Using "*HelloTalk*" in Fostering Learner Autonomy in Japanese EFL Classroom: A Pilot Study

EFL 教室においてハローロークを使うことで育てられる自主性について：試験調査

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Abstract

This pilot study aimed to investigate if *HelloTalk*, a language learning application, promotes English language learning and learner autonomy by stimulating learners to integrate self-study outside of language classroom. 10 students who had participated in a short-term study abroad program at California, USA, participated in this study. Two research questions were addressed: (1) Does *HelloTalk* promote English language learning? and (2) Does *HelloTalk* stimulate learners to integrate self-study outside of language classroom? For a duration of 6 months, participants were encouraged to use all the features of *HelloTalk* to assist their English learning outside of classroom. After 6 months, phone interviews were conducted to collect data from all the participants. Besides, the posts of all participants in their *HelloTalk* moments were also collected and analyzed. Results suggested that *HelloTalk* has successfully promoted English language learning and stimulated learners to integrate self-study outside of the language classroom.

(keywords: EFL, learner autonomy, mobile-assisted language learning)

Introduction

Mobile phone has become such an indispensable part of our lives in the modern world that it has become impossible to live without it. Thus, there is totally no exaggeration to say that we are now living in the era of mobile phones. According to The Economist (2012), the number of internet-enabled mobile devices has surpassed the number of desktop and laptop computers in 2013 (as cited in Pegrum, 2014). Mobile phone penetration in developed country was expected to be as high as 128%, reflecting that an individual might own more than one mobile phone in a developed country, such as Japan. (ITU, 2013). Besides, with the fast development of mobile devices, data also indicated large increases of mobile traffic through 2017 worldwide, accompanied by the decreasing desktop and laptop traffic. (Pegrum, 2014). The

mobility of mobile devices allows users to access to information, connect to and communicate with others with almost no restriction of time and place. Therefore, compare to using laptop or desktop, there are more and more users accessing to the internet through mobile devices which are handier.

In the field of e-learning, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is one of the most well-established subfields. However, as mobile devices are increasingly popular in replacing the usage of laptop and desktop computers, there is a need for language instructors in the ESL and EFL classrooms to take a closer look into Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL). This term was brought to the attention of many educators by George Chinnery's famous article "Going to the MALL". According to Chinnery (2014), MALL can be defined as the use of mobile phones and other portable devices such as digital media players and ultraportable computers and tablets in language teaching and learning. As the world is increasingly globalized, mobility has since become an important criterion in learning. However, can English language learning process be enhanced by using mobile technology which is available at our fingertips? This has caught the attention of researchers and educators but there aren't sufficient empirical studies to support this. It was with such question in mind that this pilot study was conducted.

Problem Statement

Let's move on to the current issue of the Japanese EFL classroom. Study revealed that although the usefulness of English is widely recognized by Japanese students, many were overwhelmingly unsatisfied with their English learning experience. (Lafaye & Tsuda, 2002; Benson, 1991; Matsuda, 2000). Many Japanese students described their English lessons as boring, less interactive and although they have learned English in formal settings for years, they have no confidence in communicating in English.

In the conventional Japanese EFL classroom. lessons are mostly designed based on the behaviorist approach. Some examples of classroom activities based on the behaviorist approach include grammar drills and pronunciation imitation. There is clearly limited or no emphasis on verbal communication. Students have very limited opportunity to use the target language outside the classroom too. Despite the fact that they have been learning English for many years, students doubted if their English can be understood by the native English speakers.

I believe that mobile assisted language learning (MALL) might be the solution for these problems because mobile devices provide a platform for students to utilize what they have learned in class and put into real practice. However, how effective it is? This study thus aimed to investigate if *HelloTalk* promotes English language learning and learner autonomy by stimulating learners to integrate self-study outside of language classroom by answering the following two research questions:

1. Does *HelloTalk* promote English language learning?

2.   Does *HelloTalk* stimulate learners to integrate self-study outside of language classroom?

HelloTalk

[1]*HelloTalk* is a language exchange learning application which can be downloaded for free for all Android and iOS users. In app purchase of VIP membership (880 yen per month; 400 yen per month for a duration of 12 months commitment; 11000 yen for a lifetime VIP membership), which offer more features that include unlimited instant translations, learning up to 3 different languages at the same time, boost search exposure, chat with up to 25 new users per day and search by gender. Users can pick the language(s) they want to learn (there are over 100 of choices) and after signing up, *HelloTalk* will direct users to its search function to allow users to start finding people whose needs meet. *HelloTalk* will help to suggest matches that have the right native language/target language combination. Then, users can send messages or a partner request when they found someone suitable as learning partner. The features of *HelloTalk* include text messages, voice messages, voice-to-text, text-to-voice, translation, transliteration, free calls, grammar corrections, moments and comments, and favorite language information.

