

The iPad as Mediating Tool to Support EFL Speaking Skills

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Abstract: *Research on the use of mobile devices in the English as foreign language (EFL) classroom has tended to focus on perceptions or receptive skills like listening and reading more than on speaking and writing skills. This study aimed to examine possible uses of the iPad to develop productive skills rather than receptive skills. In particular, this paper investigates the role of mobile devices as mediating tools in EFL by considering the use of the iPad in designing and performing speaking tasks by teachers and learners. It examines the quality of the mediation of the tool by looking at the interaction between learners and the iPad in the second language context. In particular, the mediation of the tool in this study is examined in the light of the quality and the type of support it potentially offers during the task performance. Results show the influence of the mobile device in the interaction between the learner and the tutor during the learning process.*

Key Words: *speaking, English as foreign language, mobile learning, MALL, mobile assisted language learning, language learning*

Introduction

This paper presents the analyses of the iPad as mediating tool as used by the students and the teachers through the student-iPad-teacher interaction (mediation) and key findings on the support of the iPad for speaking skills. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the body of research within MALL regarding the value of mediation in the development of speaking skills in secondary EFL learners, which is under-researched. It particularly looks at what behavioural changes occurred in students and teachers as a result of the iPad as a tool. Specifically, this paper explores the following research question: How does the iPad as mediating tool support speaking skills?

Literature Review

Developing speaking skills in MALL

The Internet and mobile apps offer a variety of opportunities for language learning, listening and speaking practice. Learners can listen to authentic materials (e.g., radio and TV channels, audiobooks), and they can also practice the language through chatting (e.g., Face Time, Skype)

or recording their voices (e.g., podcast). Some of these media have recently been investigated as supportive tools for second language learning (e.g. Lys, 2013; Pegrum, 2014).

Lys (2013) conducted an interesting study in an advanced German class, investigating the integration of the iPad into the classroom and its influence on learners' oral language development. The author particularly focused on how an instructional setting that provides additional conversational opportunities in and outside the classroom with a mobile device (iPad) could impact the quality of students' oral language proficiency. The study was a one-to-one iPad implementation project, and it was part of a larger study at a private American university; it lasted nine weeks, involving 13 students. They were engaged in a variety of speaking, listening and recording tasks. Each week they worked on a scaffolded task, had a real time video chat using Face Time and they had to provide an open-ended recorded speech. Results showed that real-time conversational activities could contribute to advanced learners' speaking proficiency. Students had more time to speak compared to a standard non-iPad class, and they reported to be enthusiastic about it. Different aspects of the study presented by Lys (2013) are beneficial for this study (use of scaffolded activities), although we should also consider some important limitations: the lack of a pen and paper group, the difficulties of assessing speaking performance and the limited number of students involved.

Moreover, there are a number of studies that investigated the use of podcasting to improve students' pronunciation. Some of these found certain improvements (Lord, 2008), others did not (Ducate & Lomicka, 2009). In a recent study at the University of Cyprus learners used mobile devices (iPod Touch) to improve oral reading fluency (Papadima-Sophocleous & Charalambous, 2015). Students recorded themselves reading a text, after having practised following a native speaker model on YouTube. After a content analysis of the data produced by the learners, the researchers found a general improvement in speed and word decoding accuracy. It was probably due to the considerable amount of time that learners spent rehearsing with the mobile device.

The iPad, and mobile devices, in general can also provide unlimited opportunities for fluency-focused speaking production (Pegrum, 2014). For instance, in a study conducted in a Japanese university, students were asked to record a 30-second video on a teacher-selected topic (Gromik, 2012). The author triangulated the video/audio data produced by the students with survey data. Results demonstrated an increasing number of words used by students task after task, and students felt the activities proposed enhanced their oral fluency.

Although the studies presented above show positive results, and generally follow a well-designed approach with a coherent data analysis process, we can argue that some aspects (limited number of students and teachers involved) could limit the reliability of their findings. Additionally, these studies do not report on innovative ideas that can support teachers on the use of mobile devices into the second language classroom. They provide a description of standard and general use of

mobile devices. This shows the need of expertise from the field of language learning technologies.

Theoretical Background

This research aimed to investigate effective language learning pedagogy to use mobile devices in classroom settings to develop foreign language skills specifically by performing speaking tasks as reported in Pegrum (2014) and Lys (2013). The present study used concepts of the Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT) from Lantolf and Thorne (2006), and Lantolf and Appel (1994) to explore the integration of the iPad into the second language classroom. In particular, this paper focused on the concept of mediation. According to Vygotsky (1978), psychological or semiotic tools (e.g., language) mediate human activities while physical tools or artifacts (e.g., mobile devices) contribute to construct knowledge.

