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EDITORIAL

# Editorial Special Collection on Migrants, Education and Technologies

Ann Jones, Agnes Kukulska-Hulme and Andrew Brasher

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

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**Keywords:** Migrants; Education; Technology

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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 MASELTOV 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

socially acceptable and so they did not want to play audio in public and might not feel that starting a casual conversation 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' language 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 designing 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 language 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 understanding 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 indicate that the focused linguistic training with the pronunciation 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 motivating material was needed. Participants in this study also reported relatively little interaction with local people and thus little Swedish was spoken outside the classroom. So whilst the mobile devices were widely used in the classroom 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 applications 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 language 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' proficiency 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 interest in and a desire for socio-collaborative approaches to learning and self-regulation when they joined conversation 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 registers, accents and varieties of English; monitor their own learning; and obtain socio-emotional support"*.

The paper by Brooker, Lawrence and Dodds is also concerned with language learning, with a focus on how language 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 language skills is a requirement of entry. They found using Computer Assisted Interviews to be an effective method for understanding the refugees' experiences and can overcome some of the cultural barriers and power inequalities 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 participatory 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 tentative 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 suggestion 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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**How to cite this article:** Jones, A, Kukulska-Hulme, A and Brasher, A 2017 Editorial Special Collection on Migrants, Education and Technologies. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2017(1): 5, pp.1–3, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.441>

**Submitted:** 03 March 2017

**Accepted:** 03 March 2017

**Published:** 05 April 2017

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