



Is there Evidence for Differential Benefits between Mobile Devices Used for Self-access Learning as Opposed to Language Learning in the Classroom with the Teacher?

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In this paper, Mr. Sweeney provides some interesting insight into several Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) projects used in English for the Workforce (EFW) training courses and the challenges faced by both students and teachers. Mr. Sweeney identifies several instructors of EFW based on their involvement at educational technology conferences or on their social media presence in this field and interviews them about their experiences employing “substantial, technology-enabled, out-of-class” (p. 2) elements in their courses. MALL projects in this study are an extension of the traditional EFW classroom, not as an integral part of in-class activities. In this regard, this study sheds light on the practical application of MALL principles in the here-and-now by creative and tech-savvy teachers.

The first practical point of note in this study was the broad range of tasks offered to students using MALL principles. These tasks ranged from traditional content delivery (texts/audio delivered by SMS) to content production (write/record your own texts/audio) to sophisticated interactive tasks using advanced smartphone features. If we are to look at the principles put forth in Stockwell & Hubbard (2013) as best practices for implementing MALL projects in the EFW classroom, the projects in this study take many of these principles into account. At the same time, however, they provide further insight into the practical challenges that must be addressed to successfully implement these principles.

Specifically, I found it interesting that many of the interviewees in this study mentioned the need to justify the importance of autonomous learning to the students being asked to complete learning tasks on their mobile devices. The differentiation addressed by Sweeney (and others) between “digital natives” (younger, seemingly more tech-savvy users) vs. “digital immigrants” (older, less tech-savvy users) did not seem to play as big a role as one might think in the willingness of these students (aged 18-70) to use their mobile devices in a novel way. Instead, while Sweeney correctly promotes the need to take individual differences (confidence level with device, experience) into account, it seems that it was more difficult for the learners (as Stockwell & Hubbard also point out) to see the potential of their devices as self-access learning/study tools instead of just personal and/or social tools. As a result, instructors had to set aside time in class to “adjust” student perceptions and perspectives.

Additionally, to further mitigate this initial student reluctance to embrace these new learning tasks, instructors found it useful to (1) teach the specific skills necessary to carry out the desired tasks, and (2) to illustrate how these new skills could provide added benefits to their professional skillset. Just as students view English as a tool to better function in their workplaces, instructors had to demonstrate that the skills gained by using their devices in this way would also benefit them on the job.

As Mr. Sweeney rightly points out, these psycho-social issues bring to the forefront the importance of task design when planning MALL projects in or outside the classroom. Whether it be teaching students how to use specific apps on smartphones/tablets or how to save an audio text sent via SMS on not-so-smart feature phones, time must be set aside in class to first ensure that students perceive the relevance of these tasks to them as professionals and then to teach the specific steps needed to carry



out the tasks successfully. While this dedication of class time is not a principle specific only to MALL tasks, it seems particularly relevant here.

The second practical point that impressed me in this study was Sweeney's observation that device ownership by the teacher and his/her own skill level with the device seems to be an important element of success. As Sweeney notes, teachers who are implementing these projects are "atypical" (p. 10) and "ahead of the pack" (p. 11). This fact will be a key challenge that educators interested in mobile-assisted language learning will continue to face going forward.

"Tech-savviness" on the part of teachers, however, is not enough. In addition to our own prowess as users of mobile devices, it seems clear from the examples in this study (and the recommendations made by others) that we will also need to know about the different types of mobile devices our students will have at their disposal. While this level of insight might seem daunting even to the most tech-savvy teacher, pedagogical and institutional support for MALL initiatives can play a vital role here in fostering the creative, risk-taking teachers needed to blaze these new trails. Although Sweeney does not explicitly make this suggestion, others do (Kukulske-Holme, 2013) and such support seems to be evident to some degree for the teachers involved in this study.

Lastly, although Sweeney admits the lack of formal evaluation of the MALL tasks involved in this study, he does broach the important topic of measuring outcomes for MALL initiatives. From a practical standpoint, Sweeney primarily uses subjective teacher judgments to determine effectiveness of the endeavors. (He also mentions student feedback questionnaires but no data are given.) Although he reports improved student participation, enthusiasm and motivation, very little is said about student performance. While these outcomes are no doubt noteworthy, it will be important to identify and assess the specific language outcomes expected from MALL tasks. What aspects of EFW are students learning and how do we know? While these standard assessment questions are not novel nor easy to answer, they should be the primary justification for how a MALL task complements and/or extends classroom teaching and learning and why it is being used to do so.

In conclusion, educators interested in implementing MALL tasks and projects in their curricula face unique challenges. On the one hand, these are similar to challenges faced by all technology-enhanced learning projects. On the other, Sweeney and others have pointed out very specific obstacles that teachers must overcome with the support of their institutional structures. From a practical standpoint, more studies of this kind are needed now and will be needed in the future as mobile technology continues to change and more creative and tech-savvy teachers step forward to lead us onward.



References

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