



Mobile Assisted Language Learning: Considerations and Benefits

KEYWORDS

Mobile, Language Learning, Technology in Classroom

Prof Mamta Amin

Asst. Professor, Indus University, Ahmedabad

ABSTRACT *Mobile Assisted Language Learning represents the new forte of the educational system. It blends the evolutions in information technology with the conceptual notions of language learning to create new techniques of language teaching and learning in the 21st century. Though a lot has been theorized about the use of mobile technology, researches fall short of extracting the crucial considerations which have to be thought of before embarking on a curriculum based on the use of mobile technology. This paper tries to explore the determinants or factors which should be analyzed thoroughly before designing a mobile assisted language learning curriculum or task and explains the benefits of the same.*

Mobile Assisted Language Learning: Benefits

The most popular view about language learning is that a formal environment is the most appropriate place for the learning to take place. A controlled environment, like a classroom, and the presence of the tutor as a "dispenser of knowledge" has been hailed as the best way of teaching English language to speakers of other language. The popularity of such a view has manifested in the classroom practices across schools and colleges where are uni-directional method of teaching takes place with very little or no learning at all. However, in the recent years language learning has awakened to the need of addressing the more dynamic mode of teaching and learning wherein learning is seen as happening even outside the constraints of a classroom. A more informal method of learning is being hailed as a scaffold to the formal methodologies of learning.

"Informal Language learning is unstructured, occurs out of class environment, & language learners are in charge of their own learning" (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Lightbown & Spada, 2001; Rogers, 2004)

Using this observation as a base, one may start to question the multiple modes available to develop language skills within students. This paper aims at finding the possibilities of Mobile Technology to be used for language learning. The focus however, is on finding the factors or determinants to be considered before designing any course of task which would be dependent on mobile technology. Through these observations it will be attempted to demonstrate the potential opportunities for second language learning in informal setting, using mobile technology.

Students' ability to communicate naturally in English is a significant feat that language teachers would like to achieve in the classroom. It is a herculean task for language teachers to be able to provide required inputs to expose students to English language to build their competence. Generally students feel diffident about their level of output in English; thus they remain hesitant as they fear making mistakes. This can be overcome if teachers are successful in creating a different setting where the shift occurs from a teacher-centric to a student-centric environment as the focus has to be onto the ongoing process of learning than the end result. This would mean that the teaching context should be able to embrace those strategies that the students are aware about and should bring these tools into the classroom for the purpose of teaching. One of the most important tools that can be employed for this purpose is technology.

"The use of different technologies can provide quick access to authentic language input in informal language learning

setting, mobile learning devices such as mobile phones now have the emerging potential to achieve large scale impact because of their portability, versatile features & low cost" (Roshchelle, 2003)

The attempt to make learning more student-centric is reflected in varied areas of the curriculum in our modern education system. There have been breakthroughs in education with the boom in IT sector. This compounded understanding can be used to design curriculum and create tasks based on mobile technology as students are more familiar to these and can easily adapt this in the process of attempting to learn language. This would also help in creating situations wherein language learning can happen even outside the classroom and thus can be used to promote autonomous language learning.

"Mobile phones can provide the learner with frequent engagement opportunities to language problems all the time increasing the learning chances by allowing the learner to use many sources of authentic audio/visual & print materials once motivated." (Beaudin et al 2006)

Frequent engagement opportunities can only arise if the contexts taken in mobile assisted language learning are directly aligned with the situational contexts of the students. Compatibility has to be established between the outlook of the students towards mobile technology and the kind of mobile technology being used. A mobile learning model that is appropriate for language learning in informal setting requires a deep understanding of the learners, their learning conditions, & their learning needs. Hence few realistic considerations have to be taken into account before embarking on the development of mobile technology in the domain of language learning.

Mobile Assisted Language Learning: Considerations

The following factors can be broadly divided into four categories:-

1. Perceived Usefulness (PU)
2. Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)
3. Subjective Norms (SN)
4. Economic Affordability (EA)

"The advancement of technology in mobile devices & applications have enhanced m-learning as a powerful tool for informal learning. M-learning allows students to learn independently regardless of time & place facilitated by an array of mobile devices & Internet." (Garry et al 2011)

The tech-Revolution has thrown open plethora of advanced mediums through which language learning can occur natu-

rally. Portable devices such as laptops, smart phones, and ordinary cell phones have metamorphosed the traditional teaching methodology into a renewed manner rendering students' autonomy at the top spot. Thus, students can engage into education resources even being away from the classroom. They can catch live classes or download Audio/Video material without the constraints of location. The major impact of mobile technology & Internet usage is making mobile devices an important tool for m-learning. However the advantage of m-learning will not be realized if learners are hesitant to imply this new innovation in their daily routine. Active participation from students & teachers is required for the progress of M-learning methodology.

