



Some Emerging Principles for Mobile-assisted Language Learning

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This paper on mobile language learning is a welcome addition to the growing literature on mobile learning. The structure of the paper – a framework overview, followed by ten principles, which are then applied to an example – provides a rich understanding of the field and a helpful reference for both practitioners and researchers. Interestingly, the framework overview had some features often encountered in literature on learning design and new technologies. Research and literature on using new technologies in educational settings is often characterised by a relatively sparse use of theoretical underpinnings coming from educational research per se, and the framework in this paper continues this approach. While there is often a good overview of the literature on the respective online or mobile learning environment, the link to educational theories as such, or general pedagogical literature is often not made. There is a possibility that a closer engagement with existing educational theories could inform and enrich the developing understanding of mobile learning. For example, Jerome Bruner's conceptual thoughts on scaffolding in learning could be applied to Principles 1, 2, 3, and 7 (and possibly more). Moll's Funds of Knowledge could play a role for Principles 4, 5 and 6, and communities of practice apply to Principles 9 and 10. In general, all the principles could be informed by a discussion of Vygotsky's Social Development Theory.

Coming from a background of sociology of education, these environmental factors of mobile learning are always driving both my research and my practical interest in the field. I have recently completed a research project involving two student groups from Texas and Australia, who were exchanging views on Edmodo, a social learning platform freely available online. Group members were enrolled in undergraduate courses at The University of Texas at Arlington and The University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. Both courses were part of teacher education programs, and had a focus on literacy and English teaching in elementary schools. Weekly open-ended questions were posted, and the students were asked to access Edmodo whenever wherever they wanted to post answers and comments.

While this was not in a second-language learning setting, many of the principles suggested in Stockwell and Hubbard's paper were at work in this research project, too. Edmodo was chosen, for example, because it was freely available online for both the American and Australian students and much easier to use than a localized learning management platform like Blackboard, which would have required organizing guest accesses, representing unwanted limitations to this mobile learning project (Principles 1, 4). No multitasking was required, as students could focus on answering individual questions, often opinion-based (for example "what is your favorite quality children's book and why?", Principles 2 and 7). Equity and learner differences (Principles 4 and 5) were accommodated by allowing students time during tutorials to access university computers if they did not want to or could not use the Edmodo app on their mobile devices. The push mechanism (Principle 3) was an interesting factor in this project, as all American students were online-only students, whereas the Australian students had weekly face-to-face lectures and tutorials. The American students, in this case, were more used to the mobile online learning environment (and dependent on it), and they engaged regularly and frequently with the Edmodo questions. The Australian students often only posted and commented after extensive 'pushing' using interrelated media for the course (Blackboard or Facebook announcements, emails, and even verbal encouragement in classes). Without such 'push' reminders, a good number of the Australian



students would not have bothered at all, particularly as for them, posting was not linked to assessment, but was seen as a generic activity to increase their overall understanding of course contents. I would therefore add to Principle 8 (task fit to technology and environment) that the task also needs to fit students' course expectations: If it is not linked to marks, or other forms of tangible benefits, students are less likely to engage independently. Principles 9 and 10 represent what I learnt from this mobile learning project, namely that the involvement of e-learning coordinators made this project much easier for me and gave me the guidance and training needed as an educator interested in exploring mobile learning.

In general, I believe that mobile language learning, particularly on social learning platforms such as Edmodo, but also through social networking on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc., has great potential due to the accessibility of multilingual speakers on such free online sites. Teachers can explore bilingual reciprocal Facebook groups, Twitter hash tags that only allow the second language to be used, and even Edmodo exchanges using Chinese script (one of the free features of Edmodo!). Here in Australia, many language teachers already use a wide variety of new technologies in their teaching practices, and I consider mobile language learning, especially through the use of social networking and learning sites, to be the next big development in this field. This is particularly the case for countries like Australia, and to a certain extent, the United States, which are geographically removed from the multilingual realities most Europeans live in.

Organizations like TIRF can support language teachers by informing them about the possibilities of Facebook, Edmodo, Twitter, and so on, and by pointing them to available professional development in this area. A TIRF Facebook group, where teachers can exchange such information, could also be a welcome idea. There is already quite a number of general language learning information groups on Facebook, but a specific one for mobile language learning could be hosted by TIRF. I'll be the first 'Like'!

References

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