Mediation serves as a key word in a significant number of studies based on Vygotsky's ideas. It involves either symbols - semiotic mediation- and/or artefacts (objects) like the iPad. However, the human aspect has an impact on the use of the iPad in the classroom, this study tries to answer the question both on the symbolic and physical face: what changes in the learner's performance can be brought by the introduction of the symbolic and physical tools-mediators (iPads)?

Methodology

The study followed an action research approach. In classroom action research, the researcher is interested in concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to teachers and learners. It is conducted during regular lessons, primarily using methods such as observations that are common to qualitative research (Burns, 1999). Action research is often seen as a spiralling process of reflection and enquiry. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), action research normally involves four comprehensive steps in a cycle: planning, action, observation and reflection. Although the researcher was not teaching the students involved in the research, this study followed mainly an action research cycle due to the collaborative and reflective nature of the project itself (Burns, 2003). The researcher was always considered as one of the participants in the cycle.

Research context

This study took place in a non-state publicly subsidized high school Italy in which the school administration recently made the decision to trial a classroom set iPad project in two of its high school classes. In the present study, the participants were 43 Italian 16-year-old secondary students who were taking part in general English language classes as a part of the Italian

Ministry of Education requirements and two English teachers. Since 2014, the students had been provided with one iPad each for their self-regulated study within and outside the school.

The data collected are classroom observation notes from three lessons, student and teacher interviews (N:18), lesson plans on speaking tasks (N:3), comments on speaking focused lessons from teachers' meetings (3 meetings in total), and survey responses (N:41). The data were examined to track the teachers' and the learners' use of the iPad in relation to the performance of speaking tasks over a period of six months.

During the first phase of the action research cycle, the researcher observed learners' early engagement with the iPad-as-tool to learn English; as they mastered it – that is, when they were able to perform simple language learning tasks (e.g. listening to a recording, playing it back etc.), she was able to observe their use of the iPad as a tool to develop EFL skills and to do things with the language. In particular, the different performances of the tool (iPad), the strategies employed by the teachers and the learners' responsiveness to such mediation in relation to the speaking tasks such as collaboration and self-evaluation were examined. The results were then triangulated with the survey and interview data conducted at the beginning of the study, in order to compare students' and teachers' perceptions and behaviours towards the technological tool.

Data analysis

Classroom observation notes and speaking lessons

Three lessons on speaking were observed and analysed. In order to get a clear picture of the progresses the lessons were observed three times during the school year: one at the beginning of the project, one in the middle and one towards the end of the main study. Classroom observation notes included comments on timing, different uses of the mobile device during tasks, issues for teachers and learners, comments on mediation of the teacher/tool and the students. Notes were also compared with the lesson plans previously prepared by the teachers in order to notice any variations and adjustments, and students and teachers' reactions to them. The three observation tables on speaking and lesson plans were analysed using nVivo following the standard qualitative coding method. In particular data from the observation notes showed that most of the students were engaged in the task and were easily following the instructions for the speaking tasks.

Survey and interviews

The survey conducted at the beginning of the study provided quantitative data on students and teachers perceptions of the development of speaking skills in the iPad classroom. Only questions on speaking were analysed for this part of the study. In particular at the beginning of the project students seemed not convinced about the use of the mobile device to improve their speaking

performance. When asked about expectations on skills development, over 38% of the students were doubtful about its value to develop speaking skills, and only 42% of them thought they could improve speaking skills at the end of the project.

The interviews for students and teachers included open questions on speaking and on specific tasks. All the interviews were transcribed and coded in nVivo, the data used for this part of the study are mainly recorded under the broad theme 'speaking'. Each interview was then individually analysed and coded. The main themes under the speaking umbrella were 'motivation', 'mediation' and 'positive practices'.

Positive practices

Teachers recognized the importance of developing speaking skills, and very often they mentioned it in the interviews as an aspect to be investigated.

I am focusing a lot on speaking activities such as interaction and presentations/making speeches, which is what they lack.

(Teacher B – interview)

I read there are many things you can do with tablets also for listening and speaking...I hope I will have more chances to work on those skills.

(Teacher A – interview)

Although teachers were fully aware of the possible opportunities of the use of the iPad to develop speaking skills, a quite large group of students were skeptical about it, as confirmed by data from the initial survey. Therefore, teachers carefully planned speaking tasks to ensure that the device always had a supporting role in the learning process. All the tasks were technologically oriented: students had to listen for gist and for details, take notes, repeat and record a real world speaking task (e.g. send a voice message, record specific instructions, describe a picture to provide information etc.). The main language goals were improving pronunciation, fluency and enlarge vocabulary.

