GENDER AND OTHER SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS IN MOBILE-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: *In East Asia, particularly China, under the deep-rooted influence of Confucianism, many women have been living in a subordinate manner, either consciously or unconsciously. Even when the proportion of girl students at college is almost as half as the total population in higher education, researches show a different narrative in their mindset. As for this study, the focus is on gender and other socio-cultural issues in mobile-based language learning through a learning management system (Blackboard) in a MBA program at Shenzhen University, China. The participants are 138 students (68 male, 70 female) who were enrolled in Fall 2018. In line with Hofstede's cultural dimensions, this study explored the gender and other socio-cultural factors in mobile-based language learning and tried to set up a mechanism for an effective learning mode, where tasks/projects are designed in such a way that woman students may become aware of their conscious/unconscious mentality of being subordinate, and hopefully enhance their self-esteem to be aspiring in their future career.*

KEY WORDS: mobile-based, language, learning socio-cultural, dimensions

INTRODUCTION

Mobile-based language learning has become a feasible alternative for learner-oriented education is in Higher Education. Previous research indicated the vastly growing need for the technology to support second language learning. The previous research (Dicks & Ives, 2008) suggests that technology could provide case-based and solution-oriented learning experience, which is necessary for an advanced and more adaptable community of learning. In light of above studies, the concept of Mobile-Based Language Learning (MBLL) as an option for mobile-based language learning becomes one of the key instruments in pedagogy. Research on the use of MBLL has shown different benefits on learners' autonomy and self-development and also revealed that learning process can be optimized with the utilization of technology (Darics, 2015).

LITERATURE

Most stakeholders in education showed positive attitudes toward the use of technology, and particularly mobile devices, in learning. The findings in researches indicate that

regardless of cultures, mobile devices are becoming a potential educational tool as well as the identity marker in learners' education experience. Evidently, mobile devices can be an ideal media to satisfy varying educational needs of the learners. Factors involved in the utilization of technology in higher education may include access, policy making as well as perspectives toward technology in general (Gimenez, 2014; Lockwood, 2017; Rapanta, et al., 2014).

On the other hand, the topic of culture and organization draw massive attention. The publication on culture by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov in 2010 reveals vital results on the study of organizational behavior. The study shares data in socio-cultural dimensions of workers from different nations in IBM. Although there are various critiques of this study as being too narrow in context and biased for considering cultures as nations, the contribution of this study is profound to people in the business world.

The term socio-cultural dimensions or in short, social dimensions, has become symbolic of Hofstede's study and are quoted as underpinning theories in many social studies. The framework used for this research is cross-cultural analysis. Meanwhile, aspects of gender and other cultural dimensions were investigated in accordance with Hofstede's six-dimensional framework in explaining cultural factors for Chinese students.

The research of social dimensions in education technology can shed some light on how to establish a new model in pedagogy. Particularly in language education, social dimensions have obtained more impact based on investigations on social dimensions in mobile-based higher education. The primary factors in ideal mobile-based language learning are personalization, authenticity, and collaboration (Lockwood, 2017). Learner choice, agency, self-regulation, and customization are core concepts in authenticity, which is fundamental for the use of MBLL. It is about how learners perceive the practices they are carrying out and the use values of these practices. Previous study reveals the importance of investigating social dimensions, i.e., collaboration as one dimension in the advancement of technology for learning. Researchers underlined the importance of collaboration while using technology (Gimenez, 2014). They suggested collaboration is subject to students' attitudes toward the importance for mobile learners to communicate in multiple ways with peers, teachers, and other experts. They suggested more ideas about social implementations in mobile-based language learning by stressing the importance of collaboration or information exchange through the use of mobile technologies for second language learners. Therefore, it is necessary to put in efforts to induce social dimensions into any technology in learning, especially in higher education.

There are six categories in social dimensions by Hofstede, et al. (2010). Gender related issues are related to one social dimension, which is Femininity and Masculinity. Meanwhile, Hofstede divided 6 dimensions in learning culture, including gender aspect of it. This study considers Hoftede's six cultural dimensions as an alternative definition for culture. Hofstede defines culture as the "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category from others" (p.231). This definition offers some basics for the scope of this particular research. In this case study, gender is regarded as marker for

the different perceptions and attitudes given by respondents in questionnaires. It is never meant to be the labeling of a certain student population. And Unsurprisingly, China's masculinity index is higher than that of most countries in East Asia.

On the other hand, China is ranked to have highest uncertainty level in East Asia region, leaving creativity and anxiety very closely intertwined. Besides, China was reported to rank the lowest in its Individualism.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to know the attitudes of students toward the use of mobile device in learning, in which Blackboard is the MBLL medium, and to analyze several cultural dimensions that influence the choices of the students. This study was then conducted to answer two these questions: "how effective is MBLL through Blackboard?" and "in what way the cultural dimensions of learners influence their learning process?"

