

Student Motivation and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

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Abstract

Low student motivation is an obstacle many university English lecturers face in Japan, particularly with lower level non-English majors. Instructors are often trying to find ways to convince their students that studying English is a worthwhile use of their time. Furthermore, instructors who have been able to demonstrate fun and exciting ways to learn English often see better results in terms of learner success. Mobile Assisted Language Learning – or “MALL” – is one area in which students might find enjoyment in language learning. Given the ubiquity of the Smartphone in Japan and the ease and frequency at which most Japanese university students navigate their phones, educators would be limiting instruction by not taking advantage of this highly available and convenient language learning resource. This study seeks to discover if students exhibit motivation to learn English with MALL. A survey was administered to gauge the participants’ motivation to learn English with apps and/or and mobile-friendly websites. Through one survey question, their level of motivation was measured by reported intent to use the teacher-recommended apps and/or mobile-friendly websites. Another survey question asked about their actual current use of non-teacher-recommended apps and/or websites. All survey responses were divided by participant level using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – or “CEFR” – to see if English levels had any effect on motivation.

1. Introduction

1.1 Students’ Motivation to Learn English

Prior to entering university, Japanese students’ motivation to learn is “strongly instrumental, namely passing a university entrance exam” (Morrow, 1987, LoCastro, 1996, as cited in Kelly, 2005, p.65). Kelly states that instrumental motivation could be

defined as “a desire for some social or economic reward through second language acquisition” (p.33). After the goal of passing the entrance exam has been achieved, then the instrumental motivation passes, resulting in many Japanese college students studying English primarily because the classes are compulsory (p.35). Moreover, Brown observed students’ motivation to learn English for another purpose: “its usefulness in finding a job.” However, Brown (2004) discovered that most of the 283 non-major first-year Japanese university student participants in his study reported that they did not want jobs that actually “require the use of English, rather they simply want to know enough English to find a job in the first place” (p. 5).

Many Japanese university students have negative anxiety about learning English largely due to negative learning experiences in high school (MacKenzie, 2014). The resulting anxiety leads to demotivation (MacWhinnie & Mitchell, 2017). Japanese students’ low drive to learn English is well-documented and thought to stem from high school English courses and the pressure to do well on university entrance exams, which means too much attention is given to grammar and vocabulary memorization and not enough time is spent on communicative language learning (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009). Kikuchi & Sakai also found the top five demotivating factors for Japanese high school students to be: “(a) Course Books, (b) Inadequate School Facilities, (c) Test Scores, (d) Noncommunicative Methods, and (e) Teachers’ Competence and Teaching Styles.”

In contrast, integrative motivation “is characterized by the learner’s positive attitude towards the target language group and a desire to integrate with that group” (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, as cited in Kelly, 2005, p. 34). According to Kelly, if there is any motivation for Japanese university students to learn English, then it tends to be integrative, often stemming from the students’ interest in communicative English language activities and learning about other cultures (p.35).

A cyclical relationship can be viewed between students’ learning activities and their level of interest in learning English. If the activities are not seen as useful or interesting, then the student would likely discontinue or decrease the frequency of said activities. At the same time, if students are not initially motivated, they may neither give said teacher-guided activities a

chance nor try to find English learning activities on their own that better suit their needs and interests. Japanese college students are probably jaded from their high school English learning experiences, which were possibly uninteresting and only seemingly useful for passing the university entrance exams. Some have likely given up on the possibility of learning something useful or interesting when presented with English learning opportunities in university. University English instructors need to work diligently to find activities that convince students that English is either useful, interesting, or both, thus helping increase students' enthusiasm to learn.

1.2 MALL Increasing Motivation in Learners

“Technology is one great way to motivate learners” (Woodson, 2014). It can put variety, authenticity and the “fun” factor into language learning, which “could play an important part in motivation” (Demouy, V., Jones, A., Kan, Q., Kukulska-Hulme, A., & Eardley, A., 2016). Technology offers a wide variety of other benefits to language learners, as well. Technology goes hand in hand with autonomous, independent learning (Woodson, 2014). MacKenzie (2014) found that students embraced the opportunities for autonomous language learning: “a shift towards a more student-centered model where students are encouraged to make choices connected to their learning.” In terms of self-study or learning outside of the classroom, Lai & Gu (2011, p.318) wrote, “Successful language learners often attribute their achievements in language learning to active engagement with the target language beyond the classroom” (as cited in Demouy et al., 2016).

