Investigating Students' Perceptions of the Use of the Ipad into the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

Over the last ten years mobile technologies, and the iPad in particular, have rapidly attracted new users, providing new abilities in and outside the classroom. This has influenced and it is still influencing cultural practices and, most importantly it is creating new contexts for learning [1] Educators still need to understand how mobile technologies can be effectively used in the language classroom to support various kinds of learning so the integration of such technologies has been more gradual. Therefore there is a clear need to investigate effective methods and materials for mobile assisted language learning (MALL). According to Kukuska-Hulme [2] ‐ "Language learning is one of the disciplines that looks set to benefit from these developments". The iPad in the classroom, for example, allows learners to record themselves and to listen to audio at any point of the language lesson. Students are encouraged to perform spontaneous interactions, collaborating and creating on their portable devices. They are also easily exposed to a wide range of authentic materials, which strongly support the integration of language learning with everyday communication needs. Tablets such as iPads provide educators with various working configurations and enable learners to perform a wide variety of tasks [3].

In the last few years, the Italian Education System has experienced a significant increase of these technologies in further and higher education, particularly in secondary schools. As Kukuska-Hulme and Taxler [4] observe, the distribution of mobile technologies in schools is "having an impact on teaching, learning, and on the connections between formal and informal learning, work and leisure". In this presentation, I will talk about an on-going research concerning the way in which English language teachers and learners in Italian secondary school education use the iPad, particularly in relation to learners' perceptions of mobile learning, and innovative English teaching practices. I will present an initial study I am conducting with two EFL teachers in two different 3rd year classes in a secondary school in Milan, Italy.

1. Introduction

1.1 State of the art

Mobile technologies have many advantages and positive aspects: they are flexible and low cost, they usually are quite small, easy-to-carry devices, and immediate so researchers are exploring how mobile technologies affect and support second language learning [5].

A number of studies have recently analysed mobile technology's use in different aspects of language learning. For example, the use of the iPad has already been implemented in several secondary institutions in the Middle East and in Australia as an accessible and inclusive m-learning tool [6,7]. There are also various studies focusing on the learners' perception of the use of the iPad into the language classroom [7,8,9,10,11]. All these studies have supported the idea that mobile technology can enhance learners' second and foreign language acquisition [12,13].

The choice of the iPad in this study was prompted by the specific needs of foreign language educators to engage learners in authentic tasks to foster foreign language acquisition, considering the fact that 'existing mobile applications often fail to exploit connections between life and learning'[14]. Consequently, there is a need to explore how instructors could engage learners equipped with iPads, and how to design second language tasks that would enhance learners' experience [15,16,17,18]. As mentioned above, recent literature confirms and supports the usefulness of teaching with tablet computers [19,20,21] although research in this area is still emergent.

In their review of mobile learning Viberg and Grönlund [22] observe that the dominating research focus is on the attitudes of learners towards technologies, their intention to use it, and the various actual uses of mobile technology integrated in their second and foreign language learning. Many research studies have focused on the descriptive analysis of specific language teaching applications, and in particular on those focusing on listening and speaking skills [12, 23, 5]. According to Viberg and Grönlund [22:7] "It would be beneficial to analyse the interconnection between individuals' learning

strategies, learning styles, and use of mobile technology. Such knowledge would make an important contribution not only to educators and learners but also to systems developers."

2. Design
2.1 Theoretical Framework
This study considers constructivism, and social constructivism in particular, as the main theoretical framework behind the design of this research project and the analysis of the various approaches and activities in the language classroom.

The basic constructivism theory supports the idea that learners make meaning of their learning based on interaction between their experiences and their reflexes. Constructivism concerns the process of how learners create meaning and knowledge in the world. Students construct knowledge depending upon what they already know, their previous experiences, how they have organised those experiences into knowledge structures such as schema and mental models, and the beliefs they use to interpret the objects and events they encounter in the world. Cognitive tools help learners organise, restructure, and represent what they know [24]. As such, constructivism promotes active learning, learning by doing, and a student-centred approach [25].

Based on the work of Vigostky [26], social constructivists believe that individuals by means of their social interactions and their interaction with their environment create meaning and understanding. The social constructivist learning theory emphasises the role of others and all forms of social interaction in the process of constructing knowledge and understanding. Moreover, social constructivists argue that certain tools affect the way in which learning and intellectual development progresses [27], for example Pritchard and Woollard [27:48] state that 'these tools can vary in type and quality and include culture, language and other people'.

Following Reeves [24], mobile technologies can be considered as cognitive tools that enable learners to perform tasks, become reflective thinking learners, and engage in deep reflection and interpretations. Therefore, iPads are tools that may promote language learning, which needs further investigation.

In a student-centred language classroom context, mobile technologies can play a key strategic role, moving from simply presentation devices of a teacher-centred context to a more cognitive and collaborative function, where learners are asked to use deeper cognitive strategies to enhance their learning.

2.2 The Scenario
This qualitative research will investigate some experiences of the use of the iPad in the EFL classroom in secondary schools in Italy with regards to innovative applications, common practices and learners' perceptions. Following the definition given by Dornyei [28] qualitative research has been chosen because it takes place in the natural settings, in everyday contexts, and it can explain quite complex situations, as the iPad language classroom could be theorised to be.

This qualitative study is intended to be in the form of classroom research. As explained in Dornyei [28:176] 'Classroom research is a broad umbrella-term for empirical investigations that use the classroom as the main research site'. The foreign language classroom is a primary research site in applied linguistic investigations. The unique features of this context have a strong influence on the way we can conduct research in it.

2.3 The pilot study
The on-going pilot study presented here has been intended as the descriptive/observational phase [29] of the study to get an overall profile of the students' perceptions of the use of the iPad into the language classroom. It takes place in one of the secondary schools involved in the use of the iPad with two teachers and a small number of students (8), who have been chosen with a convenience sampling technique regardless their proficiency in the English language.

Following the indications of Gabarre [3] before introducing iPads into the learning scenarios, it would be beneficial to allocate time and activities to allow the learners to get accustomed to the technical features of the device as implemented by Chen [19] and Lys [21]. Before starting the pilot, a trial session was planned in order to make sure students and teachers have enough confidence with the Apple device. The beginning of the study also aimed at collecting information about teachers' preferences for L2 instructions [29]. These data were collected by completing observation forms and delivering an initial survey to students.

Part 1 of the pilot study was individual semi-structured interviews with the two teachers and the eight students selected. The interviews focused on the students' effective use of the iPad inside and outside the classroom for language learning. Teachers were asked about their methodological approaches

and common practices in using the iPad. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to provide a clear framework for the next phase of research.

Part 2 of the pilot study focused on the observation of three English lessons in the first school term. This was intended to give a general indication of how teachers manage different aspects of language teaching and how students react to those strategies. Results are presented during the conference presentation.

Part 3 will include follow-up interviews about student learning experiences and teacher beliefs on methodologies and teaching and learning English with the iPad.

3. Conclusion and Further steps

The iPad potentially offers the possibility to enhance English language teaching and learning in secondary schools. Based on the analysis and results of the pilot study, the research will continue in the next school year. Three secondary schools will be chosen by means of a purposeful sampling [28, 30]. The focus will be on the systematic observations of second language lessons in the schools selected. They will be video recorded and transcribed for future analysis.

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