Chapter 3
Mobile Learning in the Arab World: Contemporary and Future Implications

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ABSTRACT

Most Arab countries started their own e-learning and mobile learning initiatives in order to cope with global integration of latest educational technologies. The high mobile phone penetration among Arabs as well as availability of good mobile infrastructure are all important factors that can enhance the shift to mobile learning. Moreover, several studies indicate positive attitudes and perceptions toward mobile learning at different Arab learning institutions. However, specific challenges may act as barriers to mobile learning in the Arab world. This chapter reviews some of the current mobile learning practices in the Arab world and provides an overview of challenges faced by Arab students, educators, and probably researchers. A description of future mobile learning in the Arab countries is then provided.

INTRODUCTION

Education systems in the Arab world are adopting different ideologies that differ from, say, Arabian Gulf countries to Morocco and Algeria in the west. While some systems tend to be more liberal and democratic, others have more focus on the study of religion and traditional societal values. However, most Arab learning institutions have relatively similar agendas that aim at incorporating latest ICT and e-learning trends. Thus, several e-learning, and later mobile learning, initiatives have been established as an attempt to cope with educational systems at the developed world. Additionally, most Arab countries are experiencing economic difficulties and are attempting to provide better but cheaper education. Thus, mobile and distance learning were meant as solutions to income shortage and/or geographical conditions at these countries (see Almarwani 2011; Al-Shehri, 2012). In other parts of the Arab world, the investment of technology into learning came as a result to the very high penetration of mobile devices particularly among young population. Moreover, the availability of modern mobile communication services as well as affordable mobile

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6166-0.ch003

internet made the integration of mobile learning an essential educational step. In this chapter, an overview of current mobile learning practices in the Arab world is provided. Challenges faced, and are being faced, by students, educators, policy makers, and possibly researchers are reviewed and synthesized. An outlook of future mobile learning in the Arab world is discussed later in the chapter.

CURRENT PRACTICES

The integration of mobile technology into educational systems in the Arab world came as a result to the global shift that implemented more technological solutions in education. Ministries of education as well as universities in the Arab world are enthusiastically working on improving their academic processes and learning outcomes. Several e-learning initiatives and practices were found as a result to cope with contemporary education systems. For example, schools and universities have already provided technological infrastructure and invited all educators to take part in those promising initiatives. Some universities have also trained their staff to use technology effectively, and provided online courses for students in different mediums.

According to Sawsaa, Lu, and Meng (2012), mobile learning has not been widely adopted in Arabic countries. However, "several attempts have been made to identify and discover the importance of m-learning and its use for improving the educational services and developing the existing systems" (p. 172). One major factor that made mobile learning a suitable and effective choice in the Arab world is the widespread penetration of mobile devices, mobile phones in particular, among Arab young students (Al-Shehri, 2012). Saudi Arabia Consumer Electronic Report Q3 (2013), for instance, reports that mobile handset sales reached US $ 1.2bn in 2013 and expected to grow to US $ 1.6bn by 2017 due to the strong demand and popularity of internet-enabled mobile devices. Almutawwa (2012) also reports that mobile phone penetration in Saudi Arabia exceeded 200 percent in 2012. SHUAA Capital issued a report on the Gulf Countries telecom sector and states that United Arab Emirates has one of the highest mobile penetration rates in the world exceeding 230 percent (Mubasher, 2012). The mobile market in Kuwait, another Gulf country, experienced strong growth in mobile penetration to 175.9 percent in 2012 (Kuwait Telecommunications Report Q4, 2012). Mobile penetration at other lower-income Arab countries such as Egypt has also passed 100 percent and reached 100.79 percent in 2011 (Telecompaper, 2012) and 113.2 percent in 2013 (Eid, 2013). However, Eid reports a decline of mobile phone penetration in Egypt with 3.74 percent in 2013. This might be attributed to the current political events taking place in Egypt. Mobile penetration at other "unstable" Arab countries such as Iraq is still only 80 percent in 2013 (Al-Khalidi, 2013). Nevertheless, high mobile phone penetration in the Arab world can be attributed to the high improvement in smart phone sales in the region, particularly Apple and Samsung products (see Figure 1).

Mobile short messaging, mobile social media, and video sharing seem to be the most apparent mobile behaviors among Arab users. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, WhatsApp Messenger tops the list of mobile applications (see Table 1). As for devices, 55 percent of Arab population are Apple fans. However, an analysis of mobile social media usage, conducted by Alwagait and Shahzad, indicates that Apple is losing market share particularly at non-English speaking countries including the Arab world (SamMobile Report, 2013).

There are several attempts in Arab educational systems to cope with the mobile learning shift. The motivation for people to use mobile learning at the Arab world differ from one country to the other. For example, young Arabs at the Arab Gulf countries are so immersed in mobile social media and mobile video sharing than others at low-income countries. Moreover, mobile learning