Chapter 36

LingoBee Mobile App:
Connecting to Language Learners through Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes case studies conducted in five European countries, where language learners were invited to use "LingoBee," a mobile app, as a means of supporting their language learning. Assuming that today's language learners are mobile savvy and "Digital Natives" and that they should be able to engage in language learning autonomously using technology, initial studies were conducted with little or no intervention by the language teachers. However, the support and guidance provided within a teacher-led context can impact positively on learner engagement. The case studies confirm this hypothesis. This chapter addresses the research question: Does the level of the support and guidance and pedagogical approach impact on learners' engagement and the synergy between formal and informal learning? Based on the experiences from the five case studies, recommendations are provided for teachers and designers of educational technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Educational technologies provide new opportunities for learning, challenging the need for innovative ways to gain advantage of their affordances. Researchers and educators are challenged to think about learning in formal and non-formal arenas (Schwier, 2010). There are several distinctions between formal and informal learning, discussed in detail in (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2002). Eraut raised awareness of the distinction between the two, where he presented the features of formal learning (i.e., a prescribed learning framework, the presence of a teacher, qualification and credit) and

classified everything else as non-formal learning (Eraut, 2000). Formal Learning is organized and has learning objectives, while informal learning is never organized and is often unintentional; it is referred to as an experience and its value has often been under-estimated. Non-formal learning has also been recognised as an intermediate between the formal and informal learning, and this has been of interest to researchers and policy makers, as the European Union (EU) (European Commission, 2013) and the OECD (OECD, 2010). The EU considers non-formal learning as structured and intentional from the learner's perspective; however, it does not lead to certification (European Commission, 2013). Thus, non-formal learning can be organized and can have learning objectives.

There has been work in using Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) to provide learning resources to students, and efforts have been made to make these environments into more personal learning environments. While these types of technologies provide access to relevant learning material, they are designed to support a management perspective both for the teachers and the students. They do not provide the necessary support for the learning processes for a learner anytime, anywhere as mobile technologies do.

Several educational technologies can support learning although these are not designed as a teaching tool. Similar to eLearning, mobile learning is also undergoing an evolution "from a position of where 'delivery' of learning was paramount, to current thinking which encompasses a learner-generated content perspective" (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). Mobile learning emphasizes the active involvement of the learner where formal learning is complemented by informal learning. This is well in line with the constructivist thinking, in particular, with social constructivism (Vygotsy, 1978). In fact, social constructivism focuses on the social context that shapes the construction of knowledge, which is important in language learning. Learning languages is strongly influenced by situations (Ogata & Yoneo, 2004), and language and culture are inextricably linked (Tang, 1999). This fits well within the concept of situated learning proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Language learners and teachers should take advantage of the affordances of mobile language learning apps. To gain leverage from such educational technologies, teachers and researchers are challenged with the ideas of technology-enhanced, non-formal learning for the benefit of formal learning.

This chapter will describe five case studies conducted in five European countries involving pre-university international students, Erasmus and Grundtvig (European Commission, 2013a; 2013b) programme language learners who were invited to use "LingoBee," a mobile app, as a means of supporting their language learning. Assuming that today's students are mobile savvy and "Digital Natives," the generation that has grown up in the digital age surrounded by computers and other technologies such as mobile phones and playing computer games (Prensky, 2001); and that they should be able to engage in language learning autonomously using technology, initial studies were conducted with little or no intervention by the language teachers. However, the support and guidance provided within a teacher-led context can impact positively on learners' engagement and use of LingoBee.

This chapter addresses the research question: does the level of the support and guidance, pedagogical approach and prior learning impact on learners' engagement and the synergy between formal and informal learning? In the following, we try to answer this research question on the basis of a number of studies that we have conducted using a mobile app for situated and collaborative language learning called LingoBee. It aims to help learners in linguistic and cultural diversity and to support a community of detached language learners. It is designed to capture language elements in learners'

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