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On the spot: using mobile devices for listening and speaking practice on a French language programme

Valérie Demouy and Agnes Kukulska-Hulme

Abstract

This paper presents and discusses the initial findings of a mobile language learning project undertaken in the context of an undergraduate distance learning French language programme at The Open University (UK). The overall objective of the project was to investigate students' experiences when using their own portable devices for additional listening and speaking practice within a course. Experience data was collected via weekly online questionnaires, recorded oral feedback and email. The use of iPods and MP3 players was quickly adopted by project participants; but whilst the challenge and the authentic aspect of doing activities on the phone appealed to some learners, we conclude that other learners will need to be helped towards recognizing the specific value of this type of practice as a stepping stone towards authentic communication. We suggest further areas of investigation and potential applications.

Keywords: language learning, distance language teaching, mobile phones, MP3 players, iPods, learner experiences, authentic learning

Introduction

Contemporary language teaching methods aim to expose learners to examples of situations in which they may find themselves, and the tasks they will need to carry out using a foreign language. These methods employ samples of conversation, authentic artefacts and various forms of simulation, including carefully crafted learning materials and ICT. The widespread ownership of personal, portable devices has added a potential new dimension, namely location-aware support for communication and language learning. This could be location-specific content and interaction, for example access to vocabulary relating to a specific place, available as needed. An alternative interpretation could be awareness of more convenient ways to study, such as opportunities to learn and practice at the same time as walking or travelling.

The use of mobile devices has progressed beyond their primary function as simple communication and entertainment tools: researchers have argued that more far-reaching possibilities should be considered (Sharples, 2003), even expressed as a "new mindset" for mobile language learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006; 2009). Recent scenarios extend to learner-centred, self-directed language learning, which may be based around communities of learners sharing resources based on common needs (Michelsen, 2008; Pemberton et al., 2009); in those cases, mobile devices facilitate

and enrich the processes of collaboration, creation and resource sharing. Scenarios of this kind may challenge the assumptions of formal education, leading to tensions between established practices, schedules and curricula on the one hand, and the sometimes unpredictable effects of innovation on the other.

Our aim in this paper is to present and discuss the findings of a mobile language learning research project undertaken in the context of an undergraduate distance learning French language programme. The overall objective of the project was to investigate students' experiences when accessing listening and speaking activities on their own portable devices for additional practice within a course, in what we predicted would be a variety of locations. Below we situate our research in the relevant literature, before giving details of the project and its findings. Finally the main findings, lessons learned and their implications are discussed.

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL)

In a review of developments in mobile assisted language learning (MALL), Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2008) define MALL in terms of "its use of personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning, emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different contexts of use" (p.273). Even when 'old' content is served up on mobile devices, the ways in which learners use it – and hence how they learn – will be different, since context and location of use are associated with environmental factors such as partial attention, shifting motivation, opportunistic scheduling of study, availability of physical space, real or perceived costs to the user, social conventions of device use, and so on. Many projects have used devices that have been lent or given to students, including Tablet PCs and PDAs (e.g. Uosaki & Ogata, 2009). Current thinking suggests that it is advisable, where possible, to use devices that most learners own already, at the same time making sure that inequalities in terms of access to technology are dealt with fairly through a system of equipment loans (see e.g. Chang & Low, 2009). Owned devices are typically personal audio players and mobile phones, and perhaps games consoles.

In 2007, Kenning noted that "the telephone is not a medium that springs to mind when considering the interface between technology and language learning", before going on to argue that phones had been overlooked "because of their ordinariness" (Kenning, 2007,p.171-2). This ordinariness is now seen as a distinct advantage. Familiarity was given as a reason for choosing mobile phones and iPods in the project reported by Cooney & Keogh (2007); this project in Irish as a Second Language targeted improvement of oral assessment and students' self-assessment by giving students the opportunity to use familiar mobile devices to listen to questions and record their answers.

