

Mobile English Learning: An Empirical Study on an APP, English Fun Dubbing

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Sihong Zhang

Anhui University of Chinese Medicine, Hefei, China and James Cook University, Cairns, Australia

Abstract—The availability of smart phones connected to mobile network and the occurrence of APPs developed for the educational purposes provide us with the possibility and feasibility of mobile teaching and learning. English Fun Dubbing, an APP designed for its users to practice oral English, was employed in this one-academic-year empirical study to evaluate the benefits of mobile APPs in the field of pedagogy. When the study ended, an anonymous online questionnaire was distributed to the 123 participants to survey the effects of English Fun Dubbing on their English language learning. The results showed that the majority of the respondents were satisfied with it in many aspects including its conveniences, flexibility, user-friendliness, rich materials, authentic language context, etc. and also its functions to inspire learning interests, foster learner autonomy, help realize personalized learning, and so on. We concluded that a reasonable and wise choice of APPs would not only be useful for students' English learning, but also help lead them to use mobile phones in a positive way.

Index Terms—mobile English learning; APP; empirical study; anonymous online questionnaire

I. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of mobile devices such as iPods, iPads and smart phones has made mobile teaching and learning both possible and feasible. The employment of mobile devices for pedagogical purposes has long been a focus in the academic circles, starting in the 20th century in the West and currently also prevailing in this century in China and other developing countries [1]-[3]. Mobile devices are in essence devices for ICTs (information and communication technologies). If teachers have a deepened understanding of information technology and if they can change their philosophy of teaching, the ICT-based teaching mode can be ensured [4]. Compared with traditional ICT devices like laptops and computers, mobile devices have transparent advantages due to their lighter weight, orientation flexibility, instant-on capacity, fast switching, mobility, long battery life and touch interface [5]-[6]. These features provide possibilities to implement ubiquitous, interactive, collaborative, informal, individualized, situated and self-regulated teaching and learning [7]-[8]. However, although some empirical studies on mobile teaching and learning have recently occurred, this kind of pedagogical mode is still rare, especially in the setting of higher education [9]-[11]. Consequently, we need more studies on mobile pedagogical strategies and how these strategies can contribute to student's learning process.

The present study is based on "English Fun Dubbing" (EFD), an APP applicable to both iPhone and Android operating systems (see <http://www.qupeiyin.com/> for more information). It was developed by a Chinese Sci-

Tech company to assist its users' oral English practices free of charge. As shown in Fig. 1 below, it provides abundant learning materials including movies, animations, short videos, classical textbooks and songs, all with native English speakers' authentic and original speaking for students of different age groups to imitate, and then dub in English. Either teachers or students can organize collaborative dubbing groups, through which group members can have discussions with each other and give comments on other persons' work. "Master's Shows", more specifically, ranking lists of the best performances of participants coming from the whole country, living in the same city and studying at the same university, are presented on a daily basis in order to inspire students' spirit of competition and attract them to participate in English dubbing activities.

However, although it is user-friendly and seen to be used by a few students at times, we have not found previous studies on how it facilitates and motivates students' English learning. This study is the output of our one academic year's participant observation of its application among more than 100 students of different majors. Its significance in triggering students' English learning autonomy and improving their English learning interests, strategies and performances deserves much attention.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at Anhui University of Chinese Medicine in China for two semesters, specifically, from the beginning of September, 2015 to the end of June, 2016. It involved two classes consisting of 123 freshmen. During the first semester, we taught students on how to use EFD, and supervised and guided their dubbing work. During the second semester (from March 1 to June 30, 2016), students were encouraged to finish as many dubbings as they could on their own. However, the minimum number of dubbings should be no less one every two weeks, i. e. eight in total for the 16 weeks of one whole semester. They could choose any topics and materials that EFD provides and that they like.

An *anonymous* online questionnaire with both closed ended and open ended questions was distributed among the 123 students at the end of the second semester, and we received 106 responses within the period of two weeks. The response rate was 86.17%. Statistical data were *automatically* generated by the website *Wenjuan Wang* (literally, Questionnaire Website, see <https://www.wenjuan.com/> for more information) that provides free templates for its users to design questionnaires in accordance with their individualized demands. Correspondingly, figures, tables and numbers used in this study were directly copied from *Wenjuan Wang* without any manual intervention apart from their corresponding English translation. The questionnaire consists of four

parts: Part I collected some personal information including the students' gender, age and major; Part II involved their uses of mobile phones and their knowledge of APPs including EFD that could be utilized for English learning; Part III asked about their experience and desire of English learning; Part IV was designed to get their feedbacks about EFD and their behaviors of using EFD and their expectations from teachers in the future.

III. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

A. Personal Information

Among the 106 respondents, 81 were females and 25 were males. Their ages ranged from 17 to 21, and 79.25% of them were 19 years old (44.34%) and 20 years old (34.91%). When they were at high schools, 68.87% of them were students of sciences and the rest were students of liberal arts. Their majors at university were relevant to three main disciplines: medicine, pharmacy and language education (Fig. 2).

B. Uses of Mobile Phones and Knowledge of APPs for English Learning

All of the respondents reported that they were using a smart phone that had accessibility to mobile network.

However, 89.62% of them stated it clear that their teachers of English never introduced any APPs that could assist English learning when they were at high schools. Out of them, only two said that they "frequently" used APPs for English learning in comparison with 64 of them reported "never" and 40, "occasionally". As for their daily uses of phones, we found that using phones for learning was listed after phoning, music-listening, photo-taking, game-playing and message-texting based on a randomized oral survey in class before this study. When the study ended, learning was ranked prior to photo-taking, game-playing and message-texting as indicated in Fig. 3. Before the start of the study, 90.57% of the respondents never heard about EFD despite the fact there were 9.43% of them who knew it.

C. English Learning Experiences and Difficulties

All the students have learned English for more than six years and 90.57% of them wanted to speak fluent English. However, only three of them (2.83%) formed the habit to practice speaking English every day. The biggest difficulty that hindered their English speaking was thought to be lack of English-using context (46.23%) and worries of not being able to speak English well and being laughed at by others (39.62%) as demonstrated in TABLE I.

