Status Quo and Prospective of WeChat in Improving Chinese English Learners' Pronunciation

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Abstract

With the ubiquitous usage of wireless, portable, and handheld devices gaining popularity in 21st century, the revolutionary mobile technology introduces digital new media to educational settings, which has changed the way of traditional teaching and learning. WeChat is one of the most popular social networking applications in China featured by its interactivity and real-time communication that has attracted attention of educators to its pedagogical value. This study evaluates the utilization of WeChat in mobile learning and, in particular, its potential for improving English pronunciation among English learners in China. It probes into the perennial problems of Chinese students in English pronunciation acquisition and oral practice, discusses WeChat's support functions in mobile learning, demonstrates the relevant empirical studies of WeChat in teaching and learning, and analyses the potential value of using WeChat in improving English pronunciation. Examinations in this paper enable one to reflect on the strengths of mobile learning by WeChat and to explore how this social media tool is likely to solve the pronunciation difficulties of Chinese English learners. It is found that applying WeChat to English pronunciation teaching and practicing helps create better self-directed learning environment, enhance learning flexibility and improve oral learning effectiveness. It is hopefully that insights gained from examining how WeChat helps improve English pronunciation learning will shed light on further innovations of teaching designs in this area.

Keywords: English pronunciation, mobile learning, oral English, WeChat

1. Introduction

English pronunciation acquisition in China nowadays is still influenced by major perennial problems in oral English learning. For years, traditional teaching methods and fossilized foreign language learning environment contribute to the typical "mute English" phenomenon and less satisfactory English pronunciation among Chinese English learners. Due to the innate differences between Chinese and English pronunciation, students' learning anxiety in English speaking, limitations on aboriginal English environment and the high cost of native English speaking teachers in China (Wu & McMahon, 2014), a new, valid and inexpensive approach to help improve English pronunciation for Chinese students is necessary in the contemporary digital age.

While instant messaging and social media applications on smart phones are gaining popularity in educational settings worldwide, mobile learning, a popular concept originated from the developing high speed mobile Internets nowadays, has given birth to new ways of learning. Scholars (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008; Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2011; Glynn, Huge, & Hoffman, 2012; Lam, 2015) have explored learning using classical social media tools such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype and Twitter as well as their pedagogical values in creating collaborative and digital learning environment. Meanwhile in China, the progressively advanced mobile technology brought about the creation of WeChat, an outstanding social network and instant messaging application developed by Tecent Company in 2011. Its cross-platform and real-time communication functions allow users to send free texts, pictures, voice messages, short videos, URLs and files to friends, receive push notifications from public platforms and share information on WeChat moments. With this social media tool becoming popular, an increasing number of studies focusing on monitoring teacher-student interaction via WeChat inside and outside school hours have shown that the typical usability of WeChat on language learning is valid and accepted (Chai, 2014; Lang, Zhang, Li, & Sun, 2016; Pan, Hu, & Quan, 2016).

However, although the pedagogical value of WeChat has been attached importance to, the focus remains mainly

on how common functions of WeChat help with general English learning, with very few research on specifically how those functions support English pronunciation acquisition. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the potential of WeChat in enhancing English pronunciation performance inside and outside classroom in a more effective and efficient way of learning. This study aims to integrate WeChat instant messaging and social networking functions with English pronunciation acquisition and offer guidelines to course designing with the application of WeChat in accordance with mobile learning principles.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Problems of English Pronunciation Learning in China

2.1.1 Lack of Attention to Oral English

A large number of Chinese students do poor in oral English mainly because of the non-standard pronunciation and inadequate communicative abilities (Liu, 2008). In China, written English composes the major parts of the school test structures for students of different ages. In contrast, oral English seems to be the least focused part in the whole foreign language learning process (Ma, R., Ma, Z., & Wang, 2012). The academic pressure and fierce competition push Chinese English students to do well in paper tests instead of oral communication, thereby paying less attention to English pronunciation. Besides, traditional class structure inevitably involves a large number of students in one class whom usually lack individual guidance from teachers. According to Wu (1999), classroom instruction was mostly knowledge-oriented, and the learners had few opportunities to engage in meaningful English communication in class, which made them become less enthusiastic in taking part in oral activities out of classes.

