

The Use of Mobile Phones in Learning English Language by Sultan Qaboos University Students: Practices, Attitudes and challenges

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Abstract

In this digital age of time, today millions and millions of people worldwide are mobile-phone subscribers. A perusal of the literature shows the use of mobile phones in different educational and social settings including restaurants, public transportation, movie theatres, streets and classrooms. This paper attempts to study and investigate the current use and practices of cell phones in the process of learning English Language by Sultan Qaboos University freshmen. The paper describes the actual practice of mobile phone by students, their behavior and attitudes and the problems they face in using their mobile in an educational and instructional setting in Sultan Qaboos University. A questionnaire survey has been devised and administered to a sample of 100 students on the Intensive English for Science Programme. The results from an analysis of the questionnaire survey indicate that the use of mobile phones in the classroom is still limited. Students like to use them but teachers do not encourage them to do so fearing that this digital device will be a big distraction for both teachers and students alike. Also, despite the fact that mobiles manifest themselves as a good learning tool, they still need to proof for educationists, practitioners, teachers and decision makers that they are more "saint" than sinners in the educational field and classroom. They further suggest that mobile phones are boons blessed if students only handle them wisely. The paper concludes with some implications for the use of mobile phone in learning and education.

Keywords: mobile phone, features, digital students and Sultan Qaboos University

I. INTRODUCTION

Defining Mobile- Learning

Trifonova and Ronchetti(n.d) states that (M- learning) mobile learning is "e-learning through mobile computational devices. Generally speaking, by mobile technology we mean all mobile devices that include Personal Digital Assisstance(PDA), digital cell phones and IPOD. These devices are "small, autonomous and unobtrusive enough to accompany us in every moment in our every-day life, and that can be used for some form of learning".

They can be very helpful and useful for us in many different ways. For example, they allow interaction with people, via voice and through the exchange of written messages, still and moving images. Further to this, they are good tools for assessing content, which can be stored locally on the device or can be reached through interconnection.(Trifonova and Ronchetti(n.d)).

The Study

Objectives:

The prime objectives of this study are twofold:

- 1- To find out how students at SQU: Sultan Qaboos University use their mobile phone in the learning process and
- 2-Explore their perceptions, attitudes and problems about the use of mobile phones in the L2 classrooms.

Questions

This research paper investigates the use of mobile phones in academic settings and explores their merits in the L2 classrooms by SQU students. The central questions of this research are:

- 1- How do SQU students use their mobile phones in learning English Language?
- 2- Does the use of mobile phone affect students' motivation to learn and engagement in learning?
- 3- What are students' perceptions about the use of mobile phones in language learning?

Methodology

Setting

The study is carried out during the academic summer school of 2007 in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University.

Subjects

The target population of this study constituted a sample of 100 participants of Sultan Qaboos University freshmen doing their summer school in the Language Centre levels 6 Sciences which is a higher intermediate level. Ninety three individuals participated in this study.84 (90.3%) were male and 9 (9.7%) were female. These students came from a variety of academic discipline and colleges mainly Science 41 (44%), Agriculture and Marine Sciences 20(21.5 %), Engineering 18 (19.4 %) and Science Education 14 (15%).The selection of those students was random.

Research Instrument

For data gathering and to investigate the study questions, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to a sample of 100 students in five different sections in level 6 Science Programme in the Language Centre. The questionnaire was not self-administered. The format of the survey was based on a mixed method of seeking statistical and verbal responses. It consisted of four main parts. Part One collected demographic information about the participants. Part Two asked questions about use and practices. Part Three asked questions about respondents' attitudes to the use of mobile phone for English language learning. Finally, Part Four gathered information about difficulties facing students in using mobile phone in learning. Most of the questions were 'close-ended', with an additional section for open-ended questions and respondents' comments.

Literature Review

While the literature on mobile phone use in classroom is scarce, there has been some research shedding light on the topic. Mobile phones and their use in language learning have yet to receive much attention.

