# A Brief Study on English Autonomous Learning Ability Based on Mobile Learning in EFL Curriculum

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## Abstract

As a transformed learning mode of the traditional learning environment, mobile learning is of great potential for foreign language learning, it enables the learner to study at anytime, anywhere and at their own pace. This paper attempts to examine the impact of mobile technology on the college students' autonomous learning ability in EFL curriculum. It also puts forward effective strategies to foster learner autonomy by means of efficient smartphone-based mobile learning.

**Key words:** Mobile Learning; Autonomous Learning; Smartphone; WeChat; College English

## INTRODUCTION

Along with the rapid development of mobile internet technology and communication technology, an increasing number of people tend to obtain information through new media platform. For instance, WeChat is a public media platform which provides subscription services for group users such as companies, media and institutions. Now it is successfully integrated into the students' daily lives and becomes the indispensable public service resources for students. Nowadays, learners may conduct their autonomous learning by using the fragmented time with their mobile phones.

Great progress has been made in the mobile learning environment. In recent years, advances in computer and communication technologies have changed the way of teaching and learning. Mobile and wireless network technologies offered opportunities for students to learn via mobile devices. Today, it is possible for students to get access to more learning contents and get actively involved in their learning activities anywhere and anytime.

One of the primary teaching goals of college English is to cultivate the autonomous learning ability of students. When facing with new media and technology, autonomous learning model is constructed in the settings of smartphones. College students are keen on using smartphones, the post-90s college students are accustomed to digital life and develop into their digital mentality. Their interests are not only confined to classroom input and book learning, students are playing with their mobile phones by using communication tools like QQ, WeChat, games and so on together with many learning applications. We'd like to investigate the interaction between smartphone-based mobile learning and the promotion of autonomous learning process.

Nowadays, traditional teaching methods are greatly challenged, while mobile learning provides practical supplement for continual classroom learning. With the help of mobile learning, students are able to access different language learning materials and communicate with their teachers and peers at anytime, anywhere. Its strong convenience, portability, social interactivity and entertaining knowledge are good supplements for the traditional classroom instruction. This paper aims to discuss some practical ways to develop the learners' autonomous English learning abilities via mobile learning. After conducting a survey regarding their attitude, mode and learning tendency, certain problems are proposed.

# 1. THE ADVANCE AND CHALLENGE OF MOBILE LEARNING

With the advent of the information age and the rapid development of mobile communication technology, great changes have taken place both in our lives and learning styles. Knowledge acquisition is no longer confined to the classroom. New learning approaches in the virtual environments through technologies are gaining popularity. In recent years, people are exposed to distance-learning, multimedia and Internet technology, digital learning and mobile learning etc., particularly mobile learning is going in depth in our lives. Gradually, the application of technology in language learning has changed to mobiles.

Since mobile learning is based on mobile communication technology and mobile internet technology, it is not merely limited to consult information, download data, install learning applications and so on. Many popular internet applications like WeChat are rooted in smartphones, in particular, post-90 university students rely on them extensively owing to the convenient operations and sociability.

## 1.1 The Application of Mobile Autonomous Learning in EFL Teaching

In recent years, mobile learning has been regarded as an imperative learning approach, scholars have indicated the potential value of such technologies in school settings. Mobile learning enables users to learn in any appropriate place and at any appropriate time. It is highly believed that this digital learning will be the future trend due to the fact that it is ubiquitous and flexible. Many people admit that they are addicted to its perceived convenience, playfulness, ease of use and usefulness. The implementation of mobile technologies in the educational contexts can promote the level of teaching. What's more, it also motivates the learners in obtaining information.

In China, the enrollment of new college students is on the rise since 1999. So it is a common trend to have large-class English teaching in the curriculum. In the past, the main approaches of large-class teaching involved giving lectures and doing interactive teaching. For one thing, we have to guarantee the teaching quality and students' interest in learning the skill in a large class; for another, how to consciously improve students' autonomous learning should also be considered. The changing world demands innovative pedagogical practices in EFL learning. When faced with challenges of new media and technology, EFL students are constructing the autonomous learning model based on mobile learning.

## 1.2 Learner Autonomy Based on Mobile Learning

Learner autonomy is a term that is used in many different ways in education. It aims to provide learners with the ability to take on more responsibilities for their own learning. The concept of learner autonomy in EFL has been the central focus for many researchers. Due to advances in modern technology and pedagogy, present language learners are exposed to various choices in improving their proficiency.

