EDITORIAL

Editorial Special Collection on Migrants, Education and Technologies

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This editorial introduces the JIME special collection looking at ‘Migrants, education and technologies’.

Keywords: Migrants; Education; Technology

As we write the editorial for our special collection the large scale migration across Europe continues. It includes, for example, those who are fleeing the conflict in Syria, or seeking better economic conditions. Whatever the reason for migration, its current scale leads to the question of how we can best support both migrants and refugees in their new homes where they face the possibility of exclusion through linguistic, social and cultural barriers. A range of online and mobile services and resources have been developed for refugees and migrants, mainly by various non-profit organisations and governments. What outcomes have been achieved? What are the particular challenges that migrants face in education?

We invited contributions to JIME for this special collection on migrants, education and technologies. Some of the themes we thought relevant and that were indeed addressed by the papers in this issue include:

• Social integration and language learning
• Contextually sensitive learning for migrants
• Smart Cities’ support for migrants
• Overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers
• Informal learning
• Learning in different contexts – inside and outside the classroom

We expected some emphasis on the use of mobile technologies as smartphones can be valuable in enabling inclusion, providing access to information resources and language learning on a familiar device during the course of daily activities (Kluzer et al. 2011). Recently, the MASELTMOV project (http://www.maseltov.eu, 2012–2015) explored how smartphones might be used in cities to support non-European immigrants’ social inclusion and language learning needs. Three of the four papers currently in the collection do indeed focus on mobile learning, whilst the fourth, the paper by Brooker, Lawrence and Dodds focuses on the role of digital research tools in helping to elicit refugees’ perspectives and to give refugee students a voice.

Whilst mobile ownership amongst migrants and refugees is partly a reflection of rapid growth in smartphone adoption worldwide, including in emerging economies (Poushter, 2016), many refugees only have basic phones, and often do not use the internet as this can be expensive and cannot always be accessed reliably. In this special collection, Gaved and Peasgood specifically address the issue of how mobile technologies can support migrants and refugees in daily life without access to the internet on the move. Their focus is on how location-triggered learning activities in an urban area can enhance informal language learning. There is an element in this paper on how Smart Cities can support migrants. In Gaved and Peasgood’s SALSA study, twenty seven beacons were designed across the town of Milton Keynes in the UK, triggering 12 learning activity scenarios. The participants in this study were studying English at local adult continuing education classes — with the app used on their smartphones complementing their formal learning with informal learning in their daily lives. All the participants successfully used the provided system and triggered learning activities by visiting the beacon locations around the town. Gaved and Peasgood drew on Kukulska-Hulme’s (2012) language learning framework to conceptualise their findings and understand participants’ practices. Thus the results were analysed in terms of time, activity and place. Each of these aspects affected how participants used the app. For example, the design of the system was intended to promote learning when out and about during everyday routines, however on some occasions participants would check the app when the beacon was triggered but study the content later, perhaps at home, if they did not have sufficient time to study the content at the time of triggering. Another influence that interacts with time is place: a central focus for this study. It was important for participants to study the content of the app in places conducive to learning – such as in a café, library or at home. Participants also wanted to learn in ways that were unobtrusive and felt

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socially acceptable and so they did not want to play audio
in public and might not feel that starting a casual conversa-
tion with strangers in a café was appropriate. Overall
the use of learning activities relevant to the learners’
aims and interests was successful, motivating and highly
valued, and developed not only the participants’ lan-
guage skills but also their knowledge about the town in
which they lived. The tension that the researchers found
between learning and ‘fitting in’, leads them to emphasise
the importance of social and cultural factors when design-
ning mobile assisted language learning. The participants
studied by Demmans Epp (as reported in this collection)
also showed a preference for using the tools in private
locations.

In line with Gaved and Peasgood, the other papers are
also concerned with the challenges of learning the lan-
guage of the adopted country, based on the experiences
of migrants or refugees in Canada, Australia, England and
Sweden. This coverage means that for three of the studies
concerned, English is the language being learnt, and the
migrant participants themselves speak a wide variety of
mother tongues. Bradley, Berbyuk Lindström and Sofkova
Hashemi’s paper focuses on learning a less widely spoken
language, Swedish. This paper reports on a study in which
the experimental group used an app to support their
pronunciation skills in addition to taking part in formal
programmes for learning Swedish. As with Demmans Epp
and Gaved and Peasgood there is a focus on understand-
ing migrants’ everyday practices in using their mobile
devices to support their learning, and an emphasis on the
social nature of language learning. Whilst the results indi-
cate that the focused linguistic training with the pronun-
ciation app is indeed useful and successful for developing
spoken language skills, the experimental group that used
the app did not use it for the length of time they were
meant to use it, and it was suggested that more motivat-
ing material was needed. Participants in this study also
reported relatively little interaction with local people and
this little Swedish was spoken outside the classroom. So
whilst the mobile devices were widely used in the class-
room and outside, most of the use was for communicating
with family and friends.