Thornton and Houser (2005) presented three studies in mobile phone learning. Their subjects were Japanese University students. They tested them in terms of the email exchange in the mobile phones, receiving vocabulary lessons at timed intervals to the mobile phones and finally using video-capable mobile phones for explaining English idioms. Students felt that using mobile phone in learning is "a valuable teaching method" (p.217) and they highly rated its "educational effectiveness" (p.217) in the classroom. A further study by Kiernan and Aizawa (2004) evaluated the use of mobile phones as tools for classroom learning. Freshman university students were surveyed and pre-tested to assess certain target learning structure. Then they were subdivided into three groups: (a) using cell phones text messages, (b) using computer e-mail, and (c) speaking. The study suggested that mobile device proves to be an effective "language learning resource worthy of further investigation". (p.71)

A perusal of the literature shows mainly two different parties for the use of mobile phone in education: advocates and opposers. I will review what the advocates of mobile phones state and then I describe the opposers' views.

Advocates of Mobile Phones in Education

Since mobile phones are widespread everywhere and are popular among students for communication with each other, they may offer a motivating alternative for L2 learning. This

group sees that "using real world resources for teaching and learning in the classroom can make education more meaningful and relevant to our students" (Mcneal and Hooft, 2006, p.1).

They see that mobile learning can offer some assets (Attewell, 2004). These are collaborative learning activities that use camera phones or multimedia messaging to add visual and audio material to a web-based multimedia map or picture. Further, there are mobile phone text messaging quizzes by developing an SMS quiz engine that includes an online editing tool. Moreover, there is mobile phone SMS mini language course. This course structure includes 100 concepts and for each concept there are textual and test dialogues have been created. The learner sends his answers via a text message and the system verifies the results and sends the students a new SMS containing the test results and the suggested improvements.

Mobile phones have positively contributed to the field of learning in many different ways. First, mobile learning helps learners to improve their literacy and numeracy skills and to recognize their existing abilities. Second, it can be used to encourage both independent and collaborative learning experiences. Also, it helps learners to identify areas where they need assistance and support. Further, it helps to combat resistance to the use of ICT: Information Communication Technology and can help bridge the gap between mobile phone literacy and ICT literacy. Moreover, it helps to remove some of the formality from the learning experience and engages reluctant learners. Besides, it helps learners to remain more focused for longer periods. Ultimately; it helps to raise self-esteem and self-confidence. (Attewell, 2004)

Also important, by using technology children are feeling "more of a sense of mastery and are feeling good about themselves" (Cited in Katz, p.95). Additionally, it allows for low-cost implementation of real time, text-based interaction and finish the on going statement of "turn UR mobile off" (Markett, 2006, p.283).

Today some schools in the US continue to ban the use of pagers and cell phones. Despite that, state laws against cell phones have been abandoned because of safety concerns, especially after the schools accidents in Columbia, Colorado and the terrorist attacks in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC. Also, some parents find it so convenient for them and kids to coordinate school and after school schedules.

Opposers of Mobile Phones in Education

Although the widespread popularity of mobile phones around the world, they have not been used widely in educational settings as some people feel reluctant (Mcneal and Hooft,

2006). There are many studies that outline and describe the disadvantages of using mobile phones in education. Some opposers of mobile phones in education call out to ban mobile technologies from schools. Their reaction to the mobile phone is that it is “a source of irritation, delinquency and even crime.”(Katz, n.d.P.92)

In terms of age some researchers agree that children should not be given cell phones because “they don’t contribute to learning”. Also, “using mobiles in the classroom would end up causing more distractions” and they just “interept teaching” (cited in Katz p.94).

Thus, after a perusal of the literature, it seems that many of these studies have tended to centre on using mobile devices particularly mobile phone in language learning. However, until very recently, students’ attitudes towards mobile phone in language learning and the challenges the face have been less researched. It is for this reason that the current study seeks to explore and understand this area more fully.

This paper reports on a classroom research project aimed at evaluating the use of mobile phones in learning English Language Sultan Qaboos University freshmen: practices, attitudes and challenges.