2.1.2 Difference between Chinese and English Accents

English and Chinese belongs to two completely different language families and have many significant differences in several aspects, which make learning English a huge challenge for Chinese native speakers (Shoebottom, 2011). The differences between English and Chinese in phonetic communities and labial characteristics make English sounds difficult to pronounce. For example, particularly in southern China, learners have difficulties in distinguishing between "r" and "l" in English, resulting in mispronounces of *rake* and *lake*, rice and *lice*. Besides, Chinese speakers' English pronunciations are commonly attached with heavy regional Chinese accents due to hundreds of dialects in China, including Taiwanese, Wu and Cantonese, most of which differ dramatically from each other.

2.1.3 Learning Anxiety and Lack of Self-confidence in English Speaking

Frustration and anxiety will negatively influence oral English learning. Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1994) pointed out that students' self-confidence constitutes a motivational subsystem in learning foreign languages, and self-evaluation of proficiency is associated with self-confidence that is crucial in second and foreign language acquisition. It was noted that anxiety in foreign language learning is higher when a student's self-perceived speaking ability is lower than that of peers and native speakers (Kitano, 2001). It has been concluded (Stephen, 1985) that the learners' anxiety, nervousness, lack of motivation, boredom and negative attitude could block incoming messages from reaching the language acquisition device (LAD) (as cited in Oller, 1988). Cenoz and Lecumberri(1999) contended that "the phonetic component of linguistic communication is immediately observable..., and it is in most cases the most salient characteristic of non-native speakers". Hence pronunciation is the most important and difficult part that non-native English learners have to face. Improper pronunciation may lead to lower self-perceived speaking ability and higher anxiety during speaking, thus bringing about misunderstanding and ineffective communication.

2.1.4 Barriers in Direct Communications with Native English Speakers

The ideal way of learning native English pronunciation is that the input of native sources dynamically involves in helping monitoring and improving the learning effect. Native teachers with decent education speak fluent, idiomatically appropriate English with authentic accent. Therefore, introducing native English teachers to teach English pronunciation is needed. However, the comparatively scarce resources and relatively high cost of foreign teachers in China deprive students of more chances to learn authentic English pronunciation face-to-face with native speakers.

2.1.5 Less Timely Feedback and Cooperative Learning

Most English language input in China comes from teachers, classmates, records, radios and television programs (Zhao, 2000). However, while students are mechanically repeating English words and texts by following recordings, little real-time interaction is made with and less timely feedback can be reported to teachers who

correct their mistakes and give essential instructions during the learning process. Moreover, under the long-lasting competitive pressure in China, students are unwilling to practice English through cooperative learning (Ma et al., 2012), which would further lower their motivation in oral English practice.

2.2 Necessity in Researching WeChat Support Functions in Learning

2.2.1 The Ubiquitous Use of Mobile Devices and Social Media

Digital mobile devices nowadays are increasingly applied for educational purposes. With the 4G Internet available, students have more access to multiple learning resources on social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Feuer, 2014). They provide users with convenient knowledge-sharing tunnels in an era where formal and informal learning are not separated (Allen, 2012). It is contended that social media make learning more flexible by helping students gain insights outside of the traditional instructional settings (Selwyn, 2007).

2.2.2 WeChat as a New Pedagogical Research Topic in China

Studies on Wechat facilitating teaching in universities indicate that WeChat has the potential to generate students' interest in language learning, create a sense of subjectivity, and offer a more individual-focused learning environment. Pan et al. (2016) defined Wechat Assisted Language Learning (WALL) "a milestone in ubiquitous learning community". He pointed out that WeChat could provide a situational and communicative learning environment for students, which in turn helped them convert language competence into language proficiency. A four-month research on applying WALL platform in college English listening and speaking class revealed that there was an increase of 333% of the meaningful English words used in WeChat group, and the sentence length and word accuracy in oral English conversations improved markedly during the experiment. Research on how WeChat facilitates Computer English language learning (Lang et al., 2016) involved 30 students in an oral trial training. Students showed higher enthusiasm, smoother pronunciation and better command over English phrases during the experiment. To prove that WeChat is welcomed by students as a learning platform, Chai (2014) gathered 99 valid questionnaires, showing that 89% of the students used WeChat as social network for communication and most of them had enthusiasm in learning English listening and speaking by applying WeChat as a mobile learning tool. It is demonstrated that WeChat is suitable for college students to carry out English listening and oral activities as it provides more interesting and innovative ways to learn English, gathers multiple sources of English materials, creates active learning atmosphere, encourages students' participation, reduces the nervousness by face-to-face oral practice and generates better use of smart phones in self-directed learning.