Also, students felt the work on fluency and pronunciation was relevant. In an interview at the end of the second phase of the study, M. a student says:

I feel we worked a lot on pronunciation, I think this is why we recorded our voice many times, also last year. I think this was good.

(M. Student – interview – Phase 2)

Under the ‘positive aspects’ theme there was a high frequency of references to ‘immediate feedback on speaking performance’ both from teachers and learners.

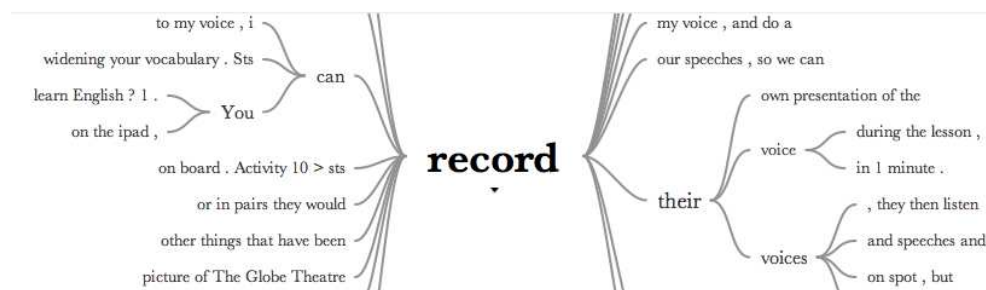
For example, T., a student, said:

‘Writing, Listening, speaking, watching films to improve language and vocabulary, and...communicate with teachers, because from home I can do exercises and my teacher can see (listen to) immediately what I’m doing and correct me.’

Although this study does not measure the impact of immediate and personalized feedback on students’ performances, data showed evidence that learners recognized some improvement in pronunciation and fluency, and in those soft skills – like giving a public presentation - often mentioned by the teachers.

Regarding the development of speaking skills both teachers and students appeared enthusiastic about the use of the recording function. The word frequency query in Nvivo, demonstrated that ‘record’ was the most frequent word used when asked for speaking benefits and activities, as shown in the word tree below.

Figure 1. Example from nVivo – word tree.



As evidenced in teachers’ observation notes, students used the recording function autonomously following their own learning pace.

‘Instructions: students have 20 minutes to rehearse and record their speaking task...Some students recorded 4 times, some 3, some only two...’

From classroom observation notes (speaking lesson 2)

The verbs *listen to* and *record* proved to be very frequent in students’ comments on the iPad performance level. This indicates their growing independence in learning the new language. Recording and rehearsal are not easily performed in a standard teacher-class lesson. Throughout

the entire study teachers mentioned the importance of developing those soft skills useful to create positive and productive learning habits. As mentioned by teacher A and teacher B at the end of the projects: students ‘felt autonomous and independent, and this contributed to create a positive classroom atmosphere’.

Findings

The role of the iPad in mediating speaking tasks

The present study analyses how the iPad has been used as a mediation tool between the language learner and the L2. In particular, data showed that: 1) the fact that speaking performances can be recorded many times and saved on the device allows learners to revise and improve it, and teachers to retrieve that task and reflect about it. Usually, the learners repeated the language tasks as many times as they needed; thanks to this they developed greater autonomy in performing the task and enhanced their competency. The evidence of these findings is shown in the following example taken from lesson observation notes and interview data. A student who was facing some issues in using the correct intonation of questions revealed a lack of interest in practicing questions out loud during the EFL lessons. He became gradually engaged in language learning tasks when he started using the iPad, which allowed him to work at his own pace on his own weaknesses. He became very motivated in the listening and practicing activities, and he completed all the recording tasks; he also listened to the recording sharing it with his teacher who provided personalized feedback.

“...I didn’t really like repeating questions and intonation, also the teacher was asking me to do it every lesson. When I started using the iPad, I thought it was a useful exercise. The thing is that no one can listen to me, so I do the activity and I don’t care what the others think...I feel my pronunciation has improved a lot”.

(G. student – interview data)

2) Based on what has been observed, this dynamic creates a collaborative habit in which teachers and learners work together to develop the learning of L2. The collaborative aspect is often mentioned by students. Many studies demonstrated evidence of self-reflection and collaborative engagement (Lys, 2013; Pellerin, 2014) during language tasks. This study confirmed such findings that self-reflection is supported by the use of mobile devices that allow for the “digital documentation or tangible and visible evidence of learning” (Pellerin 2012a, p. 14). As evidence of students’ learning awareness and self-regulation, this study provides examples of the use of the iPad to record and listen to individual performances. Several times students mentioned the fact that using the recording function they were able to listen, recognize and change different aspects (e.g. pronunciation of a specific word, linking devices to foster fluency etc.). They always perceived the experience of reflecting on their performance as a highly positive practice.

