

Using Smartphones in the Language Classroom: Making the Most of Core Smartphone Apps

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ABSTRACT

Smartphones, tablets, and touch screen laptops, are powerful tools capable of accommodating hundreds of specialized, complex operations and applications to anyone, seemingly anywhere in the world. As close to all tertiary students own and/or have access to one of these devices, it is natural for language teachers to be interested in how these devices can be used to leverage the language learning process. This short paper considers some of the built-in, core applications or “apps” which come with smartphones when they are unboxed. The potential uses for voice recorders, video cameras, timers and digital cameras in the language classroom will all be presented in an effort to stress the importance and value of these language-learning tools.

INTRODUCTION

We are teaching in a very exciting time for using technology in our language classrooms. Most tertiary institutions in Japan have developed wireless networks to a stage where all classrooms have Internet access, and as studies by Cote, Milliner, Flowers and Ferreira (2014) and Pegrum (2014) suggest, close to a hundred percent of all students in the developed world own a smartphone. As a result, a mobile device capable of performing a wide range of applications and tasks now sits in every student’s pocket. As noted by Pegrum (2014), smartphones represent a convergence of many stand-alone mobile language-learning tools. For example, digital cameras, voice recorders, notepads, books, timers, movie cameras, maps, Internet hot-spots, and voice-to-text apps are now a couple of screen taps away. While the iTunes store and Google Play offer a wonderful array of learning and teaching apps that teachers can consider incorporating to augment their language classrooms, this short paper focuses on the tools built into the smartphone when it first comes out of the box. That is to say, this paper will introduce some of the ways language teachers can make use of the core smartphone apps.

Teachers who are interested in incorporating smartphones into the classrooms ought to consider their use of core apps more carefully. To begin with, students are usually most proficient at using these apps. This situation means that the language teacher does not have to dedicate valuable class time to technology training, and should a technical issue arise, there is a classroom full of experienced users to help out. Secondly, many great language-learning apps are not available on both iOS and Android platforms. This condition can possibly

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prevent the whole class from being able to participate in smartphone-based activities. Moreover, even when an app is available on both platforms, it does not work the same way. For a lot of the built-in apps described in this paper, an Internet connection is not required, and given the app has been designed to run with the whole device in mind, concerns relating to reception and/or processing are eliminated. And lastly, some of these core smartphone apps develop learning skills that students can apply in a variety of contexts outside of the language classroom. As such, the remainder of this article will introduce four useful apps and share some of the ways they can be used in the language classroom.

Voice recorder

A voice recorder allows the teacher to: record lesson instructions, create authentic listening texts, record speaking activities, and, ask students to create audio content (e.g., narrating a class blog post). During in-class speaking tasks, one has observed that students are less likely to fall back into using their native language when they are being recorded. Students can record themselves to evaluate pronunciation or prepare for a speaking task. Not only can students evaluate the sound, the sound waves displayed on their screen can provide useful feedback on intonation. One of my favorite activities to play with the voice recorder is a “hot potato” game where a group of three to five students stand in a circle and pass a phone around the group and each member has to contribute one word to continue on a story. When teams are finished, I play the recordings over the speaker system and we judge the best story. Pipe (2014) also introduced an effective way to generate peer feedback when he introduced an activity whereby students record a short conversation and then share it with another team who would transcribe and critique the conversation for homework.

Video camera

Citing a 2013 study by Cisco, which predicted more than 66% of global mobile data traffic will be related to video content, Pegrum (2014) posited that video has become the biggest success story of the smartphone era. One very useful feature of the smartphone camera is that it is reversible. Therefore, users can rotate the camera to record a video of themselves while they are watching the smartphone's screen. This technique can be used to identify problems with pronunciation and monitor the quality of the video content being created. Most modern smartphone screens and speaker volume are also large enough for a video to be watched by a small group. A lot of the activities suggested in the voice recorder section above can also be experimented with using a video camera. One concern with the video camera function that is worthwhile noting is that the smartphone's microphone needs to be placed very close to the speaker's mouth to ensure the best sound quality.

Timer stop/watch

A useful technique for increasing student motivation is to include a component that excites the speaking task and stimulates students' heart rates (Ur, 2013). Racing the clock or displaying a timer beating down are wonderful ways to get your students moving and it creates a game-like environment. Moreover, time pressure can encourage students to express their ideas more rapidly and concisely (Nation, 1989). For classroom management, stopwatches or timers enable a teacher to ensure tasks do not run over time. Students should also be encouraged to use this application to evaluate their time spent on tasks (e.g., words-per-minute analysis for extensive reading or time taken to complete a practice test), or as a study technique to leverage their motivation while studying.

Camera

As the saying goes “a picture tells a thousand words”, some language teachers to question whether the use of images in some activities can rob the opportunity for more language being produced. However, the power of an image to stimulate or support a conversation cannot be ignored. What is more, the camera is generally the app that students are most skilled at using. Even without downloading Instagram® or other notable camera apps, the camera app found in new phones allows one to crop, take panoramic shots and use image filters. Students can flick quickly through their camera rolls and create small photo albums. This ability to quickly swipe through photos enables students to make small group presentations using their smartphone screen similar to a presenter projecting slides on a big screen. Some speaking activities could include asking students to (a) report on their weekends while flicking through their photos, (b) introduce the most artistic or interesting photo on the camera roll, (c) take photos for the class’ blog content; and (d) sending students on a picture hunt to take photos of something which is round, diagonal or red, etc. Students and teachers alike can also use their smartphone cameras to record information presented on the blackboard or projector screen.

CONCLUSION

This short paper has made the case for teachers to consider how they could incorporate the use of some of the core applications found in students’ smartphones. Students are already very experienced users of these tools which do not require an Internet connection, and they are available on all mobile devices. Moreover, many of the skills required to use these apps can also be transferred to studies in other subjects.

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