



**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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Sweeney (2013) discusses how teachers perceive the benefits – and challenges – of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), concluding that mobile devices may help "extend" classroom learning.

Perhaps the most provocative claim made by the teachers who responded to Sweeney's research questionnaire is that self-access mobile tasks can promote learning environments that are even more communicative, real world, and relevant to the workplace and community than face-to-face classroom tasks (Sweeney, 2013). Some of the teachers say they required students to "interact with the outside environment in a collaborative, rule-based way" (Sweeney, 2013, p. 7) and employ mobile-specific features such as geolocation, geo-tagging and geo-fencing. It would be useful to see some of the actual tasks that enabled these sorts of ideal learning environments.

Sweeney (2013) emphasizes that mobile learning is more successful when teachers themselves are adept users of mobile devices. Tasks must also be well-designed, he says, which means including appropriate content, accommodating the digital literacy of the learner, and adapting to the capabilities of different mobile devices (Sweeney, 2013). Sweeney (2013) also frames a useful continuum of mobile tasks, from least to most complex. It seems helpful to add that learners will benefit from tasks that are designed simply and intuitively, thus eliminating or minimizing the often-significant amount of learner training required to complete them. Most importantly, tablet and, in particular, smartphone tasks should be broken down and presented as extremely small, scaffolded sub-tasks with clearly stated objectives. Thus, mobile tasks should require only short bursts of time from the learner, with special adherence to the "less is more" maxim. That way, learners can more easily participate on the fly as they move through their busy lives.

The teachers in this study seem to have a justifiable feeling of "near obligation" (Sweeney, 2013, p. 5) to assign MALL-based tasks in order to address various limitations of the face-to-face classroom. Furthermore, the teachers may realize that learners worldwide not only have access to mobile devices but also seem to possess a strong desire to engage in mobile learning (for example, Kim, Rueckert, Kim and Seo, 2013). In fact, many believe that students will continue to seek 'anytime, anywhere' mobile education, which enables learning when learners can't access a traditional teacher or classroom (Kim et al., 2013).

Beyond the learner's motivations, teachers need to consider assessment and performance as the "primary justification" for mobile tasks (Watson, 2013, p. 2), particularly as self-access learning may not allow for the task negotiation that often happens in the face-to-face classroom. While MALL may result in increased collaboration and connection with the community, self-access mobile learning can also work to separate the learner from other learners and from the teacher, to some degree. In a classroom, learners may pose questions to other learners or the teacher when they are confused about task expectations or results. In self-access mode, however, learners, especially those who are less comfortable with mobile technologies, often become frustrated and feel hopeless (Kim et al., 2013), and they can't always immediately connect with another learner or the teacher to resolve their confusion.



It's even more critical, then, to design tasks simply and intuitively, with clear objectives, and to embed ongoing, small chunks of assessment or progress reporting or both into mobile tasks. That way, teachers may have a better sense of what stands in the way of self-access mobile language-learning and what facilitates it.

### **References**

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