Utilizing Cell Phones in Language Learning: from Idea to Practice

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Abstract

Nowadays education is more and more taking advantage of Information Technology. One of the most attractive technological devices is the mobile phone which represents a revolution in education. The traditional classroom, blackboard, and textbooks can no longer satisfy the needs of generations of students used to handle technological tools since their childhood. Today almost everybody use mobile phones. Other than being available, many are equipped with features including text messaging, blue tooth, internet access, and running games, software and multimedia programs enhancing the quality of language learning. The present paper attempts to investigate the studies done in this domain and outlines the merits and drawbacks of the application of mobile phones in classrooms. Then, it deals with some of the mobile phone features compatible with different language learning skills. Ultimately, the study suggests some innovative practical ideas on using mobile phones in language learning environments and analyzes the problems that the learners may face in an instructional setting. It also suggests some solutions removing the obstacles in order to pave the way for language learning. The paper concludes that mobile phones can provide the students with some good learning opportunities if language learners only handle them wisely.

Key terms: Mobile phone, Features, Language learning, Language skills

1. Introduction

Technology supported learning has a long history. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is used worldwide to increase the quality of education. Technological innovation is becoming more and more important in all fields of education, and the field of language learning is no exception.

ICT represents a dynamic way of learning and an innovative way of teaching. Some researchers have attempted to investigate and incorporate technology in a recent field of mobile-assisted-language-learning (MALL). (Reinders. H & Min young Cho, 2010)

Among all mobile computing devices available, mobile phones are the most wide spread devices. They have an important place particularly in young people’s lives. Other than being available and portable, many of these phones are equipped with functionalities including Bluetooth, internet access, mp3/mp4 player, digital camera, video recorder and many are Flash-enabled and/or Java-enabled and can run multimedia contents including audio and video (Salameh. O, 2011).

2. Defining Mobile- Learning

The potential of mobile technology in the language classroom has gained increased interest in recent years (Chinnery, 2006). Mobile learning, as the immediate descendant of e-learning, is the ability to provide educational content on personal pocket-sized devices.
Quinn (2000) defined mobile learning as learning that takes place with the help of mobile devices, or the intersection of mobile computing, the application of small, portable, and wireless computing and communication devices and e-learning as learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology.

Pinkwart, et al. (2003) defined e-learning as learning supported by electronic tools and media, and mobile learning as e-learning that uses mobile devices and wireless transmission.

Turunen, et al. (2003) viewed mobile devices as a pervasive medium that may assist us in combining work, study and leisure time in meaningful ways. Trifanova, et al. (2004) defined mobile devices as “any device that is small, autonomous and unobtrusive enough to accompany us in every moment in our every-day life, and that can be used for some form of learning”. Generally speaking, this definition may mean that mobile learning could include mobile phones, digital cell phones and smart phones. However, in this study by mobile learning, we mean using mobile phones in the process of teaching and learning (cited in Kamla Suleiman. A, 2011).

3. Methodology

The present study entitled “Utilizing cell phones in language learning: from idea to practice” was done by a mixed research approach. For data gathering, the studies in the domain of mobile phone learning were investigated. Then, the attitudes on using mobile phones were analyzed by outlining the merits and drawbacks of their applications in the process of learning English Language. After that, it deals with some of the mobile phone features compatible with different language learning skills. Ultimately, the study suggests some innovative practical ideas on using mobile phones and analyzes the problems and challenges that the learners may face in using their mobile phones in an instructional setting. It also suggests some solutions removing the obstacles in order to pave the way for language learning.

4. Review of Literature

There is an interesting literature about the use of mobile phones in education shedding light on the topic. One study looks at SMS in learning Irish (Cooney and Keogh, 2007), another at learning Italian (Levy & Kennedy, 2005), the other at learning literature (Hoppe, 2004).

A number of research papers reported the use of short text messages (SMS) for language learning on cell phones. For example, researchers adopted text messages as a means of providing vocabulary practice for quizzes and surveys (Levy & Kennedy, 2005; Norbrook & Scott, 2003).

Thoronton and Houser (2005) presented three studies in mobile phone learning. Their subjects were Japanese university students. They tested them in terms of the email exchange in the mobile phones (Short mini-lessons emailed to students three times a day), receiving vocabulary lessons by SMS at timed intervals to the mobile phones and finally using video-capable mobile phones for explaining English idioms. The results indicated that students receiving instruction via mobile phones scored twice higher than students receiving their lessons on paper. Students felt that using mobile phone in learning is “a valuable teaching method” and they highly rated its “educational effectiveness” in the classroom.

A study by Kiernan and Aizawa (2004) tested the use of mobile phones as tools for classroom learning. Freshman university students were subdivided into three groups: (a) using cell phones text messages, (b) using computer e-mail, and (c) speaking. The study suggested mobile device proofs to be an effective “language learning resource worthy of further investigation”.

