

The Effect of Instructor Intervention on the Usage of Mobile Devices for Informal Language Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the effect of a 10-week instructor intervention focusing on usage of informal mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). The research took place in a required English-language course in the Economics faculty at a major Japanese university. Prior to the intervention, the researcher administered an established survey instrument regarding informal MALL, which was modified and translated into Japanese with the permission of the authors. Over the course of four class sessions, the researcher introduced new resources that could be used for informal MALL. Every other week, students completed a reflective writing assignment regarding their usage of these resources. The informal MALL survey instrument was administered again at the end of the 10-week period in order to examine any changes that might have occurred due to the intervention. The results of paired sample *t*-tests indicated no significant difference in pre- and post-usage of mobile devices for informal language learning. However, the qualitative data gathered provided valuable insights to improve future interventions and obtain a favorable result.

Keywords: informal learning, mobile-assisted language learning, instructor influence, classroom intervention

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Introduction

Mobile devices have become ubiquitous in the lives of most people. Almost every task today, from socializing to shopping, is undertaken with the aid of smartphones and tablets. As educational tools, mobile technology provides students with 24-hour access to educational content no matter where they are. While mobile learning can take place in both formal or non-formal educational settings, the unique characteristics of the technology makes it particularly suitable for informal learning tasks (Chen, 2013; Jones, Scanlon, & Clough, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme, 2010). For language learners, there is an ever-growing library of applications that are available to facilitate self-directed study, and an unlimited supply of authentic materials as well as speakers of the target language that can be used for incidental acquisition (Demouy, Jones, Kan, Kukulska-Hulme, & Eardly, 2016). Although autonomy and self-initiation are essential to informal language learning, previous research has shown that instructors can have an influence on students' propensity to engage in both self-directed and incidental language learning (Mills, 2016). To this end, it is important to examine in what ways instructors can intervene in their classrooms in order to assist in bridging formal language study with informal learning. This is essential, since the amount of time students come in contact with the target language in the classroom is rarely sufficient for high levels of proficiency to develop.

Literature Review

Mobile-assisted language learning. In recent years, mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablet computers, have become increasingly integrated in our lives. According to the Pew Research Institute (2018), 77% of US adults own a smartphone, and 95% own a mobile phone of some kind. That percentage of smartphone ownership is even higher among respondents aged 18-29 (94%). The ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2018 (Galanek, Gierdowski, & Brooks, 2018) showed that 95% of students around the world possessed smartphones and used them regularly for educational activities. Due to the access university students have to these devices, as well as their portability and flexibility, there is an interest among researchers and educators in mobile learning in general and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in particular (Viberg & Grönlund, 2012). Developing a high-level of proficiency in a foreign or second language requires extensive exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981, 1985, 1992) and opportunities for interaction (Long, 1996) in the target language. Both of these are facilitated by mobile technologies that can provide the learner with 24-hour access to target language content and the ability to access these resources in any place with a wi-fi or cellular connection.

While mobile devices can be used in classroom settings, they are particularly valuable for informal learning that takes place outside of the classroom. Yet, studies focusing on informal MALL are underrepresented in the literature (Demouy et al., 2016). This is most likely due to the difficulty in gathering accurate data from students outside of controlled environments who are often utilizing their personal devices. Due to these limitations, studies focusing on informal MALL tend to rely on self-reported data from the participants. In one query of Japanese university students' usage and acceptance of mobile devices for informal language learning (Mills, 2016) participants reported using their mobile devices for both incidental and self-directed

language learning outside of the classroom. However, they were more likely to engage in passive activities such as listening to music or using dictionary applications, rather than active tasks like making posts on social media sites or playing interactive digital games. Lai and Zheng (2017) found in their study of Hong Kong university students that learning activities associated with the construct of personalization (e.g. dictionary and translation applications) were engaged in to a greater degree than activities associated with the constructs of authenticity (e.g. watching videos) or social connection (e.g. social networking sites). Both Mills (2016) as well as Lai and Zheng (2017) asserted that further research needed to be conducted on the factors that influence usage and task selection in informal MALL. One such factor identified by Mills (2016) was the influence of instructors on student engagement in informal MALL.

