

HG2052 Language and Technology

Assignment 1

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Communication in modern Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) services:

Case Study of HelloTalk

Developments in Web 2.0 technology has led to a paradigm shift in second language pedagogy. Although the use of technology in assisting language learners have existed from late 20th century (Twarog and Pereszlenyi-Pinter, 1988; Gallego, 1992), the rapid permeation of smartphones and increased accessibility to the Internet has greatly eased such cross-cultural communication for distance learners.

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL)—the use of mobile devices such as smartphones to complement second language learning—has created new possibilities for social contact and collaborative learning (Kukulska-Hulme et al, 2008). In particular, the general shift towards user-generated content has had its effects on MALL; language learning applications such as HiNative and HelloTalk which connects native users with second language learners have gained popularity alongside traditional methods which are more static and prescriptive in nature.

Amongst these transitions, HelloTalk has stood out for reflecting such trends and combining many features of both speech-like and text-like communication—which will be evaluated in this essay—in order to maximize its pedagogical potential.

1. Brief History

According to Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2008), the difference between mobile-assisted language learning and other computer-assisted language learning methods lies in “its use of personal, portable devices (...) emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different contexts of use”.

In recent years, developers have been quick to shift from computer-assisted language learning (CALL) to mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). For example, Tokyo-based Lang-8 Inc. suspended new registrations for their Lang-8.com service in 2017 in order to focus resources on their iOS service HiNative despite having over half a million registered users on the former website.

2. HelloTalk

Founded in that same year, HelloTalk is a free application available on the iOS and Android system. It markets itself as the “1st global language and culture exchange service” and allows language learners to connect and practice with native speakers of their target language through a social networking platform not dissimilar to Facebook or Twitter. As of 2018, it has 12 million users from more than 190 countries and claims to support above 150 languages (HelloTalk User Report, 2018).

HelloTalk's main functions are as follows:

1. "Moments" (Figure 1)
2. Chats (Figure 2)
3. Audio calls
4. Live class (Figure 3)

In HelloTalk, language learners can post journal entries known as "Moments", which can be subject to corrections for grammar and structure by native speakers. This correction feature can also be used in chats, as seen in Fig 2, where conversations can be brought to for more privacy. HelloTalk supports both 1-to-1 and chatgroups.

In 2018, HelloTalk also introduced its live class function—users can create virtual classrooms, upload lesson materials in the form of PowerPoint files and share about their native language with language learners. Lessons are also supported with synchronous audio calls.

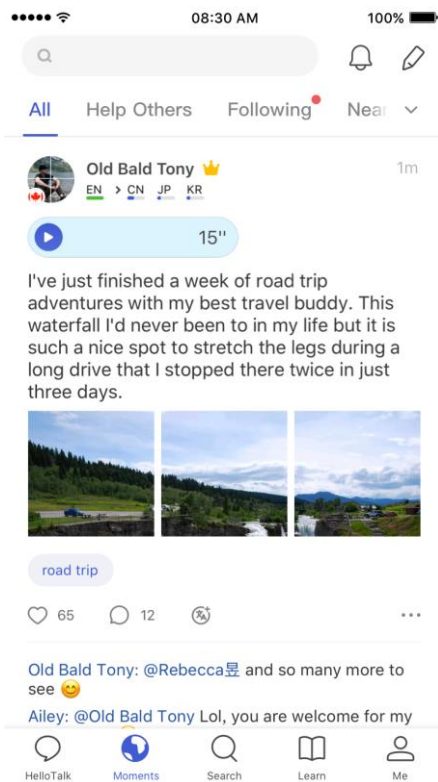


Figure 1: Moments¹



Figure 2: Chat²

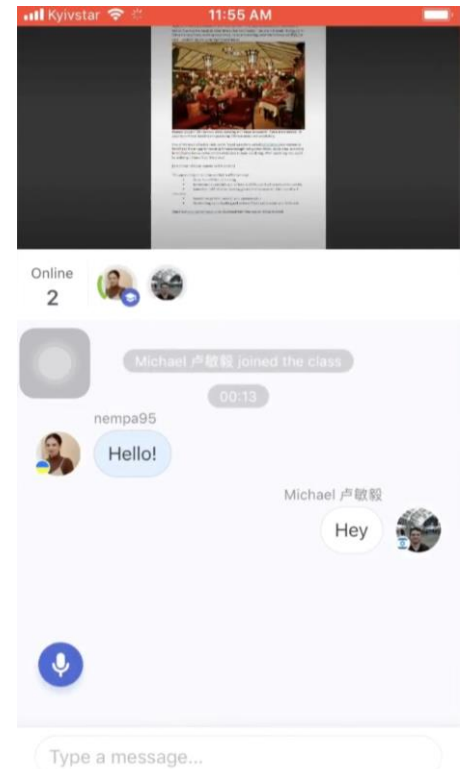


Figure 3: Live Class³

Additionally, translation and transliteration features are also available across the application. However, access to these functions is limited unless the user chooses to pay for a monthly or annual subscription.

