# Students' Experiences of Using SMS for Vocabulary Development – a Case Study

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on a case study investigating the experiences of a group of undergraduate students receiving SMS lessons to develop their vocabulary in Afrikaans. This form of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has been used to not only assist students in building and expanding their subject-specific vocabulary but also to increase their exposure to the target language.*

*Afrikaans is the third largest of the 11 official languages of South Africa and for students studying towards a Law degree at the University of Johannesburg it is offered as an elective. Given the multilingual nature of the South African society, the fact that Afrikaans is spoken by 13.5% of the total population and is widely spoken in most of its nine provinces, a working knowledge of Afrikaans is a definite asset and will help them to increase their marketability as law practitioners.*

*This case study therefore investigates the potential of using SMS for Afrikaans vocabulary development by looking closely at how a group of five students over a period of seven weeks experience the use SMS lessons and which format (single or multiple lexical items) and combination of media (text with related visual presentations and / or sound) they prefer and why. Open-ended questionnaires at the end of each week have been used to get an ongoing and in-depth understanding of students' experiences. The results show that factors such as the choice of App; the concept of "anywhere, anytime" learning and the size and content of the SMS lessons define students' experiences of using SMS for vocabulary development. While most of the findings in this case study concur with existing ones; others have been identified that should be taken into account when language teachers decide to utilise the mobile phone as a teaching and learning tool, especially for vocabulary development.*

## 1. Introduction

There is a worldwide increase in the use of mobile phones and it is therefore almost to be expected that the potential of these mobile devices as tools for learning in general and language learning in particular will be experimented with increasingly and investigated more closely especially if taking into account that mobile phones has become more affordable, is technically simple to operate and when used for educational purposes, can expose learners to the target language anywhere and at any time [1] [9] [10] [11].

Mobile devices, systems and technologies have changed the way knowledge is generated, transmitted, owned, valued and consumed in society. We tend to use it to send "small, disconnected and trivial chunks" [12] of information rather than large amounts.

Although Mobile Learning is a relatively unknown and unexplored mode of learning in South Africa the use of mobile phones here has become increasingly ubiquitous. At the moment the number of mobile phones and active SIM cards outnumber the total population. According to the 2012 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor there has also been a dramatic increase in the use of mobile phones by adults – increasing from 17% in 2000 to 76% in 2010. Furthermore people are using it less for voice calls and more for sending text messages and using Social Media, Instant Messaging and browsing the Internet. This also reflected in the findings of a pre-study questionnaire indicating that apart from using it for voice communication students mainly use it to receive and read SMSs and to chat using Instant Messaging Services like WhatsApp. They also use it to send and receive emails; use Facebook; take and send photos; record and send audio and video; play mobile games and browse the Internet.

## 2. Case Study
### 2.1 Research design

The research group consisted of five undergraduate students with varying degrees of proficiency in and exposure to the target language. Based on the findings of the pre-study investigation I decided to, over a period of seven weeks, integrate SMS lessons to develop their vocabulary and at the same time increase their exposure to the target language.

The SMS lessons were designed with this in mind. On a weekly basis students received a number of SMS lessons with difficult words taken from an Afrikaans text that was discussed in the following lesson. Receiving and reading the SMS lessons and learning these new words therefore served as a pre-reading activity.

The total number of words (lessons) sent depended on the level of complexity of the text. The format and design of the lessons were purposefully changed every week to gauge students' experiences of the use of different media and formats. At the start of each lesson assessment was done with a short vocabulary test followed by completing an open-ended questionnaire detailing their experience of that week's SMS lessons. The lesson would then continue with reading, discussing and analysing the text and thereby further exploring the contextual meaning of the target words.

To support the viewpoint of [4] I decided that the vocabulary test should not be part of students' formal assessment. This being a new learning experience it was far more important to establish how students experience it rather than linking it to assessment and testing its effectiveness.

## 2.2 Choice of App

After receiving the first series of SMS lessons concerns were raised about being unsure if everyone received the same number of SMS lessons ("*I didn't know if I had received them all or not because when I counted them I had 16.*") and a suggestion was made that a WhatsApp group should rather be used ("*SMSs are not as convenient as WhatsApp messages. A group would be better so we could be all on the same page.*"; "*Rather use WhatsApp or BBM. I did not know if I received all the messages.*" *Put us all on a group and send the words and then say 'there are x words in total.'*").

