FEASIBILITY OF MOBILE CHAT ROOM IN ENHANCING ORAL COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS AMONG CHINESE AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Foreign Language learning taps on the acquisition system largely, instead of learned system, as postulated by Krashen’s Second Language Theory. This implies that to acquire foreign language, learning subconsciously through oral communication, could help learners to acquire and perform the target learned language; This study, therefore suggesting mobile technology, by which provides the fluency platform for obligatory intakes: meaningful and communicative exercises, natural method, intercambio, total physical response, extensive reading; acting as an extended learning after formal instructions. Understanding of oral communicative skills which transmitting phonological information, will fades away in seconds, as explained by Baddeley’s Model of Working Memory; and Sweller’s Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) that explains the limitation of working memory capacity during learning instruction; retaining verbal information through rehearsal practice and considering working memory capacity during CFL learning is critical, while dealing with challenges that posed by this pictographic characters, language by nature. Four teachers and students from Malaysian International Schools underwent a semi-structured interview via online video-call system “skype” highlighted the crucial learning phenomena that added on to the CFL learning challenges – inverse directions in teaching and learning instructions, making the acquisition of foreign language tougher, especially in oral communicative skills. Teachers focus on reading and writing skills, learners aim to acquire communicative skills. When asked about smart phone usage in the classroom, all teachers never use mobile in teaching, but three out of four students uses apps, dictionary, songs, videos in their foreign language learning. Hence, in order to acquire oral communicative skills in learning Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), existing mobile phone technology could be utilized: audio, text, graphic and video messaging for its synchronous and asynchronous delivery system within a social communication platform: chat room to maximize the intakes for acquisition system. Given these positive learning environment, the feasibility of mobile chat room (MCR) is rather high for acquiring L2 oral communicative skills.

Field of Research: Mobile Learning, Oral Communicative Skills, Chinese as a Foreign Language, Chat room
1. Introduction

Oral communicative skills are crucial tools for transforming information into knowledge through the process of listening and speaking, as when learners actively clarifying thinking and reflection on learning (Focus on Literacy: Talking and Listening, 2003). Therefore, learners must “have sport” with the information they receive in order to obtain the knowledge (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 1988), thus oral communicative skills are important to enhance knowledge construction, particularly when foreign or second language learning is concern, as it is believed to be able to benefits academic progress in other subjects (Regarding World Language Education, 2007).

Foreign language learning thus, began to rise in schools, globally; all countries (except Ireland and Scotland) in the European Union mandate the study of a foreign language; with the exception of Italy and Wales, all European students must learn a foreign language throughout their compulsory education (Eurydice, 2005). Malaysian National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 highlighted “Proficiency in third language is vital for developing human capital that drives the k-economy as well as gears the country towards competitive innovation in the international arena (p.62).” Learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL), no doubt, increased on an unprecedented scale, with a total number of examinees taking Chinese Proficiency Test (Hanyu Shuipin Kaoshi, HSK) amounted to 2.01 million in year 2011, in the world (Hanban websites, accessed on 7th May , 2014). CFL learners in Malaysian International Schools, are also given options to sit for Chinese as foreign language examination at their Year 11, which covers all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, according to researcher’s four years teaching experience.

Krashen’s (1981) acquisition-learning hypothesis implies that “the major function of the second language classroom is to provide intake for acquisition”, in the language teaching program (Figure 1), demonstrate the importance of language acquisition than language learning system. L2 learning environment (under acquisition node) therefore, shall include the intake obligatory and fluency to enable competency in L2.

![Figure 1. Krashen's Second Language Teaching Program (1981)](image)

With that in mind, foreign language learning through chat room environment, which utilize the synchronous, computer-mediated audio communication (SCMAC) programs could provide second language (L2) learners opportunity (intake) to communicate with native speakers (L1), when accessing to the Internet; which then enable internet audio (and video) communication to acquire L2 (Cziko, 2003). This study, hence looking at the feasibility of mobile chat room (MCR), with it’s vast built-in...
social communication technology for supporting foreign language learning, that serve for the acquisition system.

2. Research Background

With regards to oral communicative skills, Baddeley’s Working Memory Model (1986) illustrates the importance of rehearsing verbal information. Information that we hear in phonological form fades away in seconds (Gathercole and Baddeley, 1993); the subvocal rehearsal process - repeating the sound of the word or phrase silently or aloud, could help to retain the verbal information; which happens in the mechanism called “phonological loop” (Baddeley, 1986), in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Baddeley’s model of working memory, cited in XiaoHong, 2008 (p.133)](image)

Acquiring oral communicative skills in CFL, requires different learning pedagogy due to its logographic characters in nature and unique phonetic system (pinyin) that differ from English orthography, and sounding system (Bassetti, 2007). These hamper the learning process for CFL learners, whom native language is from alphabetical system (Everson, 2008).

