

A Study of WeChat-supporting College English Mobile Learning in China

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Abstract: Based on theoretical analysis and function analysis of WeChat, this paper discusses the feasibility and application of adopting WeChat software in college English mobile learning, which consists of the integration of autonomous learning with collaborative learning, integration of language input with output, and integration of teacher guidance with affectation reinforcement. Finally, this paper discusses possible problems of WeChat -supporting mobile English learning and propose several countermeasures.

Keywords: WeChat, college English, mobile learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

In China, college English courses consist of compulsory courses and selective courses. In most universities the credits for compulsory English courses are between 13 and 16, and more and more universities are gradually reducing the credits required for college English courses. Under such conditions, the class hours allocated for college English class teaching are gradually decreasing, and thus classroom teaching is restricted.

Meanwhile, classroom teaching crises are prevalent in these limited college English class hours. First, it is limited knowledge sources. With the development of network information technology, students can quickly and easily get access to the necessary knowledge and problem-solving solutions from the network, so teachers are no longer the only channel for knowledge acquisition, and students are no longer satisfied with the limited information from teachers; Second, traditional teaching model comes to the list. Students are no longer satisfied with the teacher-centered one-way information-based traditional teaching methods. Instead, they hope teachers can take into account of their needs and give them opportunities to participate in classroom teaching; Third, it is English learning motivation. Under the influence of social environment and evaluation system, students hold utilitarian motive in English learning. They attach more importance to the scores in examinations, neglecting improvement in comprehensive ability and lacking in continuous learning impetus. The above reasons result in some students' dissatisfaction with college English teaching, even worse, students' soft resistance to college English teaching, which severely hinders teachers' enthusiasm as well as students' improvement in English learning.

WeChat is an instant messaging software launched by Tencent in January, 2011. From then on, WeChat has received wide attention and large-scale use. In social networking, WeChat has partially replaced other former communication tools and has even become a necessity for a larger part of the public and the majority of the young students.

This paper attempts to integrate WeChat with college English mobile learning to meet students personalized needs of college English learning, expand learning time and space of college English and then optimize the learning outcomes.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Mobile learning

In recent years, many researches have studied on mobile learning and accordingly what exactly mobile learning is having also been developed. Winters(2006) noted that the definitions that various researches on mobile learning have used roughly fall into four categories: First, mobile learning as techno centric, where learning is seen as something that makes use of mobile devices, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and mobile phones; Second, defined by its relationship to e-learning, where mobile learning is seen as an extension of e learning; third, as augmenting formal education; and fourth, as learner centered, enabling the possibility of lifelong learning. However, these do not cover the unique selling point of mobile learning which is closely associated with the transfer of learning contexts.

For this reason, mobile learning can be best described as “the processes (both personal and public) of coming to know through exploration and conversation across multiple contexts amongst people and interactive technologies” (Sharple, etc., 2007).

2.2 Social constructivism

From a social constructivist perspective, learning does not happen in isolation but in the interaction between contexts and other people. Learning context is of great importance to students in providing information resources and retrieval clue of knowledge. As for WeChat-supporting college English mobile learning, the richness of information input and the interactive and situational characteristics of learning context are beneficial to students’ active knowledge construction.

2.3 General systems theory (GST)

The core idea of systematic instructional design theory is the systematic view, which advocates learning system as a unified system, and takes learning preparation, implementation, evaluation and feedback as a whole process. Therefore, in designing and implementing WeChat -supporting mobile learning, the system elements such as students, teachers, teaching materials, learning situations should be taken into account. Moreover, the links between the steps in the mobile learning process should also be taken into consideration. Only through effective interaction among system components, and continuous feedback from students and teachers, optimization and adjustment of the mobile learning system, can the WeChat-supporting college English mobile learning serve students better.