Participants

10 Japanese university students participated in this pilot study on a voluntary basis. The table below shows the gender and year of study of participants.

All 10 participants have participated in a short-term study abroad program to California of United States of America. All of them shared the same learning goal, which was to sustain their English skills which

	Male	Female
Freshman	4	2
Sophomore	3	1

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[1]For more information about the usage of *HelloTalk*, please refer to the following video file created by *HelloTalk* Language Exchange: *How to use HelloTalk to learn languages and make friends [Video file]*, which can be retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZq_Qx06P8c

they have picked up via their short-term study abroad experience. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, their real names and their profile pictures will not be revealed.

Procedure

In the first meeting, participants were gathered and briefed about the study and they were introduced to *HelloTalk*. They were guided to create their *HelloTalk* accounts step-by-step, and to add each other as learning partners, including the researcher of this study to allow all participants and researcher to see the posts that the participants shared in their moments. Participants were given about an hour to explore and to familiarize with the features of *HelloTalk*.

Participants were given about an hour to explore and to familiarize with the features of *HelloTalk*. They were also encouraged to look for English native speakers who would like to learn Japanese as learning partners. Participants were explained that they are encouraged to freely use all the features of *HelloTalk* to assist their English learning outside of classroom for a duration of 6 months, which was from August 2016 until January 2017. Then, participants were interviewed after 6 months of using *HelloTalk*.

Instruments

The study applied the following dependent variables to measure if *HelloTalk* promotes English language learning and stimulate learners to integrate self-study outside of language classroom: (1) Phone interviews regarding the effectiveness of *HelloTalk*; (2) Phone interviews regarding students' self-evaluation; (3) Posts in *HelloTalk* moments.

(1) Phone interview regarding the effectiveness of *HelloTalk*

Part 1 of the interview consisted of 6 open ended questions which allow participants to freely express their thoughts in their responses:

1. Do you find *HelloTalk* useful in your English learning?

    If yes, move on to Question 2

    If no, move on to Question 3

2. Why did you think that it is useful in your English learning?

3. Why did you think that it is not useful in your English learning?

4. What were some of the problems you faced when using *HelloTalk*?

5. Would you continue to use *HelloTalk*?

6. What other comments do you have?

(2) Phone interview regarding students' self-evaluation

Part 2 of the interview consisted of 6 questions which required participants to rate certain variables for both before and after using *HelloTalk*, using a 10-point rating scale (1 = very low and 10 = very high).

1. Rate the frequency of you using English before and after using *HelloTalk*.

2. Rate your motivational level of learning English before and after using *HelloTalk*.

3. Rate your English-speaking skills before and after using *HelloTalk*.

4. Rate your English listening skills before and after using *HelloTalk*.

5. Rate your English reading skills before and after using *HelloTalk*.

6. Rate your English writing skills before and after using *HelloTalk*.

(3) Posts in *HelloTalk* moments

All the posts being shared by the participants in their *HelloTalk* moments throughout a period of 6 months were collected and analyzed.

Results

(1) Part 1 of Phone Interview

The results of Part 1 of the phone interview regarding the effectiveness of *HelloTalk* are shown under this section.

Question 1: Do you find *HelloTalk* useful in your English learning?

Response	Number of Respondents
Yes	10
No	0

Question 2: Why did you think that it is useful in your English learning?

Reasons	Number of Respondents
I could communicate with native speakers using English.	9
My learning partners in *HelloTalk* helped me when I face problem in learning English.	7
HelloTalk pushed me to use English because my learning partners cannot understand Japanese well.	7
I learned English hard so that I can express my thoughts well when I talk to my learning partners.	6
I was immediately helped by other *HelloTalk* users when I have questions about English	4
It is user friendly.	3

Question 3: Why did you think that it is not useful in your English learning?

Since all participants answered "Yes" to Question 1, Question 3 was not used throughout the interview.

Question 4: What are some of the problems you faced when using *HelloTalk*?

Reasons	Number of Respondents
Selfish learning partners who only wanted to communicate in Japanese.	4
Some people are using it with different agenda.	3
It made me busy.	2
Too many incoming messages.	2
It used up a lot of my data.	2
It was difficult to use at the beginning.	1

Question 5: Would you continue to use *HelloTalk*?