To develop autonomous English learning ability is our long-term pedagogical goal. The autonomous learning mode in the settings of internet involves finding problems, setting a goal, making up plans, selecting contents, self-evaluation etc.. To improve the efficiency of mobile learning, the application of the internet at all levels should be clearly revealed. Besides, in the designing of learning applications, we must be aware of strengthening learners' motivation and maintaining their concentration during mobile learning.

# 2. DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Recent advances in computer and communication technologies have changed the way of teaching and learning. This study attempts to examine the interaction between the application of mobile technology and the EFL college students' autonomous learning ability. It also aims to explore the feasibility and effectiveness in teaching English based on autonomous instruction in a large class. We would expect to find out what autonomy initiatives helped students develop their English skills. Besides, by analyzing EFL students' engagement and academic achievement, we hope to explain the strategies that could help teachers foster learner autonomy.

## 2.1 The Interaction Between Autonomy Initiatives and Mobile Learning

The paper deals with the effective use of mobile-related technologies in the EFL contexts. It explains an experiment of some EFL university students who worked with mobile learning devices during a semester. 120 intermediate technical college students from 2 different colleges at Qingdao University of Science and Technology participated in the survey. The participants were made up of two groups of experimental and control, each group consisted of 60 students to assess the validity and utility of mobile-based WeChat.

A 16-week experiment between the experimental group and the control group is conducted. For the data collection, this survey analyzes two different classes with different teaching methods and strategies via tests, face-to face interview and questionnaire before and after the experiment and the results were analyzed in depth. The questionnaire involves pedagogical and technical aspects of their experience with mobile learning. A total of 120 EFL college students and 15 teachers who employed mobile technology to learn and teach in English completed the questionnaire.

In the research, both pre-test and post-test as well as an attitude questionnaire were used to measure the degree of learner autonomy and determine their language proficiency level. The tests were conducted in the participants' scores on the pre-test and post-test of English after a term. The comparison of the two tests was carefully analyzed. The data were gathered and analyzed to evaluate the efficacy of mobile-based applications in college EFL contexts.

## 2.2 Data Analysis

According to the findings of this study, the experimental group achieved much better scores (84 points) in their English over the control group (79 points). The results of the questionnaire showed that the experimental group had a positive overall evaluation attitude and high learning motivation toward the mobile learning. These changes facilitate the degree of learner autonomy.

As to the learning outcome, just as expected, the experimental class had better performance than the controlled class. The students' academic achievement and their autonomous learning ability have been improved. Especially their speaking and writing skill, their ability to self-monitor and evaluation also had been raised.

The findings also suggested that mobile learning program could be used as a tool to improve students' test-taking skills and overall English comprehension. We found out smartphone-based mobile autonomous English learning, coupled with correct and proper learning strategies, will help improve EFL college students' listening performance, develop and cultivate their comprehensive English abilities. The mobile-based learning mode also enhances their interests, autonomous learning behaviors and independent thinking in learning.

The questionnaire involves the concept of autonomy and their language skills development via the mobile learning. The results of this study demonstrated that compared to students in face-to-face learning environment, mobile learning has a positive impact on the increase in average academic achievement. Students are taking responsibility for their own learning processes and benefiting from their attitude.

However, it was found that there was a major difference between the preferences of teachers and students in learning with mobile technologies. The teachers cared more about the technical issues, since they need to face the challenges and effectiveness of employing mobile technologies in school settings, they have to consider the students' learning preferences as well as the benefits and difficulties of conducting mobile learning activities in the existing curriculums. The teachers call for developing well-constructed mobile-based environments and activities. In contrast, the students focus more on the richness and usefulness of the learning content. Such as the most striking challenges for mobile learning include poor sound, download speeds, limited devices and display quality. Cost and privacy, access to the network and so on belong to other limitations of the mobile learning.

# 3. EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES TO FOSTER LEARNER AUTONOMY VIA MOBILE LEARNING

In the past decade, mobile technology has been increasingly applied to educational settings. The research finds out that mobile learning can help the learners perform better, it also has a positive impact on enhancing learners' autonomy and independent thinking in learning, and help to improve their learning interest as well. The following is effective strategies to foster learner autonomy.

## 3.1 A hybrid Approach to Fostering Learner Autonomy

There are numerous and a variety of language learning resources available online. For the learners, however, they are to make decisions about their language education and take some control over it so as to maximize their learning experience and become successful. To address issues like these, a hybrid program is needed in terms of combining different approaches to fostering learner autonomy and to help EFL college students to become more successful in learning English. Preferably, it could be: resource-based, technology-based, curriculum-based, learner-based, and teacher-based (Benson, 2011). Thanks to the improvement in technology, students and teachers have more opportunities to experience the benefits of the enhanced learning contexts.

