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HelloTalk Users' Interpretation of Language Cues: A Mixed-Method Case Study

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ABSTRACT

As language learning shifts to digital platforms, the absence of non-verbal signals creates linguistic ambiguity that risks intercultural misunderstanding. This study examines how HelloTalk users interpret language registers and apply Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) within a mixed-purpose digital ecosystem. Using a Concurrent Mixed-Method approach, data were collected from ten B2+ users via Likert scales and thematic analysis. Findings reveal strong register awareness for serious topics (mean=4.30), yet significant ambiguity exists when interpreting formal language in casual chat (s=1.29), hindering pragmatic interlanguage development. Qualitatively, the primary barrier to decoding cues is not linguistic structure, but phonetic factors such as non-standard accents and rapid speech. The study concludes that effective accommodation is constrained by these phonetic hurdles and conflicting digital cues. These results offer critical insights for Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) development, highlighting the need for interfaces to better mediate paralinguistic elements in peer-to-peer digital interactions.

Keywords: Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), HelloTalk, Pragmatic Interlanguage, Digital Paralanguage

ABSTRAK

Seiring beralihnya pembelajaran bahasa ke platform digital, hilangnya isyarat non-verbal menciptakan ambiguitas linguistik yang berisiko menimbulkan kesalahpahaman lintas budaya. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pengguna HelloTalk menginterpretasikan register bahasa dan menerapkan Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) dalam ekosistem digital bertujuan ganda. Menggunakan pendekatan Concurrent Mixed-Method, data dikumpulkan dari sepuluh pengguna level B2+ melalui skala Likert dan analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan kesadaran register yang kuat pada topik serius (mean=4,30), namun terdapat ambiguitas signifikan saat menginterpretasikan bahasa formal dalam obrolan santai (s=1,29), yang menghambat perkembangan interbahasa pragmatik. Secara kualitatif, hambatan utama dalam mendalami isyarat bahasa bukanlah struktur linguistik, melainkan faktor fonetik seperti aksen non-standar dan kecepatan bicara. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa akomodasi yang efektif terhambat oleh kendala fonetik dan isyarat digital yang kontradiktif. Hasil ini memberikan wawasan kritis bagi pengembangan Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), dengan menekankan perlunya antarmuka yang lebih baik dalam memediasi elemen paralinguistik pada interaksi digital antar pengguna.

Kata kunci: *Teori Akomodasi Komunikasi (CAT), Pembelajaran Bahasa Berbantuan Perangkat Seluler (MALL), HelloTalk, Interbahasa Pragmatik, Paralinguistik Digital*

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A. Introduction

The identified research gap is the absence of thorough case studies that employ a sequential mixed-method approach to directly compare users' statements about how they interpret formal and informal cues (qualitative data) with their actual responses to those cues in real interactions (quantitative data/interaction analysis). This study suggests a sequential qualitative and quantitative case study on HelloTalk users to provide a thorough grasp of the process of processing formal and informal cues. The results are then combined to provide useful recommendations for the design of MALL application interfaces. The rise in cross-border movement and internet access in the contemporary globalization period has made intercultural communication skills an essential global requirement.

Deardorff (2020) asserts that in order to minimize misconceptions in increasingly diverse situations, building these competences necessitates a deep understanding of interpersonal interactions. The way that language learning methods are changing and increasingly using digital technologies is directly impacted by this issue. According to Bali et al. (2024), social presence and the efficiency of information flow present particular difficulties when managing interactions in online learning. Thus, the success of cross-cultural message transfer depends on an individual's capacity to modify their communication tactics on digital platforms.

The primary theoretical framework anchoring this issue is Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Giles and Ogay (2013) explain that this theory focuses on how individuals modify their communicative behavior, including the choice of language register, to manage social distance with their interlocutors. In its evolution, this adjustment becomes more complex in digital environments due to the limited availability of traditional paralinguistic cues. Cutting and Fordyce (2020) add that language use in social contexts heavily relies on pragmatic understanding to ensure communicative intent is accurately conveyed. The inability of users to align their linguistic style with their conversation partners can hinder the effective accommodation process within technology-mediated interactions.

