Mobile Collaborative Learning in a Chinese Tertiary EFL Context

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Introduction

Integrating technology into student learning has become one of the most popular themes in many international conferences (e.g., The American Association for Applied Linguistics or AAAL conference has a specific topic strand on language and technology.). Meanwhile, several international organizations specializing in educational technology have been established and have henceforth organized conferences and training for learners, teachers and educators worldwide, such as APACALL, GLoCALL and EUROCALL. However, a word of caution is in order for teachers and those researching the integration of technology with learning, regarding the fact that the importance of task design in technology-enhanced learning projects has sometimes been overlooked. Fortunately, in recent years, the discussion of task design and technology integration has gradually captured the attention of researchers and educators with several seminal works such as Hampel (2006), Thomas and Reinders (2010), Lai and Li (2011), and Ziegler (2016).

Mobile learning (m-learning) has evolved and developed into a mature stage in certain countries and areas (Traxler & Kukulska-Hulme, 2016). For example, we have seen a sizable body of m-learning research from Singapore, Taiwan and the United Kingdom (see an overview by Duman, Orhon, & Gedik, 2014). As Krull and Duart (2017) point out, language education has become one of the most extensively researched areas for educators exploring the effects of m-learning, leading to the emergence of mobile assisted language learning (MALL).

In 2008, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield reviewed the existing MALL studies and concluded that most previous research had focused on content delivery. One typical practice was the *push* model of sending new vocabulary through mobile phones to students, whether they like it or not. Based on their review, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) called for more studies making better use of the communication features of mobile devices. In recent years, we have witnessed an increase in MALL studies that answer this call for research (e.g., in Mainland China, Wu, 2017; Zou, Li, & Li, 2018; in Hong Kong, Tang, Hew, & Chen, 2017; in Taiwan,

Tai, 2012). However, this area of research is still in scarcity, especially in the Chinese context.

Another gap of the research in this field regards the task and project design of MALL. Teachers often mistakenly believe that students' learning will be enhanced when a technology element is included in teaching. However, technology itself does not constitute an independent pedagogy (Reinders & Hubbard, 2013). How well the pedagogical tasks are designed, how teachers support learners to engage in technology-mediated activities, and how students can develop more autonomy in learning beyond the classroom all deserve educators' urgent attention (González-lloret & Ortega, 2014; Thomas, 2013). To this end, task design of MALL is the central theme of this paper.

In this paper, a learning community enabled by a mobile instant messaging app is described. The design of the community drew on a production-oriented pedagogical approach with the integration of mobile technology. To exemplify the mobile project, examples of student interaction are provided. The paper ends with suggestions for teachers in terms of organizing technology-enhanced learning projects.

China: An examination-oriented society

Before we move to the discussion of the pedagogical design of a MALL project, the importance of formal exams in the culture of China should be explained. Since the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.), China has adopted exams as a major way to select social elites (Carless, 2012). It should be acknowledged that this examination culture has the bright side of promoting social mobility in today's Chinese society as there is little chance otherwise for those from a working or underprivileged family to move up the social ladder partly due to the large size of the Chinese population. However, because of its high-stakes nature, Chinese teachers, parents and students often hold the fear that 'one test determines the rest of your lifetime' (一考定终身). The "one test" here refers to the college entrance examination test or *gaokao*. Against the testing culture, Chinese students and teachers are usually exhausted with various kinds of prep or mock tests. In the present teacher/researcher's previous learning experience, these monthly, weekly and even daily exams were not uncommon in places where he studied.

Another issue noticed under such an examination culture is the emphasis on scores, which often leads to competition instead of collaboration among student peers. However, collaborative work is very much needed and workplace collaboration is viewed as a necessary skill for current and future global employees (Jones & Hafner, 2012). In academia, cross-national collaboration is nothing new (e.g., the teacher/researcher in Hong Kong collaborated productively in Google Docs with the section editor in the United Arab Emirates on this piece of work), however, the question we may need to consider is to what extent our students are prepared for engaging in such collaborative work modes?

