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Enhancing Communicative Competence through Free Messaging Apps in EFL Classes

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Abstract

Acquiring and enhancing communicative competence in language learning has long been considered as one of the primary and substantial objectives. With impressive development of mobile technology, messaging apps and smartphones are introduced to EFL classes as an effective tool to achieve this goal. Based upon theoretical analysis and situational experiments as well, this paper presents the feasibility and practicality of free messaging apps use in EFL classes. It aims to provide language learners and instructors with refreshing ideas and inspirations along the journey of developing language proficiency in the modern hi-tech era.

Keywords

Communicative Competence, Free Messaging Apps, Smartphones, EFL Classes

1. Introduction

Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) who want to develop successful lessons face many challenges, including large class sizes and lack of instructional materials and technological support. One big problem is unmotivated students who are reluctant or even refuse to participate in class activities and therefore seriously lack of communicative competence. According to Harmer (2007), uncooperative and unmotivated students are a serious problem and can easily disrupt the instructional process. As many teachers know, the routine activities as whole class lectures and drills can result in the lack of motivation and therefore adversely influence students' learning efficiency, especially their communicative competence of English language. To alleviate this problem, more project-based communicative activities need to be developed to allow students to use their imagination and creativity and actively express themselves in a variety of interesting and enjoyable tasks. They are designed to help shift the limited facilities of the

classroom setting to the real world where students are freer to use individual learning styles and make personal choices.

As smartphones and messaging apps become more prevalent, their potential for ready-made communicative activities in the classroom comes to attach great importance lately. If the students are good at their smartphones, it is reasonable that teachers can make great use of that potential to assist language learning. One beneficial function of the smartphone is its ability to exchange text and multimedia between users, and this benefit is greatly enhanced through the availability of many free massaging apps that facilitate the exchanges. The teachers can explore the messaging function of smartphones and therefore employ the free messaging apps to boost students' communicative competence inside and outside the English language classes. In China now, there are many free messaging apps available in EFL instructional setting. For example, Wechat is a very frequently-used messaging app that is even part of popular culture in China. Along with QQ, another user-friendly messaging app, Wechat has witnessed increased popularity in both China and even in other foreign countries. Other apps including WhatsApp, Kakao Talk and Tango are also very successful on a regional or global scale. The functional services of all these apps, besides the free messaging, extend to group text chats and sharing photos, audio and video. In other words, these free messaging apps allow users to communicate with partners in their contact list through text, voice, imagery or video (Pollard, 2015). All these functions make free messaging apps a remarkable instructional tool to enhance students' communicative competence in EFL classes.

2. The Importance of Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is a term in linguistics which refers to a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately (Wikipedia, 2016). Through the influence of communicative language teaching, it has become widely accepted that communicative competence should be the goal of language education, central to good classroom practice. This is in contrast to previous views in which grammatical competence was commonly given top priority. An analysis of English language teaching methodology reveals that achieving communicative competence in a second language involves not only knowing the grammatical rules of a language but also knowing when, where, and with whom to use the language in contextually appropriate way (Ellis, 1994). This requires more than mere knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; it requires skills in how to use English in various communicative situations. For example, a person with communicative competence will know how to do things in English-such as making a purchase, asking for directions, persuading someone, and expressing personal feelings- and will also know how to manage formal and informal language styles. Acquiring communicative competence plays a very important role in language teaching and learning. According to Brown (1994), communicative language teaching allows learners to practice English as it is actually used in a speech community

and equips them with the language skills they will need when they leave the classroom for the real world. To achieve this, teachers should search ways to motivate students to communicate actively in EFL classes. In contrast to being taught a structural syllabus with a preponderance of grammar and vocabulary drills, the students are supposed to collaborate on tasks that demand authentic, relevant and real-life communicative interactions. This type of authentic communication helps students to acquire communicative competence in a second language, much as a person learns his or her first language (Richards, 2001).

3. Barriers to Communicative Tasks in EFL Classes

When putting the principles of communicative language teaching into practice, many barriers stand ahead. For instance, large class sizes tend to favor receptive activities such as reading and listening because they are less demanding and time-consuming for the teacher than productive activities of speaking and writing in pairs or groups. This will result in teacher-centered instruction that does not provide students with more opportunities of communicative interaction and unrehearsed language practice. The combination of grammar-based teaching, limited oral interaction of students in class, and inadequate opportunities to speak English outside class does not support the development of communicative competence (Sad, 2008).

