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MLEARNING: POWERFUL LEARNING TOOLS FOR EAP IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

In many of today's private higher education institutions, it is difficult to find students without a mobile phone, a PC tablet, or an iPad. At the same time, it is even more difficult to find students in higher education who use their mobile devices for academic purposes. Research indicates that English language instructors in higher education are not necessarily advocates of mobile use in the teaching classroom (Dashtesatani, 2016; Ally, 2013; Stockwell, 2012). However, in recent, years, higher education institutions are advocating the use of mobile learning for English language learning and promoting it as a "powerful learning aid" (Chen & DeNoyelles, 2013). The educational benefits of mobile learning include ease of information sharing and retrieval, adaptation of the learning to students' learning styles, facilitating the breakdown of complex learning content, independent learning, interactive learning, flexibility, increased motivation, portability, and effective communication between instructor and students (Walker, 2013; Pei-Hsun & Ming-Kuan, 2012).

Mlearning, conceptually despite its numerous benefits, has faced challenges in implementation in some cultural contexts. Misperceptions about mobile devices as non-academic devices or learning tools, has made instructors reluctant to use mobile devices for academic purposes (Stockwell, 2012). At the same time, the lack of trained educators in using Mlearning for English language teaching, poses barriers to students' learning in today's 21st C learning spaces (Ally, 2013). Mobiles are primarily perceived as a social interactive communication tool not a serious learning one.

The paper aims to correct misconceptions related to mobile learning and its use in the English language classroom. This paper will share Mlearning strategies, demonstrate how to embed Mlearning into lesson plans for EAP in a university context, highlight the correlation between Mlearning and improved English language proficiency for L2 students and share useful resources. By the end of the presentation, participants will be able to easily adapt their newly acquired knowledge in their relevant contexts.

Key words: Mlearning, EAP, student engagement, student motivation, Higher Education, Teaching strategies.

1 INTRODUCTION

In order for Mlearning to impact education, one should think of the kind of cognitive process the learner would use when he/she moves from one item to another using the capacity of learning and analysing so as to come to conducive learning. (Ally and Stauffer 2008), completed a study where students had the option to access their course materials from anywhere and at any time using their mobile devices. Feedback of the study showed that the students were pro accessing the material via their mobiles. This feature allowed them to enjoy freedom of place, time, and convenience. In Egypt for instance, students whether they are in higher education or at schools use their mobile devices to check mail, access internet, make phone calls or place on line orders. It is this accessibility to mobiles which prompted us to take mobiles to the English language classrooms at the British University in Egypt (BUE).

Early perspectives on mobile use focused on the use of technology in social networking, communication as well as the use of digital audio players and cameras which were all facilitated by the ease of access to information and mobility. (MoLoNET 2007) defined it as the “exploitation of ubiquitous handheld technologies, together with wireless and mobile phone networks to facilitate, support, enhance and extend the reach of teaching and learning.” Some other researchers, Kadirire (2009), went even further to characterise Mlearning as an extension of e-learning, which is the case explained in this paper.

Mobile Learning Theories

Mobile learning theories that advocate the use of Mlearning, define language learning as: “learning is the acquisition or recognition of the cognitive structure through which human process and store information” (Good and Brophy, 1990). This is known as cognitive learning.

Constructive learning is defined as an activity process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based on their current past knowledge (Bruner,1966).

The third theory referred to in this paper, is the problem-based learning which states that learning aims to develop students’ critical thinking skills by giving them an ill- defined problem that is reflective of what they encounter as a practicing professional (Koschmann et.al,1996).

Thus the three respective theories have well served the application of Mlearning when combining the cognitive, constructive learning and problem based learning on the activities used. Sharples (2002) elaborated that “learning is in terms of conversations between different systems of knowledge.”

Finally, with the vast technological advancement, the old ways of teaching, material and material preparation can neither be used nor upgraded, but rather what is needed is a complete paradigm shift in the whole concept of the educational experience acquisition.

Misconceptions

There are numerous misconceptions about mobile technology that hold educators back from making the best usage of it in the educational arena. Chief among these, are misconceptions arising from educators themselves. Educators, see mobile technology as too distractive for learners, and associate it with inappropriate behavior (UNESCO, 2012). Moreover, many of the educators themselves are not fully aware, trained, or proficient in the capabilities of mobile technology, neither do they consider it as an inseparable component of the daily lives of their learners, hence comes the gap. As for the learners themselves, they also have to change their outlook towards the acceptance of the mobile learning as an effective educational tool just as it is important in social communication. This, challenges the psychological attachment to mobile phones promoting its categorisation from being just a tool for social interaction to a more serious utilisation for the educational front.

Mobile phones are used all around the world irrespective of the country, the social standards or even the social background. For example MoLoNET (2007) defines mobile use as “the exploitation of ubiquitous handheld technologies together with wireless and mobile networks, to facilitate, support, enhance and extend the reach of teaching and learning.” The challenge here is the change of the concept of the use of mobile phones as a social device to a learning tool which needs to take further steps in the learning process which demands incorporation of materials that advocate Mlearning to the learning frame work which will virtually alter the psychological images deeply rooted in the minds of the learners.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1.1 Mlearning Strategies

The English language programme in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the British University in Egypt (BUE) is a two leveled EAP programme that is based to a large extent on Mlearning. The programme has 2000 students with approximately 26 instructors running the sessions. The EAP programme is taught as 4 contact hours per week and 4 hours through Mlearning. The content is interactive and communicative to ensure the creation of an engaging student centred learning environment. Prior to the teaching contact hours, students were given a writing assignment with a

prompt to search for ideas and find information relevant to the assigned task, to the teacher's great dismay only 3 or 4 students out of 27 responded to the task. This required immediate intervention. The following exercise was designed by the instructor to be used during the teaching session using Mlearning.

Description: Exercises / Quizzes

Activity 1

Purpose:

- 1) The teacher needs to have an ID and room (page) on the website to save the quizzes and material
- 2) Once the teacher has a page, the teacher has a unique room number which students can use to log on his/her page
- 3) The class is divided into groups where each group chooses a name for the group
- 4) Each group should have a mobile phone (smart phone) to log on the teacher's page using the teacher's room number provided by the teacher
- 5) Once all groups join the room, the teacher opens the smart board or data show so all groups' names are clear on the screen
- 6) Every time a group answers correctly, the progress is clear on the screen as the race goes on.

The rationale:

- 1) In groups, students tend to help each other in a collaborative atmosphere.
- 2) Students evaluate their learning and identify points of weakness.
- 3) Students enjoy the class.

Steps:

- 1) Announce beforehand that there will be an in class activity using the mobiles so all need to be ready.
- 2) Explain the type of activities that will take place in the session.

Challenges:

- 1) Not all students have smart phones
- 2) Poor Internet connectivity
- 3) Challenges with the mobile device itself (such as cracked screen or low battery or screen being too small)

How to Overcome the Challenges:

Ensure that the setup is ready before the class and that the net is available. Ensure that the students know exactly what they will do. Finally, make sure that the steps are reviewed with all the students and they know all the steps. It is advised that an external router would be available.

Results:

By the end of the activity they all have found sites to search for materials. Then, exchange ideas which has enriched the discussion through the wealth of knowledge found on the sites. This collaborative exercise was the role model of the new activity learned. Going around the class using Mlearning has raised the students' awareness towards their responsibility for their learning and indispensable stakeholders upon which lies the success or failure of the group.

Activity 2 Finding Cultural Differences

This activity was introduced to help students in finding material for cultural differences to compare and contrast the findings of their research which was the foundation of the debate activities given to them which were also followed by writing activities based on the same topic.

This activity has enhanced the language learning skills of students and made them use their cognitive skills to compare, contrast, infer then produce an opinion using Mlearning.

Steps:

1. Students were asked to bring their smart phones to class.
2. They were divided in pairs.
3. Each pair was given a site full of references and researches.
4. In pairs they were asked to browse with their phones to select the items required to complete the activities.
5. They were asked to compare their findings with the paper offered by the teacher to find the similarities and differences of their findings with sites offered to them.
6. They were asked to record the debates offered in the session.
7. They were asked at home to review the ideas, grammatical mistakes and record if there is a new structure or vocabulary word they heard for the first time.
8. The activity was constructive, informative and encompassing the attention.

Activity 3 Socrative and Quizalza

Socrative, it is just like quizalza, only the latter has a more appealing interface and is easier to use for both teachers and students.

The activity is to use the QR code which goes as follows:

- 1) The Teacher turns activities online to QR code image.
- 2) Students, in groups or pairs, send a representative to read the QR image using mobile phone.
- 3) Students try to compete to solve the exercise quickly.

The end result, is that students were using mobile phones throughout the session as they were engrossed in the answering process, totally engaged in finding information that will help them to respond to the questions, and doing their best to finish the activity before others do.

2.1.2 Embedding Mlearning into Lesson Plans for EAP in Higher Education

Quinn (2010) identifies four C's (Content, Computer, Capture and Communicate) for using Mlearning. This theory was the base on which the above Mlearning activities were designed and embedded into the EAP English language module's lesson plans. In the above mentioned activities, the students learned organising information and storing the acquired knowledge using their cognitive learning capabilities which supported the process of learning. The aim here was also to develop the learners' critical learning skills to analyse, criticise, define and then form an opinion. This confirms the process of learning where the learner constructs new ideas or concepts based on new and past knowledge (constructive learning). This style of learning enhances, promotes and facilitates collaboration among learners.

Thus, the 4 C's of Quinn are applied when the content is found through computers in the new form of mobile use, the information is then fully captured through analysing the main concepts and communicated among the learners when each student builds on that process to form one's own opinion.

3 RESULTS

3.1.1 Correlation between Mlearning and Improved English Language Proficiency for L2

At The British University in Egypt (BUE), the Department of English Language and Literature modernised its' English language programme by introducing MLearning to the EAP set up. The English programme which adapted the new EAP course to the academic year 2017/18, found that there is correlation between Mlearning and improved English language proficiency for LS students. When applying the flipped teaching approach, students needed to check materials on eLearning prior to the face to face teaching sessions and access the materials or structural exercises to be discussed and answered in class via their mobiles (cognitive & constructive learning). Most of the students used their cell phones to bring the material to the teaching sessions as they preferred to attempt almost all the necessary activities on their mobiles or tablets rather than on paper. It was obvious that they opted for this style of handling classwork over traditional learning. Based on that experience, new Mlearning materials were introduced to the class (problem based learning). Further reading can be found about this in MLearning for Assessment in the English Language Classroom, NileTESOL newsletter, Issue # 9, 2017 by Dr. Rania M Rafik Khalil.

An attempt to design a lesson based on Mlearning was carried out to test the validity and the efficiency of the hypotheses of using Mlearning in teaching L2 students in a higher education setting. Flipped teaching was the base on which Mlearning at BUE had been built. Flipped pedagogy was introduced to the English language programme in 2014. But the implementation of tailored flipped teaching sessions and designing flipped material for the English language programme was a result of research conducted at the BUE by Prof. Shadia Fahim and Dr. Rania M. Rafik Khalil in 2016, "Flipped Teaching and Learning in English Language Programmes in Higher Education" as well as "Assessment as a Learning Tool in the Flipped English Language Classroom in Higher Education." The success of this pedagogy allowed us to further experiment with the use of mobile teaching and learning strategies.

4 CONCLUSION

Finally, not all publishers and course designers are keen on developing material that is compatible with Mlearning. They consider the cost of production to be too high and they fear that duplication would be a big hit to their revenues. Hence both educators and learners should overcome the barrier of using technology through a deep understanding of the features technology offers for the application of effective learning strategies for mobile learning.

Mlearning is impacting everybody whether we allow that to happen or not. Future predictions confirm that mobile use for learning will top other devices. In a very short time, it will encompass all the attention of the educators and the learners till it becomes the learner center where they would use it in learning even more that they do now since people will be able to access material, information, knowledge from anywhere they are or aim to be. That would leave the educator with the pressure, urgency and demand to work on the use of Mlearning in the academic fields to deliver education.

It is with great confidence one may say that education and educators are speedily moving to the era of Mlearning that would soon take over the wireless PC or any type of technological devices that was experienced in the wide field of education, business and communication because the accessibility of learning materials and knowledge will soon be rampant since the web is constantly spreading out and easily reachable through Mlearning.

The role of the educators thus far is to create and introduce various types of the learning styles which will definitely need to be changed as long as unlimited knowledge will be within reach any time of the day with no space or place limitation. The learner will experience a new trend of learning which will be

challenging since it requires change of styles and special set up of learning that would be embedded in all the technological systems they are familiar with.

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