Another salient feature of the current English language education in China and in other EFL contexts is the emphasis on the input-related skills listening and reading. Chinese teachers and researchers have referred to their students' lack of production capabilities in English learning

as 'mute English' (He, 2013). The problem was further reflected in international language testing when in 2016, IELTS test-takers worldwide generally performed much better in listening and reading than in writing and speaking [1]. However, as global mobility is on the rise, EFL learners need to demonstrate a better mastery of the English language with the hope of competing with native speakers (e.g., English academic writing is a recognized problem for EFL researchers when disseminating their work in international journals, see Li & Flowerdew, 2009).

At the same time, with the economic development in China, it has become more affordable for Chinese families to sponsor their children to pursue overseas degrees. Under these circumstances, the production-related skills of English are urgently needed since English essays and presentations are the most common course assignments. However, without a significant reform of the current Chinese testing systems, the situation of 'mute English' may not be changed completely. Compared with secondary education, there is a reduced emphasis on exams in higher education in China. Therefore, to support learners in the current globalized and digitized workplace, university teachers should bear more responsibilities for improving their students' production-related skills by providing more chances for them to use the language meaningfully. Here, smartphones may serve as a useful learning tool for teachers and students as mobile phones clearly have a high penetration rate among the Chinese citizens.

An introduction to WeChat

WeChat, without doubt, is the most popular instant messaging (IM) app among the Chinese with over 938 million users at the end of March 2017, according to its official website. This free app is now available in eighteen languages and supports mainstream smartphone operating systems, including iOS, Windows, and Android. Unlike WhatsApp, which only offers limited functions, WeChat provides a number of different functions, of which chatting is only the most basic feature. With its user-friendly design, users are able to share life moments (similarly to Facebook), receive news from particular companies, agencies and individuals, play games, and even make mobile payment through WeChat. Another defining feature of WeChat is its multimodality, as users can integrate written, visual, aural, and spoken modalities into texts.

However, we have only seen the application of WeChat in language learning very recently. Focusing on the affordances of WeChat, Jin (2018), for example, employed WeChat to set up a telecollaborative project to connect Chinese and American university students. By pairing students into small groups, they engaged in language and cross-cultural communication outside the classroom. However, the study did not prescribe any pedagogical structure or design into the WeChat discussion. Students were paired up and expected to initiate daily casual conversations. Results revealed that WeChat has affordances regarding authenticity, identity construction, and access to linguistic resources. Yet, to what extent the students' discussion was meaningful and conducive to language learning was not explored. As Jin pointed out at the end of her paper, the popularity of WeChat among Chinese-speaking communities warrants closer attention from researchers due to its potential for language learning.

A production-oriented approach

This study adopts a production-oriented approach (POA) to designing a mobile learning project outside the traditional classroom setting (Wen, 2016). Wen's approach in modified form has become one of the most widely accepted pedagogical approaches in English language education in China. The POA framework suggests three pedagogical steps: *Motivation*, *Enable* and *Assessment*. By *Motivation*, Wen means that learners should be motivated to be curious and even initiate learning autonomously when they are presented and challenged with authentic tasks that extend slightly beyond their current abilities. By *Enable*, Wen meant that learners are able to finish learning tasks with support from their teachers and various learning resources. *Assessment*, in POA, propagates Carless's (2007) idea of learning-oriented assessment, including self-, peer- and teacher-assessments. The POA framework has been validated by many Chinese researchers and a full description can be found in Wen (2016; 2017). [2]

Wen's approach emphasizes the role of integrating input and output while offering students power to decide what they would like to learn from the various available resources. Three teaching and learning principles of the framework are 1) the "learning-centered" principle: proper pedagogical structure is provided to support learners to develop their classroom and autonomous learning, instead of hoping that students have the ability to achieve great academic success without teacher intervention, 2) the "learning-using" principle: learners should be offered plenty of opportunities to make use of and activate their inert knowledge and transform their passive learning style, and 3) the "whole-person" education principle, which means that linguistic achievement is only one of the ultimate aims in language education, whereas humanistic objectives such as the development of creativity, collaborative spirit and critical thinking are equally important.

