ML for EFL: Rationale for Mobile Learning

Manal Ahmad Almarwani

University of Lincoln (United Kingdom)
m_almarwani@hotmail.com

Abstract

Higher education institutions across the globe are investing much into developing and applying ICT to improve teaching and learning to cope with students' needs in the newly emerging knowledge economy and information society.

In Saudi Arabia, global economic competition has had a major impact on the development of large scale ICT educational projects. The Ministry of Higher Education launched a national project, "AAFAQ", to develop a comprehensive long-term plan for university education, to address the current and the future challenges. This project has encouraged the implementation of e-learning and distance education. Therefore, there is no doubt that e-learning with its all forms can promote the learning process in a way that encourages a pedagogic shift from a teacher-centric model to a learner-centric model.

English is both a global language, and the language of academic discourse. Consequently, EFL teaching and learning is becoming more and more necessary and popular in universities in Saudi Arabia. However, EFL instruction at university level is not able to cope with the growing numbers of students who need English to study and also to operate as global citizens. Thus, initiatives need to be implemented to improve the current situation.

Many studies are being conducted in the developed countries to theorize, develop, deliver, and evaluate mobile learning. Although such studies have generic utility, their usefulness is limited in the unique circumstances which are found in Saudi Arabia. Mobile learning in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia is a response to:

- *The Large Scale Projects.*
- *The Increased Demand for Education.*
- *Limitations of Capital and Labour.*
- *Geographical distances.*
- *Traditional Cultural Norms.*

This paper explored the unique challenges of using mobile learning for EFL teaching in a country which is undergoing rapid economic and technological development while still trying to maintain the customs and cultural norms of a traditional Islamic society.

Introduction

The evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has resulted in raising the educators interest in researching and integrating these technologies in teaching and learning. Higher education institutions across the globe are investing much into developing and applying ICT to improve teaching and learning in order to cope with students' needs in the newly emerging knowledge economy and information society.

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the challenges, barriers, concerns, and effectiveness of e-learning in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, there is no doubt that e-learning with its all

approaches can promote the learning process in a way that encourages a pedagogic shift from a teacher-centric model to a learner-centric model.

Interest in mobile learning, as one of the new trends in e-learning, has grown enormously within the last few years in the United States, United Kingdom, and other developed countries due to the rapid advancement in mobile technologies, wireless networks, and specifications of today's mobile devices. Cui and Wang (2008) state that "mobile devices such as cell phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), smart phones, etc., are carrying powerful functions as do personal computers" (p. 69) [6]. When it comes to the less developed and developing world, the notion of "whenever, wherever, however" teaching and learning can take place sounds great. In Saudi Arabia, the adoption of new technologies is accelerating dramatically.

Mobile learning for English as a foreign language

All modern developed nations have made the transition to using ICT in teaching EFL and in addition, fast developing nations like Brasil and China are also starting to accelerate their use of ICT in teaching EFL, driven by the emergence of the global knowledge economy, and the fact that the language of the internet, and also the language of international business and commerce, is English. English is also the language of academic discourse. Consequently, EFL teaching and learning is becoming more necessary and hence more popular in universities in Saudi Arabia. However, EFL instruction at university level is not able to cope with the growing numbers of students who need English both to study and also to operate as global citizens especially that Saudi Arabia is a non-English environment. Thus, initiatives need to be implemented to improve the current situation, and mobile learning via a blended learning strategy is being used to better support EFL instruction. Over the last few years, mobile technologies have been used in learning in general and language learning in particular. These technologies evidently offer numerous practical uses in language learning [4]. Hence EFL is crucial to emerging nations like China and Brasil, in their race to become first world nations. For the same reasons, Saudi Arabia is investing heavily in the use of ICT in EFL. However, for the following reasons the situation in Saudi Arabia is unique, and therefore worthy of study.

