International Conference
ICT FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING
7th Edition

Let´s Move: Mobile Learning for Motivation in Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Mobile learning (m-learning) is undergoing a rapid evolution, supporting a variety of fields, including second language acquisition and whose focal features are recognized as the potential for the learning process to be personalized, informal and ubiquitous. In addition to the increased proliferation of mobile technologies such as smart phones, MP3 and MP4 players, PDAs iPhone or iPad, learners are increasingly motivated by their personal learning needs and wants, including those arising from a greater global mobility, their need for social interaction and collaborative learning. In this sense, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) can be considered an ideal solution to break learning barriers in terms of time and place and promote out-of-class instruction.

In the light of this context, we present an exploratory research conducted at the University of Extremadura consisting on the introduction of a mobile application during 8 weeks to more than 60 ESL undergraduate university students. Learners from the fields of engineering and teacher training were provided with a mobile application, Taplingua Inc, running under Android and created by a San Francisco based startup. The App uses practical situations, video explanations and interactive games to rapidly teach English as a second language to adults, including also multiple learning strategies to improve the learning experience such as gamification, "flipped classroom", mobile learning in micro lesson format, and task-based teaching methodologies.

The study compares motivation and preferences for activities in mobile learning previous and subsequent to using the App in several groups of learners being initially taught in a traditional classroom and then exposed to the aforementioned mobile teaching tool. Several tests and surveys were performed to determine whether there are any differences in motivation and test score between students exposed to both traditional and mobile learning, revealing main effects:

- ✓ *A high degree of satisfaction with the component of the course, citing fun, portability, and easy access to resources as key benefits;*
- ✓ *Flexibility as a leading factor to promote language learning (all language skills presented in the application are positively assessed)*

To conclude, the research proved that using mobile video and games can result in general terms in higher engagement and learning outcomes. Besides, the utilization of the App within a traditional learning context shows a preliminary tendency which specially helps students with language learning difficulties to better acquire the language and meet the goals set for the language class.

1. Introduction

Mobile assisted language learning (MALL) as a subarea of mobile learning (mLearning) is undergoing a quick advancement, supporting a range of fields, including second language acquisition. Attracting the attention of practitioners and researchers, and opening newer contexts for language learning, the introduction of mobile technologies has been progressive and gradual in the last years [1]. As educators need to understand how they can be effectively used within and outside the classroom [2] and develop effective methods and materials, we find an emerging field of research to cover the process of coming to know across multiple contexts among people and mobile interactive technologies.

Recognized as the potential for the learning process to be personalized, informal and ubiquitous, some of the characteristics of mobile learning were summarized a decade ago by Ogata & Yano (2005) [3]. The technology to assist in this process includes any kind of handheld devices such as personal digital assistants (PDAs), smartphones, pads, pods, etc [4 and 5]. We include in this term anything that can be used when walking around, Laptops, which are today typically not considered mobile, can be also included to some extent according to our definition.

2. MALL: *Let´s move and learn. Main theories and results so far*

Despite some shortcomings implicit in mobile instruction and devices [6], such as small screen size, limited presentation of graphics and dependence on networks transmission capacity, Thornton and

Houser (2005) [7] show that mobile devices can be effective tools for delivering language learning materials and an ideal solution to break learning barriers in terms of time and place and promote out-of-class instruction. In this context, we will start by presenting what are some of the theories, approaches and methods used and what the results and research gaps have been so far. There is a large number of approaches and theories used in MALL, most of these derived from the cognitive psychology [8] from computing research, and language acquisition theories. In general, theories are still imprecise, and based on descriptive studies as the one conducted by Godwin-Jones (2011) [9] and Al-Jarf, R. (2012) [10] illustrating the current state of the art, the devices used and how case studies are developed.

In terms of the gained linguistic knowledge and skills, most of the current studies examine vocabulary acquisition, listening and speaking skills, language acquisition attempting to analyze the outcome in terms of learners' language proficiency. Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2008) offer an extensive overview of MALL asking whether and how mobile devices support collaborative practice in speaking and listening.

