TEACHING AND LEARNING THE SMART WAY: SMARTPHONE TECHNOLOGY AND THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Many course syllabi for university-level language courses contain a clause prohibiting the use of cellphones during class. I call this practice into question by considering the potential benefits of using Smartphone (SP) technology to supplement language instruction. I begin with an examination of current practices regarding the use of SP technology in university-level language classrooms and demonstrate that, although a majority of instructors and students own a SP device, the available data suggest that SP technology is not being taken advantage of for instructional purposes. Language instructors have legitimate concerns regarding the use of SP devices in class, and several of these are discussed, along with ways these issues might be mitigated. The last part of the article is dedicated to providing guidance for selecting SP applications (apps) to supplement language instruction, and several specific apps that can be used in the language classroom are highlighted.

CURRENT PRACTICES

According to a poll conducted by Pearson in 2015, 85% of college students own a Smartphone (SP) device. In a study on university-level language instructors' teaching practices, Stauffer (2014) found that 86% of the university-

level language instructors who participated in her study owned a SP device. While these statistics cannot be compared directly, the numbers suggest that a majority of both university-level students and language instructors own a SP device.

Although it seems a majority of university-level students and instructors own a SP device, the question is whether SP technology is being utilized for educational purposes, and, more specifically, whether language instructors are using SP technology to supplement instruction. Here, the published data is more scant. In her study on university-level language instructors, Stauffer (2014) concluded that there was a higher incidence of technology use in her participants' personal lives than in their language teaching practice. For example, while 95% of her participants reported using the internet for personal purposes, only 14% reported using the internet for professional purposes. Likewise, all of her participants reported using a computer for personal purposes, but only 59% reported using a computer for professional purposes. Unfortunately, Stauffer did not collect data regarding the use of Smartphones for professional purposes, so it is impossible to know exactly what percentage of her participants supplement instruction with SP technology.

I would suggest that the usage of SP technology by university-level language instructors is rather low. I base this conjecture on (1) the number of course syllabi I have seen with a clause prohibiting the use of cellphones in class, and (2) anecdotal evidence I collected via Facebook and face-to-face conversations with colleagues teaching language courses at a number of different higher-education institutions. When asked whether they use SP technology in their language teaching, the overwhelming majority of the instructors I spoke to stated that they did not.

The next question we may ask ourselves is the following: Why are university-level language instructors not using SP technology to supplement instruction? Although this is a complex question, most of the anecdotal evidence I collected through my informal survey suggests that the most common reasons given for not using SP technology are logistical or practical in nature: students becoming distracted and not using their devices for the task at hand, students taking pictures of exams and sharing them with other students, etc.

I would like to propose an additional contributing factor—a prevailing anti-cellphone classroom culture. Imagine, for a moment, that you are giving a lesson in a language classroom. You look up from your position at the front of the room

and see two of your students using electronic devices. One is typing on a laptop and the other is typing on a SP device. Do you assume that one or both of these students are off-task? Are you more likely to assume that the student typing on the SP device or the student typing on the laptop is off-task? Chances are that you are more likely to assume that the student typing on the SP device is off-task, whether this is actually the case or not. I suggest that this reaction is a product of the same anti-cellphone classroom culture that has led to the proliferation of anti-cellphone clauses in syllabi for university-level language courses.

In what follows, I argue for a repudiation of this prevailing anti-cellphone classroom culture in order for language instructors to take full advantage of the benefits of using SP technology to supplement language instruction.

THE BENEFITS OF USING SMARTPHONE TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPLEMENT INSTRUCTION

Lee (2000) lists a number of benefits for Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), including increased opportunities for experiential learning, increased student motivation, increased access to authentic materials, more diverse learner-to-learner interaction, independence from a single source of information, and ubiquitous learning. In the discussion below, I examine each of these benefits as they pertain to the use of SP technology, one specific type of CALL, to supplement language instruction.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is learning by doing. In the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), this can be conceptualized as acquiring language by using language for a specific purpose in a specific context. Students use their SP devices for such activities as social networking, communicating through text messages, and doing searches through an internet browser. By having language learners use their SP devices for instructional purposes, instructors provide learners with the opportunity to use the target language in an authentic context for an authentic purpose, thereby providing a context in which experiential learning and language acquisition can take place.

Motivation

According to Lee (2000), "computers are most popular among students because they are associated with fun and games or because they are considered to

be fashionable." The same could be said of SP devices. In general, SP devices are used for entertainment and convenience, and the associations attached to those devices are overwhelmingly positive. While SP technology should never be used to supplement language instruction solely because it is "fashionable," the use of SP devices in the classroom could increase learner motivation via the positive associations attached to those devices.

