

Chapter 12

Mobile Technology and Learner Autonomy in Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) provides learners with the chance to experience new learning modes that go beyond the classroom context, offering them more flexibility, learning choices in terms of language content, ways of its delivery, learning space, and time, thereby enhancing their learning autonomy. But how are English teachers using MALL? In the attempt to answer this question, a survey is carried out with a sample of 42 English teachers. The results show that the limited use of such devices is not likely to help the learners develop autonomy since it does not go beyond the objective of enhancing their knowledge of this language. This study also reveals learners' difficulties in using these devices, the skills needed, and the kind of support these teachers require. In light of these findings, a list of recommendations is suggested to enhance MALL.

INTRODUCTION

Integrating technology into language learning and teaching has become a necessary component of the educational process and a requirement to achieve the intended learning outcomes. The range of technologies available have provided both teachers and learners with a variety of teaching and learning resources which can help them interact with different authentic language materials. Indeed, mobile learning devices in learning English are gaining

more credibility with the increasing popularity of smartphones and availability of Internet access. Their use within this context promises learners' engagement with learning, since making choices of electronic learning materials and resources is appealing. Moreover, these technologies can facilitate learners' collaboration and participation via social networks like blogs and twitter thus promoting their use of the English language inside and outside classes.

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In real situations, providing different mobile learning applications and devices does not guarantee maximizing learning opportunities in the language classroom as learners may show resistance or lack of interest towards their use. Besides, integrating them in one's teaching for the sake of fascinating learners with these technologies or overloading them with input would not help them take full advantage of their use. Instead, mobile learning technologies should not only be used for the sake of enhancing learners' communication of the targeted language, but also to promote learners' reflection of their learning process, so that they can develop their autonomy and lifelong learning skills.

To this end, the way mobile learning technologies are integrated into teaching and the objective of their use remain crucial issues to consider for language teachers and researchers. Therefore, it attempts to investigate this issue through addressing a survey to a sample of English language teachers who are integrating these technologies into their teaching. Further, this study hopes to establish whether the way teachers integrate such technologies into their classes enhances their learners' autonomy or not. Finally, this research attempts to find out the difficulties learners encounter within this process, the skills they need and the role of institutions in this process.

To begin with, this chapter attempts to define mobile learning, explore some mobile devices and their implementations and benefits in language learning context. Moreover, since learner autonomy is central in this study, there is a need to account for this concept, and clarify its importance in language teaching and learning process. This chapter also outlines some empirical findings on the effects of MALL on learner autonomy, and finally, a set of recommendations are provided including the need to collaborate and evaluate the effectiveness of this process.

MOBILE ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING: DEVICES AND APPLICATIONS

Mobile learning refers to "the use of mobile or wireless devices for the purpose of learning while on the move" (Park, 2011, p.79). Such devices include cellphones, personal media players, personal digital assistants (PDAs), besides smartphones and wireless laptops (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006). They can deliver high quality multimedia stored on internal drives, removable memory cards or they can be accessed over wireless and telecommunication networks (Pim, 2013). The use of mobile learning technologies is gaining more support with the increasing innovations brought to its applications, the availability of Internet access and the popularity of social software (blogs, twitter, YouTube, etc.). In fact, "in 2003, 61 per cent of the world's population had access to a mobile cell signal, rising to 90 per cent by 2010" (Kelly & Minges, 2012, p. 9).

Hence, there is a common consensus that mobile learning is not just about the use of portable devices but also about learning across contexts (Walker, 2006). This is so, since it allows for more interactive learning which is not bound by a limited pace or time. Further, mobile learning is limitless in terms of the content and geographical extent, providing dispersed virtual classrooms accessible at any time (Jalalyazdi, et al., 2009). Indeed, its potential for flexibility in use, ownership and novelty has contributed to raising researchers and practitioners' interest in incorporating mobile devices in the teaching learning process. For instance, Peters (2007) describes this mode of learning as a step toward making the educational process "just in time, just enough and just for me" (p. 15), and Pea and Maldonado (2006, p.437) stated that mobile learning incorporates "transformative innovations for learning futures".

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