Mobile Technologies as Boundary Objects in the Hands of Student Teachers of Languages Inside and Outside the University

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the use of mobile devices by students of linguistics, future foreign language teachers, outside the university and in-campus, and their vision of the potential usefulness of such devices for language learning at tertiary level. As various characteristics of mobile devices influence their usability, users select a device to fit specific needs. This article discusses student teachers’ preferences of the use of mobile devices in the light of boundary objects theory (Star, Griesemer, 1989; Star 2010). Although they use mobile phones mainly for communication and orientation in both contexts, the functionalities are different. For example, they use phone calls outside the university versus sms in-campus, city public-transport website versus weekly schedule. The device turns out to be so flexible that allows for a selective use of its functionality depending on the context.

KEYWORDS

Boundary Objects, Learning and Teaching Languages, Mobile Learning, Student Teachers

INTRODUCTION

The first aim of the article is to present trends in the use of digital tools, that is computer laptops and mobile devices by university students – preservice language teachers. The second aim is to identify the extent technologies have been normalized (Bax, 2003).

The next aim is to reflect on the mobile devices as boundary objects. Boundary objects as defined by Star (Star, Griesemer, 1989; Star, 2010) can be used in many social contexts in various ways and for various purposes by the users, that is different communities use them as a common point of reference. Boundary objects articulate meaning and address multiple perspectives. They have different meaning in different social worlds but at the same time they have a structure that is common enough to make them recognizable across these worlds. Boundary objects are working arrangements, adjusted as needed. They allow different groups of people work together. Their actual use is worked out through the cooperation of their users. They are plastic enough to adapt to the changing needs of their users. They are not imposed by one community, nor by appeal to outside standards (Bowker and Star, 1999). Thus, boundary objects are used in an unstable way, so in the educational context, the role of mobile devices may change.

Steel and Levy (2013) discriminate between technologies and tools. Following Warschauer (2011, p. 36) they perceive the term Web 2.0 technologies as “wikis, blogs, audio/video conferencing, mobile technologies, virtual worlds and so forth” (Steel & Levy, 2013). However, the tools are perceived as a specific implementation of a certain functionality such as blog or wiki. But the tools change, thus...
Steel and Levy (2013) also use the term technologies for e.g. wiki and blog to emphasize a group of tools with certain functionalities. Some of them appear, others become outdated because of the users’ preferences. Thus, the role of the users, with a special focus on them as language learners requires constant updating.

STUDIES IN THE USE OF TECHNOLOGIES BY STUDENTS


The way students use technologies has been widely examined. Conole (2008) refers to learners’ preferences in her study from 2006 in the UK in which she collected 92 survey responses, 37 audio logs and 3 interviews. That time Web 2.0 technologies and PDA (Personal Digital Assistant – the ancestor of a mobile telephone, smartphone and tablet) were only mentioned. The well-established tools such as email, messengers, blogs, BlackBoard, Web radio, QQ were used. Skype and podcasts were new at the time. Language specific software such as Wordsmith for concordancing, online dictionaries were seldom mentioned.

Steel and Levy (2013) report a study on 587 students at The University of Queensland in 2011. They divide the technologies into three groups. The first group, A Technologies embrace online dictionaries, web-based translators, YouTube, online movies, social networking sites. Mobile phone applications, conjugation websites, MP3 devices, online language games. The second group, B Technologies involve online flashcards, podcasts, instant Messengers, discussion fora, skype, Wikis, Blogs. The group C Technologies involves iTunes, chatrooms, Micro-blogging (Twitter), video conferencing, virtual worlds. Group A is the most used and perceived as the most beneficial. Group C is the least used and perceived as the least beneficial.

Local contexts and traditions influence the ways students use their mobile devices. In Poland among 50 students at Jagiellonian University in Cracow in 2014, 81% of students possessed a mobile device (Czerska-Andrzejewska, 2015). They mainly used mobile dictionaries and listened to songs. Some of them checking webpages, used mobile apps to translate. They also use communication functionalities of their mobile devices such as exchanging sms’s in English and talking on the phone in English. At the beginning of 2014 at the University of Warsaw, 78% of investigated students (out of the total 111 people) possessed a mobile device (Gajek, 2015). The use of mobile device was not popular among students. Mykowska et al. (2014, p. 207) observed resistance to the use of MT for vocational purposes by trainers and trainees. Both groups didn’t want to use smartphones because it was difficult for them. “Some trainers appear not believe that mobile technologies can be of a real use and of a great help in the teaching process. They do not see the point in using new technologies or they seem to be too resistive of spending some time in changing their old habits”. It is difficult to assume that all university students in Poland possess a convenient access to mobile technologies.

In Canada, Palalas (2012, pp. 127-128) indicates that (N=189) “twenty-one percent of respondents reported spending more than three hours a day on their devices. Eighteen percent devoted between two and three hours to mobile tools, 22 percent, one to two hours, and a quarter of students, 30 to 60 minutes. Those that spent under 30 minutes using their devices formed the smallest group (14%).”

What is more, Palalas’ students stated they used their mobile phones while “travelling/commuting (82% of respondents) and walking to a destination (76%) because they primarily used their mobile devices. In addition, they tended to make use of their mobile device around the house (64%), during leisure time (62%), shopping (46%) and when working out (29%)”.
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