Authentic Materials

Many language instructors strive to supplement instruction with as many authentic materials in the target language as possible. This usually involves searching for authentic materials and distributing those materials to students, and the time and cost involved in doing so may (indirectly) limit students' exposure to the target language through those types of materials. By using SP technology to supplement language instruction, instructors can provide students with access to a much wider array of authentic materials in the target language, and learners can access those materials 24/7 from anywhere.

Interaction

In my informal survey regarding whether or not language instructors are using SP technology in their current teaching practices, one instructor said that they did not allow SP devices in class because they discouraged students from practicing speaking skills toward each other. This may be so, but the use of SP devices for instruction also provides learners with more contexts in which to use the target language for communication. Using the target language effectively on social media and to communicate via textual exchanges are important aspects of overall communicative competence that are often undervalued in formal language instruction. SP technology can be used to address these competencies directly.

Independence from a Single Source of Information

While many language instructors consider textbooks to be a valuable resource for language learning, they can also be limiting in that they provide a single source of information for language learners. For example, the language presented in most textbooks is formal in nature and may differ substantially from more informal registers used on social media, in chat rooms, and for text messaging. Similarly, many textbooks limit the amount and quality of cultural

information they present, which could be detrimental to language learners' understanding of the cultural context of the language. By using SP technology to supplement instruction, language instructors can provide learners with exposure to multiple registers and access to a tremendous amount of cultural information from a wide range of sources.

Ubiquitous Learning

The use of SP technology to supplement language instruction also has a more obvious benefit—ubiquitous learning. By conceptualizing SP devices as language learning tools, language instructors extend the context of learning beyond the classroom. Learning can take place at any location and at a time that suits the learner. Such freedom may serve to promote the development of life-long learning skills and facilitate a positive attitude toward both the target language and language learning in general.

ANTICIPATING AND MITIGATING PROBLEMS

Even though there are benefits to using SP technology to supplement language instruction, a number of language instructors have voiced legitimate concerns regarding doing so, and these concerns must be addressed. Here, I address common concerns and suggest ways in which those concerns may be mitigated.

Not all students own a SP device.

First, I would like to point out that not all students own a laptop, yet laptops are frequently used for instructional purposes. Secondly, a poll conducted by Pearson in 2015 suggests that up to 85% of college students own a SP device, which is a relatively high percentage—high enough, in my opinion, to advocate for the use of SP technology to supplement language instruction. However, I do recognize that the fact that not all students own a SP device could pose a problem. To mitigate this problem, instructors could have students work in pairs or groups, making sure that at least one person in each group has a device. An alternative solution would be to make use of SP applications (apps) that are PC compatible so that those students who do not own a device can use a laptop or computer instead.

Data is expensive/not free.

Most SP service providers charge a fee for data usage. If language instructors require students to search the internet, watch videos, or download files from their SP devices, this could cost students money or cause them to use data that they would rather use for personal purposes. It is important to be up-front with students from the beginning about how they will be expected to use their device. If there are concerns regarding data usage, have students connect to the institution's wireless network (if one is available), or make sure to use free-standing apps that do not require internet access. Instructors can also limit the use of high-bandwidth SP apps, such as those used for viewing videos, or use apps that are PC compatible.

SP devices pose a distraction.

Arguably, laptops, or any other electronic device with internet access, pose just as much of a distraction to students as SP devices. The key to preventing students from becoming distracted by any extraneous stimulus is to (1) monitor students carefully, and (2) hold students accountable individually for the task at hand. If students are expected to produce some kind of learning product within a limited amount of time, they will be less likely to be distracted by social media, text messaging, or their favorite web pages.

Developing materials using SP technology is time-consuming.

When language instructors are expected to head committees, organize and oversee extracurricular activities, and meet with students outside of class, there is precious little time for lesson planning, much less developing original materials that incorporate SP technology. This, coupled with the fact that there are few to no published materials with guidance for using SP technology in the language classroom, can make incorporating SP technology a daunting prospect. My suggestion for overcoming this obstacle is to use a divide-and-conquer approach. Start a dialogue and search out colleagues who might be interested in using SP technology in the classroom, or start a reading group. Working together with like-minded colleagues with whom you can generate ideas and develop materials will help to lessen the burden on any one individual and save a lot of time.

Students are not receptive to using SP technology for instructional purposes.

The first thing to do when faced with this situation is to find out why. For example, are students concerned about data usage? Are they unhappy with the types of tasks and materials being used? When using SP technology in the classroom, it is important to get feedback from learners in the form of a pre-semester, mid-semester, or end-of-semester survey so that instructional practices can be modified if necessary. Student responses may prompt you to re-evaluate the way you are using SP technology in the classroom, to limit how often you use SP technology, or to consider using different types of tasks or materials. Making small changes such as these could help to make students more receptive to using their SP devices for instructional purposes.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SELECTING A SMARTPHONE APPLICATION FOR LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

The first step to using SP technology to supplement language teaching is to establish a purpose for the SP technology. The use of SP technology should always be motivated by a specific pedagogical need; it should never be used simply because it is fashionable or new. In other words, whenever we use SP technology in the classroom, we should ensure that it is necessary to do so.