1. The Large Scale Projects

The sheer scale and complexity of the national projects in Saudi Arabia probably makes them, in terms of expenditure, among the largest such national ICT projects ever attempted. Global economic competition has had a major impact on the development of large scale ICT educational projects. The adoption of new technologies is accelerating dramatically. The Ministry of Higher Education launched a national project, "AAFAQ", to develop a comprehensive long-term plan for university education, to address the current and the future challenges facing universities. As a result of this project that encourages the implementation of e-learning and distance education; eight infrastructure projects have been established [10] as follows:

1. The National Centre for E-Learning and Distance Education (NCELDE).

2. The Learning Portal of the National Center of E-learning & Distance Learning.

3. JUSUR, LMS System.

4. MAKNAZ, National Repository for Learning Objects.

5. Excellence Award of e-learning in university.

6. Training Programs to faculty members and technical staff in the Saudi universities in the area of e-learning and its applications.

7. Saudi Digital Library.

8. SANEED, the Saudi Centre for Support and Counselling to all beneficiaries of e-learning.

The variety of governmental infrastructure indicates that the government is going towards ensuring optimal utilization of communications and information technology in education [7].

2. The Increased Demand for Education

Saudi Arabia is a young nation. The number of students applying to higher education is increasing every year. By the end of the academic year 2010/2011, 340,000 students have graduated from secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. Most of these students are looking for vacant seats in the twenty four public universities around Saudi Arabia which sounds impossible, especially that Saudi people believe in their right for free higher education. Moreover, quality issues in higher education are much consider nowadays. Therefore, Long and short term solutions need to be adopted. AFAAQ project as a strategic plan for 25 years is a long term solution. The government considers the innovations in the field of education as a contribution "to upgrading citizens' capabilities and qualifications to cope with domestic and international socio-economic and technological changes" (p. 133) [7]. Official figures published by the Saudi government indicated a population of 27,136,977 in 2010 with a median age of 24.9 years [3]. The capacity of Saudi public universities is limited compared to the high percentage of young population. Mobile learning innovations in a blended learning environment can be a short term solution. Considering the new generation of students who were born and raised in the digital age, mobile learning can be easily adopted in higher education.

3. Limitations of Capital and Labour

The growth in the number of young people, and the rise in the percentage of them going on to study in universities, is such that even if the government decided to build new universities from bricks and mortar, it could probably not build them sufficiently quickly. Moreover, even if it could build them quickly, it would not have sufficient qualified staff. Hence new ICTs provide a solution to these problems of capital and labour shortages. Despite the expansion of higher education institutions around the kingdom, twenty-four public universities, eight private universities, and twenty private colleges, there are severe limitations in both capital (physical infrastructure like classroom) and labour (well qualified instructors), particularly in rural and remote regions and new established universities in urban areas. Infrastructures noticeably vary among Saudi universities and among schools and departments within the same university. Moreover, due to the fact that Saudi higher education is gender-segregated, the infrastructures projects and plans are duplicated. Regarding labour, many studies [1]; [2] report that faculty members in Saudi universities are struggling with new technologies. Moreover, due to their full secludes and lack of interest; they don't have time to attend training programs.

Hence, to cope with the new trends in education and to facilitate teaching, learning, and communications even with all capital and labour limitations, mobile learning would make sense, especially when we compare the cost of mobile internet connection with wired connection.

4. Geographical distances

Saudi Arabia is a very large country of 2,149,690 sq km. People are spreading across the country. Beside the twenty-four governmental universities urban campuses, there are rural campuses to offer higher education around the kingdom. To overcome the communication gap between rural and urban campuses, between instructors and administrators, between instructors and students, and among students in different campuses; initiatives need to be implemented. E-learning with all its potentials to bridge the space and time gap would be very expensive and time consuming. Therefore, mobile learning could bridge the gap much easily and cost effectively. The vast growing of major mobile

networks providers in Saudi Arabia, 44.864 million mobile lines in use [5], has resulted in creating affordable internet connection for mobile devices. With reduced prices and increased offers, it will not be too far until every student will have a mobile device with internet connection.