2.2.3 Scarcity of Research on WeChat Facilitating English Pronunciation Learning

1860 articles with keywords "WeChat English learning" were found during online searching on Google Scholar (retrieved on October 18th, 2016). However, when typing "WeChat English Pronunciation" as keywords, 156 articles were found, which made up only 8% of the articles found online about English studies. It is apparent that further research should focus on the potential use of WeChat in enhancing English pronunciation learning and practicing.

3. Feasibility Analysis of WeChat Applied to Oral English Learning

3.1 Theory Base: Mobile Learning

Modern distance education is under the guidance of modern education theory, using computerized media and network communication technology to organize teaching and learning processes, and mobile learning is the expansion and extension of modern distance education. The most widely accepted definition (Sharples, Taylor & Vavoula, 2010) is that mobile learning is "the processes of coming to know through conversations across multiple contexts among people and personal interactive technologies". Crompton (2013) defined mobile learning as "learning across multiple contexts, through social and content interactions, using personal electronic devices". With the ubiquitous use of smart phones, handheld computers and tablets, mobile learning is becoming increasingly popular since using mobile tools to create learning aids and study materials is a crucial part of informal learning (Trentin & Repetto, 2013). "The main objective of m-learning is to provide the learner the ability to assimilate learning anywhere and at any time" (Crescente & Lee, 2011). Hence mobile learning enjoys advantages including openness, portability, individuality, systemic learning, multimedia interaction, virtual interaction and digital flexibility.

In order to assist language teaching and learning, the mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) system was created. Its diversified learning activities (blended learning approaches) can lead to more active engagement of students as multiple contents are delivered in a convenient way by mobile devises with continuous learning support (Saccol, Reinhard, Grings & Chacón, 2010). Besides, while the cost of learning on mobile devices is

significantly lower than face-to-face training (Elias, 2011), mobile language learning may be potentially more rewarding for its higher efficiency in saving time and space during traveling. In this context, mobile learning provides learners with synchronous and readily available learning experience. It helps create a sound learning environment and learner-centered communities, provides timely feedback for teachers (Markett, Nchez, Weber & Tangney, 2006), and generates higher motivation as well as more self-confidence of students (Shen et al., 2009).

Among current branches of mobile learning, social-networked mobile learning and SMS-based mobile learning have attracted great interest of educators. Accordingly, as the widely used social network and popular SMS tool, WeChat well embodies the essence of mobile learning in this aspect.

3.2 Functions of WeChat in Supporting Oral English Learning

As a mobile application software aimed at social networking, WeChat provides a new platform to mobile learning theory. It has shown more potential in creating free interactive space of English learning due to its communicative functions and platform-forming functions.

Firstly, text message and voice message. Text messages provide easy and common method to communicate while voice messages simplify the instant communication and generate conversations in a natural setting by talking (Wang, 2013).

Secondly, short video. WeChat is constantly reducing its video uploading restrictions and improving its video function. During conversations, users can film short videos (maximum 10 seconds) and send them to friends directly via the chat page. Videos saved in phones (less than 20M) can also be uploaded to the chats.

Thirdly, group chat. Learning groups in WeChat can be formed anytime by any users for any learning purposes. Members can send texts and voice messages, pictures, videos, links, files and articles to the groups, with all the materials open to group members. Students can discuss topics and share ideas within the same group with or without the participation of teachers.

Fourthly, video chat. WeChat is featured by free video chats among friends. By connecting to the mobile data or Wi-Fi, users can talk by video without time limit. The maximum number of friends together chatting in one video is nine. Therefore, teachers can have either one-to-one video lecture with individual student or collective class with a small group of students.