Action research. Action research is a method of investigation which focuses on giving agency to practitioner/researchers to explore practical solutions to problems they face in the context in which they teach. This is in contrast to more formal research inquiries, which are conducted by impartial observers in order to maintain the validity and reliability of the results of the study. According to the “Glossary of Educational Reform,” the general goal of action research is “to create a simple, practical, repeatable process of iterative learning, evaluation, and improvement that leads to increasingly better results for schools, teachers, or programs” (para. 1).

The practice of action research can be visually represented by a series of steps laid out in a cyclical pattern (Figure 1). The process of working in such a cyclical manner, constantly reflecting and improving upon interventions has been identified by Burns (2005) as one of the benefits of the methodology. The action research cycle, as laid out below, encompasses four steps. The first is planning the intervention to solve an instructional problem identified by the practitioner-researcher. Second, the intervention is implemented in the action stage over a set period of time. Third, the results of the intervention are observed and measured through various quantitative and qualitative means. Finally, the practitioner-researcher reflects on the results and evaluates how to move forward either in adopting the intervention or improving upon it (Burns, 2010).

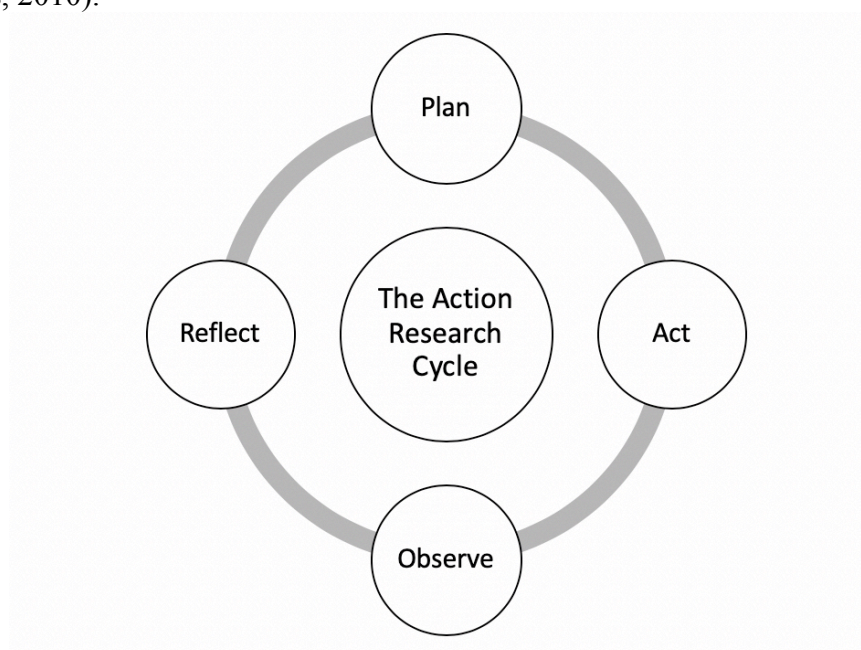


Figure 1: The action research cycle (Burns, 2010)

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this action research study was to examine how a 10-week instructional intervention affected student engagement in informal MALL. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What changes to usage of informal MALL, as measured by a quantitative survey, occurred following an intervention by the instructor?
2. To what extent did participants use the learning applications presented during the intervention?
3. What reasons did participants give for non-usage of the learning applications presented during the intervention?
4. How could the intervention be improved to increase attitudes towards and usage of informal MALL?

Methodology

Setting and sample. The setting of this action research project was a required information and communications English course held at a private, Japanese university. The course is offered in three levels; pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate. Sixty-six students were enrolled in the course; 57 students participated in the pre-survey and 46 in the post-survey. Engagement in the bi-weekly reflective writing assignment depended on the students' attendance that day.

Participants. All participants were first-year Economics students who identified as ethnic Japanese. The students in this course were placed at the intermediate level based on the results of a standardized test of English called the Communication Assessment System for Global Communication (CASEC.) The majority of students enrolled in the class were male (73.9%). Female students represented 26.1% of the class.

Intervention. The instructional intervention, including quantitative and qualitative data collection, took place over a 10-week period. The quantitative instrument was administered in weeks one and ten. In weeks two, four, six, and eight, students were presented with a PDF document that defined informal MALL and then introduced a learning application or website that could be accessed by mobile device. In weeks three, five, seven, and nine participants were asked to answer several questions regarding their usage of the application or device introduced in the previous week. Figure 2 gives a graphic representation of the 10-week intervention.