In addition, students “respond well to the stimulus of mobile devices. They stay on task, they correct mistakes in real-time and, most importantly, they get excited about learning” (Lynch, 2015). English study apps and websites can add variety to vocabulary acquisition, help students increase their motivation and improve their English levels (Taylor & Birchley, 2008). “Role plays, information gap activities, personalization, games, interesting visuals, and video clips” are all easily accessible to language learners that engage in such activities not only for the purpose of improving their second language skills, but also simply because the activities are enjoyable (Kelly, 2005, p. 43).

No matter what technological tool is used for language learning, “as students’ anxiety about communication with foreigners decreases, their own motivation to communicate increases” (MacWhinnie & Mitchell, 2017, p.9).

2. Procedure

2.1 The Survey

The survey contains research questions #1-3 below and was administered to students in the researcher’s courses at the end of the Spring 2017 academic term:

- (1) *What type of mobile phones are the participants using (iPhone, android, flip phone)?*
- (2) *How motivated (intent) are these students to use English learning apps and websites that the teacher recommended?*
- (3) *How motivated are these students to use English learning apps and websites beyond what the teacher recommended?*

Several teacher-recommended apps/websites were also explained and recommended to the students during the term and again following the administration of the survey at the end of term to remind students to try them. These apps/websites were recommended to the participants in this study based on the researcher’s positive experience using them with students in the past, in addition to other educators having written about their benefits:

Teacher-Recommended Apps/Hompages for English Learning 教師のお勧めの英語を習うためのアプリやホームページ	
<i>Quizlet:</i>	quizlet.com – vocabulary learning about many different topics! *free
<i>Speaking Pal:</i>	speakingpal.com – 5-minute lessons through a simulated video call *free
<i>iKnow!:</i>	iknow.jp – various skills and vocabulary learning *free trial, then paid
<i>English Central:</i>	ja.englishcentral.com – Learn English through videos (some parts free)
<i>Busuu:</i>	busuu.com – vocabulary and interactive tests about many topics (some parts free)

(Taylor & Birchley, 2008; Pesce, 2012; EducationalApp, 2016;

Toto, 2008; Beck, 2014; Zakhareuski, 2013)

The instructor introduced the apps/websites by explaining their various features and demonstrating how to use them on the classroom projector screen. Around week 4 and week 8 of the term, students were asked in two 20-minute sessions at the end of class to download the free versions and try them out on their phones. Following each session, the instructor encouraged at-home exploration time with these apps/websites in lieu of a homework assignment. During the following classes, they were asked to report on what they did and learned during their exploration time, taking 15 minutes each. Many students did not try the apps during their encouraged exploration time, probably because it was not a graded activity; others said they forgot or did not have time. Responses from those who did try the apps were either that they enjoyed them and found them useful or that they couldn't understand how to navigate the apps very well and gave up quickly.

2.1 The Participants

The 142 survey respondents were taking the researcher's first-year English courses in Toyo University's Business Administration Department in the spring of 2017. For the purpose of this study, the participants' English levels are referred to as borderline A1/A2 or A2, following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or "CEFR" (ETS, 2015). Classes 7 and 8 have very similar average TOEIC Bridge scores, so together have been labeled as *mid-level* (A1/A2) "basic users". Classes 16 and 18 also have very similar average TOEIC Bridge scores, so together have been labeled as *high-level* (A2) "basic users" of English.

The following are the average TOEIC Bridge scores per class:

- Class 7- Total 130, Listening 64 (lowest A2),
Reading 66 (high A1)
- Class 8- Total 133, Listening 64 (lowest A2),
Reading 69 (highest A1)
- Class 16- Total 150, Listening 71 (middle A2),
Reading 79 (middle A2)
- Class 18- Total 154, Listening 74 (middle A2),
Reading 80 (middle A2)

The CEFR levels with respect to TOEIC Bridge scores can be understood from the following chart (ETS, 2015):

Test/Test Section	Total Score Range	Scale Score				
		Minimum Score	A1	A2	B1	B2 C1
<i>TOEIC Bridge</i> TM Listening	10–90	46	64	84		
<i>TOEIC Bridge</i> TM Reading	10–90	46	70	86		

Many of these participants seem to fit the typical first-year non-English-major Japanese college student profile described in the literature review: their English education throughout high school was a focus on grammar and vocabulary memorization and not on communicative language learning (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009). Their university entrance exams are over, so they no longer feel that pressure, and therefore the instrumental motivation to learn English has passed. The courses they are currently enrolled in at the university are required, so the main motivation now is to simply get credit for those courses. Some of the participants in this study have stated directly or have given their instructor the impression that they are just concerned with passing their English classes, not necessarily with doing well. They could be interested in learning enough English to find a job after graduation (Brown, 2004), but mostly they seem to have given up on the possibility of learning something useful or interesting when presented with English learning opportunities in university. Introducing these students to the world of self-study through technology could convince them that English is useful, interesting, or both, thus helping increase the students' drive to learn.