Mobile phones are used increasingly in mobile language learning, with applications ranging from improving knowledge of vocabulary, idioms and grammar (e.g. Thornton & Hauser, 2005), to cultural awareness, listening and speaking. Mobile learning can take place in formal and informal settings. Levy & Kennedy (2005) looked at how learning Italian could be continued between formal lessons by students receiving instruction via SMS text messages on their mobile phones, encouraging them to practise throughout the week. Fallahkhair et al. (2007) developed language

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learning services to enable learning by mobile phone in conjunction with interactive television; learning could take place at home in one's living room. Ally & Tin (2009) used mobile phones with immigrant learners needing to practise their English pronunciation as preparation for speaking at work; learning could take place wherever it was convenient. Mobile phones are gradually proving their worth as flexible tools that support language learning in a range of settings.

An early investigation of the use of iPods for language learning was the Duke University iPod experience, involving 1600 students who were given iPods with voice recorders; it was reported that language courses at Duke were one of the first to adopt this technology successfully (Belanger, 2005). In recent years, podcasts have proved to be a popular way of reaching wide audiences (e.g. ChinesePod for learning Mandarin Chinese, see Horkoff & Kayes, undated). Palalas (2009) opted for the iPod Touch devices in her pilot project, which were lent out to immigrant accounting students learning English, to enable them to improve their listening and speaking skills in activities such as practising making phone calls; it is intended that learners' own devices will be used in the future.

Although published literature on the use of iPods and mobile phones in language learning is growing, it is likely that, due to the 'ordinariness' of these devices, much current practice goes unreported (Shield & Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). The L120 project, reported below, used iPods/ MP3 players and mobile phones belonging to student volunteers, in order to gain insights into how these devices might contribute to their learning experience. Unlike most other mobile language learning projects, our participants could access learning activities on a DVD-ROM as well as on their mobile device. There was no attempt to compare these experiences directly, but participants' comments highlight the variety of settings where mobile devices were used, and the authentic experience of having to understand and respond 'on the spot' -- as is the case in real life situations, without access to transcriptions and other forms of support.

The L120 Mobile Project

Students studying a language course at the Open University work independently throughout the course, though they receive support from their tutor and may have contact with other students. Whilst tutor support is often key to students' motivation, approximately 20 to 25 hours of tutor-led contact is relatively little in relation to the 300 hours of study students should complete when registered on a 30 point course such as L120. L120 *Ouverture* Intermediate French is a newly remade course that relies on books and DVD-ROMs to cover the course content and skills required of the learning outcomes. It covers a wide range of topics from leisure to work and aims to develop sound listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. The course also includes face to face and online tutorials as well as tutor-led activities and discussion forums via a course website.

To practise listening and speaking skills directly related to the course content, students need access to a computer on which they can use the DVD-ROMs. The DVD-ROMs offer a high level of interactivity and sophistication that enables students to view video clips, reveal transcripts, record themselves and play back their answers as well

as to hear model answers. They do not, however, offer the degree of mobility or flexibility that would allow students to use them in different locations or situations. The L120 Mobile Project, which took place during 2009, aimed at addressing this issue by looking at how mobile devices (specifically, iPods/MP3 players and mobile phones) could offer more opportunities for students to practise listening and speaking skills independently and thus enhance the learning experience.

Project objectives

One of the key objectives of the project was to gather information on the types of activities that were suitable for adaptation to a mobile format with devices that are widely used, such as MP3 players, iPods and mobile phones. But we also wanted to know more about the contexts in which students engaged with mobile activities and the perceived benefits of using mobile devices to practise listening and speaking skills. Where were the students when they chose to engage with the project activities? Were they doing something else at the same time? How often did they use their device every week to practise their listening or speaking skills? How long did they spend on a session? What benefits did they see in spending time on these activities using a mobile device? Were there any drawbacks, limitations?

We also wanted to investigate whether there was any difference between the way in which students used audio players (iPods/MP3 players) for listening and speaking practice in a variety of settings from how they used mobile phones. Both types of device are widely owned, but they are generally used in different ways, either listening (to music and podcasts), or communication and interaction (mobile phones).

By looking at the contexts and evaluating the benefits of providing students with mobile listening and speaking activities, we aimed to form a clearer picture of the potential place of mobile technology in relation to listening and speaking skills in language learning. We hoped to gather some important information on how to integrate mobile technology in new language courses but also, more broadly, to look at the implications for the practice of listening and speaking skills, and practice on-the-go in an independent or distance learning setting.

