Student Teacher Action Research (STAR): Technology
Fall 2016 – Spring 2017

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I. Background:

Instructors are regularly thinking about new ways to encourage the authentic use of English outside the classroom, and with modern technology, new ways to explore this idea are consistently available. Upon discovering HelloTalk, a software application that connects people who are learning a new language in a pen pal like manner, we immediately decided to use this research opportunity to test a new option for authentic English communication to our students. The various features of the application, which were tested by each instructor beforehand, includes communication through typed text in the target language of choice with respective native speakers. This feature allows a user to rewrite grammatically correct sentences, while highlighting where the mistakes were made in the first place. Other features include the correction of language use errors, communication with thousands of users from all over the world, speaking and listening practice, social networking and messaging platforms, and the ability to share audio and visual media through attachments. In addition, the learner has the opportunity to post and make comments on a community wall and to use the calling option of the app in order to engage in a spoken conversation.

II. Literature Review Summary:

Ramamuruthy and Rao (2015) observed that with the emergence of computer technology, the classroom has become readily equipped with students who have smart devices available to use as a tool in learning. In their study, surveys were implemented to find results revealing the role smartphones have on learning in the classroom. It was found that the use of mobile technology promotes skills such as critical thinking, creative thinking, communication and collaboration. Additionally, students can find information online to back up an argument with newfound facts. Meaningful communication increases when a platform is created through a social medium application. Furthermore, while autonomous learning plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness of mobile language learning, learning time can be drastically lowered through a web-based device that can find answers for you within seconds.

McClanahan (2014) observed that there are obstacles and complexities of integrating technology in the adult ESL classroom. The issues discussed are older age of learners; not owning or having access to computers, and prior education of ESL learners. Other disadvantages further discussed by Lai and Kritsonis (2006) highlight educational costs to the school; no equality of education; not all learners have the necessary knowledge in using computers; the software is limited and imperfect. And lastly computers cannot handle unexpected situations and problems. While some advantages they discussed include more independence – learners can practice authentic English at any time for any length of time; it costs less than face to face classroom teaching; frees up the teacher for other tasks; is more authentic and fun; even makes shy students feel more at ease; and can be done at one's own pace.

III. Methodology

The research question that directed this study is, "Can teachers implement technological activities in the classroom to increase the use of Authentic English outside the classroom?" Our study consisted of a Level 2 and 4 classes during a period of 12 weeks. The students were first given a pre-survey about technology and language use. They were then guided through the installation of the app on their technological devices. Tablets were provided by Mt. SAC's ESL program for the duration of the study. Class time was given each week for 30 minutes to allow students to engage with the app. Any additional time spent using the app was outside the classroom at the students' own discretions. Communication logs were provided by the instructors for students to keep track of conversations. These were then collected and studied for any interesting information. A post survey asking about the students' experiences of this project was administered during week 12.