Reasons	Number of Respondents
Yes	6
Maybe	2
No (reason: too busy)	2

Question 6: What other comments do you have?

Comments	Number of Respondents
I really like my *HelloTalk* friends.	4
I recommended *HelloTalk* to my friends.	2
Some people were rude.	1
I love English.	1

(2) Part 2 of Phone Interview

Part 2 of the interview consisted of 6 questions which required participants to rate 6 variables for both before and after using *HelloTalk*, using a 10-point rating scale, 1 being very low and 10 being very high. Then, a paired two sample t-test was conducted to assess the difference between before and after ratings for each variable. Significant differences were found between the before and after ratings for all the 6 variables, with $P < 0.05$.

These results suggest that the participants felt their frequency of using English, level of motivation and levels of proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing improved through the use of *HelloTalk*.

Variables		Before	After	t	P
Frequency of using English	M	4.5	7.1	-4.8	**
	SD	1.43	1.52		
Motivational level of learning English	M	4.2	5.9	-5.07	**
	SD	1.32	1.52		
Speaking proficiency	M	3.2	4.9	-5.67	**
	SD	1.31	0.99		
Listening proficiency	M	3.1	4.7	-5.24	**
	SD	1.2	1.06		
Reading proficiency	M	3.7	5.4	-5.67	**
	SD	0.95	1.35		
Writing proficiency	M	3.1	4.4	-4.33	**
	SD	1	1.35		

(3) Posts in *HelloTalk* Moments

A total of 286 posts from the *HelloTalk* moments of 10 participants in a duration of 6 months were collected and analyzed.

The posts in moments were categorized into two different categories, which are moments about daily life and moments about problems when learning English. Results showed that a total of 251 out of 286 (87.8%) of the posts were related to participants' daily life and only 35 out of 286 posts (12.2%) were related to problems when learning English.

Participants	Moments		Total
	Daily life	Problems when learning English	
Participant 1	60	10	70
Participant 2	25	5	30
Participant 3	35	6	41
Participant 4	17	3	20
Participant 5	10	6	16
Participant 6	20	2	22
Participant 7	34	1	35
Participant 8	20	0	20
Participant 9	18	0	18
Participant 10	12	2	14
TOTAL	251	35	286

Some examples of posts related to participants' daily life and problems when learning English will be showed here.

(1) Posts related to participants' daily life

Example 1:

Example 2:

(2) Posts related to problems when learning English
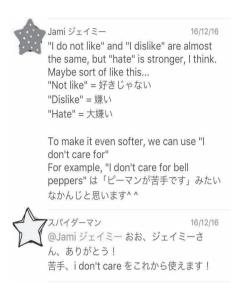
Example 1:

Example 2:

Discussion and Conclusion

The primary goal of this study is to investigate whether *HelloTalk* yields significant changes in promoting English language learning and stimulating self-study outside of language classroom. This study examined the changes by answering two research questions. To answer the research questions, this study analyzed data from the phone interviews regarding the effectiveness of *HelloTalk* and students' self-evaluation, and the posts they shared in *HelloTalk* moments. The following are the answers to the two research questions obtained through this study.

RQ1: Does HelloTalk promote English language learning?

The answer is "Yes" based on the results of students' self-evaluation during phone interviews. In the results of students' self-evaluation, significant differences were found between before and after ratings of students' listening, speaking, reading and writing proficiency, as well as their motivational level of learning ($P<0.05$). Besides, the first part of the phone interviews regarding the effectiveness of *HelloTalk* and moments in *HelloTalk* supported this finding

RQ2: Does HelloTalk stimulate learners to integrate self-study outside of language classroom?

The answer is "Yes" based on the results of students' self-evaluation. In the results of students' self-evaluation, significant differences were found between before and after ratings of students' frequency of using English ($P<0.05$). Besides, the first part of the phone interviews regarding the effectiveness of *HelloTalk* and moments in *HelloTalk* supported this finding.

The findings of the study are significant to language instructors who are currently teaching English as second or foreign language. It helps to enlighten them on the potential and the merit of introducing

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) in their language classrooms to create a more active and interesting learning environment to students. However, although it can still provide some useful implications, conclusions drawn based on data collected from 10 participants might not be able to give a very convincing and influential impact. Thus, further studies with bigger sample size are necessary to investigate the potential of MALL in a deeper sense.

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