Whether pinyin or characters shall be learned at the beginning stage, researchers have different perspectives. Chong (2003) suggested pinyin and English equivalent prompt shall be shown as a feedback after a few seconds; Zhou & Wilson (2000) however explained that semantic information in the lexicon is activated at least as early and just as strongly as phonological information – which stress on the importance for learning both characters and pinyin.

Everson (2008), to some extent denied that, explaining that if spoken language is the skill meant to be achieved at a rapid rate, for CFL beginners, pinyin shall be used instead of Chinese characters. This is to avoid slower development for the performance of the spoken language. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1994) supports the notion, which believed that learning both characters and pinyin would give implications to learning listening and speaking skills in Chinese language, due to the limitation of working memory capacity during learning instruction (XiaoHong, 2011).

Pertaining to foreign language learning, it is therefore not surprising to find out that mLearning has also gain momentum when learning to acquire foreign language, taking advantages of mobile technologies that offer to our native digital learners. Taiwan EFL (Chen, Hsieh & Kinshuk, 2008) and Japanese EFL learners (Thornton & Houser, 2005) enjoy using phone in learning due to its accessibility and flexibility in practice. Mobile learning is motivating (Kinash, Brand & Mathew, 2012; Rogers et al., 2010; Al-Fahad, 2009; Wang et al. 2009), due to six reasons: (1) learners’ control; (2) ownership; (3)
learning-in-context; (4) continuity between contexts, (5) fun, (6) communication, according to Jones et al. (2006).

Realizing the constraints and dilemma when learning CFL, this study attempts to provide alternative learning pedagogy for learners to acquire the oral communicative skills, apart from the learning system that learners attended in the schools.

3. Findings

Findings from literature reviews are discussed below to give empirical research evidence on the phenomena as well as the feasibility of implementing MCR, in foreign language classroom, for today’s digital native. Besides that, feedbacks from teachers and students could give insights to understand the teaching and learning dilemma, particularly in the oral communicative skills for CFL learning.

3.1 Literature Review

Given the speech-based retention model by Baddeley (1986), the voice-messaging which allows recording and playback of verbal information, serve great impact in foreign language oral communicative learning, as illustrated above, in Figure 2. Under the phonological system, recording (phonological store) hold speech-based material in phonological forms; whilst learners voice-messaging or playback (articulate loop) rehearsing the information in verbal form. These unique synchronous and asynchronous features in mobile voice-messaging, provide solution to the memory trace limitation (which can only last for 1.5 to 2 seconds) in the articulatory loop, thus provides “fluency” (Krashen, 1981) platform to perform the competency of oral communicative skills, in a workable way.

In addition to that, features in cell phone (which include internet access, voice-messaging, SMS text-messaging, cameras, and even video-recording) enable communicative language practice, access to authentic content, and task completion (Chinnery, 2006). Because social interaction is essential to language learning (eg., Jepson, 2005; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Long, 1996), and chat room could be created by user (Cziko, 2003) for its’ unique characteristics of mobile information communication technology (mICTs): ubiquity, connectivity, accessibility, reachability, portability, and localization (Junglas & Watson, 2003); mobile chat room (MCR), therefore has high potential for foreign language and L2 learning, which shares similar aspects in mobile learning framework by Koole (2009) – Framework for Rational Analysis of Mobile Education (FRAME), in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Koole’s (2009) Framework for Rational Analysis of Mobile Education (FRAME)](image-url)
The similar aspects and components shared by L2 acquisition system and FRAME for mobile learning are listed in Table 1, for the purpose of L2 acquisition in mobile-chat-room (MCR).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acquisition: Intake (Obligatory)</th>
<th>Mobile Learning</th>
<th>Mobile-Chat-Room (MCR)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Meaningful / Communicative exercises</td>
<td>Social aspect &amp; Interaction technology</td>
<td>Peers learning through informal chat group, extended learning after school (syllabus-based)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Extensive reading</td>
<td>Learner aspect</td>
<td>Attachment, hyperlink: Text, pictures</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Natural method</td>
<td>Social aspect &amp; Interaction technology</td>
<td>Oral and written communication, hand-held, accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Intercambio</td>
<td>Social aspect / learner aspect</td>
<td>Grouping with native speaker</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Total Physical Response</td>
<td>Device usability</td>
<td>Video / Audio recording</td>
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</tbody>
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<th>Acquisition: Fluency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Communication strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Routines / patterns (short term)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Role-playing, games, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Writing</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1. L2 acquisition in mobile chat room, adapted from Krashen’s (1981) acquisition system, Koole’s (2009) FRAME Model.

It is therefore, believed that chat room environment in mobile phone (the built-in technology) could provide meaningful, communicative exercises and for its comprehensive intake environment and communication strategies in L2 learning (Krashen, 1981).