3. Survey Results

Figure 1. The Type of Mobile Phone Students are Using

<i>Type of Mobile:</i>	Class 7 (n=35)	Class 8 (n=37)	Class 16 (n=33)	Class 18 (n=37)	Combined (n=142)
iPhone	30 (86%)	36 (97%)	25 (76%)	30 (81%)	121 (85%)
Android	7 (20%)	1 (3%)	8 (24%)	7 (19%)	23 (16%)

Flip phone	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	1 (.7%)
	*2 Class 7 respondents have both an iPhone and an android.			*1 Class 18 respondent has both an android and flip phone.	

121 (85%) of the respondents use iPhones, 23 (16%) use androids and 1 (.7%) uses a flip phone.

Figure II. Use of English study apps and homepages that the teacher recommended to the participants

<i>Future use of apps/sites</i>	<i>English Level</i>					
	<i>A1/A2</i>			<i>A2</i>		
	Class 7 (n=35)	Class 8 (n=37)	Comb- ined (n=72)	Class 16 (n=33)	Class 18 (n=37)	Comb- ined (n=70)
“I think I will use them a lot.”	3 (9%)	0 (0%)	3 (4%)	2 (6%)	3 (8%)	5 (7%)
“I would like to try using them.”	25 (71%)	31 (84%)	56 (78%)	22 (67%)	22 (59%)	44 (63%)
	<i>The most common reasons given for the top two selections were the usefulness, the possible improvement of English skills and that they could enjoy using the apps/websites.</i>					
“I don’t think I will use them much.”	5 (14%)	5 (13%)	10 (14%)	6 (18%)	7 (19%)	13 (19%)
“I don’t think I	2 (6%)	1 (3%)	3 (4%)	3 (9%)	5 (14%)	8 (11%)

will use them at all.”						
	<i>Reasons given for the bottom two selections were that they did not know how to use the app well, preferred paper books to devices for English study, did not have time, preferred an app interface in their native language (Chinese), did not see the point or just did not think they would study much English anyway.</i>					

Concerning the results in Figure IV., a significant number of students (78% of the A1/A2 level and 63% of the A2 level) reported that they wanted to try the teacher-recommended apps and websites for language learning. Only a few (4% of the A1/A2 level and 7% of the A2 level) of the participants responded that they would use the teacher-recommended apps and websites often.

Figure III. Recent use of apps and/or homepages (not teacher recommended)

	<i>A1/A2</i>		<i>A2</i>	
	Class 7 (n=35)	Class 8 (n=37)	Class 16 (n=33)	Class 18 (n=37)
<i>“YES” answers and frequency</i>	1 (3%) “only once” (1) “a few times” (1)	3 (8%) “only once” (3) “a few times” (3)	3 (9%) “a few times” (3)	5 (14%) “only once” (1) “a few times” (1) “many times” (5)
<i>Name of app/ website used:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hello Talk • TED 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-book in English • Target noTomo • Weblio • Google Translate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TOEIC English word list • Target no Tomo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idiom Navi English Dictionary • HuJiang • TOEIC 2000 words • TOEIC 500 idioms • TOEIC 800 ultimate word list • TOEIC Study Supplement

The above numbers show that few students (4 in the A1/A2 level and 8 in the A2 level) currently – during the school term in which the surveys were administered – are using other apps/websites for English learning, beyond the ones the teacher recommended. Also, a few A2 level students mentioned using TOEIC related apps, while A1/A2 level did not.

4. Analysis of Results

Concerning research question #1, “*What type of mobile phones are the participants using (iPhone, android, flip phone)?*”, given that a large majority of the student respondents use iPhones compared to androids or flip phones, and assuming this is an accurate sampling of Japanese university students, iPhone apps should be given priority in English teachers’ recommendation of apps to students.

Research question #2, “*How motivated (intent) are these students to use English learning apps and websites that the teacher recommended?*”, yields the most telling results in the study. There was a high number of participants in all classes saying they at least want to try the English learning apps and websites their teacher recommended. On the surface, this is a promising result in terms of the participants’ motivation to do English self-study. However, whether or not the students will actually use the apps or websites presented by the teacher is an unknown, and remains the participants’ reported intent, and therefore not a strong indicator of motivation to use the technology for learning English outside of class. Furthermore, on average, the A2 level respondents reported that they are less likely to use the teacher-recommended apps than the A1/A2 level. Because the A2 level is slightly higher, this point requires further study, but it could possibly be because more A2 level students have already found some language learning apps that they like, whereas many A1/A2 level students have not. Nonetheless, the results in Figure II do not match the previous oral reports given by the participants during class discussion after their encouraged app/website exploration time. These results show high interest in trying the apps/websites, but the oral reports of the participants during class exhibited that many did not have time or interest enough to even try using the apps, and if they did, most did not spend much time exploring.