Therefore, the present paper explores the four factors which need some amount of deliberation before the teacher/ researcher embark on the journey of finding multi-fold avenues for learning to happen through mobile technology.

1. Perceived Usefulness (PU)

"No matter how sophisticated and appealing a mobile learning device or its content may be, the learner uses mobile learning only if it meets his/ her individual learning needs" (Parsons & Ryu, 2006)

PU defines the functionality value in the use of technology. PU is a pre-requisite at both ends – teachers as well as students. It is the extent to which both the parties perceive the use of mobile phones being useful to them for language learning purpose. Hence in a classroom set-up, the role of a teacher becomes to identify the problem areas of language in students & encourage them to use suitable authentic material designed by the teacher to cater to different individual needs of the students in the learning process.

Since M-learning fosters greater autonomy of students, the participation of teacher cum facilitator becomes even more vital, challenging & a step ahead in terms of research to bring forth suited material. Hence the teacher must be doubly convinced about technology's usefulness prior to its adoption by the students. If individuals perceive m-learning usage will augment their efficiency of teaching-learning process they are more likely to prefer m-learning.

2. Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

"Emerging technologies such as mobile phones need to be fully interpreted and applied according to the environment in which they will operate, being well aware of its limitations & challenges, bearing in mind their potential impact on transforming current cultures and practices." (Cobcroft et al, 2006)

Perceived Ease of Use determinant serves as the second step after the individual is fully cajoled into the benefits of M-learning. Once they have undergone the contemplation in terms of PU; PEOU emerges out as certain notions on how easy can be the use of a particular technology.

It is a common human tendency to resort to an easier technique for the task on hand. Moreover, unfamiliarity breeds fear & anxiety in the minds of teachers as well as students. Teachers may fear their inability to handle new technological advancements and students though adept at tech-usage, may be anxious out of their incapacity to identify their accurate learning needs, hence at sea about the ways to enhance their language skills through the device.

One of the researches also claimed that there are many students who are not familiar with technology where m-learning

requires different types of applications to enable video viewing or audio listening. Other challenges are such as connectivity & facilitating resources capability. Hence the technical & format design are vital as it will allow users to use the applications in an easier way.

3. Subjective Norms (SN)

"Mobile learning solutions cannot be formulated according to pre-existing learning design principles without considering the practical problems specific to the location and situation of the language learners. There is the need to consider cultural & social factors when designing mobile learning activities." (Murphy, 2006)

The intention to use predicts actual usage of M-learning, and this intention is prophesied by SN. Subjective Norms is the influence of social factors on the behavior of an individual. It is a significant predictor in predicting one's intention to use a system. For example in a premium institution, the percentage of students, who are tech-savvy & having access to smart phones is higher than those who do not possess the gadgets. However, the social peer pressure would encourage them positively to acquire mobile technology & at the same time learning to navigate through it. Similarly, if the teacher is making use of technology to carry out lectures, send notes or allot assignments, a particular student with no history of operating any technology is forced to acquire tech-skills at the earliest for his/her own betterment.

Potential users may choose to adapt to new technology, although not favorable at first when influenced by someone who is important to them. One of the studies on under-graduates discovered that primary influence of family & friends has stronger impact compared to secondary influence of the media. Thus SN has significant relationship towards m-learning adoption.

4. Economic Affordability (EA)

Economic factors affect one's ability to adapt oneself to new technological tools. The market flooded with advanced technological tools caters to those who can afford the latest models. A gap is generated when there is a distinction between those who possess and ones who cannot afford them. Exposure to latest trends in technology requires one to be able to afford those particular tools. Learning is hampered if this factor affects on a larger scale. A sustainable amount of time to reach out to the lesser equipped groups has to be spent into mainstreaming them to make possible all inclusive learning. Thus cost may play an important role in determining adoption or non-adoption of m-technology.

Although m-learning enables students to learn on the go, the mobile devices factors such as display screen, battery, speed etc may hamper the suitability of the devices for m-learning. This limitation may erase the perceived benefits of adopting mobile devices for learning purposes.

Conclusion

M-learning offers benefits in several ways. It allows students a greater control over the learning environment. MALL can play a significant role in addressing the learning needs & allows knowledge to be generated by learners. However the paper highlights four factors- PU, PEOU, SN & EA which are found to be key drivers for m-learning adoption. An important consideration of these determinants by educational institutions, service providers, & mobile phone manufacturers can go a long way for the development of design & implementation of m-learning innovation.

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