Respondents Affiliation

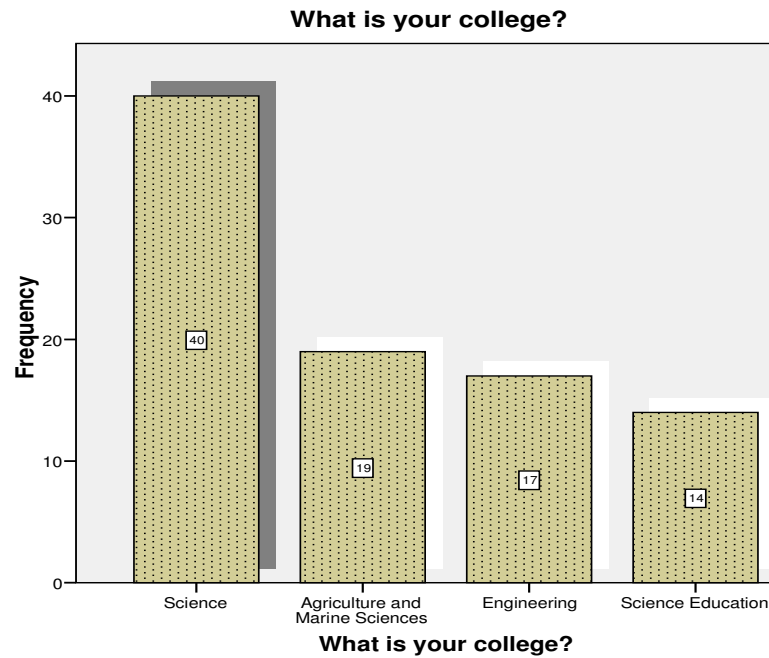


Figure 1. Most of the respondents were from College of Science. They formulated 40 subjects out of 93.

Findings

Findings of the Statistical Data

Part One: Demographic Information

Distribution of male and female respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Male	84	90.3	90.3
	Female	9	9.7	9.7
	Total	93	100.0	100.0

Table 1. Approximately 90.3% of the respondents were males, while females formulated 9.7%

Do you have a mobile phone?

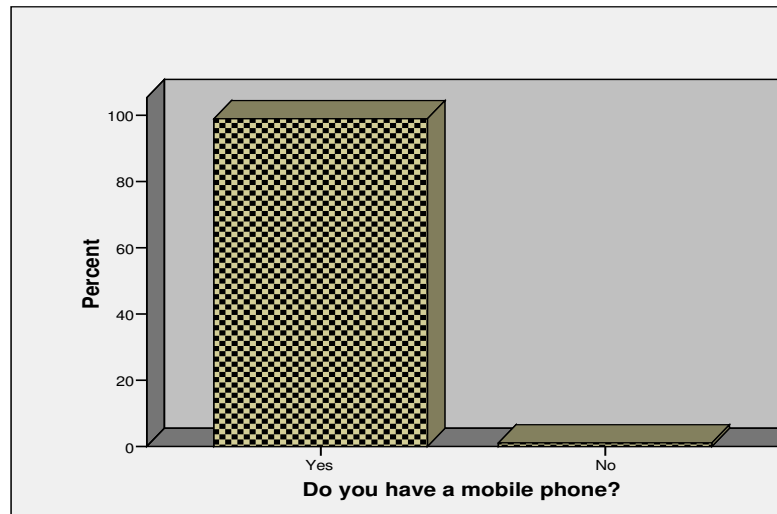


Figure 2: Almost all the respondents (98.9%) own a mobile phone.