IV. Data Analysis

a) Pre and Post Surveys

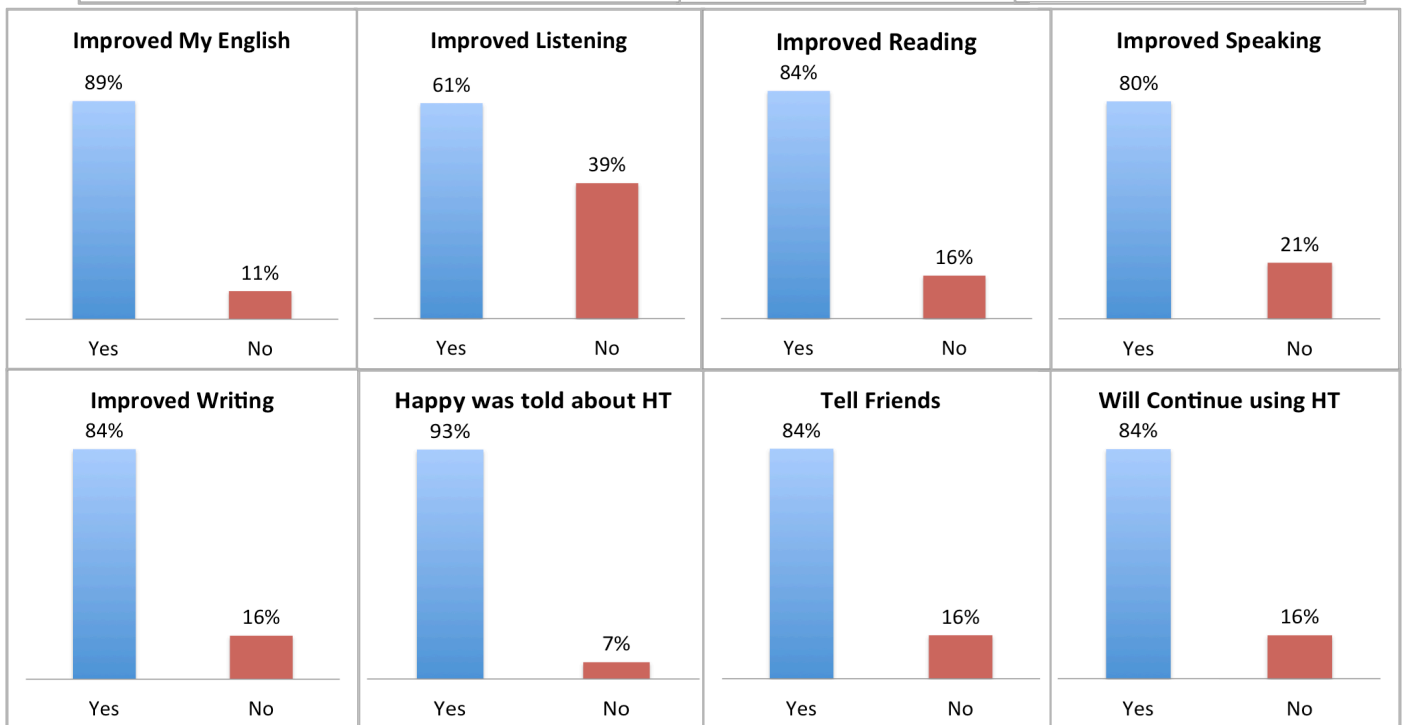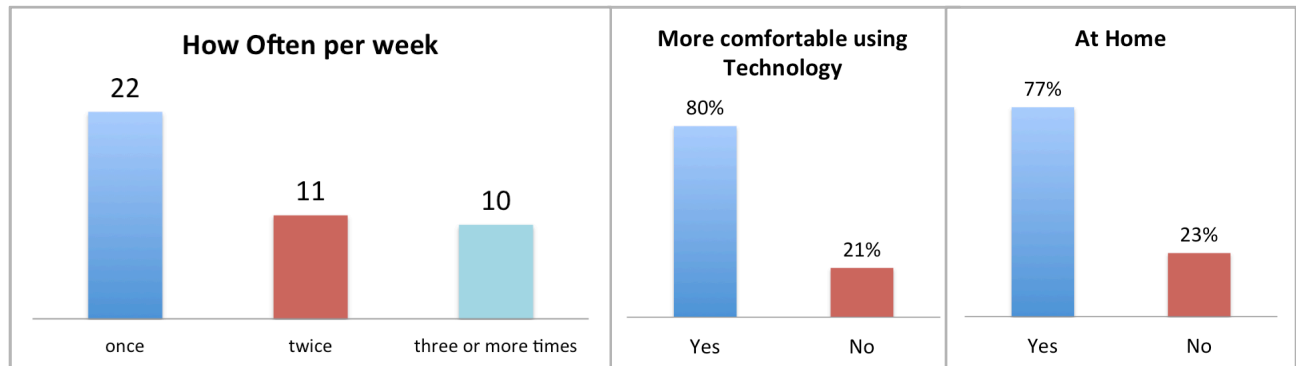**Pre-Survey** (Internet and Language Use) **Total Responses – 79**
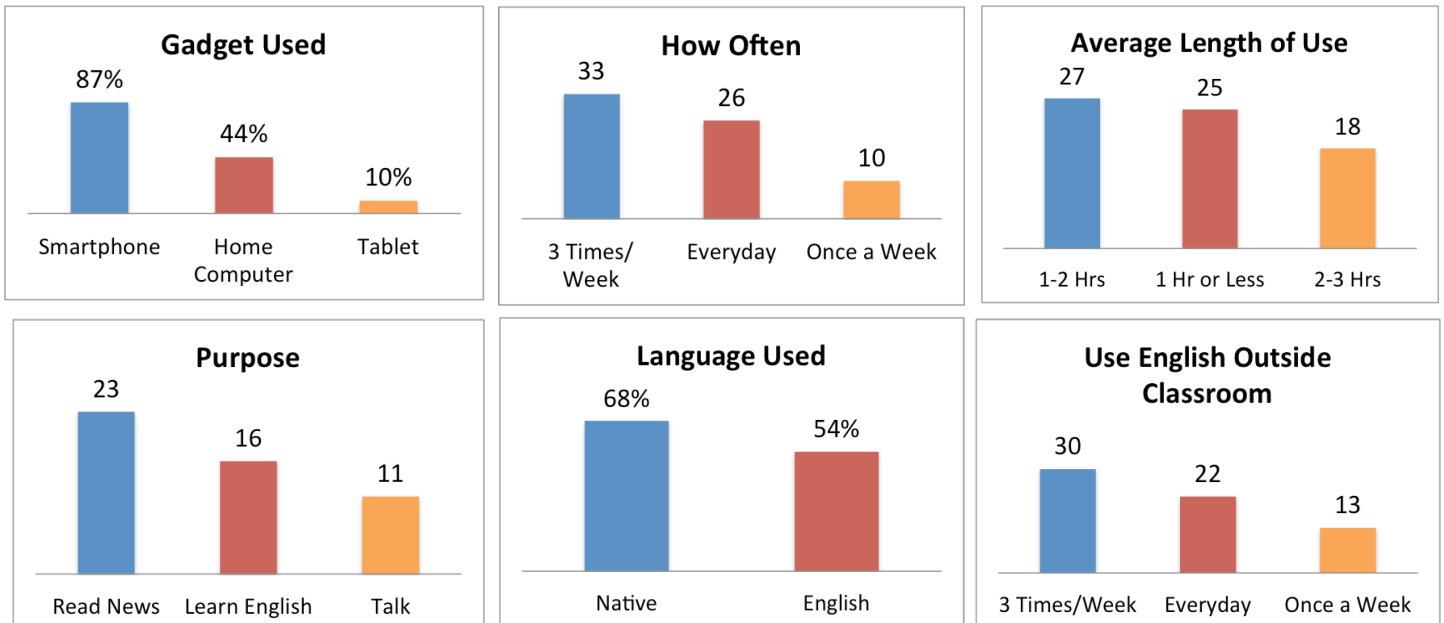
A pre-survey was created in order to get a better understanding of the students' comfort and usage of technology and their use of English outside the classroom. A post survey was conducted to measure the changes and possible improvement in English as a result of using the HelloTalk app.