Lastly, WeChat public platform. By applying this function, users are able to deliver mass information to different ends in a simple and collective manner. Once a push message is sent by one public service account, all those who follow that specific account on WeChat can immediately read the message on their own mobile devices. The push message function enjoys obvious advantages such as prompt article sharing and timely information updating (Wang, 2013). In English teaching, teachers can apply for a pubic account specially for the class and push lectures and learning materials in all forms available (text, voice messages, pictures, videos, links, files and articles) from the public service accounts. Students who follow the accounts will get the push messages automatically and instantly.

3.3 Features of WeChat Support Functions Compared to Similar Mobile Applications

In this section, functions of WeChat mentioned above that support English pronunciation learning are further analyzed. To prove that WeChat is prestigious in enhancing English pronunciation performance, other similar chatting tools including WhatsApp, QQ, Skype and Facebook are compared with it.

Firstly, compatibility and universality. WeChat is compatible with most of the smart phone systems such as Iphone, Symbian, Android, Black Berry and Windows Phone, which makes the installation easy and convenient. Moreover, WeChat has attracted more active users than QQ, Skype, WhatsApp and Facebook in China. According to the 2016 Social Networking Application Ranking: the Third Quarter revealed by Libra, WeChat ranks the first because of its 80.65% active permeability and 167.05 average opening times by users per week, following by QQ ranking the second with 52.77% active permeability and 122.31 opening times by users per week (Yu, 2016). In the survey conducted by Libra during October 3rd to October 9th showed that the weekly active permeability of WeChat reached 80.03%, ranking No. 1 among the social networking applications in China (Yang, 2016). In comparison, WhatsApp and Skype are less popular in China for the mass majority mobile users, and Facebook is disabled in the mainland of China. It is clear that WeChat has an absolute advantage in market sharing. Considering the pervasiveness of English learning, using WeChat as a learning tool to practice English pronunciation suits the needs of Chinese learners in a more universal way.

Secondly, entertainment and fragmentization. WeChat creates an attractive and private space called "moment" to share pieces of news with circle of friends. This function guarantees free information sharing while entertains the

users with instantly updated news. When used in language teaching and learning, the fragmentization of WeChat messages containing useful knowledge could be immediately sent to the designated learners. Learners can read the messages during their fragmented time periods such as time spent waiting for buses. Therefore, WeChat-assisted learning provides a trendy and convenient platform for learners in their free time. In comparison, QQ attracts less long-term users due to the lack of customized grouping function for sharing moments. Additionally, nowadays QQ is more often used to facilitate the communication among working groups or between superiors and subordinates when files and notes need to be transferred. WhatsApp and Skype only focus on their SMS functions without supporting entertainment extensions, which would make fragmentation learning less possible. Therefore, using WeChat as English pronunciation learning tool would reduce the dullness during learning process while add to fragmented learning by urging learners to get better use of their free time.

Thirdly, low cost and high efficiency. Low cost of WeChat communication is indisputable especially when comparing it to prevalent channels such as SMS in the past. WeChat can be a highly economical English learning tool since its downloading and installation costs no extra money except for the mega data fee (without Wi-Fi) and less data cost by messaging compared to QQ and Skype. An online survey (Li, 2013) was conducted to calculate the data costs in 10 minutes by video chat via WeChat, Skype, QQ and Facetime under the Unicom WCDMA 3G network. Results showed that WeChat cost the least data (33.04 MB), followed by QQ (50.92 MB), Skype (74.84 MB) and Facetime (113.02 MB). In general, 1MB mobile data covers 500-1000 WeChat texts. Considering the standard data fee in China, costs of WeChat messages are remarkably lower than that of short messages sent by cell phones. It can be proved that when WeChat is functioning as an English pronunciation learning tool, learners can either send text messages or have video classes with teachers online with incomparable low cost. On the other hand, WeChat boosts the efficiency of communication by video chats and instant messages without being limited by time and space, enabling more oral interaction between teachers and students. Timely responses can be easily made by voice messages without typing (Ma, 2016), thus making it more convenient for learning feedback delivery.

