The Use of Viber in Enhancing the Vocabulary Skills of Ethiopian Undergraduate Students: The Case of St. Mary's University

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Abstract

In this era of technology, it is believed that English language learning has been made more accessible and easier for those who are interested to learn it. Part of utilizing today's technology includes using a smart phone, not only for social communication purposes but also for learning. One of the applications used for learning in this regard is Viber which can be installed on cell phones for people to communicate not only individually but in group. This may be considered as an important tool for language learning, as a cell phone opens a gate for downloading, uploading and storing learning materials and information files. This study attempts to explore the use of Viber in developing vocabulary skills during group chat among university learners at St. Mary's University in Ethiopia. Twenty undergraduate students taking 'Sophomore English Course' at the University were selected using simple random sampling. Interview and focus group discussion were used to find out if Viber helped them to enhance their vocabulary skills. The findings show that the use of Viber can enable students to develop their vocabulary skills through a lifelong and informal activity, though some words may be spelt incorrectly and the communication could be full of abbreviations and acronyms. The study revealed that university teachers can use this application, in a controlled manner, to help their students improve their vocabulary skills.

Keywords: Viber, Smart phone, language learning, vocabulary

1. Introduction

Mobile technology is suitable for new language learning experiences, as it provides learners with fertile ground to access information from the internet. Mobile learning, which is also called m-learning, is defined as a mechanism that enables learners to acquire knowledge and skills by accessing mobile technology, anywhere and anytime which would culminate in behavioral change [1]. It is argued that using mobile application in language learning may motivate learners to be more engaged not only with learners but also with instructors.

Mobile phone has so many applications like Whats App, Viber etc. which people use for social communication purposes.[2] recommend making technologies part of the language learning experience in the globalized and information age, where the method of teaching should be more interactive, pedagogically effective, communicative and above all flexible. [3] asserts that mobile learning could pave the way for language learning since it allows daily communication and exchange of various cultural practices. Also, [4] adds that mobiles can be used flexibly as language learning tools, where people can learn English language skills, specifically vocabulary anytime and anywhere. The paper attempts to see if undergraduate students at St. Mary's University use Viber to enhance their vocabulary skills in an informal activity.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Learning through mobile phone

The mobile device is becoming an educational tool playing a pivotal role in providing learners with wider and more flexible learning opportunities. These opportunities include learning or developing vocabulary skills through simulated games, learning in pragmatic and drown-to-earth situation, obtaining information wherever and whenever a learner is, exchanging information in group mail, saving a record in an informal and continuous learning, and accessing a coordinated learning and resources [5]. Furthermore, the mobile device creates the necessary ground for the learners and their teachers to interact socially and informally

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and on the way language learning may take place up on the willingness and readiness of the two parties [3].

Mobile learning, which has become a popular concept after the technological introduction of mobile phone, is defined from various perspectives. While [6] puts it as a learning tool that takes place with the assistance of digital electronic instrument and media, [1] defines it as "the acquisition of knowledge and skill through using mobile technology, anywhere, anytime, that results in an alternation in behavior"[P.1].

[1] elaborates the definition further by mentioning three points. First of all, mobile learning should be accessed from any place and at any time. Secondly, it enhances 'self-directed' learning and the third one is that as technological advancement moves rapidly from time to time, learners are anticipated to access knowledge in a flexible manner, and this can be realized provided that there is behavioral change in approaching and using a mobile device.

Earlier, mobile learning was studied in such a way that there was more focus on the device itself and not on its capacity of securing lifelong learning. Later, there was a shift of focus in which more emphasis was put on the learners' mobility, rather than on the device itself. Language learning taking place via mobile features the application of personal and movable device that creates a different learning experience and continuity of interaction and accessing information anywhere and anytime. The bottom line is gaining a distinct learning experience via mobile device, and hence it is the perceptions and experiences that assist one to make sense out of the new learning method.

Regarding learning vocabulary, it appears that technology has made it easy and pragmatic; particularly mobile applications such as Viber have provided learners with authentic contexts to study not only the meaning of lexis, but also how they are used in a real life situation by providing examples. [7] mention various learning activities when studying vocabulary, which are grouped as behaviorist, constructivist, situated, collaborative, and informal and lifelong activities. These activities provide us with learners' vocabulary learning experiences socially, behaviorally, cognitively and psychologically. The paper focuses on informal and lifelong vocabulary learning activity which is learner–set, as the learners carry out this activity without the supervision and direction of the teacher, and hence it may be stipulated that independent vocabulary learning is taking place. Also, [7] offer five features of mobile device in terms of delivering educational activity. These are its portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity, connectivity and individuality. These characteristics should be taken into account when dealing with mobile language learning. Due to these features of mobile, the learners, wherever and whenever they are, during their social and contextual interaction, have the advantages of acquiring knowledge, skills and experiences in an entirely different way, as learning is a lifelong process and the culmination of various aspects such as connection, social interaction and portability

In St. Mary's University in Ethiopia, it is believed that majority of the university students possess mobile phones, and use Viber only for social interaction. However, this purpose of using Viber for social interaction could be turned into opportunity for learners to develop their vocabulary skills. To the researcher's best knowledge, there is no study conducted on the use of Viber in developing vocabulary skills in Ethiopia, though there are studies on e-learning systems such as the effectiveness of satellite TV program in Ethiopian secondary schools [8].This study may thus be a modest contribution in exploring if students of sophomore English at St. Mary's university in Ethiopia use their access to Viber to develop their vocabulary skills outside of the classroom and in an informal setting during a group interaction with each other.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Questions
The paper attempts to address the following research questions.
1. Do university learners at St. Mary's University use Viber chat to enhance their vocabulary skills?
2. What is the attitude of St. Mary's university learners towards acquiring new vocabulary via Viber chat?
3. What are the challenges the university learners faces while learning vocabulary via Viber chat?

