

INFORMAL ENGLISH LEARNING VIA MOBILE PHONES

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ABSTRACT

This is an improved version of the refereed paper presented at the International Conference on Mobile Phone Learning, Spain, March 2011. The paper reports a three year ubiquitous informal English learning project mainly designed for Japanese first year university students. The purpose of the project is to help students develop English reading, vocabulary and grammar ability through reading essays and doing grammar, vocabulary quizzes on their mobile phones. Various types of English learning materials are regularly sent to students' mobile phones. Learning activities are not merely intended to be performed one-way on the students' side, but with different forms of interactions such as commenting, ranking and quizzing. A quick online survey to investigate the efficacy of the project was conducted in 2011 and the result shows the project was well-received by the participants. This project indicates mobile phones are not only a suitable tool for vocabulary study but also an ideal tool for developing reading and grammar ability. From the same project, other findings demonstrated that students are more motivated in reading, than in taking language quizzes in spite of the fact that quizzes have interactive features; that students read most of the emails sent to their mobile phones but are very cautious about accessing web links embedded in the email despite being told beforehand that such web links would be safe; that students basically do not mind when the learning materials are sent to them but that evenings are considered to be more convenient for them to conduct mobile learning.

KEYWORDS

English reading, mobile phones, interaction, efficacy, Japanese students

1. INTRODUCTION

It is already widely accepted that mobile phones are an ideal tool via which to review vocabulary and to take vocabulary quizzes (Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Levy, 2005), but not really so for other language activities due to some intricate limitations (Wang & Higgins, 2006) of mobile devices. Indeed, there are few research articles and projects that prove other language skills, such as language reading ability, grammar training can also be developed through the context of mobile phone learning.

Some would argue that with the emergence of smart phones such as iPhone and Andriod, easy mobile reading has already become a common-place thing. And indeed, this might be commonly seen among people without financial worries or with working personnel who delight in the latest Apple gadgets but not necessarily so for cash-strapped university students (Impress

Japan, 2010). Thus, mobile phone content should be designed to be viewable on most models of mobile phones, cheap or expensive, contracted with NTT-Docomo, AU-KDDI, Softbank - which are the three major Japanese mobile phone telecommunication companies, or any other telecommunication companies. On the other hand, as mobile phone learning features mobility, informality and self-autonomy (Sharples et al, 2005) mobile learning content must be flexible enough to apply to the above features. The ubiquitous language project is a project designed to meet the above standards.

The project started in November, 2009, with the purpose of providing students a ubiquitous and pervasive environment in which to read English, learning grammar and vocabulary. Every week, at least three English text-materials are sent to students' mobile phones by email. During the running of the project, a survey was conducted in order to collect students' feedback. The feedback toward the project has been overwhelmingly positive although with some demands for minor changes. The subsidiary purposes of the project include verifying the efficacy of reading on mobile phones and investigating students' perceptions about mobile learning formats and mobile learning content.

In this paper, the authors will delineate the project system and project procedures as well as including an evaluation of the ongoing project. After having discussed the survey data, the paper concludes with the major view that mobile phones are indeed suitable for developing language reading and grammar ability, not only of vocabulary, and with several other findings, too.