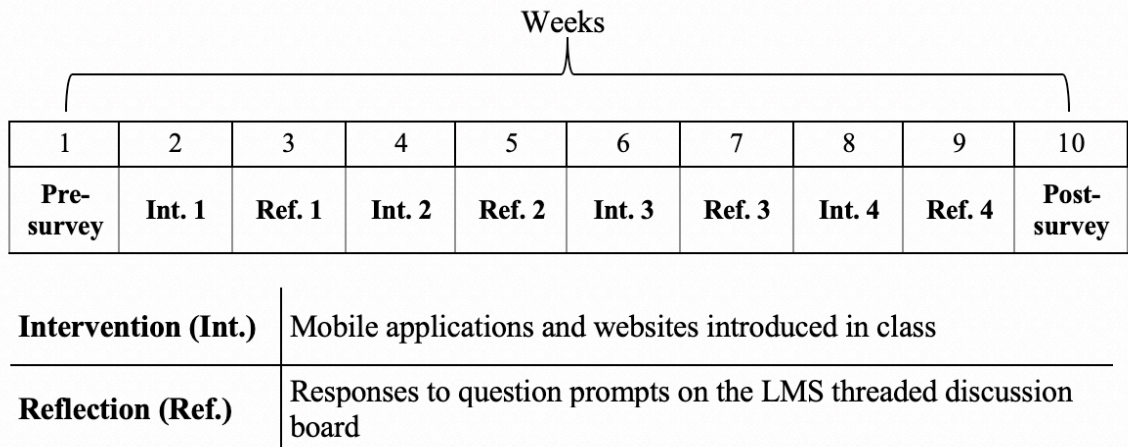


Figure 2: Overview of the intervention

The PDF document that described the informal MALL applications and websites was made available to the students on the course's learning management system (LMS). The PDF was uploaded at the start of the class and was available for the students to view and download throughout the semester. In weeks two, four, six, and eight, the instructor gave a brief explanation and provided about 15-20 minutes of class time for the students to use the application/website. He then reminded the students that they were under no obligation to use the resource presented after class, but it would be beneficial to do so if they wished to improve their English proficiency. The PDF documents used in the intervention phase can be found in the Appendix 1 of this article.

Quantitative instrument. The quantitative instrument was administered on Google Forms via a link posted on the course's LMS. The survey consisted of three sections: (1) dimensions of MALL usage, (2) frequency of informal MALL usage of devices and activities, and (3) demographics. The Dimensions of MALL scale was developed by Lai and Zheng (2017) and was translated for use in this study by permission of the authors. This scale is divided into three dimensions of MALL usage: (1) personalization, (2) authenticity, and (3) connectivity. Responses were based on a six-point Likert-scale where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 6 indicated "strongly agree." A three-step method was used to translate the instrument. First, the researcher, a native English speaker with a high-intermediate Japanese-language ability, did an initial translation of the items. Then, two Japanese native speakers with advanced English-language ability checked the translation against the original English and made suggestions for improvement. Finally, two native Japanese speakers who are educational technology experts examined the translation and made their recommendations. The original items as well as the final translations can be found in the table below:

Construct	Original	Translation
Personalization	Mobile learning gives immediate support to my language learning	モバイルラーニングは、即時に私の英語学習をサポートしてくれる
	Mobile devices enable me to learn the language at any time and any place	モバイル機器を使うことで、いつでもどこでも英語学習ができる

