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Mobile-Assisted Language Assessment: Assessing speaking

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ABSTRACT

The present study was intended to investigate the feasibility of Mobile-Assisted Language Assessment as well as the learners' attitudes to such phenomenon. This was achieved with the use of electronic portfolios and a social networking application (WhatsApp) on smart mobile phones. Seventeen advanced-level learners of English doing an FCE preparation course participated in this study. Every session one participant volunteered to record a two-minute speech on the second task of the FCE speaking module and shared her recording on the WhatsApp group consisting of all class members as well as the teacher. In the end, the participants were interviewed for their attitudes and views on the method used to assess their speaking proficiency. The results indicated mixed attitudes towards MALA on the side of the learners; the concerns were mainly regarding fairness and lack of authentic communication. It is suggested that MALA be used alongside other forms of assessment to form part of the learners' final score.

1. Introduction

One of the most recent forms of using technology to aid language learning is Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) which uses personal and portable devices. This new trend enables the user to have access to learning programs in different contexts and emphasizes continuity and spontaneity (Kukulska-Hulme & Shields, 2008). Although MALL has been widely used in language teaching/learning fields, its use in language assessment has not been considered as widely. The use of MALL in language assessment can be particularly significant due to the opportunity it provides for Dynamic Assessment (DA), a contemporary path in language assessment which can be seen as an alternative to the present static form of language testing.

In the present paper the term Mobile-Assisted Language Assessment (MALA) has been coined to combine the two disciplines of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and Portfolio Assessment which is, in turn, a subdivision of Dynamic Assessment. Therefore, in MALA, learning and assessment are intertwined, in pursuit of maximizing opportunities to expand the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of the learners.

2. Review of literature

The term MALA has been coined in this paper to join the two disciplines of MALL and language assessment; therefore, in this section the literature related to each of its main bases will be briefly reviewed.

2.1. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when cognitive and sociolinguistic approaches appeared in language teaching and due to an emphasis on engaging the students with authentic, meaningful and contextualized discourse, a full-scale shift in the use of technology in the classrooms happened. The start of using hand-held computer-based devices increased Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) as we know it today. Since the mid-1990s, MALL has focused on five mobile technologies: personal digital assistants (PDAs), MP3 players, pocket electronic dictionaries, mobile phones and most recently ultra-portable tablet PCs (Burston, 2013).

MALL offers more in some aspects in comparison with computer-assisted language learning or CALL. MALL uses personal, portable devices which provide new ways of learning. It emphasizes the continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different contexts of use (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Forms of technology which are compatible with cognitive approaches are the ones which provide learners with the maximum opportunity

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for interaction in meaning-rich contexts, helping the learners raise their competence. Some of these forms of technology are text-reconstruction, concordance, telecommunications and multimedia simulation software.

The main characteristic of MALL is its potential for personalized and spontaneous learning (Mosavi Miangah & Nezarat, 2012). Personalized learning is the key factor in the modern approaches to learning and assessment in line with the belief that each human being is different and should be approached differently if teaching/learning is meant to be effective.

2.2. Dynamic Assessment (DA)

The irony in many language learning settings today is that although a communicative approach is utilized to teach the language itself, a traditional static test/tests are adopted to assess the learners' knowledge and understanding of the lesson. On the contrary, learner-centered education is promoted and praised. Such system of language education requires equivalent learner-centered assessment, such as Dynamic Assessment (DA).

DA is defined as a form of assessment which considers individual differences among learners and includes intervention during the procedure of assessment. These interventions occur in the form of mediation from the teacher or other learners and are sensitive to the current level of ability of the learner (Lidz & Gindis, 2003). In other words, DA does not consider teaching and assessment as two different disciplines and believes that these two should occur simultaneously as learners receive instruction during assessment. More importantly, DA focuses on the process of assessment rather that its product (Birjandi, Estaji, & Deyhim, 2013). Therefore, it can be regarded as a necessary step forward according to the modern view of process-based teaching.