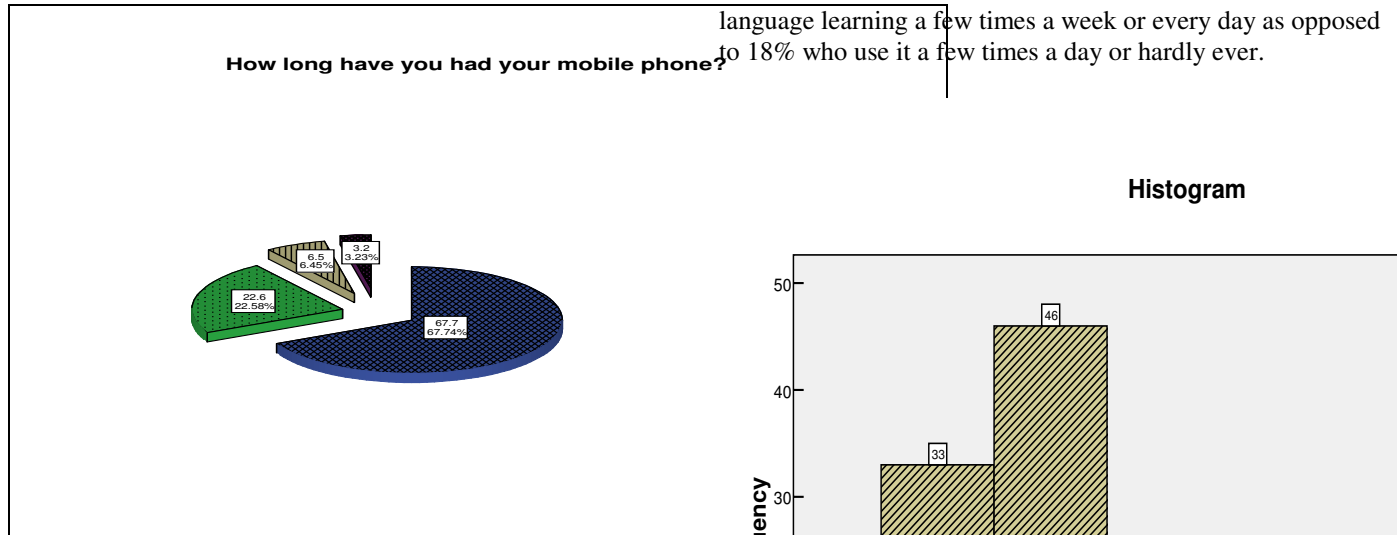
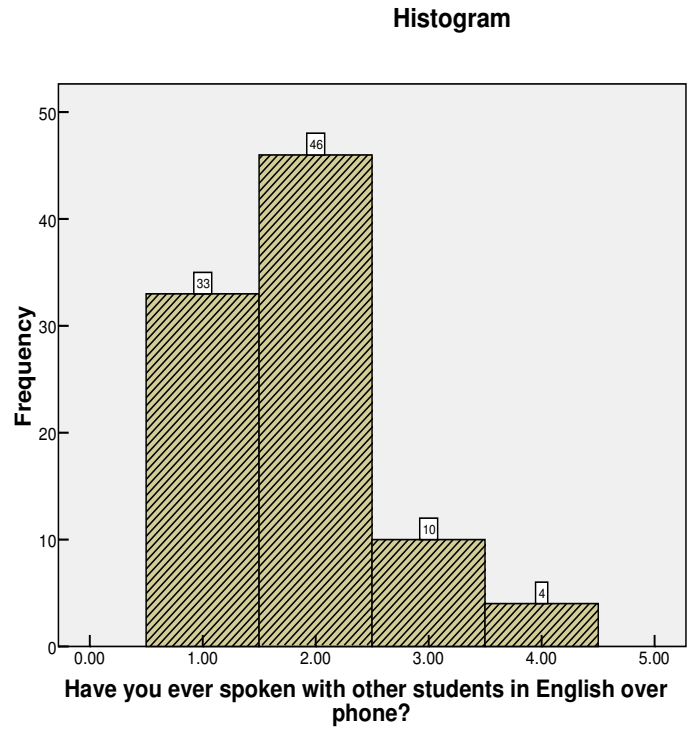


Figure 3: illustrates that the majority of the participants 67.7% have experience with their mobiles for only one or two years, while 32% only have experience with their mobiles for more than 6 years.



How often do you use your mobile phone for English

Figure 5: displays the answers to the question about speaking with other students in English over phone.