Lastly, repeatability and simultaneity. Since WeChat can save voice messages on the chatting pages, when the listeners need to retrieve the information received, they can trace back to the chat records and easily review the voice or text messages repeatedly. The voice recording function of WeChat overcomes the disadvantage of face-to-face communication during which voices cannot be saved. Also, pictures and voice messages from the same WeChat chatting page can be opened at the same time. In comparison, unlike WeChat, even though WhatsApp provides the same voice mailing function, users cannot open any pictures in the same chatting page without interrupting the voice recordings. When teachers send pictures containing important knowledge points of English learning, more detailed explanations can also be delivered to students via voice messages, and both of them can be simultaneously displayed to achieve better understanding of students towards the information shared. Skype, on the other hand, does not support voice recording, therefore it is inferior to WeChat in English pronunciation teaching and learning.

To sum up, the above supporting functions of WeChat bestow great advantages to oral English learning, making it more suitable to acquire and practice English pronunciation. In contrast with common mobile instant messaging applications like QQ, Skype and WhatsApp, WeChat exhibits superiority for its compatibility, universality, entertainment, fragmentization, low costs, high efficiency, repeatability and simultaneity. In consequence, oral learning via WeChat including pronunciation practice can be more flexible, more intriguing and more effective.

4. The Prospect of WeChat in English Pronunciation Learning

By analyzing the support functions of WeChat, in the light of the previous experimental researches that applied WeChat as a mobile learning tool in class and out of class (Chai, 2014; Lang et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2016), it is suggested that WeChat can be used to facilitate English pronunciation in both classroom-teaching and online courses.

4.1 Suggestions on Applying WeChat to Enhance English Pronunciation

4.1.1 Previewing Before Class

For both classroom-teaching and online courses, teachers can inform their students of the class schedules via WeChat to ensure better realization of the in-class tasks. Before having classes, teachers can record how they pronounce English letters, words and sentences by short videos as learning materials for students to preview the knowledge points. Video records show clearly the labial shape and manners of articulation, thus providing students with standard demonstrations from teachers. Each word can be repeated several times in one short video to ensure the articulation of pronunciations and the display of clear labial movements. Voice recordings can also

facilitate the short videos when sentences are too long to be finished reading within 10 seconds or the sizes of videos from mobile phone memories exceed the limitation of uploading. Students can follow the voice recordings repeatedly until they have a preliminary impression of the pronunciation. In this way they can acquire more in-depth learning effect when practicing in class with teachers in a more intensive way especially after previewing the lessons.

4.1.2 Practicing During Class

English pronunciation learning groups can be formed on WeChat platform. Since classroom teaching in China normally does not involve personal electronic devices from students, this in-class practicing by WeChat is more applicable to online pronunciation learning.

Online pronunciation courses are taught by WeChat video chats. Weather in private classes (individual video chats) or group classes (group video chats), the real-time chats all ensure live communication via WeChat platform. Students can learn pronunciation at home, in company, in public or any places they feel suitable to have lessons with teachers online, as long as they have internet connection on their mobile phones. A typical problem in learning English pronunciation is that when students have problems in distinguishing between different but similar sounds, the common way for them to remember is to repeatedly memorize the English words. This method does not guarantee that they will comprehend the essence of sound differences, but is more likely to push students to form mechanical memories of certain mispronunciation. Also they may easily forget how to pronounce the words after a long time. However, if during online courses by WeChat video chats, teachers can provide the students with rules of pronunciation and supervise them to practice, the pronunciation will be better remembered by students in a long run. For example, students can be confused about the pronunciation of letter "A" in different words since it has various pronunciations in English including [æ], [ei], [ɑː], [ə], [ɔ]. Explanations can be given by teachers during courses as follows: if "A" is placed in front of "ss", its pronunciation should be [ɑː] such as in the word "class"; if "A" is an open syllable such as in "lake", the pronunciation should be [ei]; the closed syllable "A" is pronounced [æ] such as in the word "ham"; when "A" is placed after "w" or "wh" such as in "what", it is pronounced [ɔ]; and if it forms an unstressed syllable such as in the word "China", "A" is pronounced [ə]. The explanation of pronunciation rules can greatly help the students with memorizing and promote learning efficiency by following the teachers during courses.

4.1.3 Reviewing after Class

Different forms of interactions can be built after class to enhance the pronunciation learning effect. The following suggested activities are applicable to both classroom teaching/learning and online courses.

