



## Enhancing L2 English Learning through Mobile-Assisted TBLT: EFL Learners' Perspectives

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### Introduction

Despite the potential benefits of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), researchers have lamented for the failure to proposing a pedagogical design that is suited to the 'anytime, anywhere' affordances of mobile devices and that taps into the function(s) of mobile devices (Burstson, 2015; Godwin-Jones, 2011; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). Task-based language teaching (TBLT), as a pedagogical framework for meaningful, real-world interaction and learning, may be an ideal solution to the problem (Burstson, 2017). However, research that devotes to task-and-mobile technology integration is scarce. This study investigated the use of a mobile-assisted task as a type of technology-mediated TBLT to foster second language (L2) English learning in a university English as a foreign language (EFL) class from learners' perspectives. This task-based project was designed to explore potential benefits and challenges of integrating tasks into technology-mediated language learning, with a specific focus on MALL.

### Literature Review

#### Technology-mediated Task-Based Language Teaching

TBLT has attracted considerable attention over the past three decades (Long, 2015). TBLT is a process-oriented approach to language teaching in which tasks are the units within curriculum design and an element in the pedagogical cycle in which meaning is the primary focus (Nunan, 2004). From a theoretical perspective, TBLT is grounded in the interaction approach (Loewen, 2015; Long, 2015), which suggests that comprehensive input, internationally modified input as a result of negotiation for meaning when there is a communication breakdown, and learners' output during meaning-focused task-based interaction facilitate L2 development (Gass & Mackey, 2007; Loewen, 2015; Long, 2015).

Despite the pedagogic value of tasks and the pervasive use of tasks in the L2 classroom, various challenges remain, such as learners' avoidance of the target language during communicative tasks (Adams & Newton, 2009; Littlewood, 2007), learners' passive learning style and overreliance on the teacher

(Adams & Newton, 2009; Littlewood, 2007), and noisy classroom when students talk at the same time (Adams & Newton, 2009; Bruton, 2005). Many of these challenges are due to physical constraints in the classroom context and could potentially be mitigated with the integration of technologies. This echoes the calls for synergies between language learning technologies and TBLT, termed as technology-mediated TBLT, to enhance the quality of TBLT and to promote students' engagement in L2 learning (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014; Ziegler, 2016).

The introduction of technology to TBLT has led to calls for extending our conceptualization of task to technology-mediated learning and a proposal of the definition of tasks in technology-mediated environments. Ortega (2009) suggested we view tasks as projects and quests. Her view was shared by Warschauer (2001), who argued for extending task to project-based learning and by Ziegler (2016), who advocated the need for expanding the definition of task for other emerging technological tools, such as mobiles and digital games to reflect the growing use and advance of technology in L2 teaching and learning. In addition to the calls for reconceptualization of task, a set of criteria for defining technology-mediated tasks was proposed by González-Lloret and Ortega (2014, pp. 5-6), including:

- *Primary focus on meaning* (i.e., learners focus on pragmatic or semantic content, rather than linguistic forms)
- *Goal orientation* (i.e., a task must have communicative purpose or element to encourage language use and have outcome resulting from task completion)
- *Learner-centeredness* (i.e., learners can draw on their linguistic and non-linguistic resources in addition to digital skills)
- *Holism* (i.e., a task should be authentic and draw on real-world processes of language use)
- *Reflective learning* (i.e., a task should offer learners opportunities for considering the process and outcome of a task)

To date, most existing studies have employed traditional pedagogic tasks (e.g., decision making tasks, jigsaw tasks) to study the effect of technology-mediated TBLT on L2 learning (Chen, 2016; Lin, 2015). Given that reconceptualization of task is desirable when it comes to technology-mediated TBLT, more research that views task as project and that involves the use of emerging technological tools is warranted (Chen, 2015). One particular type of technologies that is gathering momentum is mobile technology, which has great potential to promote L2 English learning when integrated into task-based projects (Chen, 2016).

## Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

Defined as the use of “mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where device portability offers specific advantages”, MALL is a burgeoning field of study (Kukulka-Hulme, 2013, p. 3701). The ‘anytime, anywhere’ affordances of the mobile devices, as well as the build-in function of video recording when combined with TBLT, allow the collaborative, interactive use of target language (Burston, 2017).

The potential of using mobile devices for TBLT has been examined in two studies carried out in Asian EFL contexts. Lim and Lee (2016) investigated the role of task modality (i.e., face-to-face conversation vs. mobile chatting) and task type (convergent task vs. divergent task) in Korean EFL learners' interaction. The findings showed that learners used more meaning negotiation devices in face-to-face interaction and when working on convergent tasks. Moreover, learners perceived mobile-interaction as easier to engage in the tasks, though they preferred face-to-face interaction. While the study revealed the advantages and disadvantages of task-and-mobile technology integration, the study used traditional pedagogic tasks commonly reported in the existing literature. The concept of task should be expanded in this unique learning context. Creating a problem-solving task to engage Taiwanese EFL elementary school learners in interaction outdoors, Tai (2012) found the learners showed gains in vocabulary and grammar. The learners

also perceived English learning in a positive light. Although Tai's study represented the first attempt to broaden the concept of TBLT in the MALL context, her study focused mainly on language gains, learners' perception of task design and its implementation was not fully explored. Nevertheless, learners' perception of task design and its implementation is critical to the evaluation of the quality of TBLT curricula (Bryfonski & McKay, 2017; González-Lloret, 2016).

## Research Question

Situated within technology-mediated TBLT framework, this exploratory study aims to fill the gap in the literature by investigating a mobile-assisted, technology-mediated task design and implementation for L2 English learning from EFL learners' viewpoints. The following research question guided the present study:

How do EFL undergraduates perceive technology-mediated TBLT, especially MALL within the TBLT framework, for English learning?

## Methodology

### Participants

The participants were 20 intermediate level EFL learners who enrolled in an undergraduate Freshman English class on integrated skills learning taught by the second author at a public university in northern Taiwan. There were five males and 15 females from different disciplines, with 19 from Education school and one from Music school. On average, they have received formal English education for 9.35 years since they were in fifth grade. Their average age was 18.7.

### Task and Procedure

The purpose of the present study was to design a mobile-assisted, technology-mediated task for English learning that reflects the principles of technology-mediated TBLT (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014) while catering to the 'anytime, anywhere' affordances of and the functions of the mobile devices. As a result, a campus reporting task was created to provide learners' an opportunity to know their campus and to introduce their university in English.

The task lasted five weeks and involved three phases. At the *pre-task* phase, the course instructor asked the participants to form groups by themselves, and the class was divided into five groups of four. Each group member assumed a role of leader, reporter, script writer, or technician in the campus reporting task. The course instructor then assigned a site for each group. The chosen sites included auditorium, park, sports field, food court, and swimming pool. The instructor also guided the students to look for online information (e.g., the official website of the university) that might prepare them for the task, and each group member helped with the information search. At the *main task* phase, each group was given one week to write up a three-to-five-minute script for video recording of the campus. In the next class meeting, each group went out of the classroom to do campus recording using smartphones. After task completion, the technician in each group edited the video. All the groups were required to upload their video clips and reflections on the task onto the course website, *Moodle*, a learning management system for peer comments. At the *post-task* phase, the instructor provided feedback on students' group work in the class. The class met two hours a week; some class hours were devoted to group discussions on how to perform the task.