3.2. Participants
The participants of the study are undergraduate students at St. Mary's university in Ethiopia doing a course entitled "Sophomore English". They are the first year degree students in their second semester, and majoring in Accounting. Department of Accounting was selected through simple random sampling technique from Departments of Management, Computer science, Marketing, Information Technology, and Tourism and Hospitability.

3.3. Design
St. Mary's University was selected on the basis of convenience sampling. During the course of the study, there were 17 sections in the department of Accounting taking "Sophomore English", out of which 2 were selected using simple random sampling technique, and from these two sections that comprised100 learners, 20 of them were selected by drawing lot; 12 of them are girls, and the rest are boys. An interview and focus group discussion were used to collect primary data.

4. Findings and Discussion
The study attempted to explore the use of Viber in enhancing the vocabulary skills of the students during group chat on Viber. After interviewing the sample students and conducting focus group discussion, the study came up with the following major findings.

4.1 Viber Usage among Students
It was found out that undergraduate learners at St. Mary's University in Ethiopia used smart phone and had Viber application on their smart phone and chatted with their friends/classmates 5-6 times a day. Students taking "Sophomore English" have a group mail and convey messages to each other via Viber, for example, when there is no class or when the class schedule is posted or a copy of the assignment or work sheet is posted on the notice board; any one from the class or the class representative takes a photo of the notice and texts the message to all students or conveys any kind of message in relation to an academic affair via Viber.

4.2 Type of Language Used during Viber Communication
When the university undergraduate learners used Viber to convey the message, some of them attempted to be formal in their language use, as they used grammatically correct English language and well spelt words to communicate the message. Text message taken from the targeted students is given below to show their use of formal English language.
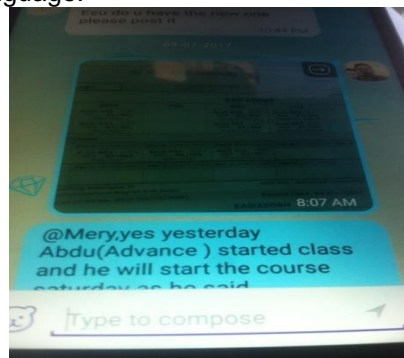
Fig.1. Viber Text 1

On the other hand, there were students who used both English and Amharic languages to text a message on Viber, and this does not seem to provide the learners with wider opportunities to develop their vocabulary skills. This phenomenon appears to be common among bilingual learners as they lack confidence to use the target language to convey their message.

4.3 Using Viber for Teaching and Learning
The use of Viber was found to be a fertile ground for the learners to learn some new words, a finding in line with [4] who argues that mobile device assists learners to learn new words and improve their English language skills. The undergraduate learners learned new words via Vibe in two different ways. Firstly, they

asked what that particular word meant in the Viber group chat, and anyone could respond to the question. Secondly, they had e-dictionary on their smart phone and referred the word in the dictionary. This practice may create a platform for the learners to learn new words, though this happens in an informal context, as nobody controls these students what to write and how to write, an activity which is called lifelong or informal activity.

Furthermore, the study revealed that the English teachers at St. Mary's University did not use Viber to give their students an extra assignment out of the classroom, as it does not seem to have been the practice here in Ethiopia. In spite of this, the targeted students believed that Viber helped them to learn not only English language but also vocabulary in an easy and accessible manner, which appears to indicate that the learners at St. Mary's University have a positive attitude towards the contribution of Viber in learning vocabulary and English language.

4.4 The Challenges of Using Viber

The students mentioned the following obstacles in trying to learn vocabulary via Viber.

1. Viber requires strong internet connection to communicate photos, notices, photographs or lengthy messages. Taking the weak internet connection in some places in Ethiopia into account, it may not be practical to use it for vocabulary development anywhere.
2. There are some students who use both Amharic and English languages to communicate a message or interact in the group discussion. The message is not explicit because the Amharic message is written in roman script. Viber Text 2, given below shows the existence of code switching between English and Amharic during group Viber chat.
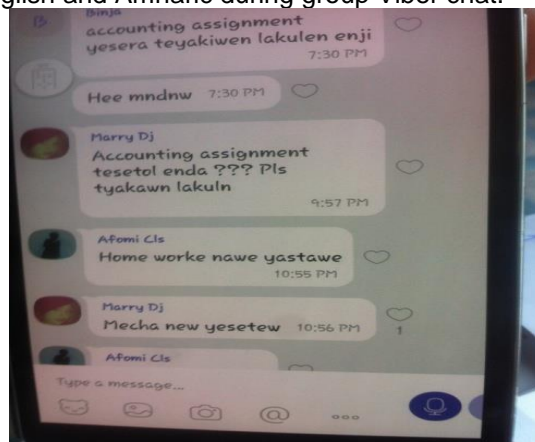
Fig.2. Viber Text 2

Thus, it appears that Viber chat helped the university learners to develop their vocabulary skills at St. Mary's University, though they faced some challenges in trying to do so.

5. Conclusions

In the era of technology, maximum use of this technological advancement is anticipated to make language learning successful. Literature shows that the mobile device, which is one of the outcomes of recent technologies, is employed as a teaching-learning tool in classrooms as well as outside. This great opportunity should be explored in Ethiopia and turned into an advantage to make the learning of English, particularly vocabulary accessible and easy, though there are obstacles.

The study recommends that integrating Viber into English teaching-learning could be a novel medium if used by the university in an organized manner where the teacher is actively involved in group assignment and propounds feedback on line to the exercises she/he sets on. Also, the study appears to be informative to material designers, EFL experts, teachers and educators about the pedagogical importance of integrating Viber into the English teaching methodology.

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