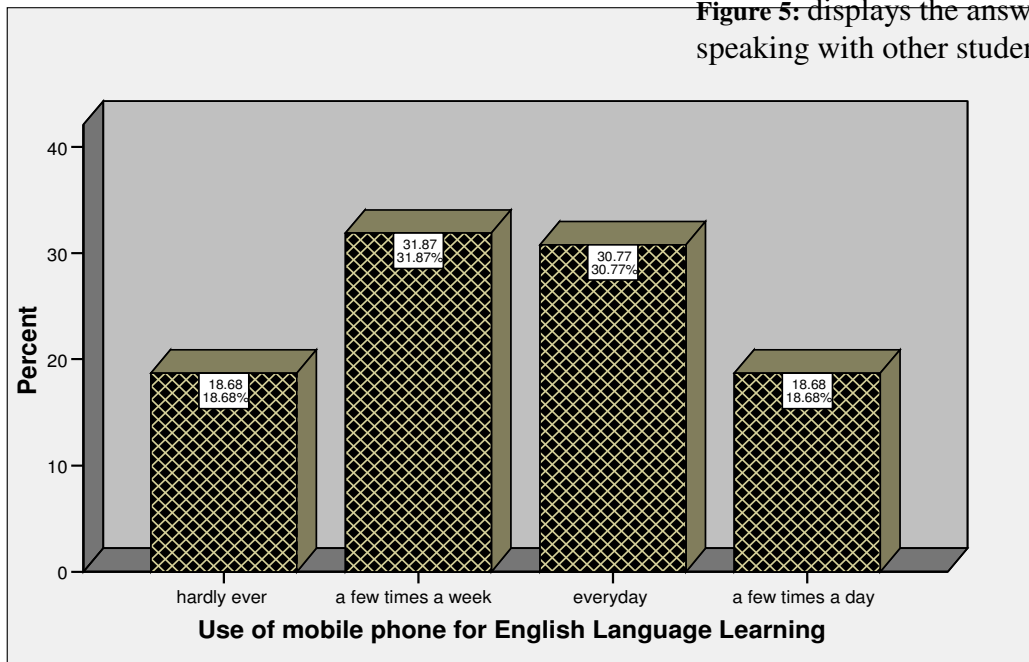


Figure 4: The question addressed in Fig. 4 tries to find out how often students use their mobiles in learning. According to Fig.4 around 31. % of the subjects uses their mobiles for English

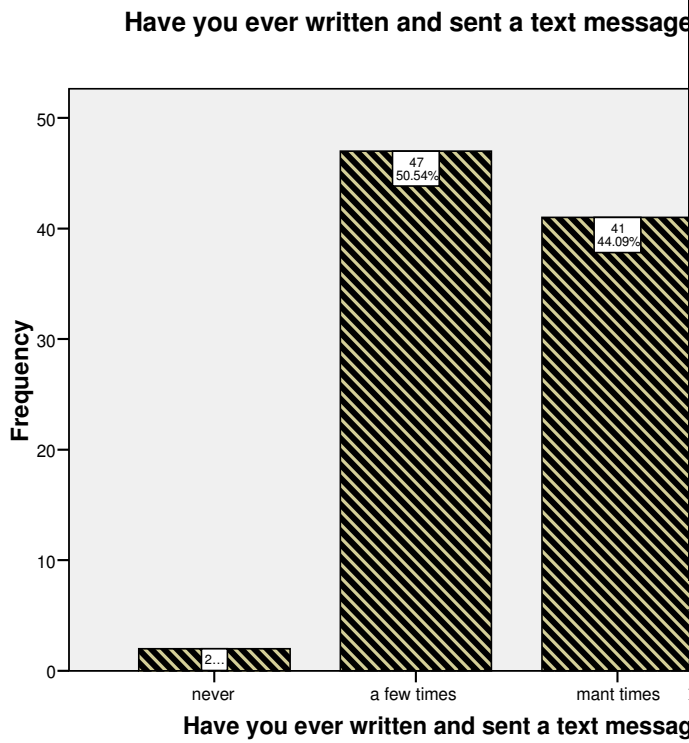


Figure 6: Almost half of the subjects have written and sent a text message in English frequently, while 3.2% use it regularly and 2% have never used it.

Which word(s) best show how you feel about mobile phone language learning?

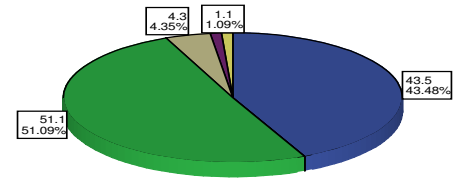


Figure 7: illustrates the distribution of answers to the question about students affinity for mobile learning. 94% consider mobile useful in learning as opposed to 5% who do not believe that mobile is useful in learning.