3. FEASIBILITY OF INTEGRATING WECHAT INTO COLLEGE ENGLISH MOBILE LEARNING

3.1 Policy guarantee and environmental support

In the "Ten-year Development Plan for Education Informationization (2011-2020)", China stresses the importance of promoting the integration of information technology into higher education in order to promote the modernization of learning materials, teaching methods and approaches, so as to cultivate innovative talents. Moreover, China will accelerate the development of information technology and higher education, digital transformation of courses, innovation of information technology integrated teaching and learning, and enhancement of personalized interactive teaching and learning. Moreover, in 2015, China Ministry of Education made it clear in its informationization plan that "urge and guide various types of schools to explore the construction of e-learning space and the application of effective mechanisms to accelerate the construction of network learning space encourage teachers and students to use network space to carry out network teaching and research, interactive communication, autonomous learning, and explore new models of adopting information technology to promoting teaching reform, and improving teaching efficiency and results."

3.2 WeChat functions and unique characteristics

As a new form of internet media, the functions and unique characteristics of WeChat can be categorized into three groups.

3.2.1 Platform functions

First, there are a wide choice of operating platforms for WeChat, like IOS, Android, Windows Phone, BlackBerry, Symbian, Microsoft Windows, Mac OS, and Web. With these operating platforms, WeChat supports mobile learning, digital learning, mixed learning, ubiquitous learning, and fragmented learning. Second, WeChat provides open platform functions of mobile application development, and public account development. With the interfaces provided by these open platform functions, related learning materials can be sent to the designated WeChat friends or be shared with friends in WeChat friend circle.

Third, as for the public platform of WeChat, it provides service account, and subscription account functions. With these functions, WeChat supports function expansion and can realize group material sharing, automatic reply, and designated sharing of relevant materials with subscribed users.

3.2.2 Communication functions

First, the instant communication functions of WeChat consist of sending text, pictures, voice, and video, video chat, sharing of locations, and just-in-time intercom. These functions can be used in communication and interaction between students and teachers. Moreover, Q &A as well as personalized guidance can also be realized through these communication functions.

Second, the group chat functions of WeChat can realize multi-people communication at the same time so collaborative learning, group learning, discussion and sharing of resources can be facilitated through this function.

3.2.3 Social network functions

First, the friend circle function of WeChat can be used to publish pictures, messages, and videos in WeChat friends circle. Through "like" click and comments, communication and interaction among

WeChat friends can be realized. So, learning resources and learning reflections can also be published and shared. Interactive comments and evaluation can also be realized through this function. Second, the friends adding functions of WeChat include WeChat account search, QQ friends, contacts, WeChat account sharing, people near finding, shaking, and drift bottles. With so many easy ways, learning group or community construction will be easy and learning resources, support, and help can also be easily got access to. WeChat affordances for mobile learning are shown in Fig.1.