Over and above the convenience and cost factor (WhatsApp is available at a fraction of the cost of an SMS) a further motivational factor i.e. the ubiquity of WhatsApp was raised ("*WhatsApp was a better foundation because not many of us use SMSs anymore. People rather use WhatsApp lately to communicate.*")

Students also realised that using a WhatsApp group also creates a space for interaction with the lecturer and the rest of the group and its use is therefore not limited to the delivery of content ("*A WhatsApp group would be better. It will also be a forum through which we can all be on the same page as well as communicate with each other.*")

The importance of students being comfortable in their learning space should not be underestimated as there has been reported cases (e.g. [5]) indicating that if students are faced with technological limitations, unfamiliar presentations and learning activities it might even prevent them from reading the SMS lessons at all.

Being part of the group and "on the same page" was an important factor in this case study and even though it contrasts with findings such as those of [7] where students preferred receiving individualised SMSs because it made them feel like they were receiving private lessons with highly personalised material. This contrast in findings certainly begs for further investigation.

## 2.3 Anywhere, anytime learning

One of the positives of m-learning is receiving information and lesson content outside the classroom at any time. This flexibility allows students to learn in their own preferred time and place [5]. Throughout the seven weeks students referred to this convenience ("*I enjoyed that I wouldn't lose the words because they were on my phone and that I always had them with me.*").

Having all the lesson cumulating on their phones and everything in one place seem to be an added advantage when students had to prepare for a test. At the same time it maximises their exposure [11] to the target language. Over time this exposure can enhance the information processing activities, making activation and recognition automatic and leading to greater retention [3].

## 2.4 Size and content of Lessons

During the first 5 weeks lessons consisted of target words and translations accompanied by different combinations of pictures and voice notes. As a means of scaffolding students' knowledge and exposure I decided to included phrases and full sentences during the last two weeks.

Although they valued the usefulness of learning phrases and sentences there was a definite preference for shorter SMS lessons containing words as opposed to phrases or sentences ("*The words were short and the messages did not contain too many words so it was easier to remember the words in short segments.*" ; "*The phrases were very difficult to remember. I prefer single words to learn in our SMS lessons.*"; "*They were useful phrases to know / learn but because they were longer and more complicated, it made them a bit harder to learn.*"; "*The sentences were harder to remember compared to just single words.*")

This concurs with existing research (e.g. [6]) where students preferred bite-sized lessons because it is more manageable and easier to remember. Also if one takes into account that it takes more effort to read a longer text on a small screen it seems reasonable to propose that SMS lessons should indeed be "bite-size" especially for L2 learners who might find it difficult to deal with large amounts of information that might confuse or demotivate them.

When the SMS lessons contained translations, pictures and voice notes with pronunciation students enjoyed it not only because of its novelty ("*It is a nice different medium of learning*") but also because they experience it as stimulating and helping them to remember the words ("*Getting pictures and voice make learning and remembering the vocabulary easier."; I like both pictures and voice notes – it makes the whole situation more interesting to learn.; I like the use of voice notes and pictures as it helps me remember things easier…"*)

The inclusion of sound in the form of voice notes assisted students not only with pronunciation but in the longer term it will help them to recognise the word when used in a conversation ("*The use of voice notes is useful as it assists in clarifying the pronunciation of words, making them easier to recognise in a conversation.; "The use of voice notes is useful as it assists in clarifying the pronunciation of words, making them easier to recognise in a conversation."*).

## 3. Conclusion and recommendations

Although this research study has been limited by the fact that it was done on a small scale (future studies should be done with more subjects over a longer period) the findings nevertheless show that MALL has great potential for vocabulary development in a language like Afrikaans. Furthermore it shows that it benefits "weaker" students with limited proficiency as well as those with "better" language abilities.

It also shows that the integration of SMS lessons should be carefully planned, taking into account factors such as the choice of App and the size and content of the SMS lesson. It should also not be used in isolation or a replacement [8] for conventional language learning activities but to enhance the conventional and thereby affording students the best of both worlds.

SMS technology is quick, discrete, and uncomplicated and MALL is without any doubt the next step in the evolution of education technology. The use of SMS lessons for vocabulary development proved to be a worthwhile and satisfying experience for students who otherwise lack not only proficiency and exposure but also the confidence to use the language. This is perhaps best summarised by a student's comment close to the end of the project: "*It* [the use of SMS lessons] *made me realize how much my Afrikaans has expanded because I was able to understand some of the sentences without having to look at the English.*")

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