Part Three:

Attitude of Use

Respondents were asked to indicate their scale of agreements or disagreements to measure their attitudes and perspectives of given statements regarding the use of mobile phone in learning. Five-point Likert scale was used to measure the scale of agreement and disagreement as follows:

	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
1- Mobile phone has assisted my overall learning process this year.	10.8	36.6	37.6	9.7	3.2
2- I plan better for my learning with mobile phone than without it.	14	26.9	22.6	24.7	8.6
3- The use of mobile phone in learning makes me more productive.	10.8	39.8	25.8	18.3	2.2
4- I find the use of mobile phone enhancing the learning process.	5.4	30.1	33.3	21.5	5.4
5 My vocabulary acquisition has increased because of text messages written in English.	12.9	43	24.7	10.8	5.4
6- My vocabulary acquisition has increased because of my mobile phone dictionary.	19.4	29	21.5	18.3	9.7
7- I find it easy writing and receiving text- messages in English.	15.1	44.1	28	7.5	3.2
8- My motivation has been enhanced by the use of mobile phone in and outside the classroom.	3.2	34.4	34.4	17.2	3.2
9- Overall I believe using mobile phone in learning English is very effective.	20.4	39.8	23.7	8.6	6.5

- 1 = Strongly Agree
- 2 = Agree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Disagree
- 5 = Strongly Disagree

Table 4:

When asked about their attitude towards the use of mobile phone in learning, 36.6% of the respondents agreed that mobile phone has assisted their overall learning process, compared to 37.6% of them who gave a neutral response. 26.9% of the respondents agreed that mobile phones help them plan better for their learning, on the contrary to 24.7% disagreed with them. A big number of respondents (39.8%) believed that mobile phone in learning makes them more productive, in contrast to (18%) who do not think so. Students seem to have a higher affinity to text messages (43%) than a dictionary (29%). Interestingly (34.4%) respondents agreed when asked about motivation being enhanced by the use of mobile phone, while a similar percentage of them (34.4%) were neutral. Overall, 39.8% believed in the effectiveness of mobile phone in the learning process.

**Findings of the Verbal Data
Part Four:**

Challenges: (Note : most of the questions are written using students words and answers)

Q13. Do your teachers encourage you to use a mobile phone in and outside the classroom for language learning? Please give examples.

- No, don't use your mobile phone in my class for ever
- My teachers sometime cannot explain some scientific words and they ask us to look at dictionary, book dictionary or mobile phone dictionary.
- No she/he never discusses this point with us.
- No because will not use it in the exam
- No because she (he) don't let me to use tranzlet in class.
- No, he did not shouted to me. It is easy to research.
- Yes I put my mobile phone in English language and send messages in English.
- No , do not use dictionary in the phone
- No, no one of my teachers support me or even talk about using mobile phone to learn English.
- No, he or she order me to put the mobile phone in his / or her desk.
- When teachers can't explain
- No, no use [of] the electronic dictionary
- No, my teacher told me to use Oxford dictionary and read books.
- Teachers prevent me to use mobile in the lecture
- She takes my phone because as she said[it] is not allowed to use it in class
- No, I did not hear any of my teacher talk about the advantages of using it for language leaening
- Students play by phone in classroom
- Engage us and not allow us to focus in our study.
- Yes when writing essays
- Yes by using dictionary or sending SMS in English and calling
- Yes to send SMS but No for using phone dictionary.
- Yes, he told us to write text massge by English, make warning for H.W
- Improve your writing when you write (massage) or learn new word.

Q14. Are there any features of mobile phones that are not used in classroom you would like to use in the process of English Language Learning?

MP3, chatting. Interesting, downloading many programmes

Q15. According to you, what are the problems encountered by students in terms of using mobile phone in learning or in the classroom?

- *difficult words*
- *size of the font*
- *students don't use seriously*
- *they keep it unsilent*
- *they will not be attention I class*
- *not focus*
- *used in a wrong way*
- *they use mobile phone all time to find meanings of words*
- *Some students play video or music in classroom and that make the classroom noisy and out of control.*
- *Take students away of their studying especially when receiving SMS or missed calls*
- *Good for learning but(with no one correct you mistake)*
- *Some teachers don't allow to use it.*
- *Most people(students) use usual phone that don't has a camera.*

If you have any additional comments to inform this survey, please make them here or attach another page.