	Mobile devices help me comprehend and use the target language whenever and wherever I need it	モバイル機器は必要な時や場所で英語を理解すること、使用することを助けてくれる
	Mobile devices enable me to have self-paced, personalized language learning outside the classroom	モバイル機器を使うことで、自分のペースで自分に合った英語学習ができる
	Mobile learning is a flexible method of learning, as it can be done anytime, anywhere	モバイル学習は柔軟性のある学習方法で、いつでもどこでも学習ができる
	Mobile devices help extend my language learning experience beyond the language class	モバイル機器は英語学習経験を、英語の授業よりもさらに伸ばしてくれる
	Mobile devices increase my autonomous learning of the language	モバイル機器は英語の自主的な学習の増やしてくれる
	Mobile devices provide opportunities to act independently in learning the target language	モバイル機器は英語を独学で学ぶ機会をあたえてくれる
Authenticity	Mobile devices make my language learning experience more authentic	モバイル機器は英語学習経験をさらに現実的にしてくれる
	Mobile devices enhance my willingness to participate in social events hosted in the target language	モバイル機器は英語で開催される交流イベントに参加する意欲を高めてくれる
	Mobile devices increase my participation in target language social communities	モバイル機器は英語のソーシャル・コミュニティへの参加に参加することを増やしてくれる
	Mobile devices enhance the authenticity of my language learning resources and activities	モバイル機器は英語学習のリソースやアクティビティーの現実性を高めてくれる
Connectivity	Mobile devices enhance my interaction with others in the target language	モバイル機器は英語言語での他者との交流を高めてくれる
	Mobile devices enhance my connection with peer learners of the target language	モバイル機器は他の英語学習者とのつながりを高めてくれる
	Mobile devices connect me with speakers of the language	モバイル機器は英語のネイティブまたは英語上級者をつなげてくれる
	Mobile devices enhance my connection with the target language community	モバイル機器は英語のネイティブまたは英語上級者とのつながりを強めてくれる

Table 1: Dimensions of MALL usage (original and translated items)

The frequency scale used in the study was created by the researcher (Mills, 2016). The scale was based on research regarding mobile learning (Cheung & Hew, 2009; Patten, Arnedillo-Sánchez, & Tangney, 2006), a scale developed to measure informal MALL activity (Santos & Ali, 2011), and the personal experience and observation of the researcher. The participants reported their frequency in using mobile devices to engage in activities such as playing video games, surfing the internet, and listening to music in English. The frequency scale contained five points including 1 (*never*), 2 (*rarely*), 3 (*occasionally*), 4 (*frequently*), 5 (*very frequently*). Respondents were also asked which devices they used to engage in these activities and whether they mainly

did so consciously (self-directed learning) or unconsciously (incidental learning). To ensure participants' responses were uniform, they were provided with definitions of the key terms, mobile devices and informal English-language learning, in Japanese.

Below is an English translation of those definitions:

Mobile devices are smartphones, tablet computers, MP3 players and other portable, hand-held, electronic devices that can be used for the learning of languages.

Informal English-language learning is any activity that has the potential to improve your proficiency in English but is not directly related to structured classes like the ones you take at university or at a private language school. Informal English-language learning can occur consciously (i.e., watching an English-language movie for the purpose of study) or unconsciously (i.e., watching an English-language movie for entertainment).

Reflective writing activity. In the class following each intervention, students were asked to reflect on their usage of the application/website that had been introduced. The reflective activity was completed using the “threaded discussion” section of the course’s LMS. First, the students were reminded of the previous week’s intervention and then asked several questions regarding their usage or non-usage. Below (Figure 3) is an example of the bi-weekly reflective activity. The questions were the same each week, only the name of the resource changed.

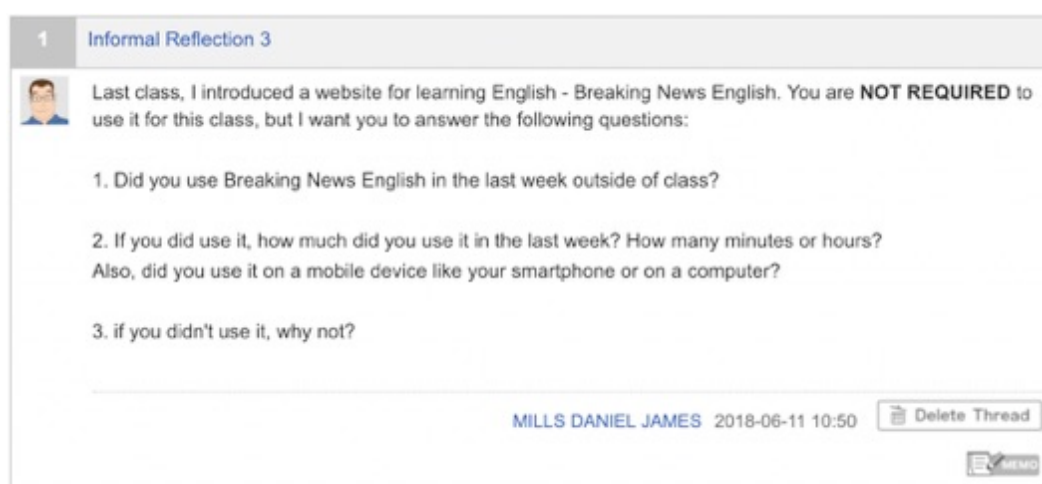


Figure 3: Example of reflective writing activity prompt

Figure 4 shows a typical response of one of the students. As can be seen, responses were usually quite short.

