Language Learning in a Modern African Context: Enhancing the User's Experience within an ODeL and Mobile Framework

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Abstract

The number of people with access to smartphone technologies in Africa is growing rapidly and an estimated 500 million African users were registered with a service provider in 2010 [1]. This makes for an ideal platform for language learning applications as smartphones provide easily accessible, fun and interactive devices. Most users are already familiar with the different ways of engaging with a smartphone and countless games and social applications make use of the immediate nature of the interaction. Users can pose a question or perform an action and get immediate feedback. This interaction can also be utilised in a language learning sphere and the notion is by no means a new one. For the African languages, however, no real development has taken place and even for Swahili, the major language of East Africa, spoken by over 100 million people, there are no state-of-the-art freely available mobile courses.

Currently, the University of South Africa (Unisa) offers free online language learning courses in 5 African languages, namely Setswana, Sesotho sa Leboa (Sepedi), Sesotho, isiXhosa and isiZulu (see http://www.unisa.ac.za/free_online_course/). The content is aimed at first time learners and offers translations of basic phrases and vocabulary that are contextualised with a short video. These courses are accessible via any web browser and with any basic computer, but have not yet been ported to mobile browsers or a downloadable application. In this study, the feasibility of porting existing content to the new platform will be discussed. Challenges faced, such as minimising costs and the size of the application, as well as enhancing the user experience and the learning environment will be given. Certain principles that are crucial to the success of an Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) framework like that of Unisa will be highlighted, especially with regard to assessment of skills acquired via the mobile application. A report on the current state-of-the-art for this and related technologies will further serve as the background from where a realistic road map for further development is drawn.

References

[1] Rao, M. Mobile Africa Report 2011: "Regional Hubs of Excellence and Innovation". [Available at: http://mobileactive.org/research/mobile-africa-report-2011-regional-hubs-excellence-and-innovation] [Accessed on 12-06-2013]