¹ Taken from HelloTalk Press Kit (<https://www.hellotalk.com/about?lang=en#presskit>)

² Taken from HelloTalk Press Kit

³ Screenshot from HelloTalk official Youtube channel

3. Communication on HelloTalk

HelloTalk's multimodal features allows for both synchronous and asynchronous features of computer mediated communication. For Moments and chats, users can provide and receive feedback from other users without being logged on at the same time; meanwhile, chats, audio calls and Live Classes are much more synchronous in nature as they are speech-based.

The various functions of HelloTalk exhibits features from both sides of the spectrum in the context of Crystal's seven characteristics of speech and text (2016). A variety of pedagogically facilitating interactions can be facilitated through text and speech, or a combination of both (such as in the case of Live Classes). In the following section, text-based communication (Moments and chats) and speech-based communication (audio calls, Live Classes) will be discussed in terms of the aforementioned characteristics.

3.1 Communication on HelloTalk: Moments and Chats

Moments and chats are largely text-based in that one can revisit the piece of writing for an unlimited number of times. They are space bound, static and permanent—the degree of persistence of text (Herring, 2007) is high, especially so for chat texts as it cannot be edited or deleted and will be retained for an indefinite amount of time. Moments face a character limit of 2000, and in multi-user environments such as chatgroups, the limitations of the screen become obvious.

Assuming minimal lags due to inefficient communicative networks, both Moments and chatgroups display a rather high level of spontaneity. However, this may prove to be an issue in larger chatgroups; unless one uses the search function to intentionally find a message, users are likely to only respond to messages at the tail end of the scrollbar buffer. This means that the user has a limited, practical amount of time (and face contextual limitations) when responding to his partner. Using Herring's faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse (2007), communication in Moments and chats are one-way—one can neither find out what other parties are writing simultaneously, nor see when someone is typing a reply. This fundamentally impedes turn-taking and creates confusion when many are talking at once and may interrupt or overlap with others.

Visually decontextualized text such as Moments and chats also signals a certain loss in other paralinguistic cues. However, Crystal (2017) has also noted that non-standard, or deviant spelling, in CMD is not chastised as in traditional writing and can be used to reflect pronunciation and emotional expressions (such as *noooo* instead of *no*). The advent of emojis, which is often used on HelloTalk, has also taken away some of those limitations. Studies have shown that emojis serve a paralinguistic purpose and provide equally important contextual information (Pavalanathan & Eisenstein, 2016).

While chats imitate actual speech and are largely loosely structured and socially interactive, Moments on HelloTalk can be elaborately structured and factually communicative. Instead of using it for journaling purposes, a significant number of users have chosen to use their page to upload educational materials for language learners.

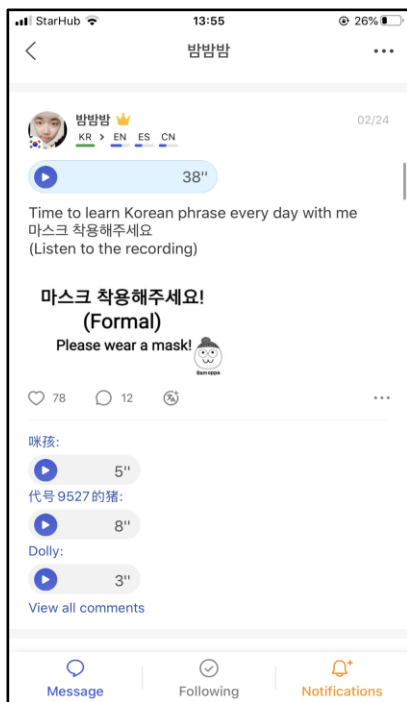


Figure 4: Example of such material⁴

For example, South Korean user Bam (@bambamtvsubscribed), who has a following of 15,000 as of February 2020, regularly uploads informative material such as common phrases and sentences for Korean language learners (Figure 4).

Moments and chats are both graphically and prosodically rich as pictures and recordings can be attached to messages, providing extra visual and auditory channels for learners. The latter is particularly important as the prosodic properties of speech such as intonation and rhythm is crucial in the phonological acquisition of languages. For tonal languages such as Cantonese, the lack of such support will prove to be key.

Thus, when combined with such characteristics—Bam, for example, uploads recordings of his own speech along with the phrases—all these contribute to the pedagogical potential of HelloTalk.