## Instrument

The instrument used to answer the research question was a questionnaire revised based upon two previous MALL studies (Chang & Hsu, 2011; Hsu, Hwang, & Chang, 2013), which aimed to collect the participants' perceptions of using smartphones and computer technologies for English learning. The participating students were asked to self-report their perceived "usefulness" (6 items), "ease of use" (4 items) and "satisfaction" (7 items) of the task and technologies on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). In addition to the 17 questionnaire items, the participants were required to answer two open-ended questions regarding their favorite part(s) of the campus reporting task and their suggestions for any improvement in the task design and implementation. The questionnaire was filled out anonymously.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered after the campus reporting task was over, taking participants around 15 minutes to finish. The closed-ended questionnaire data were entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 22.0 to obtain mean and standard deviation for each item. Additionally, the raw frequencies and percentages of participants' responses were calculated. Qualitative content analysis that involved frequency counts was applied to analyze the participants' responses to the two open-ended questions in the questionnaire.

## Results

Participating students' responses to the closed-ended questionnaire items were shown in Table 1. In terms of perceived usefulness of the mobile-assisted, technology-mediated campus reporting task, 90 % of the participants held positive attitudes towards interaction with their group members during the task and agreed that the task provided them with the opportunities to learn integrated skills. 90 % of them also concurred that they needed to perform their role well in their group to accomplish the task. 70 % of the participants thought incorporating mobile and computer technologies helped make their work creative. However, it is worth noting that while 90 % of them agreed the task helped them get to know about their university, only 50 % expressed an increased motivation for knowing more about the university they are attending.

When it comes to perceived ease of use of the technologies, 70 % of the participants responded positively to using technology for online information search on their university. On the other hand, there might be some difficulties experienced by the participants: Only 40 % of them agreed that it was easy to edit video clips; 50 % concurred that uploading the video to the course website was an easy task. And 55 % agreed that using smartphones to do the task was easy. Overall, perceived ease of use received the lowest average mean scores among the three main categories of the closed-ended questionnaire ( $M=3.65$ ).

As far as degree of satisfaction of the task and technologies is concerned, 90 % of the participants held positive opinions on the task, which appeared to be interesting to them. 80 % of them also considered video recording playful and would like to take part in similar tasks to practice their English in the future. When asked whether they want to practice English with the technologies in the future, 75 % of the participants expressed their willingness to do so. The same number of the participants (75 %) also appreciated the opportunity to do the campus reporting task. On the other hand, only 45 % of the participants viewed editing video as pleasurable. Although only 35 % of the participants plan to use smartphone to practice English, the item had the highest standard deviation among all the 18 items ( $SD=1.071$ ), indicating rather mixed perceptions from the participants.

TABLE 1  
Percentage Summary of the Questionnaire

Items	SA (%)	A	N	D	SD	Mean	SD
Usefulness							
The task helps me understand more about our university.	25	65	5	0	5	4.05	0.89
The task requires me to use integrated language skills.	55	35	10	0	0	4.45	0.69
The task motivates me to know more about our university.	20	30	45	0	5	3.60	0.99
Using technology (e.g. smartphone, computer, or editing tools such as Popcorn Maker) helps make the task creative.	40	30	30	0	0	4.10	0.85
I have to interact with my group members to finish the task.	65	25	5	5	0	4.50	0.83
I have to play my role well in the group to finish the task.	65	25	0	10	0	4.45	0.94
Ease of use							
It is easy for us to use the smartphone to finish the task.	20	35	40	5	0	3.70	0.86
It is easy for us to use the technology to search information about our university.	35	35	25	5	0	4.00	0.92
It is easy for us to upload the video to the course website.	10	40	40	10	0	3.50	0.83
It is easy for us to use the technology to edit the video.	15	25	45	15	0	3.40	0.94
Satisfaction							
It is pleasurable when we edit the video.	20	25	55	0	0	3.65	0.81
It is playful when we record the video.	35	45	15	5	0	4.10	0.85
I appreciate this campus reporting task.	20	55	10	15	0	3.80	0.95
I plan to practice English with my smartphone.	10	25	35	25	5	3.10	1.07
I would like to practice English with the technologies in the future.	20	55	25	0	0	3.95	0.69
I would like to participate in a similar task to practice English.	20	60	20	0	0	4.00	0.65
In general, the task is interesting.	60	30	10	0	0	4.50	0.68

Note. SA=strongly agree; A= agree; N =neutral; D= disagree; SD=strongly disagree; SD= standard deviation

The two open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire asked participating students about their favorite part(s) of the mobile-assisted, technology-mediated TBLT and their suggestions for improvement in the task-based project. The qualitative data provided rich accounts of the students' positive and negative attitudes towards the project.