2. READING AND GRAMMAR LEARNING ON MOBILE PHONES

2.1 Project system

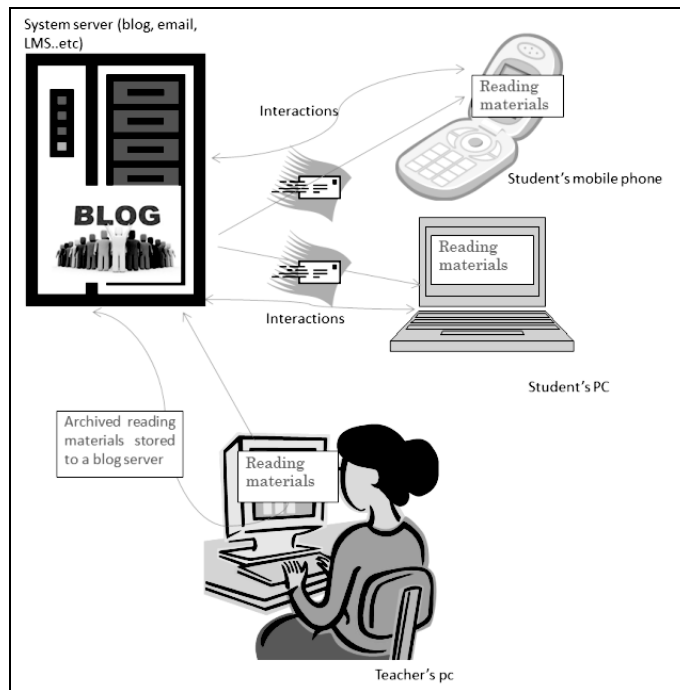


Figure 1. Flow of project system

Three technical systems have been deployed for this project. An email system is used to send reading and grammar materials; a blog system is used to store archived reading stuff; and a comment/quiz system is used for the purpose of student-student peer interaction and student-teacher interaction. All of these systems are designed or customized mainly for commonly used mobile phones, but are also completely compatible with PCs.

Figure 1 indicates the work flow of the project. The server is the key part of the project. Learning materials created on the teacher's PC are uploaded to the server. Through the email system of the server, learning materials are sent to students in email format. As email function on mobile phones in Japan is strictly preset by telecommunication companies to protect email from spam, the email system is set to send out 20 emails in plain text per minute so that emails can indeed reach mobile phone carriers without being blocked as spam or being regarded as suspicious.

The emails are sent in plain text format which can be quickly and cheaply received on students' mobile phones. When students want to comment, or take quizzes, then they need to access the URL attached to the email. The URL is automatically generated by a very powerful mobile phone-oriented comment/quiz system, called Intercussion, which is programmed in JAVA. Language teachers without any programming background just simply use Microsoft Excel to create quizzes, comment or even class survey interfaces. As the URL is unique for every reader, teachers can easily follow up the students' progress on quiz taking and comment on the