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The Pre-test showed that all the students had access to some sort of technology. However, not all the gadgets were found in their home. Most of the students indicated that they use the internet three or more times a week for about an hour. They mainly used the internet in order to read the news and they did so mostly in their native language. Almost half of the students said that they also use English three times a week, outside the classroom. However, the pre-test did not verify the situations for which the students used English outside the classroom. It is very possible that their English usage was limited (maybe for homework) and at work. This may not enable them to improve their English skill level.

Post Survey (HelloTalk Use) **Total Responses – 44**

How Often per week	More comfortable using Technology	At Home
once: 22, twice: 11, three or more times: 10	Yes: 80%, No: 21%	Yes: 77%, No: 23%

Improved My English	Improved Listening	Improved Reading	Improved Speaking
Yes: 89%, No: 11%	Yes: 61%, No: 39%	Yes: 84%, No: 16%	Yes: 80%, No: 21%

Improved Writing	Happy was told about HT	Tell Friends	Will Continue using HT
Yes: 84%, No: 16%	Yes: 93%, No: 7%	Yes: 84%, No: 16%	Yes: 84%, No: 16%

The post test showed that the majority of the students used the app at home while the remaining students used the app elsewhere. The students expressed improvements in all aspects of English: Speaking, listening, writing and reading. The students said they liked using

Hello Talk and that they intend on telling their friends and will continue using this app in the future.

One of the additional points that is important to mention is the discrepancy between the number of responses of the pre-and post-tests. As the ESL classes at Mt. San Antonio College are an open entry/exit classes, students come and go. This made it hard to have the same students begin and end this 12-week project. Some students began later in the semester and didn't have the full 12-week trial.

A few of the students in class would not or could not use the app as they said they did not have enough memory space on their phones, or that their phone was not theirs. We supplied those students (and any other student who so wished) with iPads every Monday for 30 minutes. The use of internet on their private phones often caused issues because of bad connection.

b) Hello Talk Logs

We collected all the logs from the students and found some interesting facts. Most of the students talked with multiple pen pals. This meant that most of their conversations were similar with the same basic introductory information. This was more so in level 2 than in level 4. Also, not all students completed their logs, for multiple reasons. We noticed that some of the pen-pals were students from their own classrooms. This is great for creating friendships within the classroom, but may not have been the best choice for English partners who would help them better their English. However, our goal was to encourage the students to use authentic English outside the classroom and practice English more. Which deemed true from our post survey results.