Participants and methods

Students were notified about the project at the end of March 2009, via the Course website and by email. Students who owned mobile devices were invited to register their interest in taking part. At that stage, students were told they would work on activities to practise listening skills linked closely to the course content. Those interested replied by filling in a short online questionnaire recording their age group, contact information and details of the mobile devices they owned including age, make and model. Out of 1,012 students registered on L120, just over 100 volunteered to take part.

Two groups of 35 students were formed (one would be using iPod/MP3 players, the other mobile phones). We ensured all age groups were represented, as well as the

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wide diversity of mobile devices owned. Instructions were sent to both groups by email.

The project ran over a period of six weeks between May and July; students were given a two-week extension to allow them to complete their contributions. At the end of each week all participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire via Surveymonkey (free online survey software). The questionnaires were identical for both groups with additional questions in the final one. Additionally, Group 2 participants were invited to record brief oral feedback on each individual activity they attempted.

Group 1 activity and participation

Group 1 students were instructed to download onto their iPods or MP3 players audio resources currently located on the DVD-ROMs which were made available on the Course website for easier download during the project. Their task was to listen to a series of audio clips over the six week period, the length of which varied from approximately 30 seconds to 3 or 4 minutes. The clips included dialogues, short presentations and recordings forming the basis of listening or speaking activities featured on the DVD-ROMs including sample answers provided after open-ended activities.

The questionnaires focused on frequency of use during each week, the type of audio activity they preferred working on each week, and how they thought it helped their learning. Context was also explored with questions asking not only where participants were, but also what they were doing at the same time. Additional questions were added to the final week to gather information on the overall experience.

Of the 35 participants in Group 1, 71% responded to the first online questionnaire; 51% to the second; 49% to the third; 43% to the fourth; 31% to the fifth and 43% to the sixth. Despite some decline, the average response over the six weeks was 48%.

Group 2 activity and participation

Group 2 were asked to use their mobile phones to take part in interactive listening and speaking activities available through a voice response system provided by Learnosity, a company specialising in e-assessment and mobile learning. The activities which the students were going to work on were taken or adapted from the existing course materials. Participants were provided with a user ID and password and a brief explanation of how to get started. They had access to a website (the Project website) which contained further instructions and the list of the activities available to them, together with codes for access.

The procedure was relatively simple. Students rang a lo-call (cheap tariff) 0330 number. A recorded voice prompted them to provide their user ID and password. They then had to provide the relevant activity code to do each activity.

There were six activities per week; 36 in total for the length of the project and all had been adapted or reversioned from the existing DVD-ROMs activities in order to minimise additional workload for the students taking part. The activities consisted of short listening comprehensions, pronunciation and intonation activities, grammar

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practice drills, prompted dialogues and short presentations. All of them relied on audio stimulus. There was no visual support, nor were there any text prompts.

Students could attempt the same activity up to five times. Their answers were inserted into the activity so that once they had finished an attempt, they could review their performance immediately over the phone. At the end of the review of the first attempt, they were invited to say what they thought of the activity they had just completed by recording brief feedback which was subsequently transcribed.

In addition, students had the opportunity to review their activities online via the Project website, where they could compare their answers with model answers.

As with Group 1, the questionnaires focused on frequency of use during each week, the activities participants preferred working on each week and the context in which they were doing the activities. Again, additional questions were added to the final week, asking about their overall experience of doing the activities on their mobile phones in comparison with doing the same activities on the DVD-ROMs.

Responses to the first online questionnaire were significantly lower than with Group 1. Only 28% of the participants responded to the first questionnaire. Figures dropped to 10% for the second questionnaire. At that stage, the project team decided to invite 23 hitherto unselected volunteer students to join the group in week 3. In spite of the additional 23 participants, figures remained low with 12%, 7% and 9% respectively for the remaining three weeks of the Project. This did not improve, even when we offered a two week extension into July.