However, Wu and Miller (under review) argue that the approach should be further developed taking into consideration technology mediation. Also, the framework as envisaged by Wen was situated in the context of classroom learning; however, some more recent researchers have pointed out the importance of supporting students to "learn beyond the classroom" (LBC), e.g., Richards (2015), and Reinders and Benson (2017). Thus, this report attempts to adapt the POA framework while supporting LBC and task design in a technological context.

Student participants and design of the study

In total, four year-1 and four year-2 university Business English major students were invited to establish a WeChat interest community with the teacher/researcher. All the participants were native speakers of Chinese and five were female students. Instead of pairing the students in small dyads, the nine participants (eight students and the teacher/researcher) formed a large discussion group.

During the eight-week period of out-of-class discussion in WeChat, participants were given specific questions with relevant background information (e.g., latest news) to talk about in relation to their course learning. By extending their learning beyond the traditional classroom setting, the mobile community aimed to provide more authentic chances for Chinese learners

to use their foreign language and address the negative washback effects of high-stakes examinations in China.

Data were collected through WeChat transcripts of the group reflections in the last week of discussion, of the post-project semi-structured interviews, and of the weekly discussions. The interviews were conducted in Chinese via WeChat since it afforded participants more time to reflect on their experience and compose their responses. However, some may argue that facial expressions in the online context were missing. Yet, it is believed that the use of emoji and internet memes serves as a useful tool to compensate for the lack of facial expressions.

In terms of data analysis, thematic analysis was applied to the data from the group reflections and interviews, with thematic units being the focus (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The chat transcripts of the weekly discussions were analyzed with more detailed content analysis that concentrated on the textual information in each message. However, due to the scope of this paper, only some preliminary findings about task design are reported here, with accompanying examples.

Steps of designing a mobile collaborative learning community

Step 1 Design learning objectives

Teachers, first of all, need to establish the desired learning objectives for learning communities in mobile environments. Providing students with chances to produce their foreign language was a major purpose for applying the treatment under study to this group. It was hoped that the students would become more confident in and accustomed to using the English language (1. Learning-centered principle). Although any progress in this direction might seem like a small step for English native speakers, it is indeed a big step for the Chinese EFL learners due to the 'mute English' plague among Chinese students.

In addition, the discussion was linked to the participants' course (2. Learning-using principle). The participants took a compulsory course 'An Introduction to Chinese Culture' taught in the medium of English. However, as they reflected, the students were unhappy with the traditional lecture style of instruction and they referred to the lessons as being *boring* and *tedious*. Because of the large size of the class, the students did not have chances to engage in sufficient communicative activities to make use of what they had learnt. Thus, the discussion group attempted to provide participants with a blended learning experience as the weekly discussion topics were associated with their Chinese culture course. Meanwhile, it should be pointed out that learning to express the Chinese identity through a foreign language (3. Whole-person education principle) has become a central educational aim for language teachers in China. As China is playing a more important part on the international stage, it is believed that the exchange of Chinese culture has been and will become more common.

Step 2 Design discussion topics, questions, and materials

The project lasted for eight weeks from November 2016 to January 2017 and seven topics of discussion were chosen from their Chinese culture textbook, such as food, tourism, and

history (the group reflection of the project took place in WeChat in week eight). In this round of study, the teacher/researcher decided to design the discussion questions for each week in consideration of the Chinese students' passive learning culture (in later rounds, it is hoped that the students will take more active roles in setting their own discussion questions). Typically, students were given three questions each week before their fixed discussion period, and they agreed to have a one-hour WeChat discussion every Saturday night. The questions, as students reflected in their interview with the teacher/researcher, were generally motivational as they needed to search for extra information online and prepare for the weekly discussion (*Motivation* step). However, it should be noted that the discussions were usually longer than one hour as the students appreciated the opportunity to exchange ideas and use the English language with support from their teacher. To further scaffold the participants, online materials were shared in the WeChat group including video and audio clips, news reports and articles (*Enable* step; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of materials (in Chinese) and initiation of discussion questions

Step 3 Promote discussion among the participants

With guidance and sufficient advance preparation time, the students were found to be able to voice thoughts in their foreign language more confidently than in the traditional classroom, according to their later interviews and the teacher/researcher's observations. During the discussion in WeChat, the students and the teacher/researcher would facilitate their discussion (*Enable* step) by asking for clarification and directing questions to certain students (WeChat users can @ a person and the person will receive a notification of being mentioned in the group.). Unlike the traditional classroom where teachers dominate the initiation of questions, active students in this group were observed to pose questions to other students. Apparently, learner autonomy was activated to some extent.