With regard to participants' favorite (s) of the task-based project, students' responses could be broadly categorized into three main categories, including task design, language gains, and learning gains. 60 % of the students ( $N=12$ ) regarded campus reporting as their favorite part of the entire task cycle. 30 % of the students ( $N=6$ ) favored the scripting process. Four students (20 %) viewed editing their video as their favorite. Participants also held positive opinions about language gains. Specifically, they perceived vocabulary gains ( $N=9$ , 45%) and improvement in writing skills ( $N=6$ , 30 %), both of which were enhanced in the scripting stage. As for learning gains, students learnt peer collaboration most ( $N=9$ , 45 %), followed by improved digital literacy ( $N=3$ , 15%), an increased understanding of the campus ( $N=3$ , 15 %), and getting acquaintance with their classmates ( $N=1$ , 5 %).

The second open-ended question asked participants' perceptions on improvement in the mobile-assisted, technology-mediated TBLT. Three main categories emerged from qualitative analysis of students' responses: 1) time on task, 2) task design and implementation, and 3) issues about technology. In terms of time on task, 30 % of the students hoped that the instructor could allocate sufficient time to the entire task ( $N=6$ ) and the campus reporting task in particular ( $N=3$ , 15%). They also suggested that the course instructor give them more time to complete the task so that they would not be forced to record the video clip in a rainy day ( $N=2$ , 10 %). As far as task design and implementation are concerned, students expected equal work distribution from their group members ( $N=3$ , 15 %). Besides, students uttered their desire to introduce other more interesting topics rather than the university they are attending ( $N=2$ , 10 %). They also hoped that the course instructor could let them decide the site of campus reporting ( $N=1$ , 5 %) and adopt more flexible role distribution ( $N=1$ , 5%). Regarding technology issues, one student (5 %) was

troubled by his or her poor technology literacy and technical problems he or she encountered while completing the campus reporting task in the bad weather.

TABLE 2  
*Students' Comments on their Favorite Part(s) of the Technology-mediated TBLT*

Favorites	Participants' comments
Task design	
Campus reporting (12)	"I like recording the video. At first, we kept NG because we could not help but laughing."
Scripting (6)	"My favorite part of the task is discussing with my group members about how to introduce our sports field."
Video editing (4)	"I like to edit the video because I like to use lots of special effects, such as background music to enrich our film."
Language gains	
Vocabulary (9)	"I have opportunities to learn different vocabulary words."
Writing (6)	"We tried to translate the script written in Chinese into English. That was quite interesting."
Learning gains	
Collaboration with peers (9)	"My favorite part of this task is discussing how to do campus reporting with my group members. It is great to collaborate with them to finish the task."
Digital literacy (3)	"The task forced me to learn how to use the 3C product [smartphone]."
Gain in-depth understanding of our university (3)	"I hoped to know more about our campus from this task. In the past, we left our campus straight after class dismissed and did not have chances to get to know more about the history, phenomenon, and famous people and things of our campus."
Get to know more about my classmates (1)	"I got to know more about my group members (actually classmates from our department). I felt very happy about this."

*Note.* The numbers in parentheses indicate number of participants mentioned the issue.

TABLE 3  
*Students' Suggestions for Improvement in the Technology-mediated TBLT*

Improvements	Participants' comments
Time on task	
More time distributed to the task cycle (6)	"The schedule was a bit tight. We might do a good job if sufficient time were given to us."
More time for recording (3)	"There was not enough time for us to record the video."
Poor weather for campus reporting (2)	"Because that day was a rainy day, I think it was not convenient for us to record the video."
Task design and implementation	
Unequal work distribution (3)	"I hoped our group leader could be more responsible and did not wait until the other group members told him/ her what should be done."
Topic selection (2)	"Next time I hoped we can introduce night market food. It will be more interesting."
Freedom to choose the site on their own (1)	"I think the course instructor can let each group choose the site."
More flexible role of each group member in the task (1)	"I think besides being a reporter, I should be allowed to get involved in other group members' duties so that we can finish the task earlier and learn more skills, such as video editing."
Issues about technology	
Poor technology literacy (1)	"We were not that familiar with 3C product, so it took us some time to explore the functions of the smartphone."
Technical problems (1)	"While doing campus reporting, our video had a lot of noise. We either stood near the camera or spoke louder."

*Note.* The numbers in parentheses indicate number of participants mentioned the issue.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study adds to the current literature by showing that broadening the conceptualization of task in

technology-mediated language learning contexts is desirable when it comes to task-and-mobile technology integration. The findings revealed that EFL learners' relatively positive attitudes toward the task design and implementation, integrated language skills gains, and learning gains.

The findings showed that participants perceived integrated language skills gains, such as vocabulary and writing skills gains. The finding is encouraging, given that most pedagogical interventions in the current technology-mediated TBLT research attempted to develop only one of the L2 learners' four skills (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in a single study, relatively few existing studies have reported the benefits of technology-mediated TBLT for L2 integrated skills learning (for review, see Blake, 2016; for parallel comment, see González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014).

The study also uncovered two reasons why the technology-mediated, mobile-assisted task was favored by the participating students. The participants especially found the task design that required them to interact with one another useful. This finding is different from one of the common challenges associated with the implementation of TBLT in the Asian EFL context—EFL learners' difficulty in adjusting themselves to group work (Adams & Newton, 2009). One reason for this contradictory finding may be because the integration of mobile and computer technologies added fun to students' English learning and reduced their anxiety of using English to communicate with one another. The finding is in line with previous studies, which suggested that factors such as group member familiarity and team dynamics in technology-mediated learning have a positive influence on students' perception of learning (Janssen, Erkens, Kirschner, & Kanselaar, 2009; Ku, Tseng, & Akarasriworn, 2013). The students who formed groups with their own classmates from the same department established solidarity and rapport easily, thereby perceiving the task in a rather positive light. Another task design feature favored by the participants is that the campus reporting task provided them with an opportunity to get to know their university by learning how to introduce the university. The participants' favorable attitude may be because the task design guided them to learn English in an authentic context that is helpful for their real-world encounters.

The study offers some pedagogical implications. Although the mobile-assisted, technology-mediated task described in the present study tapped into the real-world language use goals and learners' interest while encouraging them to work on various language skills, the task may not reflect the learning needs and goals of all learners. For this reason, L2 English teaching professionals are highly encouraged to design a variety of mobile-assisted tasks to cater to different learners' needs and preferences. For instance, in addition to the task employed in this study, teachers might ask learners to form groups to collaboratively create an English introduction to local stores or tourist attractions of their choice around campus and display their introductions by utilizing QR Code technology. Then, teachers can ask each group to engage in a 'treasure hunt' task (i.e., explore other groups' creation) to learn more about their community. After the task is over, teachers may ask students to write reflection journals about the learning process and outcome of the main task and subtasks in the target language and do a group debriefing in the class to encourage reflective learning. Such a technology-mediated task-based project might provide English learners opportunities for developing their English reading, writing, speaking, and digital literacy skills while engaging them in the real-world language use and task. Moreover, L2 English practitioners who consider taking technology to task are advised to allocate enough time to the task. One way to make sure learners can finish the task within the time frame is through training learners' digital skills at the pre-task phase. In doing so, learners can use technological tools effectively and efficiently during the task, which potentially minimizes the amount of time they need to complete the task.

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