Systematising the Field of Mobile Assisted Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a systematic review of mobile assisted language (MALL) research within the specific area of second language acquisition (SLA) during the period of 2005-2012 in terms of research approaches, theories and methods, technology, and the linguistic knowledge and skills’ results. The findings show a shift from the prevailing SMS-based language learning in 2005-2008 towards the use of more advanced multimedia and intelligent learning systems in the last years. Many highly cited studies focus on design of mobile language learning systems and experimental evaluation of their effectiveness. Studies often draw on mature pedagogic models and methods. However, descriptive and small-scale experimental studies dominate. In terms of theoretical approaches and frameworks, there is a lack of specific reference to mobile learning conceptual and theoretical models, which makes it difficult to distinguish any specific mobile learning theories from other learning theories. Research has so far paid most attention to learners’ vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: Intelligent Language Tutoring Systems (ILTS), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Mobile Devices, Mobile Learning, Mobile Learning Theory, Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

INTRODUCTION

The increasing development of mobile technologies allowing more sophisticated use affects our ways of communicating with each other and with the surrounding environment. It also influences the way we learn a foreign language, because language is strongly influenced by situations, which are embedded in daily real life (Ogata & Yano, 2005). Moreover, new technologies, among them mobile ones with their increasing functionality and widespread use, influence cultural practices and enable new contexts of learning (Pachler, Bachmair, & Cook, 2010). This potentially includes informal learning in everyday activities (both physical and virtual), and learning practices occurring in formal educational settings. The availability of mobile devices opens an additional platform for supporting learning (Ogata, Paredes, Saito, & Yano, 2006).

Mobile devices in today’s context express part of individuals’ own values, affiliations, identity and individuality through their choice and use (Traxler, 2010). Still their integration into teaching and learning has been more...
gradual, as educators need to understand how mobile technology can be effectively used to support various kinds of learning (Kukulska – Hulme & Shield, 2008), and develop effective methods, techniques, and materials for mobile assisted language learning.

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL) refers to mobile technology use for learning language. It originates from mobile learning (mLearning) and can be seen as a specialization of that field. Definitions vary, for example by emphasizing either the use of small, portable computing devices (Zhang, Xiong, & Luo, 2007), or learner mobility and their possibilities to engage in educational activities without being connected to specific physical settings (Kukulska-Hulme, 2005). There are also differences with respect to focusing on learning or teaching, as well as learning theories, ranging from individualist ones (such as behaviorism) to constructivist, constructionist and social learning theories. Clearly both technology and people can be mobile, and clearly also the field as a whole needs to include both student and teacher focus. For the purpose of this paper we hence define mLearning as “a process of coming to know through conversations across multiple contexts among people and personal interactive technologies” (Sharples, Taylor, & Vavoula, 2005, p. 225), with a specific focus on context. This is a definition with the student/technology user at the centre, a constructionist approach, and a recognition of social context as crucial for learning. The role of technology in these explorations and conversations is to help the user/student create a system of meaning making. Mobile technologies are more pervasive than previous computer technologies in that they are woven into all the times and places of individuals’ lives creating a place, a physical and a virtual space of conversational interaction, and an “extension of physical space through the creation and juxtaposition of a mobile social place” (Traxler, 2010, p.151). The technology to assist in this “process of coming to know” includes any kind of handheld mobile devices such as cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), smartphones, pads, pods, netbooks, media-players, in-car satellite navigation etc. Laptops are today typically not considered mobile in this context. While they obviously are to some extent, we exclude them from this paper, and, in lack of the strict definition, refer to “mobile” anything that can be used when working around (Viberg & Grönlund, 2012).

As mobile technologies provide many advantages, such as flexibility, low cost, small size, and user-friendliness, researchers are exploring how to use them to support language learning (Huang, Huang, Huang, & Lin, 2012). However, there are also related challenges, such as reduced screen sizes, limited presentation of graphics, virtual keyboarding, and limited power (Albers & Kim, 2001; Chinnery, 2006), and dependence on networks that may not always provide very high transmission capacity and may be subject to disturbances of many kinds. However, such shortcomings are mentioned less frequently in recent years, probably reflecting the fact that technology has developed considerably over the past few years. While there are still shortcomings, regardless of those most authors show that mobile devices can indeed be used as effective tools for delivering language learning materials to the learners (Thornton & Houser, 2005; Liu & Chu, 2010; Kondo et al., 2012).

Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) offer a seminal overview of MALL asking whether and how mobile devices support collaborative practice in speaking and listening. The study illustrates the two main approaches to MALL, content-related and design-related studies. These approaches still prevail in the literature, although the focus is shifting towards design-oriented studies when creating authentic and/ or social mobile learning environments (Wong & Looi, 2011).

This review presents an extensive coverage of empirical research, as published in English during the period of 2005-2012, concerning the use and effectiveness of MALL in second and foreign language (L2) education with a focus on practices and trends regarding methods and theories, and the focus and outcomes in terms of linguistic knowledge.
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