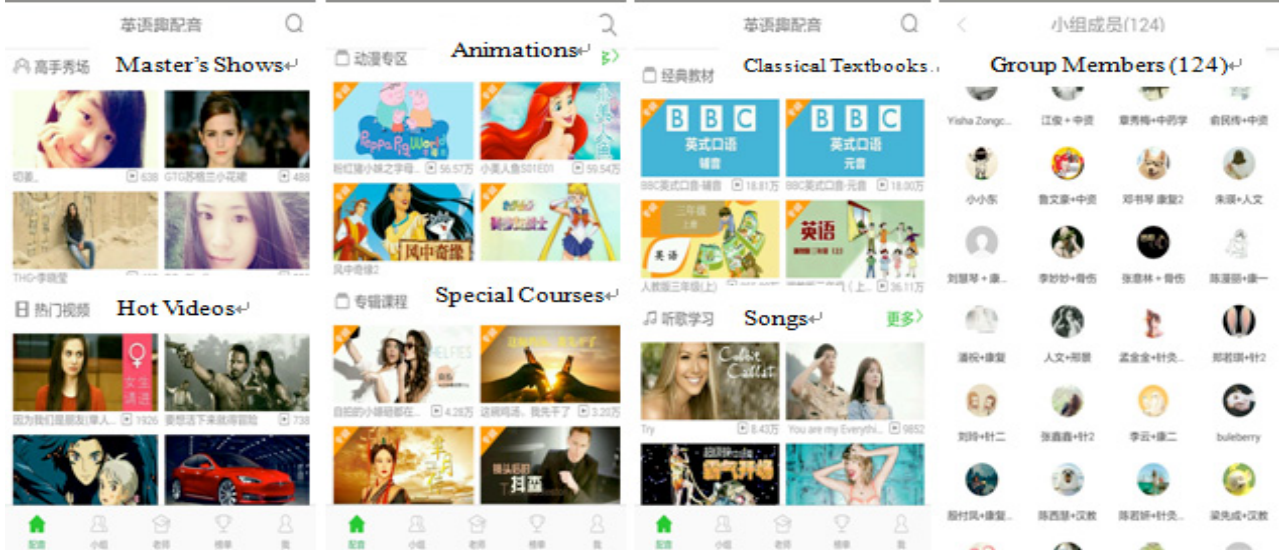


Figure 1. Screenshots of English Fun Dubbing

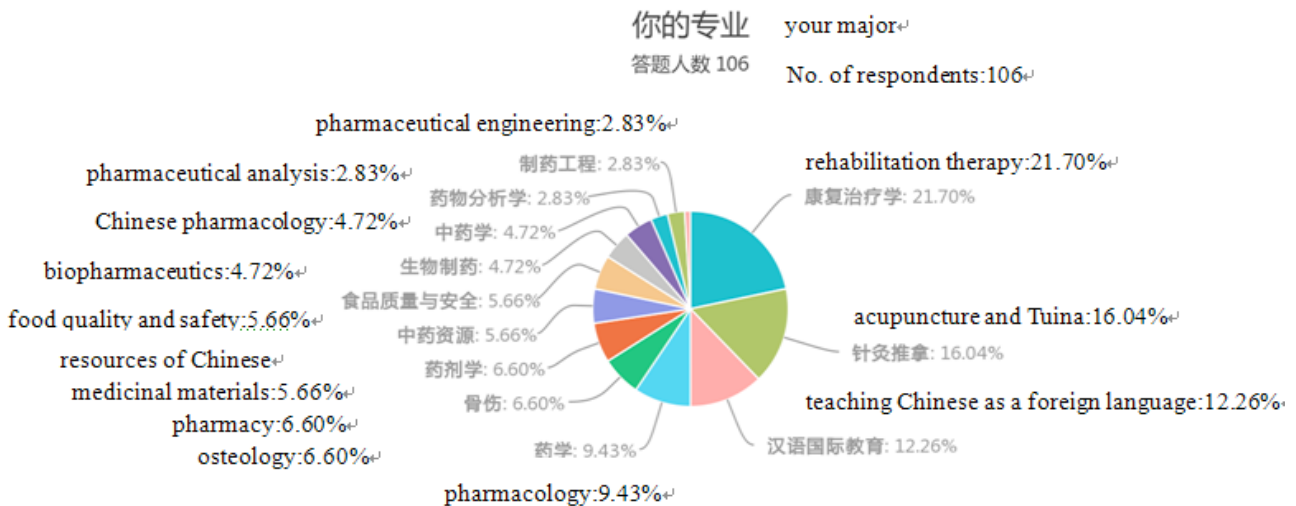


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents' majors

你使用手机主要用来 (此题可多选)

答题人数 106

What do you often use mobile phones for?
No. of respondents: 106

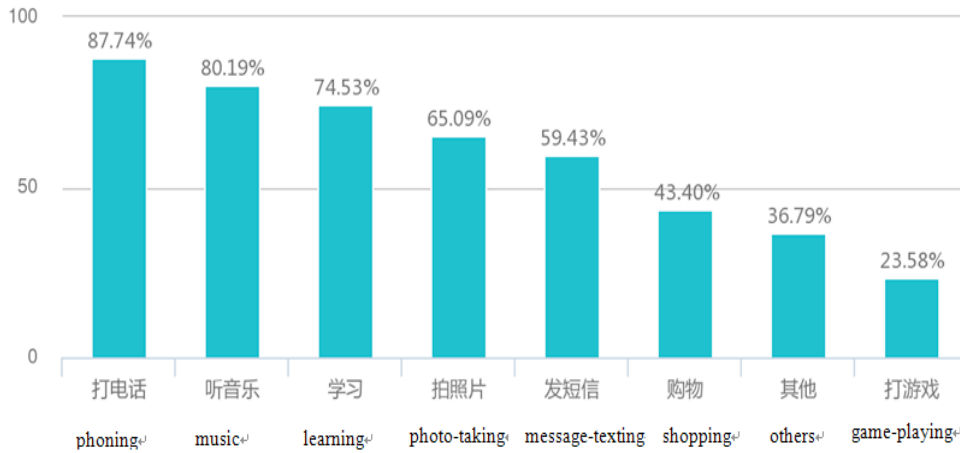


Figure 3. Ranking list of students' aim to use mobile phones when the study ended

D. Uses of, and Feedbacks about EFD

As mentioned above, the students were required to submit at least eight dubbings in one semester. The result (TABLE II) was that 120 of them (97.57%) had submitted more than the number as required although there were still three of them (2.43%) whose dubbings were less than eight. Thirty-three of them (26.82%) have finished more than 31 dubbings and four of them (3.25%) have submitted more than 100 dubbings. One of the students has made 270 dubbings and this was the largest number of dubbings among all the students.