The multimodal feature of WeChat communication was also made use of. As Figures 2 and 3 show (in the section on Samples of Interaction below) the participants frequently included emoji and memes in their conversations. These multimodal resources were not only used to brighten the atmosphere of the group, but also to support the students' arguments and demonstrate their feelings due to the lack of non-verbal cues in mobile communication.

A final point that should be mentioned is that the discussion was rarely ever limited to the prescribed questions. Because of the informal nature of the community, students were encouraged to initiate interesting topics during the discussion.

Step 4 Reflect on and improve the design of the community

In the last week of discussion, the WeChat group was treated as a focus group and the participants were guided by a few questions to help them reflect on the design and experience regarding the previous seven weeks. The teacher/researcher elicited further thoughts when he noticed interesting feedback from the students. After the group reflection, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather more in-depth thoughts about the project. Based on the participants' feedback, the design of the project was improved and it was implemented again in 2017-2018.

However, as some may have noticed, no *Assessment* step was included in this project. Indeed, the teacher/researcher deliberately left out this step due to the above-mentioned examination culture in China. Instead of interjecting concern over an extrinsically (de)motivating assessment at the end of each treatment, intrinsic learning interests are urgently needed in EFL learning culture. Thus, to lower students' anxiety in such learning projects, no formal assessment was set.

The teacher/researcher's roles

The teacher/researcher defined himself as a group member, facilitator, designer, teacher, learner and friend. Instead of adopting the more common practice of using outsider researchers to observe the discussion, the teacher/researcher decided to participate in the discussion as a member and hoped to narrow the power distance between the teacher/researcher and the students as they were all from the Confucian culture and tended to perceive teachers as authority figures (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995).

To explore the participants' perceptions of the teacher/researcher's role and his functions in this mobile community, a short survey and interview in WeChat were conducted with the participants. To summarize the results reported in Wu (2017), students generally welcomed the teacher/researcher's active participation and viewed it as necessary since they lacked the relevant knowledge and experience to facilitate such learning activities themselves.

As Hu (2002) explained, the unique context of learners should always be carefully examined so as to design and implement more context-sensitive learning tasks. Thus, the teacher/researcher took the responsibility to design and facilitate the learning, as he understood that many Chinese students were accustomed to the passive learning style and it

would be extremely hard for students to carry out learning if teachers suddenly handed over all the power to the students. As Hafner and Miller (2019) argue it, structure is needed to scaffold students while power is gradually given back and learner autonomy is promoted through different activities.

The participants also appreciated that the teacher/researcher established emotional rapport with them through encouraging words and the use of the multimodal features of WeChat. Emoji, internet memes and stickers were sent by the teacher/researcher to create the impression that the teacher/researcher was not a stereotyped old-school teacher and was interested in becoming more accessible to the participants.

However, the students also acknowledged that the presence of the teacher/researcher sometimes reminded them to be polite and avoided certain topics of discussion. A more detailed discussion of teacher's presence can be found in Wu (2017).

