

Designing strategic mobile-assisted language learning activity aimed at minimizing cultural attributes

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Abstract: In this paper, we describe our experience to design mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) activity. The participants learned new knowledge in class and then applied it to the real world using mobile devices. Several strategies were applied by the instructors during the learning process to minimize cultural attributes of language learners inherent in Asian countries. In this study, we tested how our strategic learning activity can minimize cultural attributes of language learners inherent in Asian culture. Our results demonstrated that the strategic learning activity was useful in minimizing the cultural attributes, such as shyness, reservedness, passiveness, inhibition, lack of confidence, risk-avoidance, test-oriented learning, reliance on teachers for knowledge, memorization and lack of creativity. Based on these results, we provide some implications and useful suggestions for educators and researchers.

Keywords: MALL, activity, cultural attributes, Asian culture

1. Introduction

Scholars argued that some specific cultural attributes to language learning exist in Asian countries (Goh, Quek, & Lee, 2010). Some of them influence learning performance negatively. In the following, we provide ten attributes with their definitions we found from the literature (Goh et al., 2010; Loh & Teo, 2017; Meyer, 2012; Talley, 2014; Tran, 2013): (1) Shyness – Being nervous or reserved to communicate in the target language around other people; (2) Reservedness – Refrained from expressing their thoughts and views in front of others; (3) Passiveness – A passive student usually takes a backseat in most learning activities; (4), Inhibition – Unable to act in a relaxed and natural way; (5) Lack of confidence – Low degree of the trust or faith that a student has in her/himself and his/her abilities; (6) Risk-avoidance – The elimination of learning activities that can result to unpleasant situations; (7) Test-oriented learning – Usage of examination in which the outcome determines student academic performance; (8) Reliance on teachers for knowledge – Students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher; (9) Memorization – Committing something to memory; (10) Lack of creativity – Lack of usage of imagination or original ideas to create something.

Rapee et al. (2011) suggested that these factors may be partly influenced by cultural norms and expectations. Biggs (1996) mentioned about Confucian-heritage cultures. According to Goh et al. (2010), it values a quiet, self-effacing behavioral style including modesty, social harmony, and deference to parents. Biggs (1996) argued that under Confucianism students show their great respect to the knowledgeable teacher and passivity and reticence are indications of such respect. So it is both acceptable and desirable for students to have shy and withdrawn behaviors, and they not only listen to but also obey their teacher and challenging the teacher by asking questions is not acceptable. However, these attributes impede language learning and performance. Aubrey (2011) suggested that these issues can be addressed through adopting various strategies. Tsui (1996) concluded that the degree of these attributes in the language classroom largely depends on the instructors' strategies; successful strategies minimize negative effects on language learning. Talley (2014) argued that

scaffolding students by the instructors is one useful strategy to remediate the above-mentioned issues.

To the best of our knowledge, not much attention was paid on cultural attributes in MALL studies (Shadiev, Hwang, & Huang, 2017). Therefore, in this study, we aimed to address this gap in knowledge. To this end, we designed MALL activity. The participants learned new knowledge in class and then applied it to the real world using mobile devices (Hwang et al., 2014; Hwang et al., 2016). Several instructional strategies were applied by the instructors of this study during the learning process in order to minimize above-mentioned cultural attributes of language learners inherent in Asian countries. In this study, we explored whether our approach can be useful in minimizing cultural attributes.

2. Methods

Twelve university students majored in foreign languages voluntarily participated in this study. The participants were native speakers of Chinese studying Russian as a foreign language. Seven of the participants were females and five were males. The age of the participants was between 18 and 20 years old.

