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Researching emergent practice among mobile language learners

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ABSTRACT

Within the phenomenon of widespread adoption of mobile technologies to support informal and personally relevant learning, we seek to identify instances of innovation where emergent practices point to productive ways of learning that in the longer term may also have an impact on formal education. The paper reports our ongoing research focusing on language learners, for whom mobile devices represent a liberating technology that prompts them to rethink and redefine their foreign language learning. Building on the outcomes of 30 interviews with language learners using mobile devices, we share findings from our continued exploration of emergent practice, and include two contrasting case studies of independent learners of Japanese and Chinese. Our findings lead to reflections on authenticity in language learning and we note the strong motivations that lead learners to explore ways of learning that truly correspond to their personal preferences and needs. The research is a contribution to mapping the territory of informal mobile language learning, as we continue to investigate the mobile-enabled resources available to language learners and the strategies they adopt for learning.

Author Keywords

Language learning; self-directed learning; mobile-assisted language learning; ecologies of resources

INTRODUCTION

Mobile devices have become integrated with daily lives through the process of domestication (Ling & Donner, 2009). Increasingly, educational provision must recognize that since the devices are a significant part of the grain of daily life, it means that they will be used for information access and learning, even if only informally. The ubiquity of mobile and wireless technologies suggests that patterns of use developed through informal learning will also have an impact on formal education through learners' growing expectation of mobile access. Uncovering emerging patterns of use, and trying to work with them rather than against them, is the current challenge (Pettit & Kukulska-Hulme, 2007).

Among foreign language learners, there is a long tradition of self-access to learning materials (e.g. Gardner & Miller, 1994) and the pursuit of language learning as a lifelong interest linked to transformation of personal identity, with strong social and informal elements that may complement formal courses of study. Semi-structured yet informal language learning is a rapidly growing enterprise, with environments such as Busuu.com providing a virtual space for individuals, communities and resources, with mobile access to language activities offering additional everyday practice. Yet for many learners, the opportunity to use their personal mobile device to support an aspect of language learning is the starting point for an individual journey towards satisfying particular personal requirements with regard to content, type of practice needed or the circumstances of a person's work and life. Our research is focused on these individuals who are forging ahead with developing their own ways of learning, using mobile devices and whatever materials, resources and human connections they decide are helpful, in the course of building their ecology of resources for learning (see also Luckin, 2010; Underwood, Luckin & Winters 2010). We seek to uncover emerging practices, assess in what ways the activity is innovative and examine the implications for next generation designs for mobile language learning.

INTERVIEWS WITH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Thirty adult learners (17 male and 13 female) of twelve different languages (Japanese, Spanish, French, Euskara, Irish, English, Chinese, German, Welsh, Italian, Russian and Indonesian) volunteered to be interviewed about their use of mobile devices to support their informal language learning. Interviews were semi-structured and aimed at exploring how a variety of mobile devices – smartphones, mp3 players, handheld game consoles, digital cameras– helped our subjects acquire a foreign language; specifically we sought to find out concrete examples of how these devices were used, establish patterns and common scenarios of practice, and understand the motives for adoption from the personal perspective of each of our interviewees. The 2 cases we present here will serve as illustrations of our findings to date.

Case X – learner of Japanese – exemplifies an individual who is painfully aware of his early failed attempts at learning a foreign language; he knows that if he is to learn a language, he has to do it in a different way, by choosing his own goal (to be able to read in Japanese) and choosing his own method (memorize flashcards). The mobile device provides him with a means to realize his goal. “I’m not someone that found languages terribly easy at school”, he tells us; as an adult, after an unrewarding attempt at learning Spanish, he is now focusing on Japanese, partly because of a previous stay in Japan, and partly because language learning “feels a bit like unfinished business”. Remarkably, he talks about learning a language in terms of “producers” and “consumers”, and thus differs from most of his peers in that instead of striving to speak fluently, his motivation is “being able to read something and to consume some things that I find interesting in Japanese”. To this purpose he has bought a mobile phone and installed software that runs flashcards in kanji, and aims at clearing a certain number of cards every day. Like so many of our interviewees, he finds the portability of the device very appealing –“I deliberately bought the [mobile phone] because it was fun, it was a cool little device, (...) and I was really pleased because all of a sudden, it really was *wow, this is in my pocket!*”. Since it is in his pocket and with him all the time, taking out the device to learn a few cards becomes an action that does not discriminate time or place, a combination of routine and spontaneous use which we have come to establish is popular with the majority of our mobile language learners –“I will normally do [some cards] at breakfast, I’ll often do them last thing at night in bed, I’ll do them watching the World Cup (...) I’ve probably done them waiting in a queue several times.” In this regard, mobile devices facilitate learning at moments otherwise considered “dead time” –e.g. commuting to work, waiting for an appointment, going for a walk– but this better use of time comes equally from a belief that it is the individual’s choice to learn a language this way, that learning a language informally with a mobile device does not represent a chore that will give cause for concern and regret if missed –“I think [the device] makes [learning a language] a lot easier; you don’t have to, so even if I’m not doing anything else, at least I know that I’ve not stopped (...) I guess for a lot of other people it’s that kind of, you haven’t done it for four days and you do a bit and it’s really hard work, (...) whereas I am making a choice to do this.”