Samples of interactions

Two excerpts of students' interactions in this WeChat community are presented below with the permission of the participants (whose names have been anonymized by altering their profile pictures and real names in WeChat).
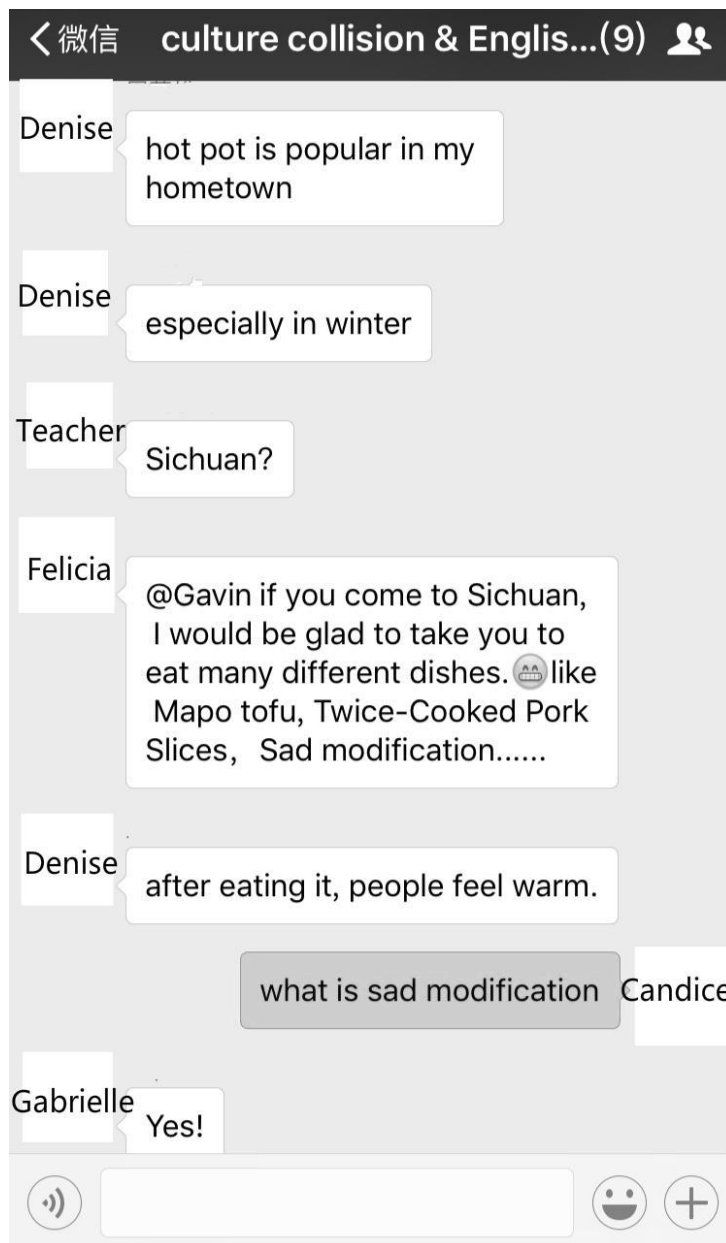
Figure 2. Discussion of hometown food

In Figure 2, the participants had been presented with a scenario in which they needed to introduce their hometown food to a foreign friend. The scenario was deemed as authentic as China has witnessed an increasing number of foreign visitors and exchange students within the past decades. Food is definitely one of the most commonly discussed topics in everyone's life but it has long been overlooked in classroom learning. Thus, during the conversation, it was observed that the students had some difficulties with expressing the names of food and ingredients. In addition, it was hard for them to explain the unique features and flavors of the introduced food.

However, in this mobile collaborative community, two ways were used by the students to construct meanings and to compensate for their language deficiency. First, as Figure 2

demonstrates, collaborative dialogues, both by the teacher/researcher and the student peers, facilitate student discussion and promote cognitive development. Instead of simply stating the name of the food, Candice proposed a question for Felicia with the hope of clarifying the meaning of 'sad modification'. Another strategy for the participants in this group was the use of pictures to support their arguments. Pictures were exchanged frequently in each week's discussion as they are more vivid than words. The multimodal feature of WeChat was made use of by the students and it was believed helpful to the development of digital literacies, as future workplaces need employees who are able to accomplish work efficiently and resourcefully, resulting in a demand for the use of multimedia resources by employees to finish challenging tasks.

