Mobile Learning Age: Implications for Future Language Learning Skills

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ABSTRACT

The dramatic shift in the language learning processes during recent years led to significant changes in the way teaching and learning may happen. Due to the pervasive of smartphone and tablets among new generations, they become academically beneficial learning tools. There is growing research body on the MALL “Mobile Assisted Language Learning.” However, there is still a dire need to explore the students’ personal use of smartphones and their apps for learning benefit. This study attempted to investigate the impact of using mobile dictionary (MD) apps for learning the English language. A questionnaire was distributed among 87 English major students and responses analyzed. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with 13 students and their responses were qualitatively analyzed. The findings underscored the essential role smartphones and tablets play in extending learning outside the classroom settings. The results also revealed that most of the students rely heavily on their mobile applications to translate unknown words. The students also revealed that their teachers did not fully welcome the skills to use smartphone translation applications. This study suggested that there is a gap between the MALL skills needed by the students and the teaching style employed by the teachers in the classrooms. This gap increases the necessity for further studies that can identify the frequencies and linguistic needs of the English language learners. The study recommends that teachers need to foster a new teaching style as new generations students will need new skills sets to thrive in social communication and technology-rich.

Keywords  
eLearning, mLearning; mobile-assisted language learning (MALL); MD (mobile dictionary); MD applications; dictionary use strategies;

Introduction

The learning and teaching environments in recent years are changing very rapidly due to the exceptional resources and features generated for teaching by the advancement of the technology. During the last decade, there was fast development in mobile devices and Their affordable prices made them available with many of the students. This affordance might create the students fresh learning experiences when using them as assistance tools for learning. Therefore, new research tried to shed light on this new trend, namely, MALL. According to Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2008), mobile learning could be a form of learning that occurs with the assistance of mobile devices and means that learning could happen anyplace and at any time. While in the past, mobile learning targeted on the role of mobile technologies and devices in education, nowadays mobile learning is characterized with the mobility of the user and also the informal learning that might take place outside of the classroom (Sharples, 2006). Therefore, it can be said that all portable devices such as media player devices, mobile phones, and tablets play roles in mobile learning (mLearning).

It is true to say that mobile phones are the most frequently used learning instruments among digital devices (Pęcherzewska & Knots, 2007) because they are very and friendly use and convenient for the learning and teaching purposes in the classroom environments (Tayebinik & Puteh, 2012). Some previous studies revealed that smartphones can leverage training (Roschelle, 2003), enhance the learning practice (Squire & Dikkers, 2012).

Literature Review

The traditional teaching methods occurs inside the classrooms, where the teacher introduces a group of students with the teaching materials. During the last two decades, the main focus was on employing technology in education such as CDs and communication networks as information platforms, but recently the emphasis has moved to use the use of mLearning. According to (Cohen, 2002) students enjoy mobile than PCs. Mobile devices offer an effective, flexible and promising learning platform. This can make the current
learning system more interesting, interactive and widespread.

Figure 1. The transformation from traditional learning into mLearning

Although the learning systems might serve the same function and might facilitate each other, this is not the case. It can be said that eLearning focuses on to improving different skills and enhance in-depth competences. The purpose of mLearning is to obtain instant access to the learning process during the moment of learning. Also, the popularity of mLearning is based on the availability and portability features of mobile devices where mobile devices are easier accessible and carried in comparison with permanent devices such as personal computers (PCs). Mobile devices offer an effective, flexible and promising learning platform. This can make the current learning system more interesting, interactive and widespread.

Mobile Learning
Traxler (2005) defines mobile learning as “any educational provision where the sole or dominant technologies are handheld or palmtop devices” (p 266). Three elements can be defined for this form of learning according to the evolutionary history of mobile learning:
- Mobility of technology,
- Mobility of learning,
- Mobility of learner.

Technology mobility is focused on investigating the opportunity of applying smartphone and wireless devices for teaching applications. The focus of mobility on learning is on using mobile devices intensively to learn outside the learning environment. The third element emphasizes “the mobility of the learner, the design or the appropriation of learning spaces and on informal learning and lifelong learning” (Pachler, Bachmair, & Cook, 2010, p. 41).

