'Why did you suggest voice messages but never use it anyway?!': Obstacles of promoting English language speaking in a mobile instant messaging community

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ABSTRACT
In this globalised world, there is an increasing need for advanced English users with excellent speaking proficiency. However, due to various reasons such as the washback effect of the current language testing systems, English speaking is a crucial yet overlooked skill among the four language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) in many language learning classrooms. With the blurring boundary between the physical and virtual worlds, technology-enhanced language learning beyond the traditional classroom is being encouraged in pedagogy but still underexplored in academic studies. To this end, the short paper explores some obstacles of Chinese EFL learners’ use of voice messaging in a mobile learning community. By analyzing data from student interviews and a teacher’s journal, results showed that our participants faced speaking anxiety, including the self-consciousness of their accents and embarrassment. From the ecological and ethnographic perspectives, the study made an attempt to uncover some of the hidden challenges that Chinese EFL learners faced in sending English voice messages. Implications and recommendations for textbook design, teacher training, assessment reform and student learning will be discussed at the end of this paper.

Author Keywords
Voice messaging, mobile learning, speaking anxiety, Chinese EFL learners, challenges

INTRODUCTION
From the 2008 Olympic Games, 2010 World EXPO, 2014 APEC Summit, to the latest ‘One Road, One Belt’ initiative, China is playing a more important economic, cultural and political part on the international stage. Against this backdrop, there is a growing need for advanced EFL (English as a foreign language) learners in China. China now has the largest population of English learning (Bolton & Graddol, 2012) and the ‘English fever’ will not cool down in the upcoming years (See other Asian countries that share the English fever, e.g., Wu, 2019). Despite the emotional and financial burden on Chinese parents in cultivating their children not to fall behind at the starting line, many families in metropolitan cities decide to let their kids begin their foreign language learning when they are toddlers. The nine-year compulsory education in China stipulates English as one of the key subjects, which is also a compulsory subject for the college entrance examination (gaokao). Due to the high-stakes nature of gaokao, it is, to many students from working-class or underprivileged families, the only hope for moving up the social ladder (Wu, 2018). In other words, according to a Chinese saying, one test, i.e. gaokao, may determine the rest of a student’s lifetime (yi kao ding zhong shen). Out of question, the value of English has been strengthened in the current examination-oriented schooling in China.

However, with such a focus on the development of English, Chinese EFL learners have sometimes failed to achieve satisfactory learning outcomes as expected. There seems to be a mismatch between their huge efforts and undesirable results. Taking the IELTS (Intentional Language Testing System) test as an example, its official website (https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/test-taker-performance) shows Chinese test takers obtained an overall band of 5.76 (full mark=9) on average in 2017. Not surprisingly, speaking is a weak spot (Mean score=5.39) for many Chinese test takers. Indeed, English learning in China has long been featured as ‘mute/dumb’ English (emphasising language input over output). He (2013) focused on this issue and found 14 major reasons for foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) among Chinese students. Among others, factors such as lack of motivation, unfamiliar speaking topics, fear of being tested, lack of sufficient vocabulary, and not enough preparation time are the most influential. Moreover, with the pervasiveness of technology, learning has been largely mediated and complicated. He (2018) reviewed 103 papers on FLSA from 1998 to 2014 and found that Chinese learners in a technology-enhanced learning environment generally reported a moderate level of anxiety, underscoring issues including technical problems, lack of interpersonal communication, insufficient development of digital literacies, and lack of instructor support. To follow this line of research, this paper aims to advance our understanding of English speaking practice in mobile instant messaging contexts by answer the following research question: What are the underlying obstacles of FLSA encountered by the student participants in WeChat-based communication?

USING TECHNOLOGY TO PROMOTE L2 SPEAKING
Even though technology is increasingly being accepted in language education, limited studies have looked into the use of technology to promote L2 speaking. One possible reason is the in-class emphasis on listening, reading and writing and an overlook on speaking impacted by the wash-back effects of the language tests (Wu, under review). Even so, some studies
have attempted to make use of the latest technologies to improve students’ speaking performance but often as a byproduct of the learning activities. In the USA, Hsu, Wang, and Comac (2008) conducted a classroom exploration of using audioblogs to develop students’ oral communication. By recording students’ assignments and getting comments from teachers, students reported a positive attitude towards using audioblogs to enhance their speaking performance, especially when they were able to receive individualized feedback. However, the project only focused on teacher-student interactions, and peer oral interactions should be further promoted. To facilitate the use of peer feedback, Wu (under review) conducted a mobile-assisted peer feedback project with undergraduate learners at a Hong Kong university. The study employed a mobile application to transform learners from passive recipients to producers of feedback; they were encouraged to provide detailed comments for their peers when preparing for a speaking assignment. Results showed that although some challenges such as the student capability to provide constructive feedback were noticed, the students welcomed the use of the mobile application and the inclusion of peer feedback.