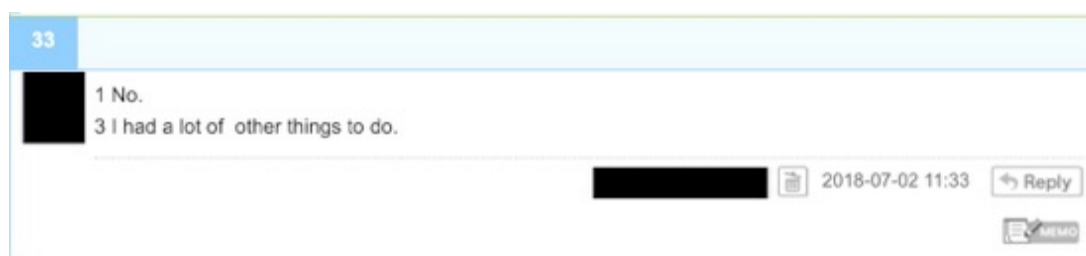


Figure 4: Example of a student response to the reflective writing activity

Data collection and analysis. Data collection was conducted over a 10-week period that included a pre- and post-survey, four intervention activities, and four reflective writing activities. Both pre- and post-surveys were created using Google Forms. A link to the survey was prepared and delivered to the students through a post in the “announcements” section of the course LMS. In the class scheduled for the survey, the researcher pointed out the link and asked students to complete the survey. However, the researcher explained that participation in the study was voluntary and would not affect the students’ grades. Once the survey link was opened, participants were able to read an explanation of the study as well as a letter addressing their rights as research subjects in Japanese. Completion of the survey signified consent to participate in the study. The link for both pre- and post-survey were accessible for one week. After the data was collected, it was input to a SPSS worksheet. Frequencies were calculated for all items. Missing values in the data set were replaced by the series mean. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all scales and sub-scales, and a paired sample *t*-test was computed to examine differences that occurred in the pre- and post-survey responses.

The reflective writing activity was conducted over four classes during the 10-week period. After all the writing activities were completed, the responses were placed in an Excel. Open-coding was used to analyze the patterns that emerged in the responses. Themes were created and the responses were sorted based on category (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Flick, 2006).

Results and Discussion

Research question 1. The data revealed that the highest mean values were associated with the personalization sub-scale and the total scale in both the pre- and post-survey. However, it was surprising that the means of the total scale and all sub-scales decreased after the intervention. One possibility is that by the time the intervention was finishing, students were entering the final few weeks of the semester. The pressure of preparing for final exams and the excitement of the upcoming holiday may have led them to see informal MALL activities as less important in their lives at that time. Table 2 below shows the means and standard deviations of the total scale and sub-scales both before and after the intervention:

Scale	Pre		Post	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Dimensions of MALL (Total Scale)	4.20	.903	3.98	1.15
Personalization	4.55	.940	4.43	1.11
Authenticity	3.86	1.24	3.54	1.38
Connectivity	3.83	1.20	3.50	1.49

Note. Likert-scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree

Table 2: Means and standard deviations of total scale and sub-scales

The results of paired sample *t*-tests indicated that there was no significant difference between pre- and post-survey results in terms of the total scale or sub-scales.

Similarly, data regarding the usage of particular mobile devices and activities showed that there was little change before and after the intervention. The greatest change in device usage was seen with an increase in mobile phones and a decrease in portable game consoles. In general, mobile devices were the most used device for informal MALL. The least used device was portable game consoles.