Over the past decade, the rapid evolution of cell phones from simple phones to smartphones, which can operate as a micro-computer, phone, or camera, and transfer data as well as video and audio files, has made mobile phones important learning resources. Due to their growing popularity among the students at colleges and universities and their roles in education, mobile phones have got more attention as one of the useful tools that might assist the learning experiences. According to Klopfer and Squire (2008), the affordances of mobile phones are because of their portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity, connectivity, individuality.

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning
Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, (2008) argue that “MALL differs from computer-assisted language learning in its use of personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning, emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different contexts of use” (p. 273). Therefore, it can be claimed that MALL is any kind of language learning that happens using handheld devices. Mobile phones are considered as very efficient instruments for general language learning (Fallahkhair, Pemberton, & Griffiths, 2007), have an advantage on language skills acquisition (Chang & Hsu, 2011), stimulate language learning attitudes and motivation of learners, and promote learner interaction, communication, and knowledge building (Joseph & Uther, 2009).

The impact of MALL on language learning can be argued from both theoretical and research-based stands. Theoretically, it is suggested that MALL «addresses many of the major challenges of Second Language Acquisition, such as comprehensible input or the interaction hypothesis, corrective/facilitative feedback, and learner autonomy. Empirical studies also show that MALL influences language learners’ vocabulary learning (e.g., Ogata, Yin, El-Bishouty, & Yano, 2010), promotes learner-learner interaction (Dias, 2002), and promotes peer-assisted language learning (Lan, Sung, & Chang, 2007). Research on MALL has mainly focused on teacher-led mobile learning and students’ use of mobile apps and the role of mobile apps in their learning have been taken for granted in the literature (Steel, 2012). This study
attempts to understand to what extent the students rely on their MD while learning. It also explores their frequency of use and their linguistics needs to refer to the dictionary. It investigates the teachers’ preference of mobile use inside their classrooms during lessons.

Methodology

Participants
Identified with pseudonyms, the students were selected with regard to meeting the criteria of comprehending both the Arabic and English languages. Students undertaking their undergraduate studies were recruited from the same university were also involved in this research study. The students met the criteria where Arabic was their first language and that they had ages between 19 and 25 years old. They all own smartphones and have dictionary apps installed on their devices.

Data collection
Data collection for this study was done through questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire aimed to capture the students’ dictionary frequency of use, opinions, challenges and thoughts regarding their preferred dictionary to be used inside and outside the classroom. It is vital that the questionnaire was formulated using the Arabic language to eliminate any misunderstanding that might threaten the participants’ responses to the questionnaire items. For the interviews, they were undertaken with the purpose of qualifying the information sought from the students on various viewpoints regarding their underlying reasons and attitudes toward the use of mobiles for language learning purposes. The instrument consisted of semi-structured questions that stimulated participants to expound more on their reasons and answers to the questions.

Data analysis
Data collected were categorized and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics tests were used. The dataset also was subjected to testing and subsequent inferential statistics using the SPSS 21.0 software. In addition to measuring the frequencies of the responses given in the study, information drawn from the qualitative analysis was used to qualify the numbers drawn from the descriptive statistics.

Results and Discussion

Questionnaire analysis
The questionnaire focuses on tap on issues related to their ownership of the MD, their frequency of use and their opinions regarding their use of their MDs inside and outside the classroom. Most of the students reported that they prefer to use one of the commonly English Arabic application on both IOS and Android platforms, namely, “Dict box”. It was found that it was installed on all students’ mobiles who came for the interview. It is important to say here that the features that Dict box has when showing the meaning of the word from the different dictionary which allows students to see the meaning in both English and Arabic languages. This could end the debate of which dictionary is more appreciate to the learners. Mobile apps could offer a new experience to the learners that was not available with paper and hand-held dictionaries.

Attitudes and Ownership
From the study, it was established that the majority of students preferred the use of their smartphones for checking unknown words. As shown in figure 1, 99% of the participants claimed that they own smartphones and 85% of them claimed that they have dictionary apps installed on. 77% of the students preferred referring to their dictionary apps in their phones. They reported that they would not hesitate to check the dictionary while in the classroom.
Figure 2: the students’ attitudes and ownership of mobile dictionary

Frequency of use
Regarding the frequency of use the results clearly show that the students use their dictionaries mainly for checking the meaning of unfamiliar words (92%) (see figure 2). It seems that reading textbooks also requires frequent use of dictionaries (86%). Writing comes next to the students’ needs to refer to the dictionary with (73%). As for the other skills, only 42% of participants reported using their MD for speaking and 33% with listening.