Findings

Exploring context

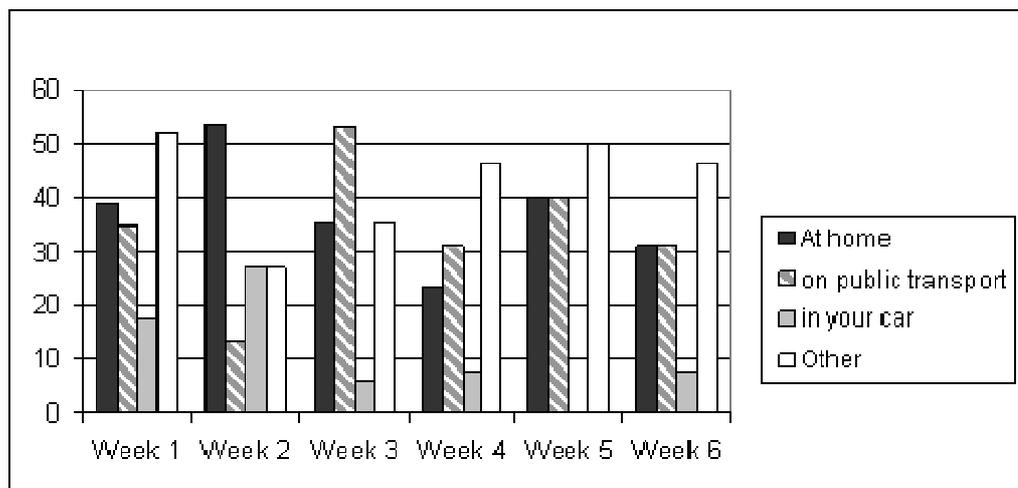**a. Where did they do the activities?**

Figure 1: Group 1 Where did you listen to L120 audio clips using your device? (Tick all that apply)

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Group 1 responses show that students engaged with the Project activities in a variety of settings; 'Other' locations included at work, in the streets or public spaces, in hotel rooms, at the beach or at a supermarket. The majority of participants indicated that they were doing something else whilst listening to the clips. This usually meant travelling (with public transport scoring an average of 36% and driving 12% over the 6 week period) or exercising (walking 45%, jogging 15%) ranking higher in the choices available.
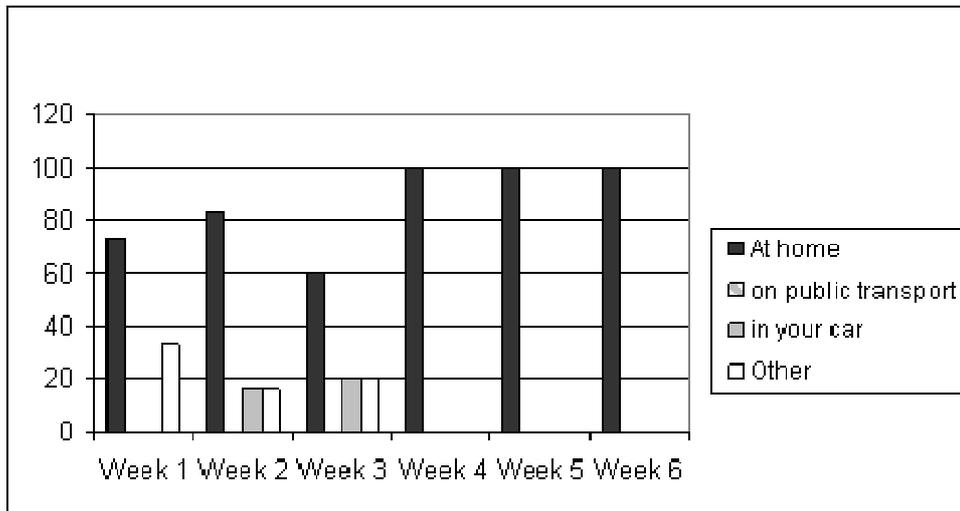

Figure 2: Group 2 Where did you do the L120 speaking activities using your device?

By comparison, Group 2 responses show a marked preference for working with the Project's activities at home. Few participants tried other locations and considering the low participation rate, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the other places mentioned such as work, public spaces or holiday locations. The nature of the activities involving frequent speaking may have played an important part in the near absence of mobility.

b. How often and for how long?