Other noteworthy observations from the gathered logs pointed out that most of the pen-pals were men and not women, and that often the men were a bit flirtatious. Some of the students liked this while others found this offensive. The only complaints that the students voiced were that they didn't get replies from their pen-pals and that the difference in time zones made it a bit hard to get instant replies.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations for Classroom Instruction

The use of Hello Talk in the classroom was successful and generally liked by students in both classes. Upon asking the students for their personal thoughts and advice, they could not come up with anything really negative that would require changing. However, if we were to use this app in our classrooms again, we would make a few changes in order to get even better results. Some of these changes are:

a)   We would go over all the features of the app in much more detail. We would use our own HelloTalk account to do a live example of how to use all the specific features and tabs of the app. It seemed that many of the students did not maximize the app by not using all the features it offers.

b)   We would highlight the importance of inputting the correct personal information into the app upon opening an account. Information such as age, gender, country or state of residence and a photo. The students are not required to identify themselves or give any details that would enable someone to find them (if they

didn't volunteer that information in their discussion with their pen-pal). This is important as the app matches the student with a pen pal of similar level of the targeted language and similar age bracket.

c) We would state the purpose of using this app much more clearly than we have – to get the students to use authentic English outside the classroom for the purpose of improving their English and possibly build their confidence level in using English and technology. This may encourage the students to take it more seriously.

d) We would explain to the students the meaning of having a pen-pal from overseas and the difference in time zones. Some of the students voiced frustration at not being able to have instant conversation like they do via text messaging.

e) It would also benefit the students to understand that sometimes the app does not provide notifications of pen-pal comments and responses. Therefore, it is wise to enter the app, even for just a few minutes on, a daily basis (ideally).

f) It is important to explain to the students that asking their friends, family and classmates to be their pen-pals defeats the purpose of this app; Talking to pen-pals whose English is not better than theirs would not help them reach their goal, as their pen-pals' English may not be better than theirs. We may suggest they connect with a higher-level student, if they really wanted someone more local. But definitely not from their own level of English.

Despite these recommendations for future use of the app, we believe the discovery and use of the app was successful and fun for our students. Overall, it enabled them to practice and better their English in an authentic setting in and out of the classroom to which end, resulted in higher confidence levels in using English and technology.

References

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Appendix A
Hello Talk Log – Students' Comments

Level 2 students
*We talked to people from Wales, Indonesia, Jamaica, Seattle, Malaysia, India, California, Moscow

*We talked about: Personal information, learning English, food, our weekend, jobs, news, hobbies, weather, El civics oral exam, daily life, health, traveling, cars, holidays, sports, and art.

*A few interesting comments from the students:
> *NaNa Ben want me give some money for buy ticket to China.
> *He's living in Los Angeles and likes to do some things same to me.
> *I tell Clinton I'm in English class. He said that's nice. We can improve your English here too.

Level 4 students
*We talked to people from Florida, Vietnam, China, Egypt, Mexico, Louisiana, Japan, Singapore

*We talked about: people who cheat and lie on the app, reading and listening to English, hometown, pets, learning a language, personal information, traveling, weather, food, working out, health, school tests and homework, movies, and culture.

*Some of the students in L4 listed each and every date they logged into the app. (which was a few pages long).

*A few interesting comments from the students:
> *I'm not feeling good because my test unit 5 I get 40%. I'm feeling so sad, confused. My teacher is really good excellent.
> *The optimist say the glass is half full. The pessimist says the glass is half empty. The engineer says the glass obviously has a design flaw.

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Appendix B

Authentic English Use Through Technology
Pre/Post Test

Name: _____   Date: _____

1. Do you own a computer?

2. Are you comfortable using the computer?

3. Do you have access to the internet?

4. On what device: Circle the correct answer or fill in the answer.
   a. Home computer   b. Work computer?   c. Personal smartphone?
   d. Other? Where: _____

5. How often do you use your computer:
   a. Daily?   b. Bi-weekly?   c. Weekly?   d. Monthly?   e. Other: _____

6. How long do you use your computer each time you use it?
   (give an average estimate)

7. What do you mostly use your computer for:
   a. Read the news?   b. Look up specific information?   c. Type a Word document?
   d. Play games?   e. Other? For what? _____

8. Do you use English outside the classroom?

9. How often do you use English outside the classroom:
   a. Never?   b. Daily?   c. Once a week?   d. Twice a week?   e. Other? _____

10. When you use the internet, what languages do you use?

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Name: _____   Date: _____

1. HelloTalk helped me improve my English.   Y/N

2. After using HelloTalk I feel more comfortable using technology.   Y/N

3. Do you have access to HelloTalk at home?   Y/N

4. My English speaking improved with HelloTalk.   Y/N

5. My English listening improved with HelloTalk.   Y/N

6. My English writing improved with HelloTalk.   Y/N

7. My English reading improved with HelloTalk.   Y/N

8. I used HelloTalk (circle one):   1x/week   2x/week   3x/week

9. I think I will continue to use HelloTalk after this semester.   Y/N

10. I will tell my friends about using HelloTalk.   Y/N

11. I am happy my teacher told me about HelloTalk.   Y/N