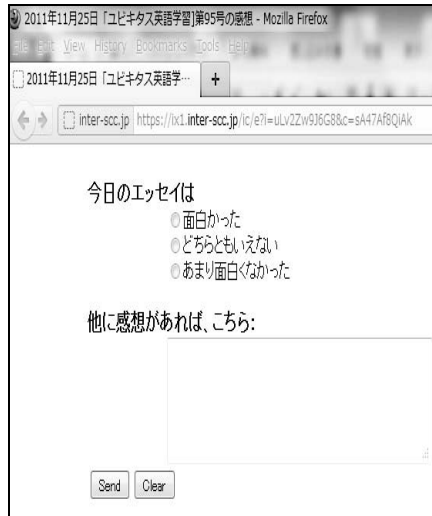


Figure 2. Essay ranking interface

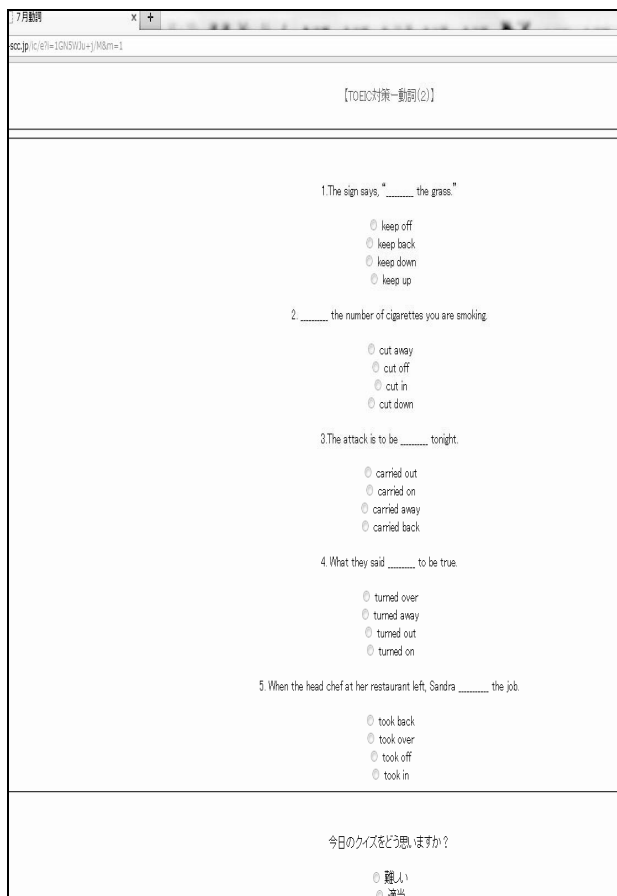


Figure 3. Survey interface

server side. Figure 2 indicates an essay ranking interfaces and Figure 3 indicates a mobile phone survey interface.

The students who do not subscribe learning materials through email can still have a web access of the archived learning materials from the mobile phones. The blog site which stores all of the materials sent in the past is specially designed for ordinary mobile phones. Not limited to smart phones, any type of mobile phones can have full access to the site.



Figure 4. A mobile phone blog-site to store archived English learning materials (<http://www.shimadai-elearning.saloon.jp/keitai-eigo/>)

2.2 Project procedures

In October 2009, a large scale survey was conducted at Shimane University in order to investigate students' possession of ICT devices. 800 first year students answered the questionnaire. The survey showed that 100% of students have mobile phones. Of this, 93% of students are able to employ email functions and 84% of students had joined some package payment plan which lets them use the Internet as much as they want with a fixed pre-set monthly fee. The data made the authors believe that a ubiquitous English language program would be both suitable and effective. As downloading audio files takes time on mobile phones,

listening training is not included in the project. The development of English reading and grammar ability is the main focus of the project.

All reading materials are originally created by the language teachers at the university. Two native speakers of English are responsible for writing simple, easy-to-read and easy-to-understand short essays; one Japanese teacher and one Japanese graduate student who has a good command of English are responsible for giving notes in Japanese for the essays; the other three Japanese teachers are responsible for editing English proverbs/wise sayings, vocabulary and grammar quizzes, riddles, etc. Taking fully into consideration that the learning materials are to be viewed on the small screens of mobile phones with low Internet bandwidth, every material package is kept shorter than 120 words. Materials are categorized into topics of cultural differences, environment, life, entertainment, science and technology, riddles, jokes, and so on. The above leaning selection is sent out three times a week on evenings when students have completed their day classes.



Figure 5. The essay viewed on small screen of mobile phones

The project has been carried out for three years but is still proceeding. Up till December 19, 2011 the project has had 487 volunteer subscribers ranging from a majority of first year students but through to graduate school students, too. The archived mobile phone blog site now has 27,187 page views from June 2010 when the hit account was opened up. The project is still open

for email registration but subscribers are also free to unsubscribe.

2.3 Project feedback

A survey was conducted during one week from March 28 to April 5, 2011 in order to verify the efficacy of the project. The survey web link was sent to 147 learning material subscribers at that time. Participant need to click on the web link and answer the questionnaire online. 87 students responded to the survey. The response rate was 59%. Table 1 shows the survey results.