Finally, research question #3, “*How motivated are these students to use English learning apps and websites beyond what the teacher recommended?*”, seeks to discover how many students are going beyond the teachers’ recommendations and using other apps/websites for English study. These results would exhibit higher learner motivation through mobile assistance, given that it is an attempt at learning without teacher instruction. However, the numbers of affirmative responses were very low, a total of 12 out of 142 students. The results in Figure III match the previous oral reports given by the participants during class discussion, with a majority of the students not spending any time or only spending minimal time using the teacher recommended apps/websites.

5. Discussion

The most noticeable limitation of this study is the absence of follow-up to see if students are indeed using the recommended apps/websites. A secondary study is necessary to measure the relationship between participants’ actual – not intended – use of English learning apps/websites and levels of motivation. Moreover, a more in-depth investigation into why the students did not put in more effort or spend more time during the at-home exploration activities with the teacher-recommend apps/websites would be enlightening.

Some variables in this study could have been eliminated by narrowing the sampling of students to those whose primary/native language is Japanese and who have gone through the Japanese high school system. This is because there are some respondents who have different native languages that could affect their experience with and choice of English learning apps, websites, etc. Different educational backgrounds of some Chinese and Korean students (having attended high school in their native land), would make irrelevant the rationale of their high school experience contributing to their low motivation to learn English. Ideally, survey questions should be added to identify those participants. In addition, further research could be conducted comparing the responses of Japanese versus non-Japanese students.

6. Conclusion

While the participants of this study do not seem opposed to the idea of learning English through apps and websites on their mobile phones, the results of this study show that they are not currently spending much time using the teacher-recommended apps/sites or other apps/sites for the purpose of English learning. Since all participants in this study already use a Smartphone, and the teacher-recommended apps and many other English learning apps available have no-cost options, convenience and cost are likely not the reason for the low results.

One concern is that since many students surveyed already have fairly low levels of motivation to learn English, they would probably lose interest quickly if they could not easily learn to use the apps/sites. This could be avoided if the teacher were to spend time in class modeling the use of the apps/sites and allowing students assisted practice time (Taylor, 2010). However, instructors would have to dedicate a significant amount of time to such instruction in spite of possible rigid curriculum requirements and holding class only once a week. A more practical approach is for teachers to recommend apps and websites that are user-friendly and have interfaces available in the participants' L1. In such a case there need not be extensive teacher instruction time for students to learn how to use the apps/sites.

In summation, MALL can be convenient, enjoyable, user-friendly, free-of-charge, and have the obvious benefit of helping students improve their English skills. If instructors are willing to spend a little time researching and recommending English learning apps and mobile-friendly websites to students, there should be no obstacle to prevent even the not-so-motivated students from attempting MALL. Hopefully the students' first experience with MALL will be positive enough to make it a long reaching habit.

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Appendix

Technology and English Learning Survey
テクノロジーと英語の学習に関するアンケート

This questionnaire is not related to your grade on the test or in this class, so please answer honestly. このアンケートは試験や授業の採点と関係ありませんので、正直にお答えください。

1. Please check which type of mobile phone you are currently using. (multiple answers are possible) 現在使用している携帯電話の種類をチェックしてください：
 (複数回答可)

	iPhone	
	Android	(iPhone 以外のスマートフォン)
	Flip phone	(ガラ携)

2. Concerning the use of English study apps and homepages that the teacher introduced in this class, please check the following. この授業で講師が紹介した英語を習うためのアプリやホームページの今後の利用について、下の項目を一つチェックしてください。

	I think I will use them a lot .	よく使うと思う。
	I would like to try using them.	使ってみたいと思う。
	I don't think I will use them much.	あまり使わないと思う。
	I don't think I will use them at all.	全然使わないと思う

Please give the reason for your answer above:

上記の答えの理由をここで説明してください：

3. Besides those that the teacher introduced in this class, are there any English study apps and/or homepages that you have used recently?
 この授業の講師が紹介しなかった物で、最近使っている英語を習うためのアプリやホームページがありますか?

	YES/ある		NEVER /ない
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IF YES, please check one or more boxes below about the frequency of use:

使っている場合、頻度を一つチェックしてください。

	Only once	一回のみ
	A few times	数回
	Many times	よく

IF YES, please give the name of the app(s) and/or homepage(s) that you used:

使っている場合、アプリやホームページの名前(複数回答可) を書いてください: