



A Constructivist Approach to the Integration of Mobile Assisted Language Learning in Enhancing the Writing Skills of Egyptian Adult ESL Learners

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Abstract

The traditional ESL classroom has been supplemented by a digital world which rests on the use of technology inside and outside the classroom. Teachers, in such a digital world, depend on a variety of mobile applications in order to enable their students to develop and acquire new skills –since usually, the class time is not enough for the teacher to cover all the learning outcomes– and to introduce and practice relevant knowledge and skills. One of the skills teachers notice that their students are struggling over in Egypt is writing; thus, they seek opportunities outside the classroom to help the students to enhance it. The integration of applications students can access from their smart mobile phones facilitates students' benefit from the feedback of both the teacher and their peers. Such applications also enable the teacher to monitor student's progress, and to provide further insights on their needs, specially, if the teacher has a large number of students. Since both the teacher and the student prefer such applications because they make learning more active, enjoyable, and collaborative, the present study reviews the mobile application of Padlet and suggests various activities which can be used to enhance the writing skills of adult ESL learners in Egypt within the framework of the constructivist approach.

1. Introduction

Mobile applications and softwares have become an inseparable element in the learning process of language. In the recent years, the ESL adult classroom has witnessed a progression from electronic learning (e-learning) to mobile learning (m-learning) which is the use of mobiles and portable IT devices (laptops, tablets, PDAs, iPads, and smart phones) in the learning environment. In the Western world, many studies have been conducted to facilitate learning English through mobile phones; in contrast, the Middle East is still experimenting the usage of such technological advancements in the classroom.

1.1 Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Many educational institutions all over the globe promote the use of technology inside and outside the classroom to encourage the independency of the learner, and to enhance his/her role in the learning process. Teachers assign their students extra-curricular activities to be done via various applications which can be accessed through mobiles. This is known as Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) through which the learner gets educational content that helps in the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

MALL makes the barriers of time and location inexistent in the learning process. One important feature of MALL, to Kukulska-Hulme (2006) [3], is giving students access to a wide variety of learning material which enables them to interact with their teachers and peers. Sarica & Cavus (2008) [5] stress that students prefer MALL because it removes the barrier of location. Despite its accessibility, there is a set of measures identified by Klopfer et al. (2002) [2] for a successful MALL environment: portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity, connectivity, and individuality. Portability means that the device can be taken to different places. With social interactivity, there is an exchange of data, and collaboration with other people in the same way of face-to-face communication. The MALL context, besides, is sensitive as it requires unique data for time, location, and environment. Finally, connectivity in MALL is the ability to connect to data collection services.

2. Constructivism

Constructivism refers to a notion introduced by Lev Vygotsky in the 1970s which states that learning is an active process where learners construct knowledge for themselves; the learners' role is to assimilate new knowledge and build upon previous ones. Vygotsky (1980) [7] focuses on the role of



the teacher who acts as a facilitator; teachers develop material to help the students acquire language skills smoothly inside and outside the classroom. The constructivist tradition makes the learner in charge of his/her own learning.

2.1 MALL and Constructivism

The constructivist approach helps the teacher to identify the learners' skills, so he/she can design and prepare relevant learning scenarios and authentic material which make the students more active learners. It also manifests itself in MALL since both teachers and students can get rid of the limitations of classrooms that teachers withdraw from the scene to make students more involved in the learning process. To maintain the success of such learning environment, Jonassen et al. (2002) [1] point to the importance of specific learning goals where both teachers and students participate in well-structured, interesting and engaging activities. They add that constructivism can be easily transferred to a MALL environment through problem-based learning (PBL); via MALL, students will focus on solving real world problems in a context which allows them to share and manage their learning according to their own pace.

3. Methodology

MALL is considered a pedagogical challenge for teachers of the Middle East as they must balance between the curriculum to be covered in class, and the areas where students need further development. In a globalized world, many people are interested in learning English for communicative purposes, and there are many mobile applications which can be used in enhancing the acquisition of language such as Linoit, Padlet, Socrative, and Nearpod. When incorporated into the adult ESL environment, Vibreg & Grönlund (2012) [6] find that MALL is usually used to enhance the vocabulary, listening, and speaking skills of students; other language skills such as grammar, pronunciation, and writing are ignored. To fill this research gap, the current study suggests various activities to help teachers enhance the writing skills of adult ESL Egyptian students in addition to the grammar knowledge needed for writing through Padlet.

3.1 Research Design

The study relies on an online survey (available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6SLLRP5>). The results of the survey are reviewed and presented in this study, and followed by a discussion of the results. The study suggests exercises and activities for teachers to facilitate the usage of Padlet in the adult ESL Egyptian classroom.

3.2 Discussion of Results

The survey was administered to a random sample of 20 ESL teachers for Egyptian adult students at both private and public educational institutions. The questions are mainly in MCQ form allowing teachers to add comments whenever necessary. The data gathered from their responses shows that the level of acceptance for using MALL and Padlet is not generally high though 89.47% of the respondents use the Internet in their classrooms. There is also unanimous agreement on using technology to download videos for the classroom, yet only 26.32% of the participants rely on smartphones. The most important uses for technology as reported by the sample are providing feedback (73.68%), and assigning homework (78.95%).

Surprisingly, 36.84% of the participants use technology to track students' progress; this result shows that teachers prefer the traditional method in giving instructions, and in helping students develop their knowledge of language. Only 1% of the sample knows about Padlet which causes difficulty in integrating MALL in the ESL adult classroom. Most of the respondents encourage their students to install free monolingual English dictionaries to their smart phones. Teachers, thus, need guided orientation to perceive other benefits of MALL and Padlet for their students, its various features, and how to use it effectively in an ESL setting.

As for teaching writing, the teachers believe in the traditional method as only 22.22% of the participants see that students' writing skills can be developed through the use of smartphones, and 61.11% of the teachers do not use smartphone devices to enhance students' writing skills. Teachers' reception of MALL in the ESL classroom is not highly promising; however, the result which focuses on the students' reaction demonstrates students' will and interest in using MALL in learning. Teachers expect that 94.12% of the students will use their smartphones to learn English since it accommodates their lifestyle. Moreover, 88.24% of the students will prefer MALL for its mobility and accessibility. The only concern students and teachers might have, according to 70.59% of the respondents, is lack of mobile Internet connection. None of the respondents report any significant success stories in using



mobile devices in language learning. With enough training and appropriate pedagogical support, teachers will be able to use MALL to enhance their students' acquisition of language.

3.3 Using Padlet to Enhance Students' Writing Skills

Padlet is a free interactive online sticky board which can be accessed on the web (www.padlet.com), and can be downloaded on the mobile. It allows both teachers and students to add images, videos, documents, and text, for it takes the shape of a timeline or a wall; it has also a gallery. Users can build and modify their own boards, and Padlet allows them to share material on Google+, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, e-mail, and Pinterest. The content published on Padlet can be in the form of pdf, image, Excel, or CSV. It is important to note that Padlet posts do not have the same appearance as typed on each screen.

The following is a list of activities teachers can use to improve their students' writing skills:

1. Complex and compound sentences: Teachers posts an image and asks their students to write a sentence to describe it; they can even suggest transitions for students to use. By turn, students will practice correcting punctuation for such sentences.
2. Summary Writing:
 - a. Teachers posts a video or a song and ask students to state its main idea. Teachers can also share a short article and ask students to summarize it; they, then, assign a prize to the best summary. Students can be involved in the selection of the winning summary since this will enhance their awareness of the structure and the elements of a good summary.
 - b. Students are divided into pairs in class, and on Padlet each member of a pair should post to the other an audio or a video to be summarized.
3. Writing Process:
 - a. To save time for a writing session in class, teachers post the writing prompt on a Padlet wall then students brainstorm ideas on this topic so that teachers can proceed with outline writing in class.
 - b. Teachers share a cartoon with an argumentative topic, and students start debating over its topic, and they write the essay in the classroom.
4. Chain Story: The teacher assigns students a topic for a story. Each student takes a turn to write one or two sentences to develop it; the teacher provides feedback once the story is completed.
5. Paragraph Writing:
 - a. Teachers assign a movie for students to watch over the weekend, and they write a paragraph to express their opinion of it on Padlet. The teacher should encourage peer feedback on the paragraphs.
 - b. Teacher adds a paragraph without a topic sentence, and the students are asked to add the topic sentence.
6. Academic Style: The teacher posts sentences or paragraphs written in informal style, and he/she asks students to rewrite them in formal style. The first student who posts the correct answer is the winner.
7. Writing introductions: Teachers add an incomplete introduction, and the students are asked to add the missing thesis statement.
8. Flipped Classroom: The teacher posts a scrambled essay for students to put in the correct order. In the classroom, the teacher holds an open discussion as to why students opt for this order. They can even create an outline for it on Padlet.
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Using the previous activities helps the teacher to reach the goal set by Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler (2005) [4] in using mobile phone devices: to support the learning and teaching processes through cheap and powerful means.

4. Conclusion

MALL constructivist practices in the ESL adult classroom in Egypt are capable of enhancing the students' existing knowlegde and writing skills. The survey shows that teachers and students alike are interested in using MALL and Padlet to build up their language skills, especially, writing. Using MALL enhances students' confidence and language proficiency through online interaction. The constructivist approach makes MALL an integral part of the learning process, for it promotes learners' independence.



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