Firstly, pronunciation learning resources can be shared in WeChat groups. These learning groups not only represent study communities with the same learning objectives, but also help create a more motivating and dynamic learning environment online after class. Materials found by individuals can be shared in the group including texts, URLs, articles, push messages, voice recordings and videos clips. These information will help students gather resources from a wider range. After browsing more materials, students will further enhance their memories of English pronunciation by reviewing English words, sentences and passages of different topics, and get better understanding of the pronunciation rules and norms.

Secondly, pair reviewing can be organized on WeChat groups to facilitate after-class activities. By choosing their own partners and interacting with each other, students can acquire more stimuli and motivation than solely reviewing English pronunciations by themselves. It is suggested that teachers could assign some word discrimination games to each pair of students: one finds the English words with easily-confused syllables and designs the tests; the other should finish the test and in turn creates new tests for his/her partner. In this pair reviewing unit, WeChat provides students a virtual stage where they can find more friends with similar levels or the same interest towards English practice, which will bring more fun to the learning processes and largely generate their enthusiasm in improving English pronunciation.

Thirdly, Q&A becomes much easier in WeChat learning groups due to the real-time interaction of online communication. When students encounter problems during pronunciation learning, they can immediately submit the questions on WeChat platform. For instance, one of the universal problems faced by most Chinese English learners is that Chinese Pinyin and English phonetic symbols are alike no matter how they are essentially different. For instance, the four English sounds [eɪ] [ɑɪ] [əu] [ɑu] are highly similar to Chinese words "诶", "爱", "欧", "敖". However, they still sound differently in terms of places of articulation. When pronouncing only by referring to Chinese Pinyin, it is common to make mistakes such as pronouncing big [bɪg] as [bɪgə], sister [sɪstə] as [sɪsətə], and these perennial mistakes are particularly hard to detect or revise. Group Q&A helps to detect such mistakes and, solving problems together with group members and teachers not only helps students

who raise the questions, but also enlighten others in case these questions are common among the rest of the group.

Fourthly, digital tests and homework on word pronouncing can be posted via WeChat to individual students or groups to check the learning effect. For example, words with similar phonemes can be listed as follows to form comparisons in homework or small quiz in order to form deeper impression on students: cost [ɔ] and post [əu], five [ɑɪ] and give [ɪ], ship [ɪ] and sheep [ɪ:], close [əu] and clock [ɔ], bed [e] and bad [æ]. These practices can be sent in the form of picture such as jpeg, jpg and png etc., or in the form of document such as doc or pdf. Files including homework and quiz can be saved in students' phones for future reviewing. Test answers and homework can be checked and revised in an interactive way involving both teachers and students online in WeChat groups. In this way, teachers can easily trace the learning progress after class, acquire timely feedback on pronunciation practice, and improve teaching strategies according to the performance of students.

4.1.5 Instant Pushing During Free Time

After registering WeChat public accounts, teachers can send materials, assignments, notifications to students any time during the day. Instant pushing messages can be delivered by the same public account to all the WeChat users collectively and simultaneously. Once they follow the accounts, users will receive pushing messages as notifications that remind the students of their pronunciation previewing before class or self-practicing after class. Instant pushing messages could also include extra-curricular knowledge. For instance, how to make liaison when pronouncing English sentences is crucial for pronunciation learning since English is not only formed by isolated syllables or words, but also by phrases and sentences. In the instant pushing messages, teachers are suggested to prepare some English daily conversations with voice or tape recordings to help students practice sentence liaison, such as "How are you?" [hɑu ɑ: ju:] — [hɑwɑ: ju:] "It is an old book." [ɪt ɪs æn əuld buk] — [ɪt ɪsænəuld buk] "Not at all." [nɔt æt ɔ:l] — [nɔ tæ tɔ:l]. These pushing messages will promote students' self-directed English learning in their spare time and, more importantly, build a flexible, positive and student-centered learning environment.

4.2 How WeChat Solves the Perennial Problems in English Pronunciation

Firstly, WeChat has changed the traditional way of teaching and learning. It applies the mobile learning model to oral English practice, facilitates in-class teaching and boosts after-class self-directed learning. Experimental classroom assessments(Pan et al., 2016; Lang et al., 2016; Chai, 2014) revealed that students are better motivated by incorporating WeChat to oral English learning. This increases motivation, reduces anxiety, nervousness, boredom and negative attitudes, helps students to gain confidence and increases the English language input.