Specific problems emerge on language exchange applications such as HelloTalk, where users frequently experience pragmatic failure when interpreting formal and informal register cues. These failures are often caused by the inability to detect subtle linguistic nuances without the aid of non-verbal signals. Dai and Zhao (2022) identify that pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication requires intelligent analysis strategies to minimize negative impacts on social relationships. The urgency of resolving this issue is high, as misinterpretation can lead to intercultural conflict and decrease learner motivation within the Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) ecosystem. The unique nature of HelloTalk as a platform that blends structured learning objectives with casual social interaction creates role ambiguity that complicates the decoding of language cues.

This research context is highly relevant to the educational technology and applied linguistics sectors, where mobile-based speaking learning models continue to evolve. According to Jia et al. (2025), the development of speaking learning models on mobile devices must undergo rigorous evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of user interaction. This sector requires a better understanding of how application features

can support or even hinder the interpretation of language registers. Ishihara and Cohen (2014) highlight that teaching pragmatics is the point where language and culture meet, suggesting that MALL platform designs must consider sociopragmatic aspects. Thus, the specific characteristics of voice and text-based interactions on HelloTalk become a critical area for further exploration.

Current research gaps indicate that most previous studies tend to focus on a single research dimension in isolation, either qualitative or quantitative. Mapping commonly used methodologies shows a dominance of qualitative content analysis or quantitative surveys without strong integration. Tashakkori et al. (2020) assert that the foundations of mixed methods research are essential for integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive overview. Furthermore, scholarly debate persists regarding which factors are more dominant in the interpretation of language cues. Taguchi (2019) argues that second language pragmatic acquisition is heavily influenced by context, while other researchers may emphasize linguistic proficiency alone.

As a solution to these gaps, this study proposes a concurrent mixed-method case study to compare user statements regarding formal-informal cue interpretation with their actual response data. This approach aligns with the principles of Creswell (2009), who suggests using mixed-method designs to strengthen the validity of findings through data triangulation. By combining descriptive statistical analysis and thematic analysis, this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of HelloTalk users' cognitive processes. The results of this study are expected to offer practical implications for MALL interface development and teacher development in second language teaching. According to Yan and Huang (2025), teacher development in the context of second language instruction must remain adaptive to technological advancements and the ever-changing dynamics of digital interaction.

B. Research Method

Research Design

This study adopts a Concurrent Mixed-Method Case Study approach. Specifically, a Concurrent Triangulation Design was utilized, characterized by the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data to validate and deepen findings (Creswell, 2009). This design aims to integrate numerical data regarding language cue interpretation with a nuanced understanding of cognitive processes. As noted by Tashakkori et al. (2020), such integration provides a comprehensive view of complex social and behavioral phenomena, which in this context relates to how users navigate the pragmatic nuances of digital communication.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were active users of the HelloTalk language exchange application. A total of ten (10) participants (N=10) were involved in this case study. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on the following specific criteria:

1. They were HelloTalk users participating in English-speaking Voice Room sessions.
2. They had an English proficiency level equivalent to B2 or higher (according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* - CEFR). This criterion ensured that the participants possessed adequate linguistic competence to interpret the nuances of formal and informal language cues.

Participants were recruited directly from the HelloTalk Voice Room. After obtaining verbal permission from the moderator and voluntary consent from

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potential participants, the questionnaire administration proceeded.

Research Instruments

The main instrument used was an Online Questionnaire (Google Form) designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data in a structured manner. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections:

1. **Quantitative Data**

Five (5) questions employed a 5-point Likert Scale (e.g.1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). These questions aimed to measure the participants' tendencies in interpreting the level of formality of specific digital language cues (e.g. sentence structure).