Besides that, the readiness of mLearning among Malaysian school students is rather high, in terms of device, knowledge as well as accessibility. In Malaysia, there was 140% mobile (hand phone) penetration in year 2012 (World Bank, 2014); 63% smartphone penetration in year 2013 (The Star newspaper, 2013); while school learners in age group 15-19 form the second highest of hand phone users in Malaysia, with 11.4%, in year 2012 (Malaysian Hand Phone Users Survey, 2012). mLearning readiness for Malaysian university students attained 63.71% in year 2009 (Zoraini, Chng, Norziati, 2009), readiness for high school learners however, is yet to be ascertained.

Research on listening and speaking for Chinese remain limited to date (Jiang & Cohen, 2012). This study, therefore will look into the mLearning feasibility for CFL learners; likewise, investigating teachers teaching approaches when teaching CFL in the classroom, as to give a clearer pictures of CFL practices in International schools, which could serve as determining factor for implementing MCR in enhancing oral communicative skills.
3.2 Teachers from International Schools

Four CFL teachers were selected from different states in Malaysia to give the overall pictures of teaching and learning phenomena in local international schools; with all of them having more than four years of local teaching experiences. In general, CFL teaching and learning in Malaysian International Schools are categorized as foreign or second language learning; therefore learning hours are 80 – 160 minutes per week. English language is their lingua franca for learning and communication; among Chinese ethnic neither, makes no difference. Examinations are mainly paper-written-base, teachers therefore have to focus on drilling students in their writing and reading skills, due to the fact that these are the most difficult tasks to attain, and they are sitting for paper examination.

Though listening and speaking are the other two components to be assessed, apart from reading and writing, these oral communicative skills are difficult to be developed as it is an environmental factor. After few years of formal instructions in schools, though learners are able to speak a few basic sentences, but unable to understand and communicate in the conversation; in other words, listening skill are rather weak due to unfamiliar to the language structures, speed, language usage, tones and etc.

When asked about the main factors, all teachers revealed that the environment for practice is most important. Learners need an environment which they can only use Chinese to communicate; either with friends or family members. International schools and home environments however, are not able to provide this because teachers and parents are either using English or their mother tongue in communication; hence the platform to use Chinese language is less, aside from activities given by school teachers. Besides, most parents are non-Chinese speakers, therefore practice after school lessons make it almost impossible.

Usage of technology and multimedia in teaching include books, videos, pictures, music, computers, software like power point, social network, none of them have ever use mobile phone in teaching, but would love to give a try then.

3.3 CFL learners from International Schools

Four middle-year-school learners (respectively Korean speaker, Thai speaker, Tamil speaker and English speaker) from Malaysian International Schools, whom have been studying CFL for more than 3 years, expressed their prior interest in learning CFL is to be able to orally communicate with friends in Chinese. Though they understand the importance of reading and writing skills, but being not able to talk in Chinese after few years, is a set-back in their learning. All admitted learning to read and write Chinese characters is tough, and their preferences to learning to listen and speak are based on pinyin.

Three out of four learners finding hard to use Chinese in conversation because they seldom use the language; as a result of they rarely practice the language with friends. Korean learner is able to understand and does basic conversation with Chinese speakers, acknowledged that his oral communicative skills were developed from constant interactions with his schoolmates. When asked about is the formal lessons in school helps in acquiring the oral communicative skills, he explained that it does help in correcting the language grammar and tones, but practices by using the language with friends helps him most.
All learners have experience using technology and multimedia in learning CFL, which include books, pictures, stories, movies, podcast; one uses mobile application; yet they agreed no teachers have ever use mobile phone in teaching. They all would like to explore mLearning as they think that it could be joyful and effective.

4. Implications for Learning

Findings from literature review and feedback from teachers and learners, shared the common learning phenomena: Oral communicative skills are important, yet it needs linguistic environment for practice. Teachers and learners are technology literate, and multiple technology and multimedia have been integrating in their teaching and learning sessions.

However, though neither learners nor teachers, both understanding the importance of oral communicative skills, their feedbacks confirmed the oral communicative skills of CFL learners are rather weak. None of any skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in language learning could be neglected, as Oller (1976) and Krashen (1981) reported that it is impossible to focus on just one skill and ignore the others; there is no clear evidence for an oral modality factor, as opposed to a written modality factor (Krashen, 1981).

Extending from that, there is no better time that now to find a learning alternative to facilitate the CFL learning dilemma. Also, high penetration of smart phone and high literate of technology usage among teachers and learners in Malaysian International Schools, have given us extra credits on feasibility to implement the mLearning in foreign language learning, or more specifically the “mobile chat room” to enhance the oral communicative skills in the virtual social learning environment.

5. Conclusions

In short, oral communicative skills should be given prior attention among CFL teachers, as these are the skills that learners want to possess, and it is a most direct way of daily communication with peers, especially in the context of Malaysian; whereby there is many Chinese speakers in their learning environment. However, this does not serve any opportunities, if there is no appropriate pedagogy carried out for CFL learners. Hence, based on the feedbacks from preliminary investigation, challenges in learning in CFL or L2, the above mentioned learning pedagogy (mobile-chat-room) could serve as an ideal linguistic learning environment to acquire the oral communicative skills.

References


**Electronic Sources:**