Another problem is the fact that students may feel too shy or reluctant to speak in class or perform in public, especially in English. This performance anxiety and other feelings students have in the language learning process have long been an important consideration in EFL classes. To make it worse, students' reluctance to engage in communicative activities in class can be aggravated by cultural differences. Since the communicative approach is originated from western countries, it is best suited for the interactive classrooms of western cultures where communicative activities are more common (Harmer, 2007). In cultures where the teacher-centered classroom is still the norm, learners may not respond willingly to communicative activities. Without a doubt, therefore, the development of communicative tasks in EFL classes is surely getting disappointing effects in such eastern culture as China.

4. Advantages of Free Messaging Apps Use in EFL Classes

To overcome the above barriers, teachers must be creative and constructive in seeking methods to make their EFL classes more communicative. One effective tool is to take advantage of the latest mobile technology, especially the free messaging apps which all greatly interest and motivate students. Its major advantages make it possible for free messaging apps to be popularly used in EFL classes.

4.1. Availability

It proves quite available to use mobile phone technology in EFL classes. For many people, mobile phones are a part of modern life. It seems mobile phones are used everywhere by everyone. Mobile phones are relatively cheap and increasingly powerful,

especially when more and more smart mobile phones become popular. Research on the use of mobile phones for the delivery of vocabulary materials to English learners in China shows that students enjoy using their phones because of easy access to materials and the ability to practice anytime and anywhere; in addition, some students like the screen size limitations, which make the amount of content more manageable than that of other teaching materials (Chen, Hsieh, & Kinshuk, 2008).

There is an enormous range of smartphone makes and models, and the technology is always advancing. More and more various types of messaging apps are developed and operated in smartphones. Many of them can be downloaded and used free of charge. It has gained great popularity among students. The intrinsic beauty of using these messaging apps is that messaging is a tool that students discovered first and it became very agreeable and popular via their peers. These are not tools that are forced upon students by their teacher for the purpose of study, but tools that form a part of their everyday lives. This factor, along with the ease of implementation, makes it very much available and feasible as an effective learning tool in EFL classes.

4.2. Capability

As a basically communicative tool, messaging apps were originally designed to facilitate communication and interaction between people. It is this natural quality that makes messaging apps better fulfill the objectives of communicative language teaching. Its right use shows great capabilities to enhance students' communicative competence in EFL classes. As noted above, performance anxiety interferes with second language acquisition. The free messaging apps use can overcome students' negative feeling about class participation because it may deals with interesting, real-world topics and they feel very safe and confident controlling their own technical device to response and learn. One way to gradually make shy students more assertive and participatory is to not require them to stand up and act in front of the whole class. With a messaging app project, hesitant and uncommunicative students have the option of training their language in a non-threatening and private setting where they feel comfortable. With more and more time and experiences, students can get accustomed to speaking and acting in front of audience. With the free messaging apps in smartphones, the teacher assign specific language tasks which students need to accomplish through dialogue, group chat, and team discussion. All these bi-lateral and multi-lateral interactive communication play a very significant role in enhancing students' communicative competence in English language learning process.

4.3. Creativity

Smartphone and messaging apps are a great product of creativity in high technology, and at the same time, also injecting creativity factor into every realm where they are. EFL class is such one of its realm. Using free messaging apps is adding value to every language class. There are no fixed rules, no unified forms, no same steps and no set lines. The technology is advancing, the content is updating, the idea is refreshing, and

everything is changing and improving. With time and efforts, both teachers and students are making more creative and effective collaboration in EFL classes, which greatly boost communicative competence in English language. It offers numerous choices for students with different interests and abilities. According to Harmer (2007), instructors must create suitable settings and appropriate methods and materials to fit the different cognitive or affective needs of students. And this is a strong rationale for considering individual differences in aptitude, attitude, motivation and learning styles. In this case, the creativity element of messaging apps is the very answer to address this problem in communicative language teaching.