There is another experience in using mobile phones to provide study support (Traxler & Riordan, 2003). This work shows that SMS can be used to provide support, motivation and
continuity; alerts and reminders; bite-size content, introductions, tips and revision; study guide structure.

Audio clips have been used to help with pronunciation for English as a second language by Man Lee Liu (2007). The results of this work indicated that the content should be in short units.

Petersen and Markiewicz (2008) have reported applying video clips for language learning on mobile devices. Unfortunately, the increased video file size and small screen discourage their use on cell phones.

An offline slide based solution is proposed by Anaraki (2009). In this project each lesson contains several slides consisting of text combined with audio. These slides are targeting several aspects of language learning including listening, grammar and rules of conversation. In general, the results indicate that students’ English language skills are enhanced.

5. Findings
5.1. Mobile Phone Features
Many of the mobile phones are equipped with functionalities including dictionary, Bluetooth, text messaging, internet access, mp3/mp4 player, digital camera, video recorder and some are Flash-enabled and/or Java-enabled and can run multimedia contents including language games, interactive software, and audio and video educational materials. Each of these features can be effective in improving listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. In this section, we suggest some practical ideas for enhancing the language learning skills considering the mobile phone features.

5.2. Some practical ideas improving language skills
Here we suggest some practical ideas and innovative ways to enhance both receptive and productive language learning skills.

5.2.1. Listening skill
- We can improve our listening skill by listening to some authentic listening materials.
- We can record our teacher’s voice while reading a text and listen to it out of the classroom so many times.
- We can listen to someone talking on the phone.
- We can ask one of our classmates to record his voice while reading a passage and send it to us via Bluetooth. (peer education)
- We can check the pronunciation of the new words by using the talking dictionaries of mobile phones and save their pronunciations in the history section to listen later.

5.2.2. Speaking skill
- We can improve our speaking skill by talking on the phone. (But it is expensive)
- We can listen to or watch an audio or a video material and talk about it. (integrating listening and speaking skill)
- Teachers can write some questions on paper and ask their students to answer them orally and record their voice.
- We can work in pairs or small groups debating on a topic and record the event.
- We can have a oral chat with our friends or teachers. (Of course it costs a lot as well and we can benefit from our school facilities.)

5.2.3. Reading skill
- We can take a picture of a reading passage and read it so many times.
• We can listen to a recorded text and practice reading that text many times in order to get mastery in reading.
• We can refer to the dictionary to check the meaning of the new words for a better comprehension.
• We can get some extensive reading materials via internet. Or our teachers also can send some extra materials via Bluetooth.

5.2.4. Writing skill
It seems that the learning opportunities provided by the mobile phones to enhance the writing skill is both diverse and more practical.
• We can use the note feature to write anything.
• We can send SMS or emails. (It is a bit expensive but we can purchase text message bundles available.)
• We can have a circular writing activity where students create a story together. Each student writes a sentence or two and then sends this on to the next student, who adds another message, and so on until the story is complete. (It is better to use the school wireless system.)
• We can have a written chat with our friends and teachers.
• We can check our spelling by T-9 dictionary.
• We can display some of new words on the monitors for more practice.
• Teachers can write some questions on the board and ask their students to write the answers on their mobile phones using the note feature. The answers can be saved and sent to other students or the teacher for correction.
• We can inactivate T-9 dictionary and then have a spelling test. The test can be self, peer or teacher corrected if T-9 dictionary is activated.

5.3. The merits of using mobile phones
Using mobile phones in education has many advantages, presents educational potentials for today’s generation and provides some good learning opportunities with the learners.

✓ Encourage ‘anywhere, anytime’ learning
Mobile devices allow students to gather, access, and process information outside the classroom. They can encourage learning in a real-world context, and help bridge school, after school, and home environments.

✓ Language learning equity
Because of their relatively cheap prices compared with computers, mobile phones can be purchased by almost every one. So it helps language learning equity, allowing children from low-income families to benefit this technological tool in education.

✓ Widespread
Among all technological devices available in our era, mobile phones are the most popular ones, and they have an important place particularly in young people’s lives. In all over the world mobile phones outnumber personal computers.

✓ Being portable
Mobile phones are small, light and easy to be carried wherever we go.

✓ Fit with learning environments
Mobile devices can help overcome many of the challenges associated with larger technologies, as they fit more naturally within various learning environments.

- **Enable a personalized learning experience**
  Not all children are alike; instruction should be adaptable to individuals. Mobile phones can be used to encourage independent learning experiences. Therefore, language learning can be managed by the learners. Thus learners can identify areas where they need assistance and develop a personalized learning strategy.