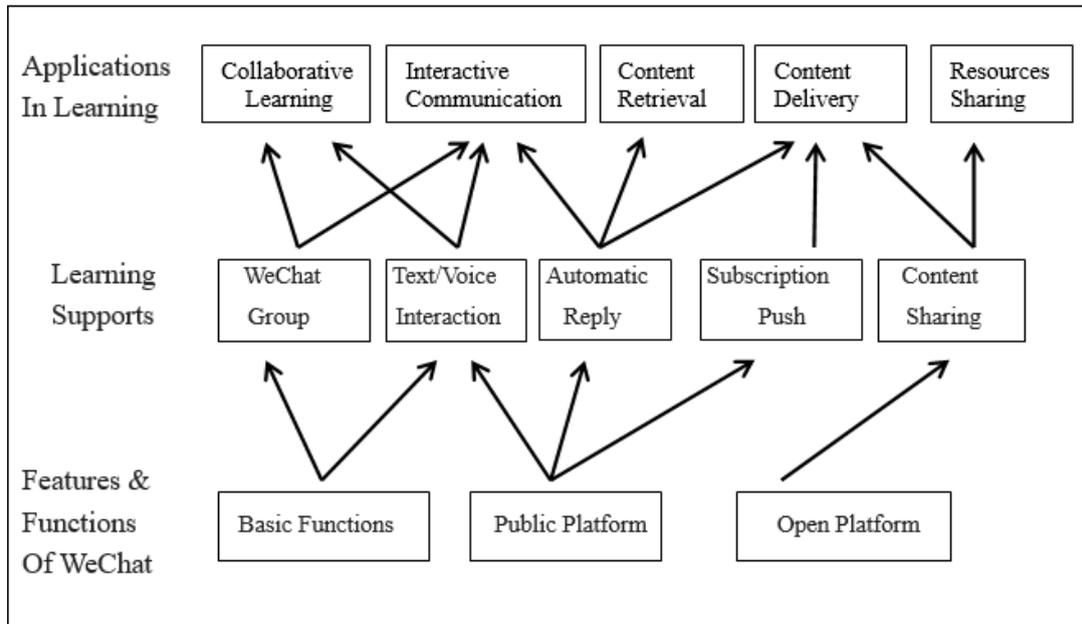


Fig.1 WeChat Affordances for Mobile Learning

3.3 Integration of autonomous learning with collaborative learning

The suggested WeChat -supporting college English mobile learning model is displayed in Fig.2. First, the teacher applies for a WeChat public account and build a WeChat group to construct an interactive and personalized mobile learning environment for students. With the help of WeChat platform and teachers' guidance, students do autonomous learning and collaborative learning in the skill practice of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, which can supplement the limited practice in scarce class hours. In addition, through group presentation and group interaction, this way of learning can motivate students to reflect on their study and integrate others useful learning gains into their learning and hence the learning outcome will be improved.

3.4 Integration of language input with output

Students' "cultural perception" and "identity orientation" are laid emphasis on in integration of language input with output. After the teacher does students analysis and learning objective analysis, the teachers can stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning by presenting interesting videos or hot-spot links to students, which may include overall learning objective or subordinate objective in this class and real-life language contexts can also be provided with WeChat platform. By this way, it will be easier to motivate students and through teacher-student and student-student interaction, students' listening and speaking ability as well as cross-cultural perception ability will be enhanced too. Besides, teacher's role in the WeChat-supporting college English mobile learning environment

has been transferred to an organizer, guide, and supervisor. Accordingly, students have more control in their learning process and their new identity will be reoriented.