5. Activities for Free Messaging Apps and Smartphone Tasks

With the great advantages listed above, free messaging apps and smartphones can be effectively applied in EFL classes. A series of activities are developed ranging from simple text messaging and group chat tasks to the more complicated simultaneous interpretation and translation, from text, image to audio and video form. It shows endless opportunities and ideas. The following are two typical activity examples.

5.1. Oral Training Activity

Having students do English oral practice outside the classroom is an activity that is hard to monitor and control. However, through the use of a messaging app that allows for recording to take place, the monitoring bridge can be crossed (Pollard, 2015). The students are assigned a topic or a question that they must respond to with amount of details within limited time. A few minutes is an optimal time limit in which students are required not only understand the subject, organize the speaking structure but also provide a recorded audio response with personal ideas and details. If needed, group discussion can also be led into the process where group members can exchange opinions and do the brainstorming, and the team leader ultimately do the final report to the teacher. After acquiring the spoken response from students, the teacher should offer reasonable feedback to them. As the primary objective of oral training activity is to develop communication and fluency, it would be not a right option to over-focus on the grammar of students' recording. It is better to give feedback focusing on pronunciation, organization and constructive comments on the topic or contents within that realm. Besides encouraging students' oral practice and improving their communicative competence, this activity greatly raised EFL teaching efficiency. What's more, it appears that offering oral feedback via an audio message helps to develop rapport with students.

The most important point to emphasize with this activity is that the primary goal is communication and language fluency, but not grammatical accuracy. One of the greatest barriers in boosting EFL students' spoken proficiency is overcoming the inherent passion for accuracy. Grammatical errors are not intolerable but natural accidents on the way to interpersonal communication. Considering communication is the basic purpose for language, too much focus on errors or accuracy can hinder communication. Therefore, it should be made clear to students that they must not write a script

beforehand; instead, they should be encouraged to resort to other methods such as brainstorming or noting keywords to keep their thoughts on track.

5.2. Group Video Project

Taking advantage of students' great interest in the latest mobile technology and the use of free messaging apps, the teacher can design a project-based group video task to enhance students' communicative competence in EFL class. The basic procedure is to assign students some topics that they must produce a video drama project in groups and be shared through the messaging app for peers' discussion and comments. To begin, the teacher can get ideas from many popular programs on television, including talk shows, news specials and films. The student groups choose the right topic and develop their own video project to the requirements of class size, language level and time limit, etc. To give feedback and evaluation of the final outcome, teachers and students can make active interactions through the messaging app and result in a reasonable rating.

This task, which combines drama, technology and teamwork, motivates students because they enjoy recording with their smartphones and sharing through messaging apps; and when they do so in a group they receive approval, cooperation and support from their partners and peers, which is also an important motivating factor for their language learning. It breaks the monotony of traditional class teaching and is enjoyable and stimulating. In addition, group video project is an excellent way to get students to use different communicative functions in English, including description, narration, identification, debate, and decision-making (Sad, 2008). As they must write English scripts, engage in peer discussion, and design and produce the video in English, students get a good practice in all-inclusive language skills via modern technology like mobiles and messaging apps.

6. Conclusion

How to motivate and inspire students to be cooperative and efficient in language learning process remains a tough question before teachers in EFL classes. With the development of mobile technology, one of the feasible and effective answers is to through free messaging apps that are so much available, capable and flexible in use among students. Although the purpose of this technology revolves around language and communication, its application to language education still appears to be under-developed. The free messaging apps have many functions that are ideal for exposing students to communicative interaction on their language-learning process, which as a result can be served as a remarkable tool to enhance students' communicative competence in EFL classes. The activities noted above are only two simplified examples for smartphone and free messaging apps use in this way. They are relatively easy to set up and supposed to provide inspiration and motivation to the language learners and instructors. By quite a lot of experiments with these tasks, students proved to be more competent in communication and proficient in language skills as expected. Another byproduct is developing the notion of learner autonomy. Being aware or not, now the students do not need to

necessarily be in the classroom to practice their English, which is note-worthy motivation factor and a big step along the language learning journey. With these free messaging apps, teachers can find more and more opportunities to make their language classes in a fun and friendly manner, and students can come to acquire essential motivation and substantial communicative competence in developing their English language proficiency.

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