In this study, we used both closed and open ended questions to survey the students' comments on their uses of EFD. The closed ended questions were designed with reference to a typical five-level Likert item [12]-[13] as shown in TABLE III.

In response to the open ended question about EFD, "What other comments do you have on EFD?", the students' answers could be mainly classified as follows: 1. It provides me with authentic language context. 2. It enables me to get knowledge of news, the hottest topics and the most interesting information of other fields. 3. It gives me chances to practice different accents of English. 4. It provides me with a platform to observe other students' dubbings and thus encourages me to compete against them. 5. It offers me a domain of myself to imitate authentic English and practice my oral English and thus I am not feeling nervous.

All the students chose to do their dubbing work after classes, especially between 19:00 (after dinner time) and

22:00 (before going to bed). 85.95% of the students reported that they have listened to the original sound of the native speakers' for more than eight times and then begun to dub in English. Ninety-five out of the 106 respondents (89.62%) preferred the teachers to introduce more online English learning resources for them in the future as demonstrated in Fig. 4 below.

TABLE I. DIFFICULTIES THAT THE STUDENTS HAD IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

What difficulty do you have in your English speaking?	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)
I do not have an English-using context.	49	46.23
I am afraid that I cannot speak English well and could be laughed at.	42	39.62
I always think that other students' English is better than mine and I am shy to speak English.	9	8.49
I do not have any chances to speak English.	6	5.66

TABLE II. DUBBINGS THAT THE STUDENTS SUBMITTED IN ONE SEMESTER (16 WEEKS)

No. of Dubbings	No. of Students	Percentage (%)
< 8	3	2.43
8-10	12	9.76
11-20	22	17.88
21-30	53	40.09
31-40	17	13.82
51-60	4	3.25
61-80	3	2.43
100-269	3	2.43
270	1	0.81

TABLE III. STUDENTS' FEEDBACKS ABOUT THE USES OF EFD

comments	strongly agree	agree	neutral	disagree	strongly disagree
rich in materials	32.08%	59.43%	8.49%	0.00%	0.00%
user-friendly	30.19%	66.98%	1.89%	0.94%	0.00%
interesting	29.25%	61.32%	9.43%	0.00%	0.00%
good for oral English	33.96%	58.49%	6.60%	0.94%	0.00%
good for listening in English	24.53%	54.72%	20.75%	0.00%	0.00%
good for group discussion	8.49%	10.38%	62.26%	16.04%	2.83%
good for improving English learning autonomy and enthusiasm	19.81%	52.83%	27.36%	0.00%	0.00%
good in overall	22.64%	70.75%	6.60%	0.00%	0.00%

你是否希望老师给你介绍更多的网络学习资源吗？

答题人数 106

Do you want your teachers to introduce more online learning resources to you? No. of respondents: 106.

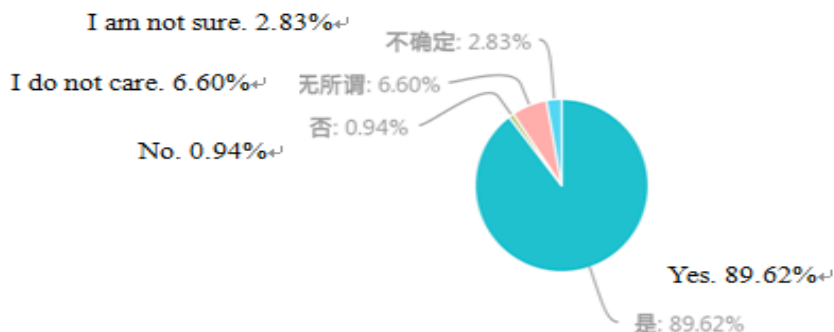


Figure 4. Survey of the students' desires for more online learning resources in the future