Some of what is reported on migrant language learning
in these papers reflects what is already discussed in the
literature on informal language learning. For example,
Bradley, Berbyuk Lindström and Sofkova Hashemi found
that as reported in other contexts of informal language
learning (e.g. Demouy et al., 2016), participants used a
wide range of apps and technology to support their
language learning —including resources such as Google
Translate. The participants in Demmans Epp’s study also
used a range of mobile tools, including the MALL applica-
tions provided to learn vocabulary or to practise and test
their listening skills – or, for example, the experimental
applications to complete homework. However, although
there was a general belief that using the target language,
English, to interact with others, would support their lan-
guage learning, they tended to use and rely on tools that
supported receptive knowledge development rather than
productive skills. One of the research questions for this
study was to investigate which language-learning and
communication needs are not being met by current MALL
tools. The results differed according to the learners’ pro-
ficiency levels, with lower proficiency learners struggling
to work out the meaning of vocabulary through context
whilst those with higher levels of English also identified
vocabulary gaps but could use context to determine a
word’s meaning. Some participants expressed an inter-
est in and a desire for socio-collaborative approaches to
learning and self-regulation when they joined conversa-
tion groups to rehearse their speaking skills. One of the
gaps identified by Demmans Epp in their paper is that “too
few tools scaffold the larger learning challenges faced by
these migrants. These challenges include (English Language
Learners’) ability to communicate; understand multiple reg-
isters, accents and varieties of English; monitor their own
learning; and obtain socio-emotional support”.

The paper by Brooker, Lawrence and Dodds is also con-
cerned with language learning, with a focus on how lan-
guage learning challenges relate to other challenges for
young refugees in Australia and how language challenges
affect their educational experiences. This study includes
more participants than the other papers in this special
collection and also pertains to three different settings:
school, university and adult education. The technological
tools involved in this study are tools for research, rather
than tools for learning. The authors were not surprised to
find that the English language was the biggest challenge
for their participants but were surprised that this finding
applied equally well to university students, as strong lan-
guage skills is a requirement of entry. They found using
Computer Assisted Interviews to be an effective method
for understanding the refugees’ experiences and can over-
come some of the cultural barriers and power inequali-
ties that might be present in other ways of investigating
the participants’ views. Brooker, Lawrence and Dodds
emphasise the importance of involving participants in
the research: “Researchers have a responsibility (...) to help
the young person express their experiences in meaningful
and authentic ways”. A conceptual map produced by each
young person became a visual aid to help them think
about their challenges and elaborate on their experiences.
This approach to research moves participants from those
to whom the research is ‘done’ to a position closer to
co-researcher.

Demmans Epp’s study takes account of the participants’
perspective through adopting a user-centred design
approach, whilst Gaved and Peasgood adopt a participa-
tory design approach.

So what can we learn about migrants, education and
technologies from the papers in this special collection? Any
suggestions on the basis of four studies must be ten-

tative but it would seem that at present, there is a focus
on the use of mobile technologies: not surprising because
such devices can allow for informal learning at times
and in places that suit the learners, and can complement
more formal opportunities. However, there is also a sug-
gestion that the notion of ‘anytime, anywhere’ learning
requires some further nuancing. Social context is clearly
important here, and the findings for two of the studies
(Demmans Epp's paper and Gaved and Peasgood) suggest that the context must be appropriate for participants to carry out their learning wherever they are, and if it is not, then they will defer that activity until later.

Learning a new language to a sufficient level to integrate into the community and participate fully is clearly a challenge, and Brooker, Lawrence and Dodds's results show that this is the biggest challenge for their participants, even for those whose English skills are sufficient for them to attend university. Demmans Epp's study has helped to identify some of these language learning challenges including communication, understanding multiple registers, accents and varieties of English. But it may be that the challenges also include becoming more self-directed learners so as to “monitor their own learning and obtain socio-emotional support”.

The studies reported here are small scale, and take either a qualitative or mixed approach. They help us to build up some understanding of migrants’ practices in using mobile devices for their language learning, and in using digital tools as alternatives to face to face interviewing with vulnerable participants. However, there are a number of other areas and issues where we might expect future work to focus, including the possible role of social media; supporting low educated migrants in their social integration, work-based learning and policy developments for the linguistic integration of migrants (Language Policy Unit, 2016). We look forward to seeing how this important area of research develops in the future.

**Competing Interests**
The three editors of the special collection were all members of the MASELTOV project (http://www.maseltov.eu, 2012–2015).

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