- **Outside of the classroom learning**
  It is widely acknowledged that children do learn not only at school, but out of school as well. Their informal experiences outside the classroom may offer just as meaningful learning opportunities as the structured learning environment established within schools. The availability of digital learning material allows learners access to relevant content inside as well as outside the classroom. The learner is no longer restricted to learn at fixed locations.

- **Fit with life-long learning framework**
  The possibility to learn anywhere, anytime also fits well within a life-long learning framework. At present times, learning is no longer confined to a particular period in life from four to mid-twenty.

- **Informal learning**
  Using mobile phones in education helps to break some of the limitations and formalities from the language learning classrooms and involves reluctant learners to remain more focused for longer periods.

- **Enhancing motivation**
  Mobile phones help to raise self-esteem and self-confidence. Moreover, by using technology children are feeling “more of a sense of mastery and are feeling good about themselves”.

- **Diverse Feature**
  Nowadays, almost all mobile phones are equipped with functionalities including text messaging, blue tooth, internet access, mp3/mp4 player, audio and video recorder, camera, and can run multimedia content.

- **Satisfying the needs of the new generation**
  Mobile phones also can satisfy the needs of generations of students used to handle technological tools since their childhood.

- **New horizons in assigning homework**
  Using mobile phones present new horizons in assigning homework. Instead of traditional homework, language teachers can assign some audio and video homework. This kind of assignment prevents cheating or copying the homework.

5.4. **The drawbacks of using mobile phones**
Using mobile phones in education has some disadvantages and drawbacks. In this section, we will deal with some of the challenges and propose some possible solutions and suggestions to remove the obstacles in order to pave the way for language learning. We can classify these problems into the two main categories of physical and socio-cultural limitations.
5.4.1. Physical limitations

Physical aspects of mobile phones may prevent an optimal learning experience, and cause some limitations. These limitations include:

- small screen size
- small keyboards
- limited battery life
- limited memory size
- restricted text entry
- health concerns

5.4.2. Socio-cultural limitations

Followings are some potential socio-cultural problems associated with using mobile phones in language learning, along with some possible solutions and suggestions.

- **Lack of access to mobile phones**
  Not all students in all classes will have mobile phones, and the concerns around lack of access are valid; however, it is probably safe to say that of all the technologies available to teachers, mobile phones are the most widespread.
  **Solution:** It is better to share phones between students for certain activities.

- **High cost of mobile phones**
  It is important not to place a financial burden on your students and their parents. Activities such as texting, going online, and of course making calls cost money.
  **Solution:** It is better to purchase text message bundles available or use the school wireless system.

- **Noise and disruption in class**
  Despite the potential for mobile phones to increase opportunities for learning, they make a lot of noise into a classroom. Some students may play music or video in class. They may focus on the device than the lesson. They can be disruptive as well. Therefore, it makes the teacher tired and also makes the class out of control. It wastes the educational time of the class.
  **Solution:** It is better to have clear tasks for your students to work with mobile phones. Clearly some ground rules and a definite policy are needed.

- **Privacy considerations**
  It is necessary to consider issues of privacy before using mobile phones in class. If you teach younger learners, you may need to get parents’ consent to use mobile phones in school.
  **Solution:** It is better to talk to the students’ parents to remove private information from the cell phones.

- **Unethical behavior**
  Another obstacle in using mobile phones for learning activities is that some students may commit unethical behavior and use their devices for inappropriate purposes.
  **Solution:** It is better to explain to your students what your intentions are. Similarly, you need clear rules about when and how phones can be used so that students do not use them for inapt intentions.

- **Increased teacher workload**
  Finally, the use of mobile phones has the potential to increase teacher workload. However, there is also the question what happens if all of your students start texting you?
Solution: It is better to set boundaries and make it clear to students what they can send to you when, what you can and cannot respond to, and what you will respond to individually and in class. There are also tools that can help you manage text messages. Programs like Notepage (www.notepage.net) let teachers respond to multiple text messages or send out bulk messages from a computer, thus greatly reducing the time needed to respond.

- **False rivalry**
  Probably some students may compete with each other bringing the latest and most recent versions of cell phones to the class as a prestige.

- **Solution:** Teachers should talk to their students that bringing regular cell phones to do the classroom activities will suffice.

6. **Conclusion**
The current study extends the application of mobile phones as a device for communication and entertainment to an educational means in language learning environments. It also strongly emphasizes that mobile phones can improve the quality of learning, facilitate the mastery on both receptive and productive language skills and help the reluctant students be more motivated and more focused for longer periods in language learning. Furthermore, learners will be able to benefit from any previously wasted time like being on the bus or on their way back and to school, and manage to use it on learning languages. Ultimately, the paper concludes that mobile phones can provide the learners with a plenty of language learning opportunities in the educational field if language learners only handle them wisely.

**References**