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The popularity of online materials has undoubtedly made learning more and more convenient and efficient. However, it might also lead to information overload and confusion to the students [14], especially to those students who previously had few contacts with APPs used for English learning as described above. Consequently, a reasonable choice of APPs that are alike is necessary. That is why we selected EFD from many APPs and recommended it to the students and gave instructions to them on how to use it during the first semester. Our practices revealed that a well-chosen APP like EFD could really contribute to the students' English learning. Firstly, EFD can foster the students' language learning autonomy. Holec (1981, p.3) defined "learner autonomy" as learner self-direction and control of the learning process [15]. It is also a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (Little, 1991, p.4) [16]. In this study, the students demonstrated their learner autonomy both through much more dubbing submissions than required and through their dubbing work done almost always after classes, i. e. in their leisure time. Additionally, according to the students' feedbacks, they volunteered to get information of other learning areas, which is an added value of EFD that was originally unexpected. Another unexpected added value is that while dubbing, the students also practiced their listening. As described above, more than 80% of the respondents have listened to the original sound more than eight times before their dubbing work. Secondly, EFD can make the students feel much more interested in English learning. Interest is viewed as a kind of intrinsic and internal motivation of language learning, and students will lose their desire to learn a language if they are not interested in it [17]-[18]. The rich learning materials that EFD provides can help students find dubbings of their interest. As shown in TABLE III above, more than 90% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that EFD was interesting. Thirdly, EFD can help lead the students to use mobile phones in a positive way. Students' "addiction" to mobile phones has long been criticized in the educational setting of China [19]-[20] and mobile phones are strictly prohibited in classrooms in

many universities in the country. However, owing to the evolution of mobile technology, mobile phones have become indispensable to modern society [14]. We should thus instruct students to reasonably and wisely use them rather than ban their uses. A case in point is that in this study, we not only asked the students to practice using EFD but also encouraged them to seek other learning materials and information in classes. After one academic year's practices, students have begun to treat learning as one of the main functions of mobile phones (Fig. 3) in the end. Fourthly, using EFD is reported to have exposed students to authentic language learning context. As is known to all, contextualized language learning is of great importance to the improvement of students' English language skills. Through imitating and dubbing the native English-speakers' speaking, students have benefited a lot from the authentic English context that EFD provides as demonstrated from students' feedbacks about their uses of EFD described above. Fifthly, EFD can develop and cultivate students' confidence in using English. EFD lets the students have a chance to practice their English by themselves and without being noticed by others. They can assess their own performances while comparing their dubbing work with the original speaking of EFD. Practice makes progress. After many practices, they are sure to feel and find their advancement in English learning through their own self-assessment. Accordingly, this process can make them more and more confident of themselves in English learning. Finally but not the least, EFD evidenced that using mobile APPs can help realize students' personalized learning. In a personalized learning environment, academic goals, curriculum, content, method and pace can all conceivably vary [21]. During the whole second semester of this study, we only asked the students to finish the stipulated number of dubbings without giving any other instructions and interventions. From Section D of Part III above, we could find that students' dubbing work varies a lot in the number of dubbings, the time to dub and the content to choose. In other words, they tailored their dubbings in accordance with their personalized goals and demands.

Although using APPs like EFD for mobile English learning is promising, there are still some limitations (or

future research suggestions) that should be clarified. Above all, TABLE III above indicated that less than 20% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that EFD was good for group discussions. However, group discussion is of course an important part of collaborative learning. This needs to be further studied. Furthermore, the present study was based only on a one-academic-year observation and follow-up studies for a much longer period of time are more significant. Additionally, this is a small scale empirical study. A comparatively larger scale study with much more participants must be able to produce more convincing findings. Finally, there were three of the 123 participants whose dubbings were less than eight as shown in TABLE II. How to inspire those students who might be indifferent to their study to actively participate in APP-aid learning deserves more energy and research.

The present study implies that using mobile APPs like EFD to assist students' English learning is characteristic of conveniences, flexibility, contextualization, personalization, learner autonomy, self-assessment and self-regulation, etc. And almost 90% of the respondents showed a strong enthusiasm about more online resources that might be of assistance to their learning in the future (Fig. 4). We are sure that in this era of mobile technologies, there will be more and more powerful and user-friendly mobile phones and APPs occurring in the coming days. Under the teacher's guidance, future students will surely benefit more and more from mobile technologies. About this, we are quite optimistic.

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AUTHOR

Sihong Zhang, PhD, is an associate professor at The School of International Education & Exchange, Anhui University of Chinese Medicine, Hefei, 230012, China. He is also an adjunct research fellow at The Language and Culture Research Centre, James Cook University, Cairns 4870, Australia. His research areas include: language documentation and description, linguistic typology, corpus linguistics and language pedagogy. (Email: zhang-sihong@qq.com)

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