Portfolio assessment is derived from the more general concept of Dynamic Assessment. Although DA is associated with Vygotsky's concept of ZPD, it was not until 1961, that Luria, his colleague linked statistical and dynamic approaches to assessment (Luria, 1961, p. 7). Accordingly, statistical approaches to assessment assume that a complete picture of one's capabilities if attained merely by their performance on a single test. However, dynamic approaches to assessment go further and argue that to obtain a full picture it is required to assess the person's performance with assistance from someone else and the extent to which the person can benefit from this assistance not only in completing the same task or test, but in transferring this mediated performance to different tasks or tests. Portfolios create the opportunity for the learner to learn while being assessed and to transfer that to future tasks.

Through Portfolio assessment, learners can produce a variety of more authentic and creative works (Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009). Moreover, portfolio assessment provides more freedom for the learners and helps them develop meta-cognitive strategies and improve higher order thinking skills. Portfolios give the students the opportunity to see themselves as individuals with special interests and needs not just as readers or writers and also to advance their learning. Portfolios nurture assets such as reflection, variety, dream power and individualism, which cannot be found in norm-based assessments (Yurdabakan & Erdogan, 2009). The studies done on portfolio assessment convey positive results; positive reactions of both teachers and students toward portfolios; positive attitude development toward learning in classes where portfolios are in use; evidence on portfolios being more successful than traditional tests in assessing student attainments; improvement of students' writing skills and positive changes in students' study habits; increase in students' taking responsibility of their own learning; improvement in students' higher order thinking skills, critical thinking skills, problem solving strategies, and self-evaluation abilities; and evidence towards portfolios role in improving communication among students, teachers, administrators, and parents.

Recent technological advances have been so beneficial to language teaching and learning; besides, the new generation of students receives them well. For instance, the entire school community would be encouraged with the process of creating portfolios to establish learning goals and expectations and also to reflect upon their learning throughout. Teachers would have the opportunity to give a detailed feedback on students' work and encourage them more (Ahn, 2004). EPortfolios are perceived positively by learners, mainly because they increase metacognitive and affective awareness and also provide a multi-dimensional perspective of evaluation (Ferrari & Zhurauskaya, 2012). EPortfolios allow learners to be more autonomous and to personalize their learning (Ferrari & Zhurauskaya, 2012).

Certain researchers believe that the true effects of portfolio use are only possible to be observed in following time periods, since they do not affect learners' achievement or their attitudes toward the lessons. In addition, portfolio assessment is accused of taking a lot of time (Ediger, 2000; Fenwick & Parsons, 1999; Juniewicz, 2003) and being much more costly than standardized assessment (Ediger, 2000; Gomez, 2000); Therefore portfolio assessment will be more likely to succeed, if the teacher and learners are trained and provided with sufficient time for activities (Fenwick & Parsons, 1999). Firstly, using ePortfolios should be easy for the students and also the teachers so that it can play a better role as a more effective form of learning and assessment. Secondly, it should be considered that ePortfolios are different from traditional paper portfolios since they are transferred onto computers they are not actually the same tool. Another one of the challenges in portfolio assessment is uniformity and scoring. In case rubrics are designed and provided, better uniformity will be achieved (Bourne & Moore, 2003).

2.3. Peer-assessment

Peer-assessment is referred to the type of assessment which includes processes which require learners to “provide either feedback or grades (or both) to their peers on a product, process, or performance, based on the criteria of excellence for that product or event which students may have been involved in determining” (Falchikov, 2007, p. 132). Accordingly, she believes that ideally, any form of peer-assessment should allow learners to practice making reasonable judgments regarding their peers' achievement and expected outcomes. Modeling, scaffolding, and fading are the strategies which Falchikov suggests teachers apply in order to improve the quality of peer-assessment.

Computer-based peer-assessment systems allow learners and teachers to communicate with each other via email, ftp, the World Wide Web, and other specially designed tools. Reflectively communicating with peers and teachers enables learners to critically question practical problems with the help of their experience and provide solutions (Christie & Menmuir, 1997). Yet there are difficulties in using web-based peer-assessment systems as a tool for course assessment. For instance, the criteria used for evaluation may not always be obvious. Students may need support to build concepts for evaluating portfolios by the instructor. Learners and teachers require sophisticated support in order to compute relationships among different concepts and learners' portfolios (Tseng & Tsai, 2007). Finally, the learners and teachers may find working with online systems confusing at times and be discouraged by their own lack of expertise. When replacing computers with mobile phones, a number of differences can be made. Mobile phones provide easier access and are more user-friendly. Therefore, MALA can facilitate technology-based peer-assessment by