2. **Qualitative Data**

Two (2) questions utilized a short answer paragraph format. These questions were exploratory, asking participants to share where they learn English to improve their listening skills and state the most challenging parts in listening. This qualitative data served to enrich and provide deep context for the Likert scale scores.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out through a series of structured steps:

1. Access and Recruitment: The researcher entered the HelloTalk Voice Room sessions relevant to English as the language of interaction. The researcher announced the purpose of the study and requested voluntary consent from users who met the B2 criteria or higher.
2. Participant Screening: Participants who agreed were screened to confirm their English proficiency level (e.g., through a self-assessment question or verification of qualifications).
3. Questionnaire Administration: The eligible participants were provided the Google Form link. The researcher acted as a facilitator, directly filling out the form based on the verbal responses provided by the participants one-by-one in the Voice Room. This procedure ensured data completeness and mitigated potential technical barriers.
4. Response Recording: Both Likert scale responses (Quantitative) and narrative answers (Qualitative) were accurately recorded by the researcher into the Google Form. The entire data collection process adhered to research ethics, including participant confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis Methods

1. **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Likert scale data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically calculating the Mean and Standard Deviation. The Mean identifies central tendencies in register interpretation, while the Standard Deviation measures the degree of pragmatic consensus or variation among users (Taguchi, 2019).

2. **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The narrative data from the two open-ended questions will be analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Tashakkori et al., 2020). The primary goal is to contextualize and explain the quantitative findings. The process involves:

a. Coding: Identifying key phrases regarding formal exposure sources and interpretation challenges on HelloTalk.
b. Theme Development: Synthesizing these codes into themes that explain *why* participants responded to specific formal/informal cues the way they did.

3. **Data Integration**

In the final stage, quantitative results were synthesized with qualitative themes. This integration allows for a robust explanation of how users apply Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to manage social distance and politeness in a digital MALL environment (Giles & Ogay, 2013; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014).

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C. Results and Discussion

Statement	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	S. D (s)
1. Long, complicated words are difficult to follow.	3.40	1.26
2. Quick/slurred sounds cause important details to be missed.	2.60	1.08
3. Immediately listen more carefully to serious topics.	4.30	0.48
4. Tone switch (serious to funny) is confusing.	3.40	1.17
5. Formal language in casual chat implies distance/politeness.	3.10	1.29

Table 1. Qualitative Results

The participants' formal English listening is primarily sourced from media and entertainment (e.g. movies, songs, audiobooks), which was mentioned in 6 out of 10 responses. About half of the responses (5 out of 10) also mentioned academic or informational sources, such as documentaries, lectures, news, and professional teachers. Specific digital platforms like Spotify, YouTube, and HelloTalk itself were noted as sources by a few respondents (3 out of 10).

The biggest challenge identified by participants is directly related to accent and pronunciation, mentioned in 5 out of 10 responses, with some specifically noting difficulty understanding the British accent. Similarly, speed and unclear speech were major hurdles, cited by 4 out of 10 respondents, who struggle with speakers who talk too fast or have unclear pronunciation. External factors and other issues, such as idioms, finding a suitable person to talk with, and internet connection, were mentioned by 3 respondents.

1. Interpretation of Formal and Informal Cues in the HelloTalk Context

This section addresses how HelloTalk users decode formality cues, a process fundamentally rooted in Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). The data show that participants are highly attuned to topic seriousness as a cue for accommodation, with a Mean of 4.30 and a low Standard Deviation of 0.48 for the statement: "Immediately listen more carefully to serious topics." This suggests a strong, consistent tendency among users to adjust their focus (a form of accommodation) when the content shifts to a serious register.

