

Mobile Phones: Under-utilized Pedagogical Devices

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Abstract: The potential of digital mobile devices such as Personal Digital Assistants and mobile phones to achieve a large scale impact on learning has been well documented by a number of researchers. Recent investigations on mobile devices have increasingly focused on the importance of documenting the relationship between pedagogy and technology. We see many educators heaping malediction upon the prevalent use of mobile devices and kvetch that the learners have become addicted to these devices. They are of the opinion that learners should not be allowed to use mobile phones in the classrooms. We have paid very little attention to the fact that a lot of learning has been done on mobile phones and these ubiquitous devices can be used as valuable teaching tools. This article provides an introduction to mobile learning and explores its role in a classroom setting. It will exemplify using mobile phone as a learning tool and its relationship with the postmodern pedagogies of socially constructed learning. It will also provide guidance for language educators who want to adopt a more productive teaching and learning process in their classes by implementing M-learning. The article will help the readers understand the impact of these under-utilized devices on teaching and learning.

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1. Introduction

Mobile phones are prevalent and have become part and parcel of our digital society. Most of our daily activities depend on the latest technology which is rapidly growing. This speedy growth of technology has put us (educators) in a limbo where we have no idea what to do and how to utilize it in language teaching. According to recent developments in information technology the researchers tend to claim that this digital generation uses the devices they are comfortable with and they attribute a lot of value to these devices in their personal and professional lives. There is no denial of the fact that our digital-immigrant educators find these devices as gizmo of evil or in simple words these devices are disruptive in their classroom culture. However, “combined with visual, kinesthetic, and tactile learning styles, these under-utilized devices as educational tools can contribute to a more holistic approach to learning”, (Ahmed, 2012; p.1156).

Using a mobile phone is not appreciated in our classroom culture (Ahmed, 2012, Sharples, 2006). Today learners are techno-savvy and we believe that not only do they expect their educators to share the same tendency of being technological savvy but also consider this act of depriving them of using mobile phones in the classrooms as very offensive. They perceive the use of their personal devices as their right. We are of the opinion that it is not their fault to get addicted to these devices. It is the generation of technology. So, instead of halting this progress, we assume that educators should accept the

on-going change and be well-equipped in all the aspects. On the contrary, it seems as if we have paid very little attention to the fact that a lot of learning has been done on mobile phones, and they can be used as valuable teaching tools. Klopfer et. al (2002) also claim that “digital mobile devices provide improved opportunities for portability, social interaction, contextualization of learning, connectivity and individuality (personalization)” (p.95). In other words, these devices provide better personal learning space where individual learners construct their own community of practice and interact with each other and their interlocutor in less threatening environment. This use is more personalized, contextually situated, and geared towards the needs of this postmodern and high-tech era. Therefore, we believe it is never too late to learn. We should step forward and take a chance of using this a la mode entity in our teaching and learning culture. Instead of using very expensive teaching and learning tools, we can utilize our omnipresent mobile phones as learning and teaching tools and explore their relationship with the postmodern pedagogies of socially constructed learning.

2. M-learning defined

The term M-learning (mobile learning) cannot be defined in a generally accepted definition due to its rapid evolution as a domain and its inseparable functionality with the other fields such as: e-learning and distance learning. In our opinion, the use of mobile devices in learning and teaching

process is called M-learning. "Mobile learning is any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies" (O'Maley et. al, 2003). Moreover, Traxler (2005) defines it as "...any educational provision where the sole or dominant technologies are hand-held or palmtop devices" (p.262). To cut it short, there are numerous definitions of mobile learning given by numerous researchers in the educational community that are still questionable and to reach a consensus on any one of the widely accepted definition is difficult. The basic purpose of this innovative arena is to enable our learners to play an active role in the knowledge building process anywhere anytime.

3. A framework to problematize the under-utilized pedagogical devices

To date, it is hard to trace any development in theorizing mobile devices. However, refuge can be found in Vygotskian frame of thought. In his Activity Theory, Vygotsky (1978) postulated two learning perspectives of mediation. The first perspective works at intra-psychological level where the learner reconciles and constructs his/her own personal space of cognitive patterns. While the other perspective functions at inter-psychological level where the interlocutor interacts with the external stimuli and reconstructs instances of improved learning opportunities. The application of this theoretical frame meticulously conceptualizes learning through mobile devices.

The technological shift around the globe has affected Saudi youngsters so much that they have become addicted to the technological devices. These youngsters consider mobile devices as part and parcel of their culture. These cultural tools and signs in Saudi Arabian context provide a solid base for the development of the learner at intra-psychological level. The omnipresence of mobile devices facilitates the accessibility of these gizmos to their interlocutors, which in turns, activates their internal stimuli.

The shift in Saudi culture has not only affected their society but has also had a major impact on their mode of communication. Using Vygotskian second perspective, the external stimuli has been very quietly substituted by technology. Now, the interaction at inter-psychological level takes place between the consumer and the product. In a nut shell, humans are being replaced with tools such as mobile phones, ipads, PDAs and tablets which function as interactive agents in the process of learning. Saudi youngsters are keen on using mobile devices to

interact in their respective societies. Blog, micro-blog, weblog, sms, tweet and threaded discussion play the role of communicative agents in their lives. Scaffolded by the rich Saudi technological culture and a strong Vygotskian theoretical frame work, this study provides a strong case for using mobile devices in teaching and learning process to activate learners' schemata.