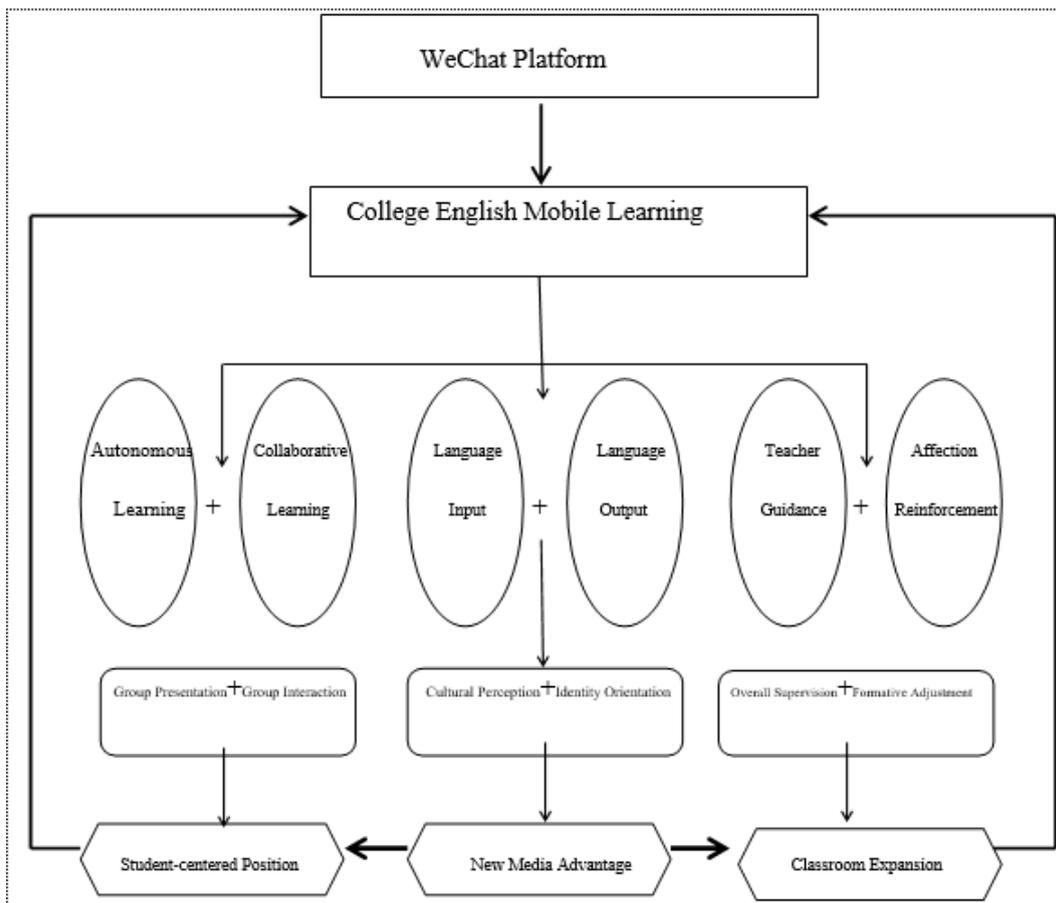


Fig.2 WeChat -supporting College English Mobile Learning Model

3.5 Integration of teacher guidance with affection reinforcement

This means the teacher gives the overall supervision over students and meanwhile provide students with affection reinforcement, so the traditional classes can achieve necessary expansion in time and space. With the help of WeChat, students can do self-assessment and peer assessment with the help of assessment tool and material in WeChat platform. Through the timely feedback from students, teachers can focus more on the improvement of students' learning strategies and efficiency and then more time can be spared for optimizing teaching and learning. More important, with the help of WeChat, college English teachers can be better aware of students' study, life, and thinking and then give them some help and suggestions accordingly, which can be an important supplement to the communication loss and affection absence in traditional college English class teaching.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

During the WeChat-supporting college English mobile learning, several possible problems may arise. First, there may be distraction of smart phones in students' mobile learning. Since smart phones are not only a useful tool for mobile learning but also a convenient tool for entertainment. During the process of learning, if students do not have enough self-control, they may be distracted from English learning and use smart phones doing other learning-unrelated things instead. Second, students may experience anxiety from the difficult learning materials. In autonomous learning, some students may

have some questions and problems. If these questions and problems are not answered or solved in time, they will accumulate to such an extent that contribute to students' anxiety and then hinders students' motivation and confidence. Third, discount in collaborative learning may arise. In group learning, only with active participation can students realize better deep learning, if the task allocation in group work is not clear and students do not participate actively, the transferring of deep learning in collaborative learning will be discounted.

Therefore, the design of learning materials and construction of learning community should be put more effort on. For example, learning material needs to be micronized, which can be done in students' fragmentized time. Besides, gamification can be applied in the design of learning materials to make it more interesting and hold students' interest for a longer time. Moreover, formative assessment of students need to be integrated into the learning process, through which students as well as teachers can adjust learning and teaching in time and to the point. And diverse assessment tools need to be employed to maintain students' confidence and help them achieve satisfaction. To make the learning communities in the WeChat platforms more prolific and effective, culture and rules need to be constructed through collaborative efforts from both students and teachers. As a new form of learning, in future more needs to be tested and perfected in the process of WeChat-supporting college English mobile learning.

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