Case Y – learner of Chinese – is a more successful and experienced language learner, who has studied several languages formally in a classroom situation and has lived abroad in several countries. He is also a language teacher who blogs about his experience of language learning and has an awareness of his own development as a learner: “I found as I get better at language learning I’m getting more confident with myself and knowing what I want and how to learn”. He tells us how he went about learning Chinese with an mp3 player and a digital camera during a recent stay in China: “I’ve been recording conversations I’ve had with people in Chinese, in my very basic Chinese. So for example, I would record the conversation buying soya milk and asking them how they make their soya milk, *‘What is that?’*, *‘Oh it’s sugar’*.” These recordings become key learning objects as he plays them back in one-to-one sessions with a teacher, learns to write and pronounce the words, and gains confidence to use them outside the classroom. There is a strong sense of personal satisfaction: “It felt really good. It felt a lot of fun and felt like I was really interacting with my language. And it was very, very different from passively listening to a radio station, which of course I couldn’t do in Chinese”. He takes photos of what he finds peculiar, to talk about it in class: “...in China they have these, I guess they’re sort of police boxes, but they’re kind of like signs that just flash and says “Police” and there’s a telephone number. And so I wanted to know what it is, why is it? You know. Very strange thing and so I took a photo of that. And so things like that, I think, you know *‘What’s going on here?’*” and then bring it into class and have a conversation about it. And then there’d be new words that come out of it but it would also be me repeating a whole load of phrases that I’d, you know, learned before.” He is aware of his own limitations as a beginner language learner, but that does not stop him from looking to do things differently, looking for fun, wanting to be active, and finding that a mobile device is a channel for authentic interaction. He explains how he also takes snaps of signs, billboards, menus –“I would look at a menu and go blank. But through bringing them into class I was able to learn words like *steamed dumpling* or something like that, that would appear frequently and so I’d be able to recognise those and build up vocabulary around that: *‘Is that pork or vegetable?’*. The effect of the mobile device on his learning is that it brings a connection to the real world; through the mobile device he is able to bring authenticity into his lessons –“I really enjoyed that, really having a connection with the things around me”. He remarks that his mp3 player is unobtrusive, and because people around him do not notice it, he has been able to put it next to something else that he is holding, and make a recording.

RELEVANCE AND LIMITATIONS

The two cases above show contrasting approaches to learning a language, which doubtless reflect in some way the learners’ circumstances in terms of being either outside the target language country or travelling within it. Our sample of informal learners do not tend to study in a group, which is not to say that they are isolated; on the contrary, mobile devices provide a connection to a level of peer support that learners find both motivating and customizable. In the

following quote, the learner of Japanese refers to the online forums where he lurks fishing for tips to learn kanji –“It's one of the first times that I've seen the real value of the sort of peer support (...) all of a sudden you find something, you're interested enough and there are all these people posting their experiences and it is quite motivational; it gives you ideas, because I think you stagnate if you just do the same thing.” The learner of Chinese finds it motivating to have animated discussions with his teacher, using the artifacts and recordings he has gathered on his daily rambles in China. But his motivation also comes from having discovered a learning method that he is personally very satisfied with, which contrasts with his previous experience: “(I can tell you about) textbooks that I've used, particularly with Chinese, where they've just missed the point entirely and not teaching the stuff that I want to learn”.

In language teaching, it is still considered that use of authentic learning materials, i.e. typically written or spoken by native speakers for non-language teaching reasons, is an excellent way to approximate an authentic communication experience. But as Duda and Tyne (2010) have observed, technology can turn on its head the idea that “authenticity in materials is essentially about the conditions in which they are produced ...” to arrive at the idea that “authenticity can also be about the conditions in which they are used ... or indeed the conditions in which they are created” (p.100). In this way, the essential goal of authentic communication is transformed from an aspiration to a situated enactment. However, the personally meaningful learning that we are discovering through the case studies is being done outside of formal education, and it will be challenging to find ways of integrating these positive informal experiences with formal learning.

MAPPING THE TERRITORY OF INFORMAL MOBILE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Following on from the interviews, we have continued to investigate the mobile-enabled resources available to language learners and the strategies they adopt for learning. Developments include access to an abundance of mobile apps through iTunes and other online stores, increasing opportunities for mobile social networking, and mobile interaction with online environments that were once desk-bound. Learner strategies are in line with those identified as belonging to successful language learners more generally, such as practising; repetition; self-monitoring, etc. (Bond, n.d.), yet mobile technologies can both restrict the range of strategies available (such as limitations on visual mnemonics) and introduce new ones, e.g. drawing on more diverse social networks and aligning language practice with the small routines and unexpected opportunities of everyday life. At one end of the innovation scale, mobile learners exhibit conventional language learning behaviours like memorizing vocabulary, while at the other end, they create their own agendas, networks, resources and tools. As noted by Norton and Toohey (2001), interest in successful activities or practices in second language acquisition has had a long history; yet defining what makes a successful language learner requires constant updating, as the language learning landscape continues to evolve (Young, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

Emergent practices point to personal, productive ways of learning that in the longer term may also have an impact on formal education. Our interviews provide evidence that mobile technologies facilitate and encourage self-directed learning, and they bring to light previously hidden learner motivations connected to mobility and personal use of time. It is also clear from this research that other learners, who have limited experience using mobile devices for language study, will benefit from guidance on how to make the most of everyday, situated opportunities for learning. In terms of preferred technologies and their relationship to emergent practices, it appears that currently learners are using whatever mobile device they happen to own, and when they hit upon something that works for them, they stay with it. More widespread sharing of both successful and unsuccessful learning is necessary to bring the hidden, personal experience of individual learners out into a public forum where learners, teachers and mobile technology designers can all learn from it.

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