overlapping with the vocabulary, these push notifications can come in the afternoon (e.g., at 2:00pm) or at night (e.g., at 8:00pm). They can be written in the form of frequently-asked questions (FAQs), and they should be comprehensible for weaker students. It is important that the tips should exclude unimportant details to increase the user friendliness[25]. Just like the vocabulary part, there will be a multiple-choice question at the end to test whether the student has understood the referencing

knowledge, such as use of citation in different ways. Through daily exposure to such information repetitively, it is hoped that students will remember what to do when they cite or discuss external sources in their college assignments.

The humanistic approach concentrates on the learner's individual needs. To address this end, the app can include a function through which the user can be directed to a mobile messaging device (e.g., WhatsApp) where students can ask questions or discuss their problems with the teacher or peers on the contact list. An icon to start the operation can be included in the push notification which shows the academic vocabulary or referencing tips. When the icon is clicked, a screenshot can be taken and sent through the messenger, through which they can visualize the thing(s) to be asked or discussed[26]. Whether to ask questions or discuss problems through the apps depends on the user's motivation, but this function recognizes with the nature of MALL, which is contextual and personal[27]. Such convenience will also facilitate teacher-student and peer interactions, timely to the user and specific about a word, a phrase, or a stylistic issue.

There have been many educational apps with the similar affordances in the market. Hence, the app should be appealing enough to attach students to use it continuously and pay attention to the pop-up messages or push notifications intrinsically. First, the contents of the pop-up messages should be related to some formal assessment activities in the EAW course. For instance, use of the vocabulary will be tested in a mid-term quiz, or knowledge of referencing style will be asked in the final examination. This serves a formal incentive to motivate students to be serious about the app[28]. Additionally, this prevents students from removing the app by any uninstall process.

Second, all the information about EAW should be readable, so that students can take the initiative to learn or refer to the content whenever in need (even when there is no push notification at a time). It is suggested that when users click the app icon on the home screen manually, they can choose to read the information about academic vocabulary and referencing tips systematically. The database is saved on the Internet servers, but users can install everything for offline reading. This makes the app a database for revision or learning in their own pace[29], further improving learner autonomy in terms of the choice of materials[30].

Third, to prevent students from closing the push notification without reading through the contents, the app could afford users to create an avatar to represent their "status" in terms of EAW knowledge. When they finish reading a page *and* answer a question correctly, they will earn a point through which they can use to "nurture" the avatar; when they earn a certain number of points, they can use them to unlock new settings (e.g., dressing, accessories). The image of the character can be shared with other users through the messaging function, and it can be considered a token of participation (which is part of the formal assessment) in the EAW course. This creates some entertainment and an ongoing informal incentive to invite students to spend more time on the app, which can indirectly increase the degree of achievement[31] at least in the semester.

In general, the app should be professional, comfortable, and comprised of mainly text, except icons, background images, and the avatar page. It is quite important to stress that the app should be down-to-earth from the low achiever's perspective. Instead of including many details about the academic register, it should provide the most basic but important information only; otherwise it will just scare the target students away and fail to achieve the primary goal, which is to assist students with low English proficiency in catching up with English learning in university. Thus, contents of the academic vocabulary and referencing tips should be written by experienced local English teachers who have thorough understanding of the main difficulties facing the students. In practice, the app can be piloted in a section of EAW to see whether it can significantly improve the students' performance in EAW. Further studies are needed to confirm the possibilities and limitations of such an app. As successful MALL depends on how it is utilized in the existing syllabus[32], EAW teachers are supposed to design classroom activities in consideration of the app.

4. Conclusion

This short paper, albeit without an empirical study, has tried to manifest the potential of MALL in EAW courses in Hong Kong universities. English is an atypical but essential second language in Hong Kong. Because of this situation, university students are often faced with a challenge. On the one hand, most of them have to admit that their English is non-native and ungrammatical on some level. On the other hand, English is vital for success in university, partly due to the EMI environment, partly due to its functional roles in future job hunting, and partly due to its symbolic roles on a societal level. This general phenomenon makes many of them struggle in the GE English courses they have to pass in their first year of study.

In order to assist the majority of students in learning how to write academically, MALL can be incorporated

into the EAW courses. Key persons in these courses can apply for funding to develop an app to increase students' exposure to the academic register out of the classroom. This app can afford push notifications to provide learning materials for academic vocabulary and referencing style. It also enables students to ask questions about the notification contents through a mobile messaging device. Apart from learning via the push notifications, students can read the notes according to their own needs. To attract them to take a serious attitude towards the app, they will earn points upon completion of reading each pop-up notification and a correct answer to the question, through which they can use the points to build an avatar to show their achievements for fun.

Effective learning in EAW or EAP depends on how MALL is employed in practice. The conceptual paper has reflectively discussed the affordances of MALL in EAW courses in Hong Kong, but the outcomes are determined by individual teachers' use of it and students' motivation to play with the app. In the EAW classroom, a considerable number of low achievers need strategies for building the knowledge of academic register. Otherwise, they may just retreat to give up or produce unqualified academic essays, both of which indicate a failure of English education in the university GE curriculum. It is hoped that researchers and practitioners can try to develop and use an app of this kind and investigate its help in EAW students, so that they can use English confidently and accurately for academic or professional purposes in the future.

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