When Group 1 were asked how often they used their iPods or MP3 players to listen to the Project's audio clips, results from the online questionnaire show a marked pattern. Twice to four times a week was the preferred modus operandi. With regard to duration of use, most of those answering the questionnaires spent 15 minutes to 2 hours per week listening to the audio clips (22 out of 25 in week 1, 14 out of 17 in week 3, and 9 out of 14 in week 6). The majority of participants reported spending at least 10 minutes in each listening session and a few reported spending more than 20 minutes in each session (4 out of 25 in week 1, 4 out of 17 in week 3 and 4 out of 14 in week 6).

In comparison, no such pattern in routine or practice emerged from the results of the online questionnaires for Group 2 participants. But again, the small number of responses does not make this finding sufficiently reliable.

Exploring the benefits

a. Did Group 1 find the activities useful?

The final week questionnaire (answered by 15 participants) shows that only 5 already used their mobile device to listen to the L120 audio clips before the project started while 9 did not (one participant did not reply to this question). However, all the participants who responded to the final questionnaire said they would carry on using their mobile device to listen to audio clips on L120 and other language courses.

In addition, when asked to rate the usefulness of listening to L120 audio clips on their mobile device as part of their studies on L120, 6 responded that it had been extremely useful, 6 very useful and 2 useful.

Participants' positive remarks focused on the potential mobile devices have for maximising exposure to the language, thus boosting confidence and enhancing speaking skills: "It made me realise how important repetition is. I listened to some extracts many times more than I would have done if just using the DVD."; "I love listening to the audio clips. I find that I build up familiarity with the language and keep my brain tuned into the sound of French as much as possible. This builds up my capacity to understand and makes me more confident in expressing myself." Others commented on the flexibility it added to their learning experience: "It really helps to be able to study whilst at work where I don't have access to using a computer for the DVDs".

b. Which aspects did Group 1 find most useful?

Participants were asked to rank according to their usefulness the following four aspects :
- practising general listening skills
- understanding and/or recognising grammatical points
- improving vocabulary
- helping towards intonation and pronunciation

Listening and intonation/pronunciation scored consistently higher throughout the 6 weeks.
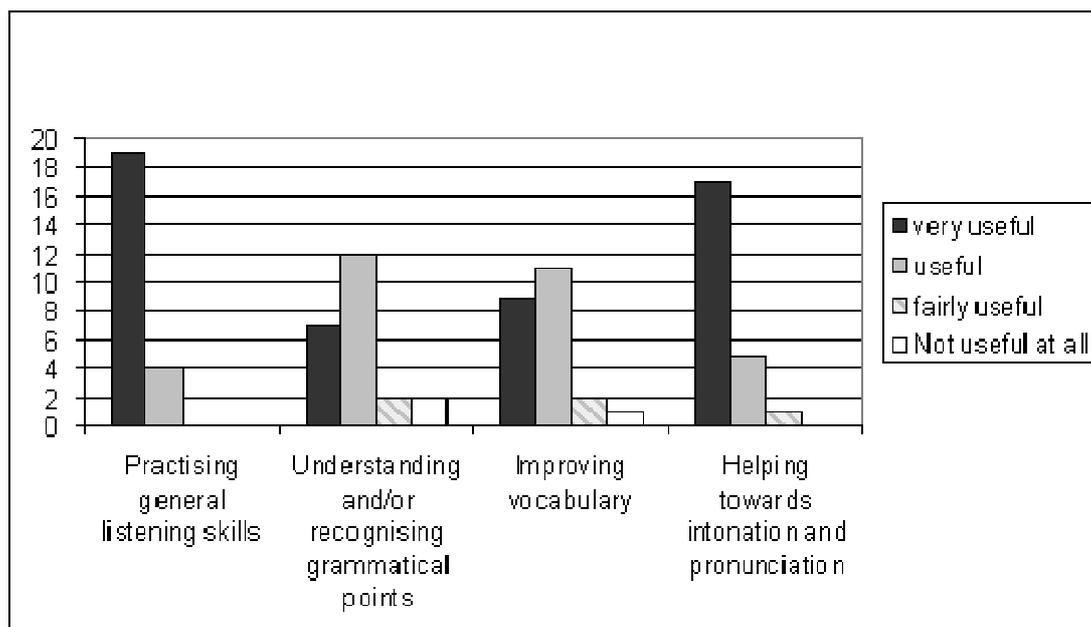
Figure 3: In listening to the audio clips, which aspect did you find most useful? (Group 1 Week 1)

c. What did Group 2 like?