Blackboard, a learning management system, is used as the platform. For this study the respondents were asked to install Blackboard and used it for a couple of weeks. The students were then asked to fill in the questionnaire. Afterwards, the same students were invited for a face-to-face interview session with some questions to elicit further information.

This study is complete with both questionnaire and interview as means to collect data. Respondents for this study were 138 students of three different classes. There were 70 female students and 68 male students participating in this study. Data was collected at the end of the course of Business English in Fall 2018.

Since power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long-short orientation in Hoftstede's six-dimensional model were not applicable for the respondents of this case study, three other dimensions were used to explore learners' dimensions of culture, namely, Individualism VS Collectivism, Masculinity VS Femininity and Indulgence VS Restraint. Individualism VS Collectivism would reveal the independence level of the respondents as Blackboard users. Masculinity VS Femininity would reveal the gender aspects of mobile-based language learning. This dimension would also be enlightening for any MBLL-related application of English education. Finally, indulgence VS restraint would reveal the potential of Blackboard in assisting English learning and would also show how a learning management system could be further developed.

The questionnaire was distributed online. There were 30 items in the questionnaire in three parts: personal information, MBLL elements and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. In personal information section, age and gender is included. In terms of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, responses were expected from questions on Individualism VS Collectivism, Masculinity VS Femininity and Indulgence VS Restraint. The section concerning MBLL was adapted to socio-cultural model, with three distinctive characteristics of personalization, authenticity and collaboration in Blackboard users. Users as respondents to this study were asked to answer questions on Likert scale.

The interview was mainly with general questions, which are: "How do you feel about Blackboard?" "How much difficulty you find in using Blackboard?", etc.

FINDINGS

The results are shown in 2 sections: students' perception on mobile-learning through Blackboard; and students' gender and other cultural dimensions in mobile learning.

4.1. Students' Perception on mobile-based language learning through Blackboard

Overall, 99% students had positive experience with this platform and opted for Agree to Strongly Agree. Regarding the elements of MBLL, 95% students were either Agree or Strongly Agree that MBLL (Blackboard in this case) enhanced the quality of Personalization. As many as 90% of the students also ticked the choice of Agree or Strongly Agree to the statement: MBLL (Blackboard) is engaged with the element of Authenticity. Details of this result from the 10 statements in the questionnaire describe the characteristics as presented in the elements of MBLL.

For all 10 statements, the answer from most students was "agree", meaning that most of the population supported the statements given in the questionnaire.

4.2. Gender perspective and other cultural dimensions in mobile-based language learning

Issues of gender and other cultural dimensions were covered with questions related to students' interaction with Blackboard. It was revealed that students perceived technology as having more masculine qualities and therefore projected their masculine expectations regardless of students' gender.

Overall, faced with the statement "It is more important for men to have a professional career", 75% of the students chose the choice of Agree/Strongly Agree. In the total population, 85% of female students opted for Agree or Strongly Agree. This number showed the majority of female students in this study agreed/strongly agreed with the statement. Overall, students preferred Masculinity to Femininity as their cultural dimension.

Other dimensions of investigation were Individualism VS Collectivism, and Indulgence VS Restraint, with details as below:

In the former dimension, 55% respondents chose to give preference toward Individualism and 45% towards Collectivism. When it comes to the following statement: "It is more important for a lecturer to encourage a sense of duty in learners (i.e. I will feel more comfortable when a lecturer tells me what to do regularly)"; 76 respondents chose Agree. Another statement: "It is then less important for a lecturer to ask students for individual initiatives (i.e. I like it when lecturer takes all the initiatives)"; 77 respondents said Agree. On the other hand, Statement: "Individual rewards are not as important as group welfare"

got negative response from 60 students, while statement: "Group success is more important than individual success" received 70 Agree responses. The result showed respondents are being moderate in terms of getting individual/group acknowledgements. In addition, this moderation was supplemented by the need of belonging, suggesting there was still the need to use Blackboard as a platform to exchange views. It is implied from this result that Blackboard as the medium for MBLL is expected to provide opportunity for individual acknowledgement and sense of inclusion.

For the latter dimension, all students identified with "happiness", "free choice", "more indulgence", and "leisure", with the strongest response given to the " free choice" or "opportunity". Overall, students preferred to have indulgence to resemble their cultural dimension.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown a live experience in mobile-based language learning through Blackboard as the medium. Positive responses showed that MBLL could be further implemented in teaching and learning English in Higher Education, particularly against the backdrop of 5G network available soon. Gender preference showed inclination, not only from male students but also females, to male characteristic.

It is implied that studies combined with socio-cultural dimensions could benefit pedagogy in second language teaching. If instructors design the tasks/projects in MBLL with particular attention to the socio-cultural factors and provide woman students more opportunity to present themselves, they may become aware of their conscious/unconscious mentality of being subordinate, and hopefully enhance their self-esteem to be aspiring and ambitious in future career.

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