In the beginning we collected demographic information from the participants and informed them about details of our MALL activity. The MALL activity was designed following general recommendations from earlier related studies (Huang, Shadiev, Sun, Hwang, & Liu, 2017; Hwang et al., 2016; Shadiev, Huang, Hwang, & Liu, 2018; Shadiev, Hwang, & Liu, 2018). Russian as a foreign language course was administered for this study during one semester. The instructor lectured on weekly base. There was one lesson every week and it consisted of three classes each lasting for forty minutes. The following five topics were covered in the course: (1) About myself; (2) My family; (3) My study; (4) My work day; and (5) Visiting someone. During lessons, students learned new vocabulary and sentence patterns. In addition, students read texts and dialogues from the textbook. After the class, the instructor assigned students to complete homework by applying new knowledge to the real world - they had to write and talk about the topics they learned and relate created content to their daily lives. For example, for “My family” topic they could write and talk about their family members such as grandparents, parents, and siblings. We asked them to use mobile phones for completing their homework and sharing them with their instructor. For completing homework, students used mobile phones functions such as texting (to type textual content), voice recording (to record verbal content), photo taking (to take pictures of people, objects and scenarios related to homework) and messenger (to share homework with the instructor). Informed by earlier related studies, the instructors employed several strategies to minimize cultural attributes of language learners inherent in Asian countries. First, they asked the participants to link essay content to their everyday life. Second, they provided examples of how to complete the tasks. Third, they established teacher-student relationship based on trust. Fourth, the instructors gave follow up questions to extract more information. Finally, they asked students to share their essays with the instructors only in the beginning and later, with all students. These strategies were useful for making learning effective and minimizing cultural attributes. At the last class we carried out interview surveys.

All participants and two instructors were interviewed by the researchers in order to explore the participants’ perceptions towards usefulness of our activity to minimize cultural attributes inherent in Asian culture. During the interviews, the participants and instructors were asked open-ended questions to tell about whether our MALL activity minimized their shyness, reservedness, passiveness, inhibition, lack of confidence, risk-avoidance, rote learning, test-oriented learning, reliance on teachers for knowledge and lack of creativity. For interview data analysis, we audio-recorded all interviews with the participants’ permission first. We then fully transcribed all interviews for our analysis. Next, we highlighted and coded the text segments that met the criteria of providing the best research information. After that the codes with similar meanings were sorted into categories and established categories formed a framework to report findings.

3. Results and discussion

According to the results, one category (i.e. Cultural attributes) and ten sub-categories emerged from interview data analysis (i.e. shyness, reservedness, passiveness, inhibition, lack of confidence, risk-avoidance, rote learning, test-oriented learning, reliance on teachers for knowledge and lack of creativity). Results of the interviews showed that our MALL activity was useful in minimizing cultural attributes inherent in Asian culture. The participants mentioned that they did not feel shy to speak in Russian during the activity. They also said that they were not afraid to speak in Russian anymore neither to use new or unfamiliar vocabulary in their writing/speaking. The participant said that they actively tried to apply new concepts to the real world and were confident and could take risks to use the language because MALL activity was linked to their everyday life and the instructor provided examples of how to complete the tasks. Some participants mentioned that the learning process was student-oriented so they were free to select what to learn and how to learn. For example, they selected authentic contexts by themselves to practice the language. The teacher-student relationship was established so that the participants could contact the instructors and request for assistance or suggestions. The instructors provided scaffolding and gave follow up questions to extract more information and details related to created content. Furthermore, the participants tried to find some extra resources on the Internet to enhance their language skills and make their created content more creative. The participants admitted that they tried to apply new knowledge to solve real-life problems. In this way, they could acquire the language better. The participants admitted that, in the beginning, they were not happy to share their created content with others because they felt not confident and were afraid to be criticized by others. Sharing their content with the instructor helped them to improve their work and gain confidence. Later, the participants were not afraid presenting their work to other participants.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study showed that the strategic MALL activity supported by mobile technology was useful in minimizing cultural attributes. Therefore, we suggest designing such learning activity and use strategies as in this present study. Such approach can help the participants become more active, confident and creative as well as make learning process student oriented and based on application of newly learned knowledge.

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