Device	Pre	Post	Change
Mobile Phone	94.7%	97.8%	+3.1%
MP3 player	17.5%	17.4%	-0.1%
Reader	15.8%	17.4%	+1.6%
Tablet	19.3%	17.4%	-1.9%
Game	5.3%	2.2%	-3.1%

Table 3: Percentage of students who use a particular device for informal MALL

In regard to activities, participants reported the greatest positive change in usage of games. The largest reduction in usage was seen with English-language news. While listening to English-language music was the activity participants said they engaged in the most, using dictionary applications, watching movies, TV, and videos (e.g. YouTube) was also ranked highly. These findings corroborate earlier work by the researcher (Mills, 2016) as well as Lai and Zheng's 2017 study which showed that students tend to engage in passive activities rather than ones that require more active use of the target language such as social networking sites and English-language games.

Activity	Pre	Post	Change
Websites	24.5%	21.8%	-2.7%
SNS	24.5%	21.7%	-2.8%
Apps	29.8%	23.9%	-5.9%
Games	14.0%	17.4%	+3.4%
Music	58.6%	60.8%	+2.2%
Audio	28.1%	21.7%	-6.4%
Video	40.4%	43.4%	+3.0%
Movies/TV	43.9%	43.5%	-.40%
Dictionary	45.7%	43.5%	-2.2%
Translation	36.8%	39.1%	+2.3%
News	17.6%	6.5%	-11.1%

Table 4: Percentage of students who engage in a particular informal MALL activity frequently or always

The total usage scale measure had a mean score of 2.80 in the pre-survey and 2.89 in the post survey. A paired sample *t*-test showed not significant difference between the results.

Research question 2. The second research question looked at participants' usage of the specific applications and websites introduced in the intervention. It was quite disappointing to see that engagement with these resources was low, even when students expressed great interest in the classroom session. This was the case with Lyrics Training, which the students seemed to really enjoy. The data regarding

informal MALL collected to answer question one demonstrated that listening to English-language music was the most engaged in activity. However, when asked to do so in a more active way, like filling in an interactive gap-fill while listening, only eight out of 43 did so in the week following the intervention. The website which was least used after the intervention was Talking English, which is a site specifically for Japanese learners of English.

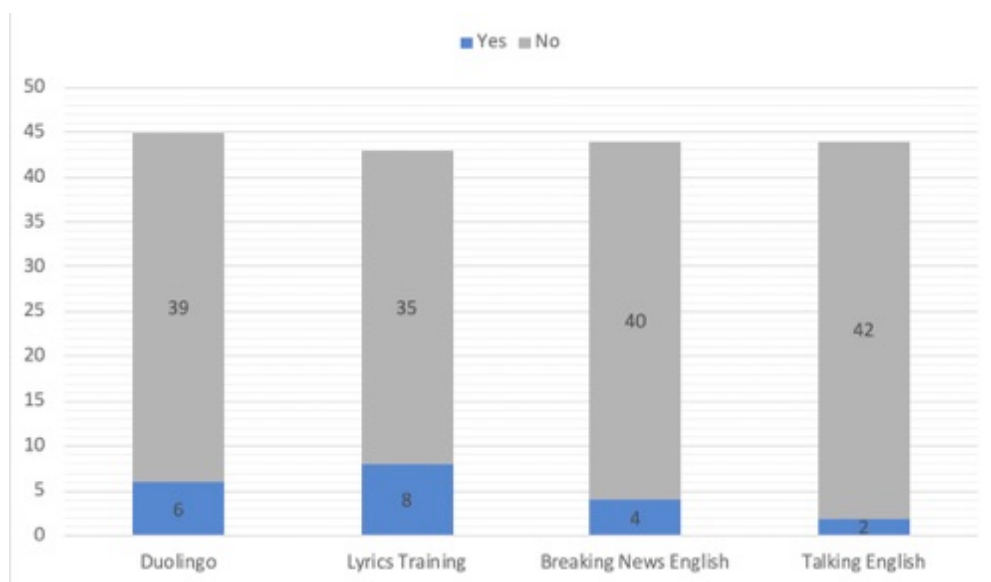


Figure 5: The number of students who used the resource is in blue, while the number who did not use it are in gray