The low number of responses to the online questionnaires does not provide reliable data. However, the oral feedback given by participants at the end of each activity offers some insights into what students liked or found valuable. Three broad themes emerge from the data gathered.

First, participants welcomed the additional practice in pronunciation, intonation or grammar especially through repetition, provided prompts were short and the activities did not rely too much on memory. A good example of such an activity is 412[1] where students had to repeat short sentences containing the words 'tout', 'tous', 'toute(s)'. "For me this activity was easier than 411 because it involves shorter sentences and I can take my time over them" one participant said. More interestingly and despite the fact that most participants did the activities from home, a few felt that this type of activity was well suited to phones. One participant provided this comment on activity 412: "a good activity and easy to do on the move". Another one said: "This is a very good activity. I'm hosting a football match at the moment and I'm still able to do it." A particularly keen participant summed it up in the last week of the Project: "I think to repeat actual words and sounds is a very good exercise to do on the phone. It's easy and lends itself very much to do on a phone or mobile'.

Second, because of the different experience it offered, some participants found it more valuable to tackle the same activities on their mobile phone after they had done them as part of the course on the DVD-ROMs. As all 36 activities on the Project were adapted from the course materials (particularly from the DVD-ROMs), they were not standalone. Most were topic-based as they were meant to be fully integrated in the

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[1] See Appendix: Examples of activities

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course content and study pathway. As one participant pointed out, you often had to do an activity "very close to when you've actually worked through the book to remember all the context". But what was for most a disadvantage, turned out to be very valuable for one participant: "I really like the challenge of doing these activities with the mobile after having done them on the DVD. I think as I say it's the first time I have used a DVD and then the phone immediately after and this has really been beneficial." From then on (week 3 into the project), this participant worked on the mobile activities after she had done the same activities in the course materials. She found the activities "so much easier to do" in that way.

Third, it was the challenge and the authentic aspect of doing these activities on the phone that particularly appealed to some participants. The DVD-ROMs offer a stark contrast to the phone, in terms of functionality. On the DVD-ROMs, students can play snippets or longer extracts, pause, go back to a specific point in a recording, reveal the transcription, play a clip any number of times with or without the transcription, record themselves, re-record immediately, play back their recording, jump from one question to another easily… This high level of sophistication allows students to move step by step in a closely guided and perhaps 'safe' approach through each activity. On the phone, things were different and though participants could play a question again, and re-record their answers if they wished to do so, navigation was far more limited. In addition, they had neither visual clues or transcripts to help them. Not only did this make most activities very challenging, but also more realistic as students had to rely on, or develop sharper listening skills and acquire good and quick oral response skills in a foreign language. Participants' comments on a variety of activities confirmed this: 'Although daunting, I appreciate the chance to do authentic listening and speaking activities'; "This is a good experiment actually to see how much I can understand with one listening. I've just done it and listened to it once. I found the recording a little fast but that's how it should be really because French people on the phone don't speak slowly for English people who are learning French so it's just a question of tuning the ear and getting to grips with the language."; "This really stretched me. I thought it was very good"; "although it wasn't easy, this activity provides a real-life type of practice"; "I think of course the way it happens on the phone, you probably don't quite do as a good job but I think it's certainly more realistic than doing it on the DVD or in other ways".

d. What did Group 2 not like?

In comparison with the DVD-ROMs, the very limited functionality of their phones, plus the poorer sound quality hindered some participants. One participant "found it difficult to navigate" and "couldn't easily go back and go forward." The same participant shows frustration and anxiety: it "was a bit scary" and he/she was not "quite sure (…) how to get out of it". Others had mixed experiences with the sound quality: "the volume on my phone insufficient, struggling to hear" or "I found it too difficult to hear the questions before I could answer".