Apart from the weekly Saturday night discussion, students were encouraged to initiate small talk in the group, as shown in Figure 3, which illustrates an example of students sharing songs.
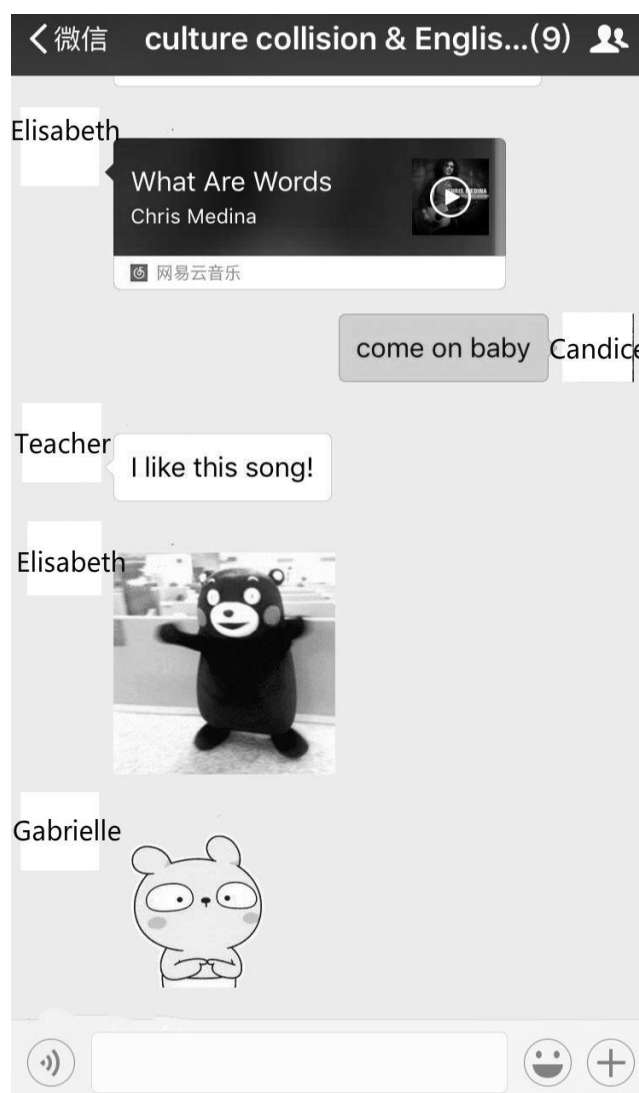

Figure 3. Small talk

Elisabeth shared a song and the teacher/researcher replied that he liked the song, followed by Elisabeth's and Gabrielle's internet memes, used to showcase their happy mood. It should be pointed out that Gabrielle's meme was downloaded from WeChat. WeChat provides a number of memes for users free of charge and memes are quite popular among the young generations. Although researchers have argued that the lack of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and gestures may lead to less active discussions online, the use of memes and emoji in the current mobile community may offer a strong counter-argument as the students exchanged 2,771 messages in the eight weeks.

Conclusion

Task design in today's technological environment of learning has become more complex and teachers should by no means overlook the importance of it. Meanwhile, in many EFL contexts the focus of language learning is primarily on input-related training, such as reading and listening. To these ends, this paper drew on the production-oriented approach to designing a WeChat community that engaged students in meaningful discussion based on their course book learning. From the eight-week period of engagement and observation in the mobile discussion, it was found that 1) students were able to make use of their inert knowledge gained from formal learning, 2) the multimodal features of WeChat enabled learners to accomplish complex tasks in spite of their linguistic deficiency, and 3) students in this community, instead of having to learn on their own, had chances to confirm and construct meaning with feedback from other participants. However, the design is not flawless. The teacher/researcher was in control of the project design, but it has been argued that learners should be more involved in making decisions as well.

As the study is still ongoing, a modified design is now being implemented based on the feedback from the participants in this phase. In the next phase of the study, more power is given to the participants in hopes of activating more learner autonomy to shoulder the learning responsibilities. However, it should be stressed again that the pedagogical structure and the guidance and support from teachers and more capable peers should never be ignored (Hafner & Miller, 2019).

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Notes

[1] See IELTS Test Taker Performance 2016: https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/test-taker-performance [back]

[2] Professor Qiufang Wen is a renowned scholar in language education who has published over 100 papers and has been delivering plenary speeches about POA in recent international conferences such as Faces of English: Theory, Practice and Pedagogy, Hong Kong, 2015 and MAAL/HAAL/Asia TEFL Conference, Macau, 2018 [back]