Chapter 1

Understanding Learner and Instructor Attitudes Toward and Use of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers insights into the benefits and drawbacks of adopting mobile learning in language education, both from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view. A survey was designed to explore pedagogically sound practices and provide a better understanding of the current and future role of MALL on language learning, specifically in higher education (HE). Comparison between the two target groups (learners and teachers) produced results to aid in aligning and narrowing distances between the learners' independent usage of MALL in informal learning and the instructors' perception of how mobile apps can or should be integrated into the language curriculum. The chapter proposes a number of research areas that require further exploration in MALL and with a set of recommendations in terms of embracing MALL practices in language learning and teaching.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes a multinational research project conducted by members of EuroCALL's[1] Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) Special Interest Group. Mobile learning involves the use of mobile technology, either alone or in combination with other information and communications technologies (ICT), to enable learning anytime and anywhere (UNESCO, 2012, p. 6). Mobile devices permeate our daily lives, providing unparalleled access to communication and information and, as the power, functionality and affordability of these devices increase, so does their potential to support learning in new ways and settings (UNESCO, 2013, p. 7). For the purpose of this study, mobile devices refer to smartphones or tablet computers that allow the use of mobile applications. Laptop computers are generally seen "as portable more than mobile" (Pegrum, 2014, p.54) therefore, in the context of this study, they are always mentioned in comparison with smartphones or tablets. The research study was thus designed to shed light on how mobile applications (apps) can have an impact on the way language learning is currently being approached by students and instructors. The multinational project targeted participants –both instructors and learners– based in Asia, North America and Europe and the data was collected by means of a large-scale online survey which investigated their practices and attitudes toward the use of MALL as a language learning tool in today's educational context, in an attempt to determine future trends. Data was analysed both qualitatively, based on Glaser & Strauss' Grounded Theory (1967) to conceptualize the data, and quantitatively through descriptive statistics. Comparison between the learners and teachers' data sets allowed us to draw a global picture of MALL usage in informal learning and attitudes toward the integration of mobile apps into formal learning. Consideration is also given in this chapter to the language skills and linguistic competences that learners and teachers perceive as the most appropriate and useful in MALL. The chapter finally suggests some MALL research areas to explore and provides a number of recommendations in terms of MALL practices.

BACKGROUND

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning in Higher Education

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning projects have been implemented globally at different education levels, from primary schools to higher education (HE) contexts (Bebell & O'Dwyer, 2010; Fleischer, 2012; Zucker & Light, 2009), although "statistically reliable measures of learning outcomes are few and far between" (Burston, 2015, p. 16). What has driven most researchers more recently is the idea that mobile learning involves not only the mobility of devices, but also the mobility of participants, experiences, and time (Pegrum, 2016; Lai et al., 2018). Teachers and learners use their personal mobile devices, such as tablets and mobile phones, in formal and informal settings, very often shifting the role of the device from content delivery to content creation thus allowing various and ubiquitous ways of learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2016). In such a diverse and flexible situation, it has become crucial for researchers to investigate perspectives and attitudes toward the use of mobile devices both in formal (Kukulska-Hulme, 2016) and in informal language settings (Byrne & Diem, 2014; Ch'ng & Samsudin, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme, 2012) as the influence of self-directed use beyond the classroom can inform classroom practices and innovative methodologies (Lai et al., 2018).

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