Apart from the in-class attempts of using technology to promote L2 speaking, educators have also explored out-of-class learning in various ways. In particular, telecollaboration is an effective way to provide language learners with meaningful and interactive experiences to augment their holistic language learning experience. To improve learners’ linguistic competence, some scholars like Jung (2013) organized a telecollaborative project, inviting 45 South Korean students and their peers from other Asian regions such as Singapore and Japan. Results not only demonstrate learners’ intercultural awareness improvement but also indicate learners’ appreciation of the chance to improve their speaking and listening skills.

To bridge the gap between in-class and out-of-class learning, the potentials of digital storytelling have been proved in different learning contexts, such as in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and language learning courses (Zhang, 2019). Hafner and Miller (2011) pioneered their digital storytelling project in an English for Science course in Hong Kong. By guiding students to create scientific documentaries, learners reflected on the valuable chances of practicing oral English in an authentic, informal, and collaborative manner. Similarly, Thang, Mahmud and Tng (2015) who used digital storytelling in learning Mandarin found that Malaysian students’ confidence in speaking Mandarin was increased as the digital environment afforded a relaxing and enjoyable experience.

THE STUDY
The paper reports some preliminary findings from a larger research project in a Chinese tertiary institute. A pilot study (Cycle 1), which was conducted in 2015 before formed into a formal research project from 2016 to 2018, consists of two cycles of participation. In total, four year-3 students and four year-2 students from the same Business English program were voluntarily joined the two cycles (Cycles 2 and 3, 16 weeks). They are all native speakers of Chinese and have at least nine years’ experience in learning English. The teacher/researcher and the students formed an instant messaging WeChat community with the aim to promote language use and critical awareness of social issues. More details of the project can be found in Wu (2017, 2018) and Wu and Miller (forthcoming).

WeChat is an instant messaging application that incorporates multiple functions, including text, voice, and video messages, pictures, hyperlinks, life moments, shopping, and gaming. We encouraged students to use voice messages to practice their speaking because they did not have many chances to speak English with a class size of more than 40 students. However, it should be noted that the use of voice messages was voluntary and not associated with assessment. The teacher did not intend to impose affective pressure because students were not familiar with such informal learning approaches. Surprisingly, although the participants themselves suggested “using voice messages in the next round of discussion” in their post-cycle 1 interview, they still refused to use it in the second cycle. To this end, the study aims to explore the participants’ unwillingness to send English voice messages via WeChat by focusing on the post-cycle 2 interviews.

The study employs an ecological (van Lier, 2004) and ethnographic perspective with the teacher/researcher’s participation into and observations of the discussion (teacher journal), reflections on the macro socio-cultural context of the participants (teacher journal), and in-depth interviews with participants through WeChat. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese to elicit deeper reflections. A thematic analysis was applied to analyze interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and triangulate the data in the teacher/researcher’s journal. To improve the validity of the analysis, the first author coded the entire data set and the second author commented on the initial findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS
To explore the potential obstacles of students’ use of voice messages, we first triggered them to reflect on their user habit of WeChat, especially whether they have the habit of using voice messages. Results show that the participants generally reflected that it is common for them to send Chinese messages in their daily conversations. Thus, we suppose some hidden reasons might underlie their unwillingness to send voice messages in L2.

‘I have a very poor accent!’
One of the often-given factors in inhibiting students from speaking English is their self-perception of their pronunciation. More specifically, they were concerned about their Chinese accents or dialectical accents in their spoken English. This finding is opposite from Ahn and Kang’s (2017) study who discovered that Korean students were positive about their English pronunciation with accents. To further understand the influencing factors of students’ perceptions of their
English accents in the current study, their received training in year-1 Phonetics course was discussed. Students reflected that their phonetics textbook and course did not cover the topic of accents. The focus of the course was largely centered on the basics of phonetics, such as speech organs and places of articulation. The researcher further interviewed the course instructor of Phonetics and found that she had no knowledge of World Englishes (WE) or English as Lingua Franca (ELF), although she recently graduated from a top-tier Chinese university, holding a degree in Interpretation and Translation.

However, the teacher/researcher, as he reflected, explained the concept of ELF in his course to these participants. It seemed that the in-class instructions, to some extent, failed to achieve its expected effects. Thus, other factors, in addition to the teacher’s instructions, may be intertwined and uncovered. From the ecological perspective, we found that the learning culture at the current research site may be one possible explanation. Firstly, regarding the general school learning ecology, although the university has been striking for the formative assessment reformation over the past few years, the course assessment is still primarily based on the final exams (usually 60%-70% of the total weighting). To pass the exams, it is usually enough for students to memorize the so-called ‘important knowledge points’ (zhishi dian). ELF has not been stressed in their textbooks yet, and thus students may not pay special attention if not tested (Reeves, 2006).

Another possible reason for their low self-esteem of their accents is the Chinese face culture, our interviewees may have experienced a dilemma as they had the desire to improve speaking but were not psychologically and pedagogically well-supported by their teachers.

‘It’s just so embarrassed!’
Embarrassment is another widely mentioned obstacle by the participants. With a further elaboration on the topic of embarrassment, several influencing factors were found. The fear of not knowing enough vocabulary and making grammatical mistakes is an important reason given by the interviewed participants. The finding is consistent with He (2013), who also reported that fear of making mistakes ranked high in his list of speaking anxiety among his 302 Chinese college student participants. In the current study, the interviewees explained that they often did not know how to express themselves in English. As they were intermediate language learners, vocabulary and grammar may not be a major obstacle to stop them from speaking English. It is supposed that some affective reasons like their anxiety and fear of speaking may be the key reason.

One reason mentioned in the interviews was that their previous teachers provided a bad role model of English speaking and thus further impacted their speaking learning. Candice (year-3) remarked that “When I come to the university, I suddenly discovered that many things I learnt were wrong. How should I say it? The education I received was not up to standard.” The “many things” here primarily relate to English speaking as she further elaborated. She gave the example of ‘th-‘ and explained that without an accurate speaking model, she was constantly worried that she would make mistakes. It appears that her teachers’ L2 speaking performance imposed an affective obstacle as her language confidence was negatively affected.

The participants’ physical environment also accounts for the participants’ choice of not sending English voice messages. As some mentioned, they could not send voice messages if they were in the library or in the dorm (the fear of losing face in front of roommates). “But sometimes, it is not convenient to use voice...such as when we are in a quiet environment” (Gabrielle, year-2). Although mobile learning has been argued with the major benefits of extending learning beyond the classroom, the current study found that student learning is still largely constrained by their physical surroundings.

In addition to these reasons, embarrassment is believed to be closely related to the Chinese face culture (teacher journal) (Miller & Wu, 2018). Face culture has rooted in the Confucian culture for centuries and it sometimes seems to become a negative factor for language learning (Wu, 2017) as the willingness to take risks of losing face is a crucial step for foreign language learners to improve their language skills (Vinagre & Esteban, 2017). Complexing the issue, the Chinese examination-oriented culture also poses challenges to learners as the heavy emphasis on listening, reading and writing in class. As mentioned, due to the backwash of exams, teachers tend to overlook the practice of speaking. As Gabrielle (year-2) explained, “I never read articles aloud. I just read vocabulary aloud in high school”. It is surprising to find that this student never had the chance to practice speaking above the sentence level. She provided an example of how she read words aloud in high school. “a-p-p-l-e, ai pao (phonetically similar to apple)”. This story provides a snapshot of Gabrielle’s previous language learning and points to the issue of pedagogical foci in language classrooms. Coupled with the Chinese face culture, our interviewees may have experienced a dilemma as they had the desire to improve speaking but were not psychologically and pedagogically well-supported by their teachers.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
The paper explored several obstacles of sending English voice messages in a WeChat learning community from an ecological perspective. Findings from the interviews showed that students experienced affective barriers such as the feeling of embarrassment, caused by various reasons including the influences from previous language teachers, the learning environment and the culture. Based on the findings, some implications are proposed:

Textbook: An innovation on current textbooks especially phonetics books in Chinese higher education is needed. More up-to-date syllabus for the phonetics course is of great importance. It should not merely focus on the phonological
knowledge of English (e.g., speech organs). More efforts should be made on enhancing students’ communicative competence in the globalized world.

Teacher training: Zhang (2018) argued that the teacher’s accent of speaking a second language may not be the most important factor that impacts students’ foreign language speaking development. We should take other issues like language teaching quality and the appropriateness of the curriculum and pedagogy into consideration. In this case, teacher training seems necessary in terms of promoting current perspectives of ELF: increasing awareness and knowledge of current language pedagogy and improving pre-service teachers’ speaking proficiency. However, it is by no means an easy task that requires collaborations among researchers, administrators, teachers, students, and policymakers.

Assessment: Although Chinese gaokao system is hard to change, teachers should never use it as an excuse to avoid teaching speaking. Perhaps a shared belief among school administrators, teachers, and students that acknowledges the importance of L2 speaking is the first step to lead to classroom changes.

Student learning: Students, on the one hand, should be provided with more chances to practice their speaking with the support of their instructors or peers. On the other hand, learners themselves should realize the importance of English speaking in the development of their linguistic competence. They should take more initiatives to practice speaking outside the classroom. However, due to the Chinese current examination-oriented culture, it is expected to be challenging for students to change their mindset about learning and transform themselves from passive learners to active learners.

REFERENCES