3.1 Communication on HelloTalk: Calls and Live Classes

On the other hand, calls and Live Classes, which are supported by audio, are largely speech-like. Calls on HelloTalk are uncomplicated and share most characteristics of the communication modality of speech (except for being visually decontextualized as video conferencing is not supported).

Live Classes combine features of both text-like and speech-like medium of communication. It is time-bound; all participants have to be present in real-time in order to receive the lesson and interact with the teaching native speaker. Like most speech exchanges, there is a high level of spontaneity and any questions by learners can be answered immediately with little time-lag. However, it is also contrived, elaborately structured and factually communicative like text — the foundation of the exchange will be based on the lesson material (PowerPoint files) uploaded by the teacher, who can plan and anticipate the feedback from the lesson.

The speaker can immediately revise errors made in speech, and as Live Classes are both graphically and prosodically rich, the loss of extralinguistic cues played by nonverbal modalities in speech can be minimized. However, being visually decontextualized, the speaker will not be able to rely on extralinguistic cues played by nonverbal modalities in speech (such as facial expression and gestures) in order receive immediate feedback on the recipient's response to the synchronous lesson.

⁴ Screenshots are taken with permission from its respective owners

Text like	Text-based communication (Moments, chats)	Speech like	Speech-based communication (Calls, Group lessons)
space bound	space bound	time bound	time bound
contrived	spontaneous*	spontaneous	spontaneous, contrived*
visually decontextualized	visually decontextualized	face-to-face	visually decontextualized*
elaborately structured	elaborately structured	loosely structured	loosely structured, elaborately structured*
factually communicative	factually communicative	socially interactive	socially interactive, factually communicative*
repeatedly revisable	repeatedly revisable	immediately revisable	immediately revisable
graphically rich	graphically AND prosodically rich*	prosodically rich	prosodically rich, graphically* AND prosodically rich

Table 1: Summary of spoken and written language criteria as suggested by Crystal (2016), contrasted with text and speech-based communication on HelloTalk

In summary, there is a balance between both text-like and speech-like affordances. However, it is worthy to note here that all communication modalities on HelloTalk are visually decontextualized as opposed to face-to-face, as video conferencing is not supported across the application. Furthermore, the efficiency of Live Classes will fundamentally depend on the quality of the teaching native speaker.

Although the use of the application alone cannot replace traditional face-to-face interaction, these are still far more holistic and flexible than traditional teaching methods for online distance learners. All in all, it is a competent medium for its purpose and a satisfactory learning experience can be expected.

4. Effects on language

Herring (2007) pointed out that the “overall greater persistence of CMD heightens meta-linguistic awareness”. Communication, especially those text-based, can be reflected upon and users are made more conscious of factors such as language choice. Coupled with the nature of HelloTalk as a language learning application, this means that native speakers are generally more careful with their language used on the application compared to other social media.

However, these may have led to a tendency in native speakers to overcorrect the speech of language learners. Figure 5 shows an example of one of such corrections.