Figure 3: mobile dictionary frequency of use by the students

Interview Analysis:
Most of the students being interviewed reported that their MDs provided them with immediate access to the needed information. Students agreed that the dictionary apps available on apple and google stores were easy to be used and they can choose the most suitable apps for each of them. The students also stated that they became less dependent on their teachers and peers because their dictionary can offer to them the wanted information.

The role of the teachers
In the interview students implies that the teachers' role in the technology has changed and their reliance on the teachers become very less. They stated that it takes time for their teachers to reply to their questions. In contrast, their MDs can provide them with an instant answer. It is true to say that there are distinct features of mLearning. mLearning’s main features enable students to learn anywhere and anytime. Smartphones are more spontaneous than any other kinds of learning tool. They are also portable which allow learners to use it anywhere and anytime. Students said in the interview that teachers can also use the mobile for teaching and checking the dictionary for unknown words too. Hails (2002) claims that this new change in the information revolutionary age contradicted the traditional teacher role when seeking information. It can be said that teachers’ interaction with students became much reduced over the last decades (Ghaln, 2011) See figure 3. below.

Figure 4: teachers’ role in technology era (Ghaln, 2011).

According to Ghaln (2011), the teachers in the past played the role of the information expert and the main source of knowledge to the students. However, the transformation in media formats has changed the task of the average teacher from being an expert to being a presenter of the knowledge of others. With the social networks revolutions in recent years, various things have shifted again. In these settings, the teacher's role needs to change from the provider of specialized knowledge to the mediator of conflicting situations. As the role and responsibility of learners change for mobile technologies, the role of the teacher is slowly changing towards the role
of the advisor. In this role, teachers need to be able to identify students’ interests, relate these interests to learning objectives related to the topic, and provide opportunities to reach these goals related to the specific circumstances in which the learner is present.

### Conclusion and Implication

The purpose of the present research was to study the influence of using the smartphones dictionaries apps on language learning. The positive impact of the MALL dictionary was confirmed in this study. The obtained results confirm earlier studies findings that, when learning English as a foreign language, usually the academic situations Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) can have a beneficial impact on learners’ performance. Using technology increases the motivation of the students, establishes positive attitudes towards English language learning and reduces the anxiety of students when learning English.

With the help of a single mobile app, the use of mobile dictionaries in English classes and learning can be broadened to situations outside the school environment, to social interactions and various learning settings. The smartphones learning features are more practical support which increases the learners’ autonomy and learning motivation. Furthermore, since EFL learners require regular informal practice, phones and tablets provide learners with extensive resources to have sustained links with the target language. Teaching staff should be able to recognize the interests of students, link them with the goals of learning and provide opportunities to achieve the goals that are related to the particular circumstances in which the learners are involved. Thus, it is the teachers are responsible for:

- Obtain high self-confidence levels in classes
- Reduce obstacles and improve learners' autonomy and motivation
- Apply various methods of assessments.

The new generation of the students are more to technology and heavily use it on an everyday basis. According to Du Plessis (2011:28), “there is a need to explore and understand the elements of technology, social media and social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate those elements into teaching and learning”. This means incorporating technology not only as part of teaching-learning but also finding a “creative classroom setup”.

Finally, in the past decade, language learning practices have witnessed a lot of developments and transformations. The current educational challenges are to create motivated, engaged learners who might tackle difficult matters in a variety of educational situations. Many conventional pedagogical methods that allow students to be purely reactive and receivers of knowledge and expertise may thus struggle to achieve the appropriate skills. Teachers should, therefore, be prepared for future students’ needs and the process of teaching and learning in the digital era. They have to admit that the traditional techniques of teaching need to be linked to the students’ lifestyle inside and outside the classroom. It is very important to leave space of freedom for technology use inside the classroom and encourage learners to be self-reliant. The teacher should be critical and creative to build a classroom environment that is contributing to thinking and creating. The establishment of a suitable learning environment is important. Moreover, the modern design of the classrooms, opposite desks to encourage students’ interaction, and outdoor teaching possibilities should form part of this new thinking.

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