My Personal Mobile Language Learning Environment: An Exploration and Classification of Language Learning Possibilities Using the iPhone

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ABSTRACT

Mobile devices can motivate learners through moving language learning from predominantly classroom–based contexts into contexts that are free from time and space. The increasing development of new applications can offer valuable support to the language learning process and can provide a basis for a new self-regulated and personal approach to learning. A key challenge for language teachers is to actively explore the potential of mobile technologies in their own learning so that they can support students in using them. The aim of this paper is first to describe the basic theoretical framework of Mobile Learning and Personal Learning Environments. Secondly, it intends to assist language teachers and learners in building their own Mobile Personal Learning Environment providing a useful classification of iPhone applications with a description and examples. The paper concludes with the proposal of ideas for practical, personal language learning scenarios, piloted in an Italian language learning context.

Keywords: Contextual Learning, Language Learning, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Mobile Learning, Personal Learning Environments (PLEs), TEL

INTRODUCTION: THE ARRIVAL OF MOBILE LEARNING

Web 2.0 has changed the way that we communicate, get information, collaborate and learn. The increasingly ubiquitous nature of internet connectivity with the development of wireless and GSM networks, as well as the spread of broadband, has made it possible to access the web from almost everywhere. The Web has turned into a community of loosely connected participants who share their knowledge and interests (Tuchinda, Szekely, & Knoblock, 2008). Mobile devices including smartphones now include functionality for voice, text, camera, video, paging and geo-location and are increasingly changing the nature of knowledge exchange and discourse in learning (Dieterle & Dede, 2006). This rich variety of platforms not only enhances the learning process but alters the nature of learning – both formal and informal- and changes the ways in which learn-
M-learning can be delivered (Ally, 2009). As Traxler comments, “Mlearning is uniquely placed to support learning that is personalized, authentic and situated. Formal learning is giving way to informal, mass learning to personalized learning” (Ally, 2009, p.18).

This new way of learning, assisted by mobile technologies, has opened new horizons for many fields of learning and especially for Language Learning. One of the major challenges for both foreign and second language learning is thinking about how technology can mediate or create connections between formal and more informal Personal Learning Environments (PLEs). MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) is a new research field and according to research findings from several projects, mobile technologies can play an important role in foreign and second language learning. Language is about communication, and the ability to use newly acquired language skills in an authentic environment is seen as an important motivating factor for successful Language Learning.

Mobile technologies such as smartphones, can support communication, content delivery, personal learning engagement and contextual learning (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, & Sharples, 2005). Language learners can explore and choose the applications and tools that can support self-directed learning and can also assist the learner in developing a Personal Mobile Language Learning Environment (PMLLE). Language teachers can support this learning process and create their own PMLLE. Mobile devices such as smartphones can bridge the distance between learning in formal and informal contexts. These technologies have the potential to transform language learning into an exciting lifelong learning experience. This article will explore these issues. The first section of the paper will briefly introduce the concept of Personal Learning Environments and a more open and democratic technology-assisted education and learning culture. The second section will describe the key issues in Mobile Learning and will briefly present a number of MALL projects. The following section will examine a number of Language Learning applications and services developed for the iPhone and will then propose a classification of those ‘dedicated’ and those ‘not dedicated’ to Language Education. The aim of this classification is to introduce language learners and educators to the rich variety of applications and services that iPhone offers, in order to become aware of the possibilities to create a rich PMLLE. The iPhone has been chosen because of the popularity of this mobile device among language learners in Greece. However other smartphones offer similar functionality. The paper will conclude with the proposal of practical, personal, collaborative Language Learning scenarios and a reflection on the benefits and implications of using the iPhone for creating a Mobile Personal Language Learning Environment (MPLLE).

OPEN EDUCATION AND PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Have new technological developments paved the way for a new more open and democratic in education and is this a new development? The vision of an open educational system was expressed many years ago by Piaget, Illich (1970) and Freire (1970) who have contributed their voices in a call to make education more equitable, more accessible, and more reflective of the nature of learning. Other researchers and educationalists have argued for reform in the balance of power between teachers and learners. Papert and Harel (1991) suggested that learning requires active doing and not lecture-based telling, while Vygotsky (1978) and Wenger (1998) emphasized the importance of social, culture, community, and history for learning.

In the digital age, new technologies can support an open educational movement that can bridge the divide between formal and informal learning, transforming this diachronic vision into a reality. The open technology-enhanced educational movement has the potential to improve access to educational media and networks and can provide standards and tools for the development of Open Educational Resources. Perhaps
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