While the DVD-ROMs offered immediate access to sample answers, the mobile phone activities did not. Students could record their answers, review them on the phone immediately afterwards and choose to re-record or not. In the same phone call they could also review the whole activity with their answers inserted immediately after completing it. However, they had to go online in order to access sample

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answers. Participants were aware of this, but interestingly, few if any appeared to have used this facility. Comments seemed to indicate that sample answers might have been useful in the review mode at the end of the activity. One student pointed out that "the review is fairly useless because you have no model to compare with, you know you hear what you've said but you don't know if that is good, bad or indifferent". Another added: "when you hear and listen to it at the end it only gives your answer. It doesn't give an official answer from the speaker which would be helpful for actually checking your answers are actually correct".

Although participants liked the challenge, they frequently found the activities very difficult to do via this medium.

Relying on good memory proved to be an issue and comments seemed to indicate that some students might rely quite heavily on transcripts when working with the DVD-ROMs activities: "It's alright when you get going but I don't have the memory to remember (…) as I need the transcript to remember what I need to say" or "It's again rather difficult to memorise and repeat and concentrate on pronunciation".

Some participants struggled to understand questions or words without access to the transcript and seemed to feel demotivated by the experience: "I find it difficult to hear the questions so I find it difficult to give an answer. I'm afraid I'm finding this whole thing not very easy". Another participant said: "I needed to repeat these questions at least 3 times before I could attempt to answer them. I think otherwise …it was a use …no I don't know if it was useful or not".

Adding to the challenge was the fact that most activities required from participants a good knowledge of the topic on which it was based. It was far more difficult to do a mobile activity when one had not done the relevant surrounding activities in the course materials, or spent time gathering information about the topic. This was the case with activity 411[2] for instance and one student remarked: "First of all I did this exercise right after I had worked through the text. In this case, it's probably OK because it's quite a long text to memorise and to memorise is more the difficulty than actually talking about it. So in combination with the text which one had read before, it's a good exercise. If you just hear and you have to respond, you probably have to listen to it a few times otherwise it's quite difficult". And activity 342[3]: "this activity was I think a little difficult. It'll probably be easier if I repeated it, I'm sure and I may have to read up in the book a little more information about les restaurants" (the speaker refers to "les restos du Coeur" here.)

So, were these challenges responsible for the poor uptake in this strand of the project? What were the reasons why participants did not start at all, or go beyond the first activity of the project?

e. Reasons for dropping out

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[2] See Appendix: Examples of activities
[3] See Appendix: Examples of activities

Despite a prompting email sent to the original 35 students in week 4 of the project, participation did not improve significantly. By then, the extra 23 students had been recruited, but uptake was still poor.

In an attempt to find out more about the reasons behind the low level of participation, another email was sent in July to all students who had started the project but had chosen not to continue. To maximise responses a few possible reasons were suggested (more than one could be selected):

- I was too busy with the course and the project created additional workload
- I found doing the activities by phone too difficult in comparison with using the DVD-ROM
- I did not want to pay the call charges
- I did not like the way the system operated (i.e. ringing a number and pressing keys etc.)
- I encountered technical difficulties (i.e. not being able to access the number, sound issues)
- Other reasons…

9 out of the 15 students contacted replied to the email. The information they provided was added to other data already given by participants who had elected to withdraw from the project at an earlier stage. Though study pressure and cost ranked higher than the other reasons given, it is difficult to single out one or two factors as being responsible for students dropping out of the project. In many cases a combination of two or more factors deterred students from continuing with the project.

Although the majority of these participants did not engage fully with the project, quite a few thought that it was a good idea. One participant commented that he might have engaged more with the project if he had been "more attached" to his mobile phone. Another remarked that it was a "good idea though" and didn't see "why it shouldn't be a useful tool in the future."

Lessons learned and possible practical applications

Using iPods and MP3 players for listening

Though we knew from anecdotal evidence that students used mobile devices (and in the past portable cassette and CD players) in relation to listening and speaking skills, initial findings from the project seem to show that even if students own a mobile device, they might not necessarily use it as a tool for their studies, despite suggestions to do so as is the case on L120. As we have seen, 9 out of 14 of Group 1 participants had not used their iPod or MP3 player to listen to the audio resources available on the course, before the Project (the audio resources were not made available on the course website, so they could only be extracted from the DVD-ROMs). At the end of the project all agreed that it was useful or extremely useful to use their device to practise listening skills. They quickly saw the benefits of using their device to maximise exposure to the language in spaces and at times that suited their lifestyle. This suggests that this practice needs to be encouraged more overtly, especially in a

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distance learning setting where regular exposure to the spoken language can be an issue.