In general terms, there is a lack of empirical studies providing concrete evidence on how the mobile technology can enhance individual's language learning results, more experimental cases testing how mobile technology can assist and improve learners' writing process, reading comprehension, pronunciation performance, and second language grammar acquisition are needed. Empirical research investigating the possible changes in learning strategies and styles when employing mobile devices is also needed.

It is also worth mentioning the new shift the implementation of MALL is experiencing in the last years, focussing its research on the the creation of authentic and/or social mobile learning environments instead of content-related studies [11].

In this sense, our study is focused on describing the main features of a new mobile application, Taplingua inc (http://www.taplingua.com) offering an overview of the benefits in motivation by integrating this App for language learning in formal tertiary education. Taplingua is a mobile application running under Android and created by San Francisco (USA) based startup.

3. Results. MALL: Motivation and Preference

To cover our objectives, and after presenting a short description of the APP under study, we show the preliminary results of an exploratory research on motivation conducted at the University of Extremadura during 8 weeks to more than 60 ESL undergraduate university students. Learners from the fields of engineering and teacher training were provided with the mobile application Taplingua Inc.

3.1 Taplingua, a new APP for mobile language learning

The Taplingua App includes visual explorations of short videos (more than 50 videos categorized in 75 levels), explanations led by native speakers of English and practical situations such as asking for a coffee or buying a plane ticket. It also describes vocabulary and grammar issues (1-3 minutes) for A2/ B1 levels. The shortness of the videos is one of the major benefits which allow learning in small bites whenever short periods of time are available. The videos are used to practice listening, reading, writing. Speaking is practiced with individual tutors via videoconference. After the video explanations, the app offers games to practice each level and skills. In other words, Taplingua offers interactive games to rapidly teach English to adults, including multiple learning strategies to improve the learning experience such as gamification, "flipped classroom", mobile learning in micro lesson format, and task-based teaching methodologies.

3.2. An overview on Mobile learning and motivation

As for the familiarizarion with mobile apps, our work reveals that a high percentage of the student population subject of this study, belonging to different learning fields, uses apps on their phones on a daily basis. However, it is striking to uncover the fact that most of apps are related to leisure (sports, news, photos and videos, music, lifestyle, etc) and only in a few cases educational applications were preferred. On top of that, if used, the learning apps utilized were essentially dictionaries and translators. More in detail, our study shows that only an 18,1% of the respondents have used a language app before, being the translator the most common among them. In contrast to the idea of language learning as an habit formation and undergoing minor changes in terms of m-learning and socio-educational rules as the promotion of out-of-class instruction, it is outstanding that more than 60% have never used a language app before.

Under the guidance of a professor and in a traditional learning setting, Tapligua was presented to the piloting group in order to motive students to use digital educational resources to support the language

content of the established syllabus of the different courses where the app was implemented. The key tip to encourage students to make use of Taplingua was the fact that the app unifies fun and learning taking advantage of gamification, using game thinking and game mechanics in a non-game context to offer an attractive ESL course for adult students.

To measure the motivational effects of Taplingua on students, we initially studied the frequency of use of language apps of those who had already used them on their cell phone. From the only 28% of those who had used mobile language apps more than twice a week before de experiment (Fig.1.), the number of times using Taplingua per week increased, between twice and 5 times, reaching 75,75 % of students (Fig. 2.). It was interesting to see that educational applications were challenging students to be taken away from the established material with original, ubiquitous, tailored and customized technology related to the specific subject.