Conversely, interpreting formal language within a casual environment is seen as implying "distance/politeness," yielding a Mean of 3.10 with a high Standard Deviation of 1.29. This variability suggests that while formality may generally signal social distance or respect, this interpretation is not universally consistent across all B2+ users. This high standard deviation indicates that cultural background and individual pragmatic norms heavily influence the perceived intent politeness versus intentional distancing of the interlocutor,

complicating the Pragmatic Interlanguage (as further explored in Section 3).

2. **Complexity of Processing Verbal and Digital Paralanguage Cues**

The interpretation of formality cues in Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) environments is complicated by the presence of both verbal challenges and the absence of conventional non-verbal cues (intonation, gestures). Quantitative findings confirm difficulties with rapid and complex verbal input: the statement "Long, complicated words are difficult to follow" received a moderate Mean of 3.40 (s=1.26), and "Quick/slurred sounds cause important details to be missed" had a Mean of 2.60 (s=1.08).

These quantitative struggles align directly with the Qualitative Results, where the biggest challenge cited by participants (5 out of 10) was accent and pronunciation, followed by speed and unclear speech (4 out of 10). This indicates that the core difficulty in interpreting linguistic cues in a platform like HelloTalk stems from non-standard pronunciation and delivery speed, which override the capacity to correctly decode *register*. Furthermore, the confusion caused by an abrupt "Tone switch (serious to funny)" (x=3.40, s=1.17) interpreting emotional context without visual and in-person non-verbal indicators, as discussed by Bali et al. (2024), who emphasize the challenges of navigating social presence and interactions in online environments.

3. **Sources of Exposure and Contextualization of Language CuePragmatics**

The analysis of Qualitative Results regarding where participants obtain formal English exposure provides context for their interpretation of cues on HelloTalk. The dominant sources cited are media and entertainment (6 out of 10) and academic/informational sources (5 out of 10), such as documentaries and lectures. This finding suggests that users primarily encounter formal registers in one-way communication formats (receptive input) or highly structured academic settings.

When these users transition to the mixed-purpose ecosystem of HelloTalk which blends formal learning objectives with informal social interaction their established Pragmatic Interlanguage frames the interpretation. For instance, the high consistency in recognizing "serious topics" (mean=4.30) (referenced in Section 1) is likely derived from their academic/news exposure, where topic register is clearly defined. Conversely, the high variability in interpreting "Formal language in casual chat" (s=1.29) demonstrates a failure of CAT-driven accommodation when the *channel* (casual chat app) contradicts the *message* (formal language). Since their primary exposure is often non-interactive, they lack robust experience in negotiating and responding to the ambiguity created by these conflicting cues in a real-time, peer-to-peer setting.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study addressed the extent to which HelloTalk users interpret formal and informal linguistic cues, confirming the applicability and limitations of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) in the Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) context. Three main findings emerged:

1. Topic Register Dominance: Users show high and consistent accommodation when the topic is overtly serious (Mean=4.30), leveraging pragmatic norms learned from academic/media exposure.
2. Pragmatic Ambiguity: Interpretation highly varies (s=1.29) when formal language is used in casual chat, indicating a struggle

with Pragmatic Interlanguage due to the conflicting *channel* (casual app) and *message* (formal register).

3. Phonetic Barrier: The primary obstacle to interpreting register cues is not linguistic complexity, but non-standard accent, speed, and unclear speech. These phonetic challenges override the ability to decode subtle formality shifts.

In summary, effective communication accommodation on HelloTalk is severely constrained by both the ambiguity of the platform's mixed-purpose nature and the lack of conventional non-verbal cues.

Future research must resolve the identified gap by adopting a Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Method Design. This involves first quantifying stated interpretations, then following up with qualitative analysis (e.g., stimulated recall) of actual conversational transcripts to compare stated beliefs against real-time accommodative behavior.

Additionally, studies should specifically analyze digital paralanguage (emojis, abbreviations) as compensatory mechanisms for missing non-verbal cues and explore the direct influence of cultural background on interpreting formality ambiguity, moving beyond the focus on only linguistic proficiency.

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