- *This idea is good for some student only.*
- *I think mobile phone will be useful to study.*
- *If we use in best ways and improve it to learn English Language, for example put programmes to study English.*
- *We feel bored about it.*
- *Mobile phone is good for learning, but there are many thing better than mobile for example computers.*
- *The screen of mobile is very small.*
- *The cost of Internet in mobile phone is very expensive.*
- *We do not use mobile phone in lecture at all.*
- *notes in mobile*
- *University must make some programmes for mobile to learn English.*
- *We need someone teach us how can take benefits of mobile phones.*
- *They don't have features for learning English because many students use it for fun.*
- *not intrsting to use mobile phone in learning at all.*
- *helpful when writing SMS, otherwise, they are not.*
- *harmful because it causes a lot of health problems.*
- *difficult to speak in English.*
- *You can record any useful lecture.*

Analysis:

Part One: Characteristics of Respondents (Questions 1 to 3 from the survey)

Of those responding, 90.3% indicated that they were male and 9.7% female. Most of the respondents were at the College of Sciences doing Level 6 of the Intensive English Programme in the Summer School of 2008.

Part Two: Use and Practice

Almost all participants 93(98.9%) reported owning a mobile phone. They had their mobiles for a period that varies from 1-2 years 63(67.7%), 21 students (22.6%) have had it from 3-4 years, 6 students (6.5%) have had it from 5-6 years and 3 have had it for more than 6 years.

Part Three: Attitude of Use

When asked about their attitude towards mobile learning, 36.6% of the respondents agreed that mobile phone has assisted their overall learning process, compared to 37.6% of them gave a neutral response. 26.9% of the respondents agreed that mobile phones help them to plan better for their learning, on the contrary to 24.7% disagreed with them. A big number of respondents (39.8%) believed that mobile phone in learning make them more productive, in contrast to (18%) who do not think so. Students seem to have a higher affinity to text messages(43%) than a dictionary (29%). Interestingly (34.4%) respondents agreed when asked about motivation being enhanced by the use of mobile phone, while a similar percentage of them (34.4%) were neutral. Overall, 39.8% believed in the effectiveness of mobile phone in the learning process.

Part Four:

Challenges

Q13. Do your teachers encourage you to use a mobile in and outside the classroom for language learning? Please give examples.

When students asked this question, they responded differently to it. Some gave positive answers. To cite an example, some stated that they needed mobile phone when writing essays, using dictionary, sending SMS and calling. Also, some asserted its use as a reminder for homework assignments as one respondent said "I use it to make warning for H.W". This goes in par with what has been found in literature in using mobile devices as writing tools for taking notes and composing essays and reports(Thornton & Houser, 2005). Amazingly some students affirmed that teachers allowed the use of mobile to support teaching or when "teachers sometime cannot explain some scientific words" .

In contrast to this, most of the respondents stated that they are nonusers of mobile phone in the classroom because of their teachers. To put it clearly, some teachers do not support the use of mobile in the classroom as one respondent claimed that his teacher “never discusses this point with [him]”.

Furthermore, another one declared that none of his teachers “support [him] or even talk about using mobile phone to learn English”. Similarly, another one stressed that he or she never heard about “the advantages of using it for language learning”. Additionally, one of the respondents argued that all his teachers “prevent [him from using] mobile in the lecture”. To justify teachers’ negative attitude to the use of mobile phone in the classroom, respondents believed so because some students abuse using it in the classroom as some said “students play by [the] phone in [the] classroom”. Also, it “engage[s] us and [does] not allow us to focus in our study”.

Q14. Are there any features of mobile phones that are not used in classroom you would like to use in the process of English Language Learning?

Respondents gave brief answers to this question, for instance MP3, chatting and downloading many interesting programmes are the most desired features in a mobile phone. Interestingly, Kiernan and Aizawa (2004) believe that modern phones with photo and video functions are “not very obviously useful for foreign language learning” as it is moving from verbal to visual forms of communication (P.80). I see it differently, students like to have and try new functions in their phones due to their usefulness in language learning.

Q15. According to you, what are the problems encountered by students in terms of using mobile phone in learning or in the classroom?

There are various answers to this question that can be categorized under two themes technical and social constraints. Technical constraints can be seen in the “difficult words” offered by the phone, the “size of the font” and this of course is due to the small screen existing in the mobile phone. Interestingly, this goes in line with what Kiernan and Aizawa (2004) have found in terms of the limitations of mobile as a learning tool such as “economy of words”, “quantity of language that can be seen” and also limited message length (P.80). Thornton and Houser (2005), also, affirmed that “the mobile phone’s tiny screen” is one of the mobile ‘s caveats in learning. (p.225).