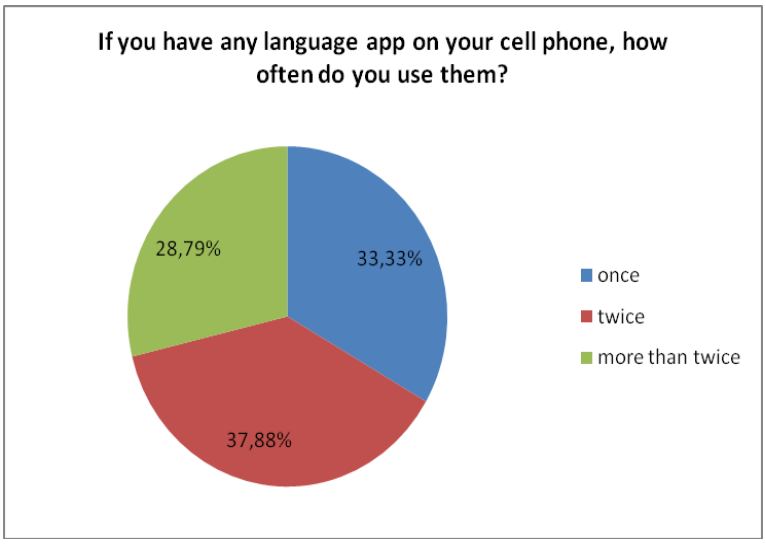

Fig.1.

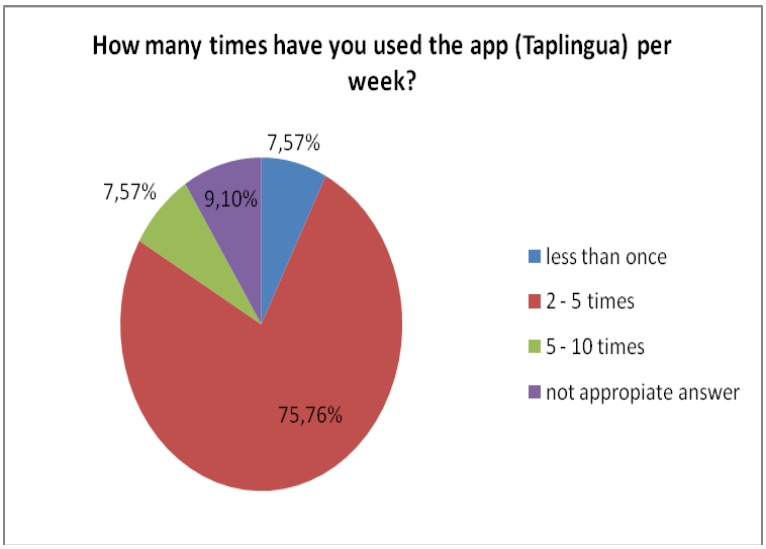

Fig. 2.

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As for the preference about the language skill to practice, the opinions are homogeneously distributed, though a slight preference for reading and listening is observed (Fig. 3.).