Research question 3. In order to improve future interventions, the researcher queried participants regarding the reason why they did not use the resources which were introduced. By far, most participants stated that their reason for non-usage was being too busy. This is unsurprising since Japanese university students often take 10 classes each semester, about double of a student in the US. English classes actually earn less credit than the courses in their field of study, so this might make study of core subjects more important. Many students also reported forgetting about the applications and websites after leaving the class. Fifteen percent described other reasons for not using the resources. Some of these reasons were that the resource was too easy or too difficult, the student was absent from the class, they did not receive class points for using it, or they simply were not interested in it. Figure 6 provides percentages associated with each response category:

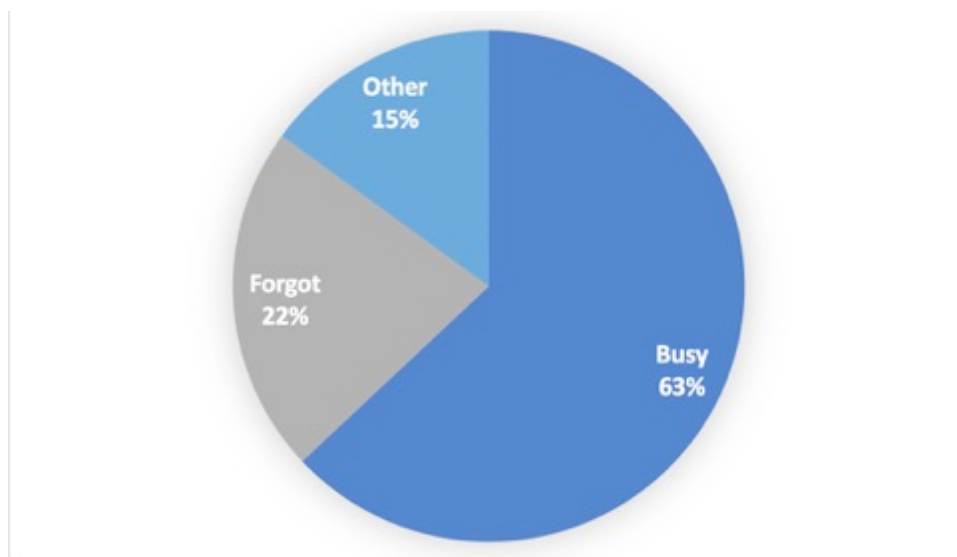


Figure 6. Student responses as to why they did not use the resources introduced during the intervention

Research question 4. Based on the results of questions one to three, it became apparent that the intervention would need to improve in subsequent iterations. To that end, the researcher identified several ways that such a project could be modified based on his own experience and the advice of other researchers and educators. First, the resources were chosen for the intervention solely by the instructor. Students were not queried about their learning needs or the types of websites/applications that they preferred. In addition, information about these resources were delivered from the top down. It may have been more beneficial to adopt a student-centered approach when presenting the resources to the class. For example, small groups of students could have worked together to choose and then present their selection for informal learning resources.

Another issue that could have been improved was for the instructor to provide more instruction regarding informal learning and its benefits for language learning. Further, while the focus of this study was informal learning, which is characterized by student volition and autonomy, it might have been advantageous to require usage of the intervention resources for a period of time, so that they could see how helpful they were. The hope, of course, would be that students would then adopt these resources for informal study based on the previous positive experience. Finally, in order to properly execute a follow-up study with the above suggestions, a longer time horizon is indicated.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to investigate how a 10-week instructional intervention affected students' usage of mobile devices for informal learning. However, responses to a post- and pre-survey showed that there were no significant differences, and in some cases, mean scores were actually reduced in the post-survey. In addition, the majority of students did not use the mobile applications and websites introduced during the intervention after leaving the class. Responses in reflective writing activities revealed that the main reasons that participants did not use the

intervention resources outside of the class were because they were too busy or forgot about them. Based on these results and through conference with other educators and researchers, it was determined that several changes need to be made in order to achieve a better result with a redesigned intervention.