5. Traditional cultural norms

Most nations are developing the use of new ICTs for language learning for reasons of cost and effectiveness. What makes the situation in Saudi Arabia unique is that the use of new technologies permits the growth in EFL teaching but without jeopardising or undermining important cultural and religious norms. Culture has been always affecting the flow of adopting new technologies across the world. In the case of Saudi Arabia, any new trend in any aspect of life is always being inspected for its compatibility with cultural and religious norms. When it comes to facilitate teaching and learning through mobile learning, several issues are raised. First, due to cultural and religious norms, male university instructors are not allowed to teach females face-to-face. Therefore, due to the lack of female university instructors, male instructors are teaching females through closed circuit television which need special expensive facilities and infrastructures that is time and budget consuming. Second, universities have gender-segregated campuses. Male students cannot interact with female students or share information and experiences. Consequently, mobile learning could be an effective tool to promote learning and communication. If mobile learning is used effectively to reduce the time students spend on campus, which would be helpful for female students and female instructors so due to their duties toward their families they would not have to spend extended time away. With the use of ICTs, despite the need to separate men and women for the purposes of tuition, both groups can freely access a large range of high quality learning experiences, and thereby fulfil their personal and intellectual potential.

Conclusion: Why Mobile Learning? And Why Now

Regardless of the positive changes and the great benefits of ICTs projects in higher education, these advancements are not always used effectively. While students need guidance to use ICTs effectively, their instructors do not perceive the significance of integration of ICTs in teaching and learning. They see ICTs as a challenge to their traditional practices. Hence, it is a big challenge for educators and designers to blend mobile revolutions into the educational process to better support the new generation of students [9] as it is not merely an integration of the technology [11]. Therefore, the blended learning environment which can be created by using mobile technologies "is in many ways the most innovative path, the most difficult to achieve, and where the greatest reward may lie in the long run" (p. 156) [12]. In the case of Saudi Arabia, all the challenges discussed above beside AAFAQ project, internet and mobile revolutions, new generation of students are creating a fertile environment to implement mobile learning.

References

[1] Ali, S. H., Sait S. & Al-Tawil, K. (2003). Perceptions about eLearning in Saudi Arabia. World Conference on Science and Technology Education, April 2003, Penang, Malaysia.

[2] Allhibi, M. M. (2001). Faculty Adoption of Internet Technology in Saudi Arabian Universities. Doctoral Dissertation, Florida State University, Florida.

[3] Central Department of Statistics and Information (Saudi Arabia). (2010). Population 2010. Retrieved July 10, 2011 from http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/

[4] Chinnery, G. M. (2006). "Emerging Technologies: Going to the MALL: Mobile Assisted Language Learning." Language Learning & Technology 10(1): 9-16.

[5] CIA. (2010). The World FactBook (Saudi Arabia). Retrieved July 10, 2011 from
https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html

[6] Cui, G. and S. Wang (2008). "Adopting Cell Phones in EFL Teaching and Learning." Journal of Educational Technology Development and Exchange **1**(1): 69-80.

[7] Ministry of Economy and Planning (Saudi Arabia). (2010). Brief Report on the Ninth Development Plan (2010-2014).

[8] Ministry of Economy and Planning (Saudi Arabia). (2011). Achievements of the Development Plans: Facts and Figures, issue 27. Retrieved July 9, 2011 from
http://www.mep.gov.sa/index.jsp;jsessionid=B69FFDA8A0F1BC37C054C17DA254BF9A.alfa?event=ArticleView&Article.ObjectID=

[9] Naismith, L., et al. (2004). Literature review in mobile technologies and learning. Futurelab Series. University of Birmingham. Retrieved December 2, 2010 from
http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/lit_reviews/Mobile_Review.pdf

[10] National Centre E-Learning and Distance Education (Saudi Arabia). (n.d.). Our Projects. Retrieved July 9, 2011 from http://elc.edu.sa/portal/index.php?mod=content&page=25

[11] Pachler, N. (2010) The Social-Cultural Ecological Approach to Mobile Learning: An Overview. Medienbildung in neuen Kulturraumen, II, pp 153-167.

[12] Ross, B., & Gage, K. (2006). Global perspectives on blended learning: Insight from WebCT and our customers in Higher Education. In C. Bonk & C. R. Graham (Eds.), The Handbook of Blended Learning: Global Perspectives, Local Designs (pp. 155- 168). San Francisco: Pfeiffer.