The social constraints can be found in that “students don’t use [mobile phone] seriously”. Some students play video or music in the classroom and that makes it “noisy and out of control”. In addition to that, some teachers “don’t allow to use it” in the classroom because students can not focus and will not pay attention.

Eventually respondents gave these additional comments stating the pluses and minuses of mobile phone. To start with the pluses, they stated that mobile phone is good for some students only.

To the contrary, other students expressed the disadvantages of mobile phone by saying they “feel bored” using it. Moreover, it is “not [interesting] to use mobile phone in learning at all”. Also, they don’t use it because teachers do not encourage them. The nonusers of mobile phone in the classroom stated their reasons for not using it like the high cost of the Internet, small screen of the mobile, the health problems and the big distraction it causes for both students and teachers alike.

Ultimately some respondents recommended that the University should play a role in encouraging and supporting the use of mobile technology in education as one student suggested “university must make some programs for mobile to learn English”. In addition to this, some students still feel they do not know all the “saints” of mobile in learning and that they needed someone to teach them the “benefits of mobile phones”

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

In light of the research results presented here and the advantages reported in terms of the use of mobile in the classroom and learning, the researcher puts forward a number of scenarios that might be worth of investigation. Such scenarios would include a bigger number of respondents might give a clearer picture about the use of mobile in learning. Another scenario is conducting this research project on students who are doing (EES) English for English Specialist. Also, this paper did not focus in a specific mobile phone function like text messages, email and camera in details and did not investigate its performance towards the English Language Learning. However, it tackled all the functions generally. Most importantly, this paper is suggested to be repeated again trying to investigate and find out about the other side of the coin, teachers’ perceptions and problems who are salient element in the learning process.

Implications

The study of mobile phone use in the classroom and language learning is not novel. Many research papers have been conducted in this field supporting the use of mobile phone in learning. Also, they all manifested positive feedback towards the use of mobile as a “popular learning tool” (Kiernan and Aizawa, 2004, p.80) and as a “valuable teaching method” (Thornton and Houser, 2005) Therefore, the implications of this study will be to consider and encourage the use of mobile phone in learning and the classroom. Also, it is essentially important to encourage teachers to support their students regarding the use of mobile by explaining the benefits of mobile phone in teaching and learning. Furthermore, it is equally essential to reflect on the potential use of mobile

phones in CALL: Computer Assisted Language Learning to “alleviate some of the pressure on institutional and organizational resources like computer rooms and labs, especially regarding the use of email and Internet. (Kiernan and Aizawa, 2004.p.80).Similarly crucial is the effectiveness of mobile phone in learning other skills like writing, teaching vocabulary lessons and idiomatic expressions. It is worth mentioning here that the impact of economic and cultural issues of the respondents is something needs to be highly considered.These Omani university students do not seem all to have affinity towards technology and its use in learning as they said they “ feel bored” using it and find it “ not interesting” in the classroom, unlike the Japanese students who have “ unique attitudes, unique access to technology, and and unique patterns of using mobile technology”. (Thornton & Houser, 2005.P.227)

Conclusion:

In sum, this paper attempts to investigate the current use of mobile phones in learning English Language by Sultan Qaboos University Students: Practices, Attitudes and Challenges. It has found that students use mobile phone in learning, but in a very limited way. Suggestions have been proposed to overcome the barriers that students may face in using mobile phones, including reconsidering its importance in learning and explaining to both students and teachers alike the merits of mobile phone in the classroom to gain confidence in using it and allowing it in the classroom respectively.. Finally, recommendations for further research are suggested in order to avoid the limitations of this study in terms of the number of subjects and the use of mobile phone as an example of using mobile technology in educational setting.

Acknowledgements

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Biography

Al Aamri, Kamla Suleiman, MA in Applied Linguistics for language teachers, is a senior language instructor at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University. She has been teaching English Language for ten years. Her interests are computer, the internet, and classroom and action research. She is also interested in the emerging of smart devices and their use by students in the learning process.

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