There are many unique and helpful SP apps that can be used for language instruction. However, it is important to be able to evaluate these apps before using them for pedagogical purposes. Here, I enumerate five considerations loosely based on Chapelle's (2009) discussion of the relationship between SLA theory and CALL.

Consideration #1: Learning Potential

Does the app provide a theoretically-motivated learning potential? Does the app help learners to achieve the learning objective in an efficient way? It is important to ensure that the app will actually help students to achieve the learning objective, rather than serve as a hindrance. Likewise, language instructors should also ensure that use of the app to achieve the desired learning outcome is grounded in SLA theory.

Consideration #2: Quality of Input/Output

Does the app provide rich, interesting input? Does the app require that learners produce the target language in a meaningful way? Most SLA theories maintain that receiving input in the target language is necessary for acquisition (see Van Patten & Williams, 2006 for an overview of contemporary SLA theories), and providing learners with opportunities to produce output in the target language is important for the development of communicative competence. Therefore, language instructors should ensure that any app selected for language instruction provides learners with input, encourages them to produce output, or both.

Consideration #3: Learner Ability

How will the app affect the interaction between learners? Do learners have the linguistic skills to use the app to achieve the learning objective? In a traditional language classroom, communication in the target language takes place face-to-face between two learners. However, using SP devices for language teaching provides additional contexts in which communication can occur, such as communication through text messaging, email, or group chat. It is important to consider whether learners have the linguistic skills required to communicate effectively in these contexts. If not, scaffolding may need to be provided.

Consideration #4: Authenticity

Does the app provide learners with access to authentic materials in the target language? Does the app contribute to learners' cultural awareness? Authentic materials in the target language can be beneficial to learners in two ways. First, they can provide rich, interesting input in the target language. Secondly, they can provide unique cultural insights. Any app which capitalizes on these benefits by providing access to authentic target-language materials affords an opportunity for learning.

Consideration #5: Practicality

Is use of the app by students logistically plausible? Do learners have the technical skills necessary to use the app? When evaluating an app, it is important to consider the cost of the app and whether use of the app requires internet access. Any app which will place a financial burden on students, no matter how

small, must be used with caution. Additionally, it is important to consider whether any training will be required for students to use the app effectively.

SMARTPHONE APPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

It would be impossible to list all SP apps that can be used to supplement language instruction, simply because there are so many. Instead, I have chosen to highlight several apps of different types that may prove useful to language instructors. I stress once again that it is important that instructors (1) establish a purpose before searching for SP apps to supplement instruction, and (2) evaluate SP apps before using them.

Socrative is a real-time questioning app that allows instructors to instantly aggregate and display results visually. It can be effective for in-class quizzes, comprehension checks, and exit ticket questions.

Edmodo is a social networking app designed specifically for education. It can be used as a safer and more secure alternative to more mainstream social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram.

Story Kit is an app used to create electronic storybooks that can be shared via the internet. Inside the app, there are several customizable storybook templates with pre-selected images, but there is also the option for users to create their own storybook by adding pictures and text.

Remind is an app which facilitates instructor-to-student communication. Through the app, instructors can send out reminders to students by email or text message, as well as hold chat sessions. Students can receive text message reminders on any phone, but they need the app to participate in chat sessions.

PhotoCard is an app in which students can create virtual postcards by adding photos, text, and voice messages. Sharing the postcards via email is free, but there is also the option to have the postcard printed and mailed for a small fee.

FluentU is a language immersion app featuring videos with interactive captions, each accompanied by flash cards, quiz questions, and games. Videos are sorted by level—beginner, intermediate, advanced, and native.

CONCLUSION

Technology and how we use it is in a constant state of evolution. This poses a significant challenge for language instructors, as new ways to communicate using technology emerge. Despite the proliferation of SP devices on college campuses and the high incidence of text-based communication taking place on those devices, the development of this important aspect of overall communicative competence remains undervalued.

I have suggested that there is a prevailing anti-cellphone classroom culture in many university-level language departments across the country, and I have advocated for a rejection of this prevailing anti-cellphone classroom culture on the basis that supplementing language instruction with SP technology provides several benefits including increased opportunities for experiential learning, increased student motivation, increased access to authentic materials, more diverse learner-to-learner interaction, independence from a single source of information, and ubiquitous learning. I addressed several common concerns related to using SP technology in the language classroom and discussed ways in which those concerns might be mitigated. Finally, I provided criteria for evaluating SP apps and highlighted a number of specific SP apps that could prove useful to language instructors.

As language instructors, we must adapt our teaching practices to meet the needs of our students. SP technology, if used effectively, can serve to extend the classroom farther than we ever thought possible and address communicative competencies, such as those underlying the use of SP devices, that we are only just beginning to recognize and understand.

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