Table 1. Survey results

集計日時:2011-04-10 20:15			
1. 配信した「ユビキタス英語学習」に目を通しましたか？			
毎回必ず読んだ。		31.00%	27
半分以上読んだ。		41.40%	36
時々読んだ。		21.80%	19
ほとんど読まなかった。		5.70%	5
合計		100.00%	87
2. 「ユビキタス英語学習」について、全体的に英語勉強に役に立ちましたか？			
すごく役に立ったと思う。		8.00%	7
やや役に立ったと思う。		59.80%	52
どちらとも言えない		24.10%	21
あまり役に立たなかったと思う		8.00%	7
まったく役に立たなかったと思う。		0.00%	0
合計		100.00%	87
3. 「ユビキタス英語学習」の中で、気に入った内容はありますか？（複数選択可）			
文法		18.40%	16
エッセイ		35.60%	31
英語のジョーク		48.30%	42
英語のなぞなぞ		33.30%	29
すべての内容		8.00%	7
気に入った内容がなかった		6.90%	6
合計	-N		131
4. 配信した内容は難しかったですか？			
とても難しかったです。		20.70%	18
少し難しかった		33.30%	29
適切であった		36.80%	32
すこし易しかった		6.90%	6
とても易しかった		2.30%	2
合計		100.00%	87
5. 携帯電話の機種を教えてください。			
選択肢	選択率		選択数
AU携帯		36.80%	32
Docomo携帯		49.40%	43
Softbank携帯		8.00%	7
iphone		1.10%	1
iphoe以外のsmart phone		3.40%	3
その他		0.00%	0
合計	-N		86
6. 発信した内容はいつも着実に届いていますか？			
毎回着実に届いています。		94.30%	82
届かない場合があります。		4.60%	4
メールアドレスを変更した後届きました。		1.10%	1
合計		100.00%	87
7. 携帯電話でインターネット使い放題の定額プランに入っていますか？			
選択肢	選択率		選択数
入っている		83.90%	73
入ってない		16.10%	14
合計		100.00%	87

3. DISCUSSION

The questionnaire response rate was rather low (59%). Reasons for low response rate can be various. For instance, the survey was sent in a web link, while Japanese students are usually reluctant to open a URL that looks unfamiliar to them due to security fear. Nevertheless, a low survey response rate does not mean the data is not representative or that the data collected is invalid.(Templeton, et al, 1997). The survey shows that 94% of participants did read English learning materials on their mobile phones. 87% subscribers think that the project is helpful for their English study. 67% of the participants do not care when learning materials are sent to their mobile phones as they can choose to read at anytime they want. However, as 28.6% of students think that evening is the best time to receive learning materials, this remind us as teachers that we may email learning content in the evening when students are maybe in relaxation mode after a busy student day. 54% participants consider that the materials were hard for them, which reminds us that the materials read on mobile phones should not be too challenging. English jokes and riddles are the most favored learning materials with the scoring of 48% and 33% respectively. By contrast with these numbers, only 18.4% participants like grammar materials. This result implies that learning materials designed for mobile phones should not be too tough and boring: on their part, students may not have the time or the energy nor have the tools to do deep study.

Some respondents chose to leave their comments on the project:

“I was happy to receive the leaning materials on my mobile phone and every time I couldn’t wait for the next message. “

“It was good to read those essays on so many different topics. I have learned a lot. As the essays are short and easy to understand, now I have got used to reading English!”

“I saved messages sent from the project every time and read them when I have time. I like this kind of informal learning: learn when I have time and when I relax!”

4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The project which focuses on creating an informal language learning environment has been welcomed by most of the participants. By constantly taking participants’ feedback into consideration, the project keeps evolving. At the next stage of the project, students will be involved in developing learning materials, that is, learning resources will be developed by the students and serve students themselves. As Smith has noted in his paper (2011), this type of informal learning matches what has been called a ‘deep approach’ to learning and attaches significance to the quality of learning outcomes based on the underlying goal of gaining a

thorough understanding of learning. This learning focuses on a type of self-directed learning in which the learners own knowledge is accessed and related to new knowledge. Learning is determined by the freedom which the learner is given to set learning goals, to identify resources, and to determine allocation of time and under what evaluation learning will take place (Long, 1989). It is easy to see the roles of the learner in this form of open leaning as less idealized, less fixed and which allow the learner to choose between a highly directed course or an autonomous one. In this case we allow students to follow a highly autonomous role and we are currently asking students to write their own essays for the project which will give students ownership of the project which is an important aspect of independent learning. Furthermore it embraces the philosophy that the learner should be taken as the central reference point for decision making, content and form of language teaching (Tudor, 1996).

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