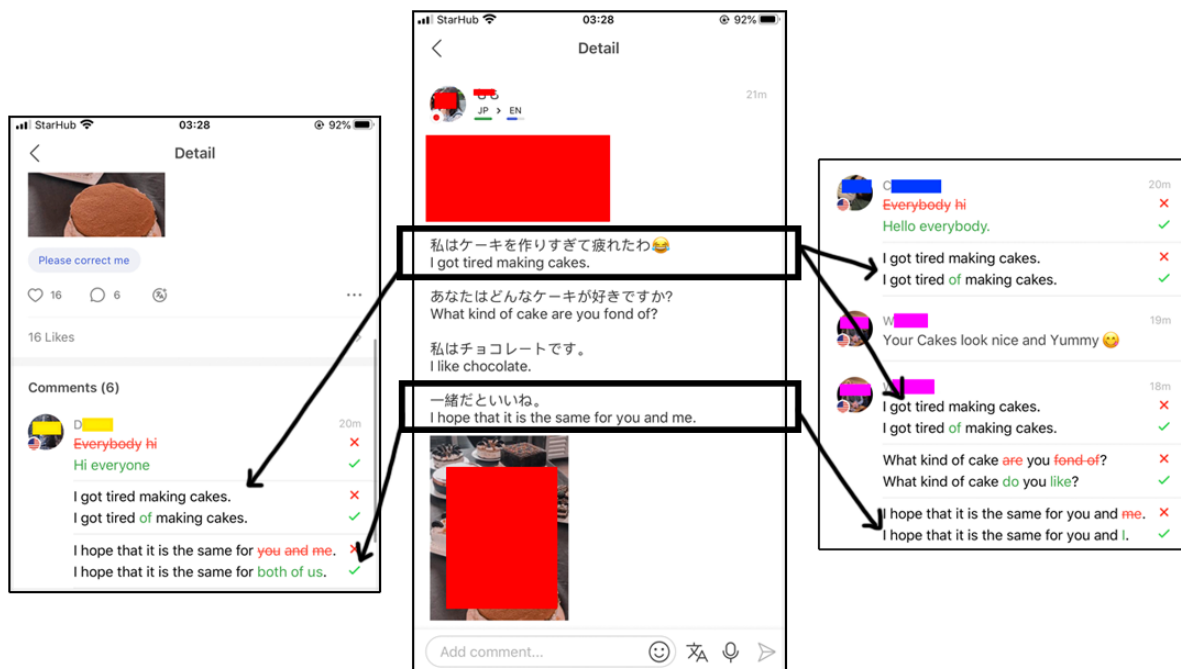


Figure 5: A Moment posted on 27th February 2020, along with corrections it received

In this example, many native speakers corrected the initial construction (1) *I got tired making cakes* into (2) *I got tired of making cakes*. However, considering the student's initial text:

- (1) 私 は ケーキ を 作りすぎて 疲れた
watashi ha ke-ki wo tsukuri-sugite tsukare-ta
 1SG NOM cake- ACC make-too much tire-PST
 "I made so much cake, (I) got tired"

The initial construction of the ESL student, *I got tired making cakes*, was grammatical and more consistent with her original source text as compared to the correction received. Insertion of the preposition *of* to form *tired of* is extraneous and changes the sense (which would have a more direct relationship with the verb 飽きる *akiru* "to get tired of; to lose interest in" in the source language).

This seems to parallel the observations of Piché (1978) in their study on the attitude of teachers when evaluating compositions of standard and non-standard English speakers. The study found an implicit bias and imagined linguistic differences amongst teachers when assessing essays identical in content and vocabulary, whereby Black writers were held to a higher standard than their Anglo-counterparts.

In addition, a typical example of linguistic hypercorrection can be observed in the native correction of the following construction:

- (2) Original: *I hope that it is the same for you and me.*
 Correction 1: *I hope that it is the same for both of us.*
 Correction 2: *I hope that it is the same for you and I.*

Although Correction 1 avoids the controversy by changing *you and me* into *both of us*, many prescriptive linguists will likely disagree with the use of *you and I* as an object in Correction 2 (Quirk et al, 1985). Many books have touched on the very use as a form of hypercorrection; with some pointing it out as “some combination of explicit correction and subsequent hypercorrection” (Bybee & Hopper, 2001, p.384) when speakers actively try to avoid mistakes.

However, as with many new mediums of communications, there is insufficient data and research as of now; a more in-depth study of a larger scale will be required in order to come to a conclusion.

Effects on language and society

Language popularity on HelloTalk, as seen in its user report in 2018, largely reflects learning motivations which has little to do with geopolitical-related interest. The Korean language, for example, is the most popular language amongst female learners next to English; Philippines' Korean Popularity Index is also the highest, overtaking countries such as Japan. Wai et al. (2011), in particular, attributes it to the “influence of the so-called Korean Wave, or *hallyu* (...) throughout the world, especially in East and South East Asia” (p.152) in their book establishing the influence of popular media on foreign language learning.

However, HelloTalk has been convenient not only for such language learners, but also heritage speakers who grew up with limited input from their non-dominant language.

HelloTalk may also be a decent reflection of sociolinguistic changes—the popularity of the English language amongst Turkish users (HelloTalk User Report, 2018) could be an indication of a larger language shift in progress. This is consistent with studies by Selvi A. (2016) and Kırkgöz Y. (2019) which recognises an ubiquitous spread of English in Turkey.

Most importantly, HelloTalk carries significant pedagogical potential and has created a new dimension for language educational technology. In its first year of launch, HelloTalk won Google Play’s Best of 2017 for Social Apps—and indeed, language learning is fundamentally a social activity. The combination of a social networking system (SNS) and language pedagogy, coupled with an intuitive UI, seems to be useful in motivating language learners to pick up new languages, equalizing access to usually expensive foreign language study.

Conclusion

HelloTalk is one of the newer additions even to the relatively short history of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). Although it is a competent communication modality that incorporates both speech and text-like features, HelloTalk is fundamentally an application made to supplement, not supplant traditional modes of language acquisition.

In its 3rd year of service, HelloTalk, along with MALL technology in general, is still in its nascent stages. Future research on should focus on the possible impact of next generation technology on second language pedagogy.

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