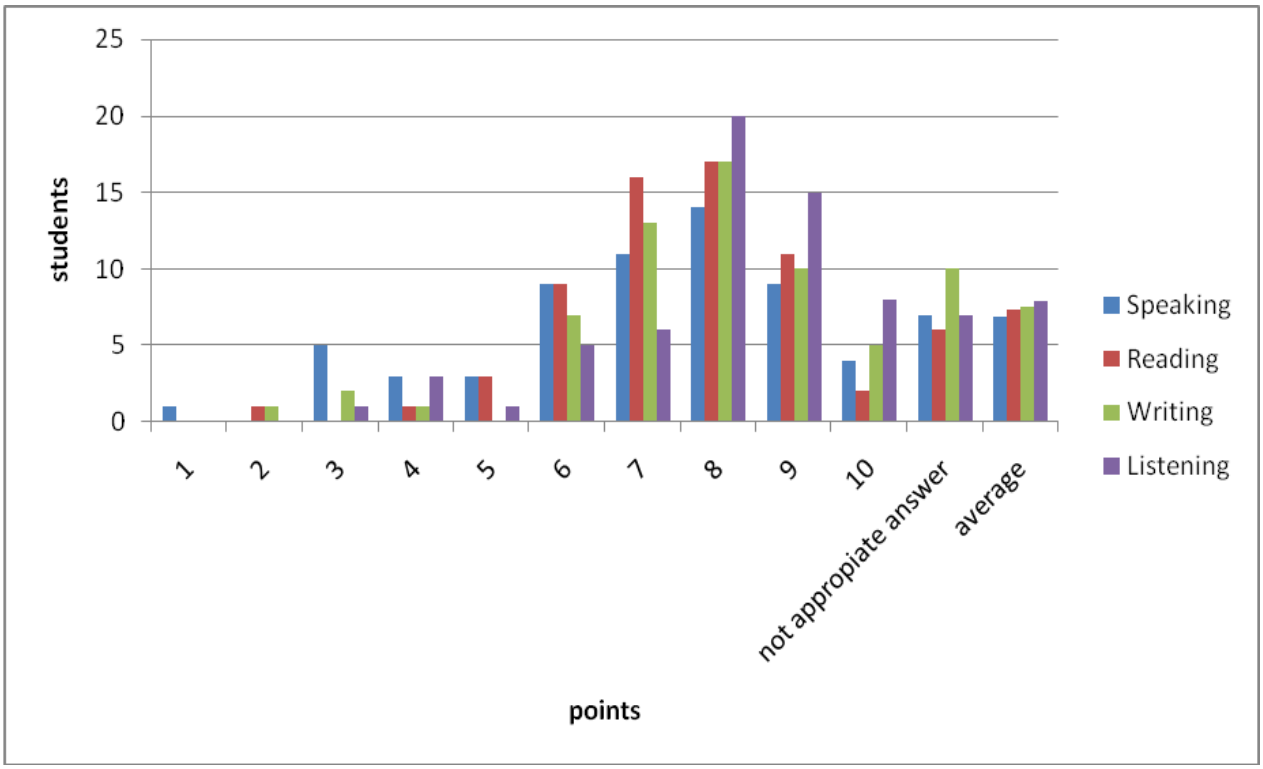

Fig. 3.

As far as the other skills are concerned, students feel that the app would also help them improve their writing ability, closely followed by oral production. Frequent use reinforces concepts and learners can rapidly improve their language skills. Also, having a device that is always available enables learning whenever the student finds time on .e.g on the bus, between classes etc.
Bearing in mind our study and the previous analysis, other preliminary results can be summarised as follows:
-More than 80% would use taplingua to keep improving their English. The high percentage of students could lead to the idea that this tool helps increasing the students' motivation towards foreign languages, and more specifically, mobile assisted language learning. The app is especially useful for users who already live in the second language country or will be moving shortly
-Considering students now understand how games can be used to learn languages, more than 75 % would play and compete using Taplingua with friends. Besides, all of them would recommend the app to someone else. This could be seen as a will for collaborative learning, since the application allows users to play together and compare results. From the total population under study, only four students scored with less than five their will to play and compete with others while learning languages..
-The design of the app and overall functioning are also higly appreciated.

4. Conclusions

In general terms, MALL research is needed to be able to distinguish the field from other kinds of technology-assisted learning, such as CALL. In other words, there is a need of studies offering tangible proof on how the mobile technology can enhance individual's language learning results. Empirical research investigating the possible changes in learning strategies and styles when employing mobile devices is also needed. To this light, this study reveals the advantages of implemented educational apps in traditional learning contexts in order to enrich the general syllabus. The idea is to stimulate students who are familiar with apps but not habituated to educational devices to exploit apps such as Taplingua which uses gamification in order to complement their process of learning acquisition. Once students are encouraged to do so, it has been proven that motivation to learn has resulted, in general terms, in higher engagement and more positive learning outcomes, particularly in those subjects who presented some initial learning difficulties. According to the data, the experience has being enriching a crucial impact on both educators and learners, as they can achieve higher proficiency. In spite of the preliminary basis of the study, positive results have been drawn out from this app. Students learning outcomes and needs have been fulfilled during the testing. Motivation is a tough concept and volatile, not all students are motivated in the same way, however, in that

research students expressed their interest in using educational applications as part of a traditional second language learning format class.

5. References

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