The researcher has decided to create a plan of implementation that will encompass two fifteen-week semesters. The first semester will be dedicated to planning and the second semester will focus on the intervention. In the first semester, the researcher will utilize the SAM (Successive Approximation Model) 1 (Allen Interaction, n.d.) of instructional design in order properly assess learning needs and preferences of learning resources. In the second semester, a modified action research model will be applied to implement the modified intervention. In addition, for the purpose of increasing the integrity of the study, it is the researcher's plan to recruit participants from several ICT classes. In this way, one class will receive an instructor-centered intervention, the second will feature an intervention which is more student-centered, and the final class will serve as a control. Figure 7 offers a visual representation of the planned improvements to the intervention:

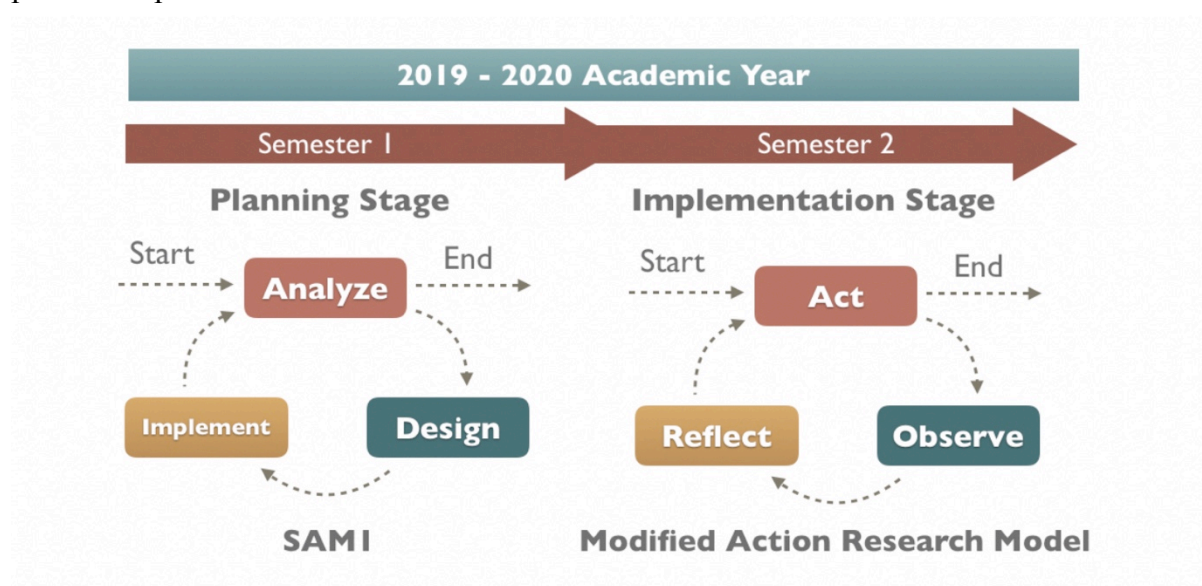


Figure 7: Second iteration of the informal MALL intervention

While a positive result was not achieved in the current study, the researcher continues to believe that interventions leading to increased student engagement in informal language learning will lead to better educational outcomes in EFL and ESL classrooms. The preliminary study featured here revealed important information regarding the struggles of students to engage in out-of-class learning related and hopefully shed some light on how those struggles can be addressed.

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Appendix 1

Informal MALL Resource Example

モバイル機器とは

モバイル機器とはスマートフォン、タブレット、MP3プレーヤーのような携帯することができ、手に持って操作ができる電子機器で、言語教育に利用可能なものです。

インフォーマル英語学習とは

インフォーマル（非公式）英語学習とは、構造化された授業、例えば大学の英語の授業や英会話スクールのレッスンなどに直接関わりのない学習で、英語の上達につながる可能性がある活動全てを意味します。

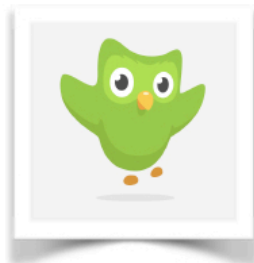
インフォーマル英語学習は意識的に、また無意識に行われます。

例え) 意識的とは・・・英語の映画を英語の勉強のために観ること無意識的とは・・・英語の映画を娯楽のために観ること

Informal Mobile Learning Resource #1: Duolingo

What is it?

Duolingo is a freemium language-learning platform that includes a language-learning website and app, as well as a digital language proficiency assessment exam. Their goal is to give everyone access to a private tutor experience through technology. As of November 2016, the language-learning website and app offer 68 different language courses across 28 languages, with 8 additional courses in beta and 15 additional courses in development. The app has about 200 million registered users across the world. - Wikipedia



Website:

<https://www.duolingo.com/>