In the settings of Internet, autonomous learning is combined with cooperative learning by taking full advantage of online resources. It can facilitate the change from force-feeding teaching method to the cultivation mode of capability. It explores the guidance of learner interests, collaborative methods and learners' engagement as well as academic achievement. As a self-regulated learning mode, the mobile learning strategies give many inspirations.

## 3.2 Fostering Learner Autonomy by Strengthening Learners' Motivation

Learners' motivation could be strengthened by building good social relations, promoting interaction in the classroom and setting up adequate evaluation systems, etc. Since language learning is a social activity that requires interaction with others, autonomy in language learning obviously does not simply equate with independence. Besides, it is found that the regular college classroom teaching is still meaningful for enhancing the learning effect. Therefore, we shouldn't neglect the teacher's guiding role in autonomous learning method.

### 3.3 The Integration of Information Technology and Curriculum

It is apparent that the use of mobiles in the pedagogical and real contexts can increase students' sense of autonomy. Accordingly, in order to meet the challenges of the mobile education, we should actively innovate to integrate information technology with curriculum. According to the learners' proficiency, the learning contents have to be carefully selected, relevant educational strategies also need to be adapted to it. All together they help maintain a trustful academic interaction and learner satisfaction. For instance, we conducted online speaking and writing practice based on mobile learning. Instant communication between instructors and learners is a great advantage offered by the mobile communication network. Compared to conventional classes, mobile learning aids the quality and effectiveness of the teaching-learning process.

In the EFL classrooms, mobile learning can be utilized by the teacher to boost the different techniques and strategies of learning. The following ways to aid the process:

(a) *Personalized learning*. The learning materials can be shared to the other learners' mobiles for studying or reference. This will bridge the educational gap among the students. In the past decade, traditional teaching methods are greatly challenged. In the new era, in order to make good use fragmented time, we are supposed to attach great importance to *personalized learning*. It will serve as a good answer to the barrier of the present college English learning.

(b) Preview. Students are expected to consult the contents relevant to the preview questions via their mobiles before class. Ask questions to check their preview.

(c)Assigning extra listening, speaking, reading and writing homework through mobiles. Assignment is transmitted to students by means of video or messages. Teachers may easily communicate with students via QQ or Wechat. Vivid and systematic instructions may help learners to correct their mistakes. Mobile learning is playing a supporting role for university classroom teaching and after-class tutoring.

Mobile learning is characterized by independence, inquiry, and collaboration. We are supposed to construct the autonomous learning mode concerning the interactive relationship between teachers and learners along with the collaboration and evaluation among students.

The integration of information technology and curriculum is highly essential. When mobile learning is applied to educational and instructional process, we pay more attention to the application after class or before class. We realize that to start with, the key of mobile learning is to integrate digital content to the whole curriculum, and then integrate into teaching in classroom. Furthermore,

for the sake of creating effective mobile learning environment, we would better integrate target content into the discipline curriculum. If well-trained teachers with a clear instruction goal could apply productive digital contents into the teaching process, the student's ability to inquiry and study is likely to be enhanced. Eventually, achieving mobile learning objectives is possible.

## CONCLUSION

This paper probes into the application of mobile autonomous learning in EFL curriculum. The paper demonstrates that pedagogically driven mobile learning encourages autonomous student learning and offers a blended learning environment model for EFL learners. However, it does not necessarily follow that there exist no problems in it. Scholars indicate that the appropriate use of mobile-related technologies in and outside classroom may facilitate the teaching-learning process and the students also have access to learn the language better and gain information in depth. By means of applying mobile technology, language instructors can create the suitable environment for teaching.

Mobile learning is learner driven and student-centered, the various tasks and activities can be customized for the individual learners. Mobile learning is a potential for learner autonomy, it gradually becomes more personal, collaborative and lifelong learning approach. Not to mention its low cost and economic advantages. Mobile technology help both the students and teachers search for information, collect data, and summarize findings at anytime and anywhere. We can anticipate that learning environments that conform to both students' and teachers' preferences will play an important role in the future. We are confident to expect more of the pedagogical applications of mobile-assisted language learning, they are doomed to contribute to improving EFL learners' English performance.

To sum up, in the new era of information technology, if we could take good advantage of fragmented time, construct an autonomous learning mode *under mobile environment, personalized learning* will go beyond classrooms. It will provide a new direction for the English courses in colleges and serve as a good answer to the barriers of the present college English learning.

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