Secondly, WeChat provides English learners with more opportunities to practice pronunciation repeatedly with voice messages and short videos, and better understand pronunciation rules by pictures and words sent by teachers. Recordings of the labial movements and visual aids in WeChat messages help enhance the learning effect of English pronunciation. Furthermore, since pictures, text audios and videos are saved automatically in the chat history, students can review the pronunciation again and again by themselves after class.

Thirdly, WeChat facilitates students to communicate with native English speaking teachers and acquire standard pronunciation practices. By video, audio and text messages, classes with teachers and students overseas can be organized whenever and wherever both parties are available. Therefore, WeChat is an ideal intermediary that builds the bridge between native English speaking teachers and Chinese English learners. Moreover, having online classes by WeChat is much cheaper than having traditional English classes taught by foreign teachers in classroom. Learners do not need to pay high tuition fee to meet foreign teachers in real life situations, but can still learn indigenous pronunciation in a native English speaking environment.

Lastly, WeChat helps build more complete feedback mechanism between teachers and students. To avoid only single-way lecture by teachers, students can raise questions on WeChat chat pages and get immediate reply during online communications. In WeChat groups, problems about English pronunciation learning can be solved by teachers and students together in order to form mutual aid learning atmosphere. By handing in homework of pronunciation practice via WeChat platform, students can learn from others' merits and improve their own weaknesses in English pronunciation. In this way students are stimulated to fully exert their subjective initiative to acquire more participation on a common, positive learning platform inside and outside class. Timely feedback form students about their improvement can be informed to teachers in a quick and simple way by using WeChat. Corrections on students' mistakes and suggestions on students' performance can be sent efficiently on the WeChat chatting pages. Moreover, online oral English corners can be organized to encourage more oral practice with teachers, peers and study mates. Talking online reduces the awkwardness of face-to-face chatting especially for those beginners who tend to be self-abased about their oral English levels, thus helping learners to have more

interactions with teachers and classmates in pronunciation training.

5. Conclusion

After reviewing the support functions of WeChat that are applicable in educational settings, probing into the use of WeChat in oral English learning, this study draws the conclusion that WeChat is a convenient, economical and multifunctional platform which has great potential in facilitating English pronunciation teaching and learning both inside and outside class. Since WeChat enjoys great interactivity and instantaneity during online communication, by incorporating WeChat as a learning tool in pronunciation acquisition, the learning process tends to generate more interest of students to express themselves in English, gives access to free online resource-sharing channels, and improves the overall oral English learning effectiveness. It provides more practicable solutions to the perennial problems of English pronunciation learning in China, thus contributing to the creation of a dynamic, positive and self-directed learning environment for Chinese English learners.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study presents a snapshot of current researches on the application of WeChat in oral English classes. Studies on how its support functions are utilized in actual pronunciation teaching and learning are limited. Among all the articles found on the academic databases, only a few experimental or empirical researches on WeChat facilitating language education referred to English pronunciation learning. It can be seen that although oral English teaching and learning are attracting an increasing amount of attention, English pronunciation is still being neglected by the majority, which can be reflected in the number of research papers focusing on this area. Therefore this study relies mainly on a small number of valid reports that can be found to prove whether the application of WeChat actually facilitates English pronunciation learning.

Besides, Even though WeChat enjoys numerous advantages, its social networking functions could attract learners' overdue attention and distract them from the original learning purpose. When personal mobile phones are used during courses, it is more difficult for teachers to supervise students' activities in class. The "entertainment" functions of WeChat such as moment sharing and "shake-shake" may turn English pronunciation learning into a casual activity. Besides, countless WeChat public accounts push innumerable messages on a daily basis, therefore it is difficult for students to choose to follow the most qualified ones that provide required knowledge. On the one hand, the abundant information online and fascinating functions available offer students broader vision and more pleasure in the learning process; on the other hand, they restrict WeChat from being a simple learning tool. This is also one of the reasons why the pedagogical value of WeChat still needs more exploration and observation.

Therefore, future research is required to base on experimental and empirical studies. Both qualitative and quantitative examinations could be added in order to inspect the in-class and out-class practices using WeChat in English pronunciation teaching and learning. It is hoped that further research in this field will enlighten new pedagogies for pronunciation acquisition in both formal and informal learning environment.

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