Features of mediation in MALL

It is possible to identify two distinguishing features of the mediation of the tablets in the classroom: they encourage interaction and facilitate scaffolding. 1) They allow a way of task-based speaking interaction (mainly asynchronous), one to one or one to many, modifiable, and learning oriented. This supports the idea that a task-based and computer mediated interaction can become a 'cognitive amplifier', in the sense that it provides learners with a new dimension and stimulates learning. The learners involved in this study, used the iPad mainly to construct an asynchronous interaction with the teacher. For instance, they asked for and got personalized feedback (written or voice recorded) through the use of specific apps like Evernote. The tool mediated this interaction by providing them the opportunity to speed up the process of creating a good speaking performance. Certainly, the time and amount of mediation required differed from one learner to the other, but generally, according to the teachers' feedback, students were able to perform high quality speaking tasks in a relatively short time. The fast work on revision offered by the tool, for example, had an impact on learners' pronunciation.

2) Tablets support and provide important scaffolding functions (e.g. providing a modelling sample, motivating, stimulating interests on a specific topic, simplifying the task). Through the scaffolding created in the interaction with the medium a learner may be able to perform beyond his zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". As evidence of this, while doing classroom observation, the researcher was able to see learners redoing their recordings more than once. Very often they were using the recording function as a scaffolding technique to support their performance. Students were explaining this behaviour as a positive aspect to improve their accuracy.

Learners had access to many authentic speaking samples; the tool mediated their understanding of the content and of the task instructions in several ways. First, as mentioned by many students involved, it allowed them to listen to the sample as many times as they wanted according to their proficiency in L2. The iPad in this case served as a motivator, scaffolding tool and task simplifier. At the end the learner was able to perform the task in the time required, regardless the quality of his performance in the foreign language. As explained in Lantolf and Thorne (2006), in fact, the performance in itself might not change significantly from one lesson to another, but the frequency and quality of assistance and mediation needed to perform a task in the new language can vary over a relatively short period of time (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). The learners involved in the present study, for example, needed time to respond positively to the learning mediation of the new tool, probably because they were used to seeing the teacher as the only mediator in the language classroom. Therefore, in terms of development, as supported by Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 208) "while nothing has ostensibly changed in the learner's actual performance, development has taken place because the quality of mediation needed to prompt

the performance has changed.” As evidence of this, for example, some of the scaffolding activities required at the beginning of the project, such as following instructions from a pdf document produced by teachers or listening to the full recording to search for key information instead of selecting a part of it, were not needed in the last lessons.

Moreover, symbols may remain useless unless their meaning as cognitive tools is properly mediated to the learner. The mere availability of a mobile device does not necessarily imply that the student recognizes it as a useful psychological/physical tool. This fact is clear in the results of this study and supports also the outcome of other studies in the same field (e.g. Pellerin, 2014). The learners in this study were aware of the existence of the tool in itself, they were using it in their everyday life and they knew the key features of the medium. What they lacked at the beginning of the study was the awareness that the iPad could be a second language learning tool. To reach that level of awareness they needed to be guided by their language teachers. Only after they performed specific speaking tasks, learners started to understand that in a way the tool was having an impact on the process of learning and on their specific speaking performance. This shift of perspective was not immediate and needed to be explicitly clarified by the teachers. In addition, this resulted to be more difficult due to the different expectations of most of the students involved. The survey, in fact, showed that most of the students did not believe that the iPad could help them develop speaking skills.

Conclusion

This paper presented results from the analysis of the data on the speaking skills in relation to the mediation role of the iPad. The results showed that an analysis of students’ different uses and their reactions towards tasks and performances enable us to observe possible features of the tool in the process of developing L2 speaking skills and the changes of behaviours of the participants. It was also noted that, in order to get changes in the development of learning, it is crucial to support motivation, and have a clear and explicit introduction to the iPad as a tool for mediating learning. As shown by this study, if the teacher is able to identify the key mediational features of the tool, and to present it to the class, the learners are likely to benefit from the use of the tool for specific language tasks. Therefore, it might be argued that even if the teacher explicitly elicits the features of the iPad as learning facilitator, students could not take it as such, and refuse to undertake new opportunities. However, especially weaker or unmotivated students seemed to feel more involved in such practices. This is probably due to the fact that weaker students find it beneficial to work individually and at their own pace before performing a task in front of the class. Moreover, mobile devices and apps facilitate one-to-one and one-to-few feedback from the teacher who can provide detailed and personalized comments on students’ performance fostering motivation.

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