Despite the fact, the theory of Social Constructivism represents a different school of thought in which learning takes place in a socially constructed environment; it also supports the presence and role of mobile devices in the learning process. Unlike the cognitivists and the propounders of the Activity Theory, socio-constructivists believe that knowledge is constructed through social interaction in which the presence of external agents is inevitable. Whereas, the cognitivists strongly believe that such knowledge construction is impossible in the absence of internal stimuli.

Both these theories support mobile learning in a sense that mobile devices work as agents of stimulation at inter and intra-psychological levels. Contrary to the past when it was believed that humans need humans for interaction, mobile devices seem to have falsified these myths by providing chances of interactions anywhere anytime.

4. Why mobile phones in a language class

Recent investigations on mobile phones have increasingly focused on the importance of documenting the relationship between pedagogy and technology (O'Malley, 2002, Sharples, 2002, 2005, 2006; Traxler, 2009).

It is clearly stated in theory of situated learning that "learning is more likely to take place when information is contextually relevant and can be put to immediate use" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Therefore, Mobile technologies we assume can provide a powerful connection between a variety of formal and informal learning contexts and can help to build a community of learners. If used properly and sparingly, these prevalent devices can link the classroom with the outside world. Not only this, these devices are highly productive and we have experienced that they support and produce all four basic language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Therefore, these devices seem to enable learners to easily take classroom activities, presentations, and notes with them after the class. Also, learners are encouraged to personalize their learning experience which enables them to play an active role in the knowledge building process. As a matter of fact, our students are the inhabitants of the net generation and if they are given chance they

would explore and exploit the use of these under-utilized devices in learning that would surprise us.

5. Pedagogical uses of mobile phones

Many educators think that mobile phones are just the latest way to cheat and/or to cause disturbance, thus they ban them in most educational contexts, whereas, others see these devices as new ways to integrate technology into the classrooms. We believe that mobile phone, as Liz Kolb calls it, is “an anytime, anywhere, data-collection tool.” If mobile phones are used properly and accessed effectively, they give educators greater power to teach, persuade, cajole, encourage, motivate, and engage learners in numerous ways. For example, learners can text-message homework assignments to their knowledge constructing fellows and create educational podcasts with their mobile phones using free services like *Gabcast* that allows users to record podcasts. Moreover, they can type narrative descriptions for pictures to share with classmates, family, and friends on social networking sites like *Facebook* and *Twitter* whether inside or outside of the class. Text Messaging can be used for circular writing, reading, and grammar activities in the classroom to name a few. To add to it, educators can work around this to have learners working in groups, collaborating and solving problems together and share ideas, pictures, sounds and videos. Mobile phones have organizers, voice recorders, and multimedia creators which are really very helpful in the classroom for recording lectures, organizing timetables and setting goals. Nevertheless, applications like Calendar, Notes, To-do-list, Reminder, Clock to name some, can be of immense importance in a language class if educators explore their pedagogical use. Curriculum materials are delivered digitally; educators can deliver material directly to learners on their mobile phones for the immediate action.

Mobile phone with an internet connection adds flavor to learning in the classroom or on mobility. There are numerous websites which allow learners and educators to be creative and enjoy learning-teaching process. For instance, <http://mentimeter.com> is an excellent site that allows learners to check reading comprehension and educators to get immediate feedback on the progress. Another website www.pdictionary.com is worthwhile site for learners to learn pictorial words and find the meaning of difficult words and expressions being on the desk. Educators can be more innovative and forward thinking by exploring and digging into further use of these features to bring the outside world inside the classroom that suit the needs of their learners in formal learning.

6. Mobile phones as motivational tools

These ultra-modern tools enmesh learners' curiosity by their ever-increasing functions and features. They provide new opportunities to engage learners by giving them the chance to use mobile phones inside the classroom which is a novelty in pedagogical system that differs from their traditional classroom setting. The learners who are reluctant to put pen and paper, the phones appear to be opening the doors to literacy because they are used to writing stories in the forms of short messages, blogs and updating their status on social networking websites. By allowing our learners to use mobile phones in a fashion that would integrate our teaching objectives and their passion for these devices directly or indirectly motivates them.

7. Conclusion

Prensky (2001) and Sharples (2006) insist that mobile phone is not a standalone tool in the classroom. Controlled use of mobile phones can prove to be the best learning tools. That day is not far when learners will enter the classroom with nothing but a mobile phone and we could read on the classroom entrance ‘No Student Allowed without a Mobile Phone’. Digital mobile learning approaches increasingly support the principles of social interaction in learning, and “...a learner centered philosophy that allows for a high degree of learner control and the individual construction of learning pathways”. (Torrisi-Steele, 2006)

It seems as if it is inevitable to be familiar with the new resources that are available and to challenge our teaching-learning myths and prejudices. Learning is maximized when a variety of resources are used. We completely endorse the idea of van Lier (2003) that “...if [technology] is to be a positive force in education, [it] should not be cast as an alternative to classroom teaching, or as replacing the teacher, but as a tool that facilitates meaningful and challenging classroom work”.

Despite what technology has to offer, we should always keep in mind that it is not only about the use of technology but also about how educators use it. Digital tools don't affect the learning of a language unless they are used in a thoughtful way. Careful planning and proper execution play a vital role in the effective use of digital devices in order to achieve desired learning outcomes. The beliefs of the educators about the integration of technology and its pedagogical uses are also important aspects to foster learning. To fully recognize the educational use of mobile phones, our perceptions of pedagogy need to be shifted from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning.

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