In the final week of the project, we asked Group 1 to tell us if they thought it would be useful to have simple quiz type questions on their mobile device while playing the clips. Eleven out of 15 said it would be useful or extremely useful to have quizzes linked with the audio clips. Two thought it would not be very useful and one was not sure it would be useful at all. There are currently technological issues affecting the feasibility of such an approach. However, the responses of the participants are interesting as they show some degree of uncertainty as to the usefulness of such an approach, especially if we compare it to the 100% commitment to adopting the practice of listening to the course audio clips via mobile iPod or MP3 player. Having listening activities with quizzes on mobile devices might very well be useful and worthwhile for students but these activities might not lend themselves so well to being done on the move or in a space and time that is also devoted to another activity.

Using mobile phones for listening and speaking

a. Activities to do on the move or at home?

Group 2 results have to be treated with caution as they are purely indicative. But initial findings seem to show that interactive speaking activities are not done easily in public places, in front of others or while doing something else. Participants generally chose to do them at home. They rarely managed to find a 'quiet' spot or time to try out an activity outside their home. We saw earlier how students found the activities difficult and challenging, requiring a lot of concentration. It might have made sense for them not to do them in places where any distraction would compete too much with the activity. Standalone repetition activities, especially those on pronunciation and intonation might fare better in that respect. They require less concentration provided prompts are short enough to memorise, do not require students to have previously acquired some content or knowledge or ask them to produce any 'new' language. These findings need to be explored further in order to be confirmed.

b. Integrated or loosely integrated activities?

Similarly, follow-up activities in listening and speaking designed to complement other exercises in the course materials or online might prove useful to students. We saw that very close links to the course content meant that students often had to go back to the course materials before they could do an activity. They often needed access to information about a topic, or had to have covered a key grammatical point to be able to complete an activity on the project. But if activities were more 'loosely' integrated into the course content and key learning points, students might find them easier to do.

c. Practising listening and speaking in a new way?

Perhaps the most promising finding remains the 'authentic' or 'realistic' dimension mentioned by some participants. In contrast with the DVD-ROMs, it was indeed different to tackle listening and speaking on the phone. Participants told us how the DVD-ROMs allow for maximum support both visually and functionally. They feel in

control of what they hear and what they see. They can also have a break while doing an activity on the DVD-ROMs, open their books to check a grammar explanation or pick up their dictionary to look up a word.

With the voice response system used in the project, there was no visual support and very limited control in the way in which participants did an activity on their phone. They could of course play back a question but they could not pause to check a word or play back a specific chunk in a recording. Ultimately they either completed the activity or hung up. They felt put "on the spot" as one of them commented. There is a strong element of do or die in such a method and of course it is reminiscent of real life situations, where oral communication in a foreign language can be daunting and stressful, especially at beginner or intermediate levels. Students might generally only find themselves in such situations during classes or tutorials, which are infrequent (and not compulsory) in a distance learning setting. But, uncomfortable as it may be to be put on the spot when communicating orally in a foreign language, a few participants recognised that this was an essential part of the language learning. One of them commented: 'It's always good to do spontaneous speaking (…). I think, having listened, I should repeat the activity and perhaps prepare my answers to do a better job but that defeats the purpose in a way. Useful but ... it doesn't feel good when you're not happy with your answers. On the other hand, it's more like real life practice so in that way, I think it's useful.'

We might now wonder how often students feel they are put on the spot when using the listening or interactive speaking activities on the DVD-ROMs. With such an artificial degree of control, the DVD-ROMs seem rather at odds with the concept. It seems that there should be a place for using the basic function of a phone to enhance listening skills and, in particular, to develop quicker oral responses in oral communication. Perhaps we should look at educating our students about the benefits of complementing the step-by-step approach of a medium such as the DVD-ROM with more challenging activities that would stretch their abilities in oral communication.

Conclusions

The L120 Mobile Project investigated students' experiences when accessing listening and speaking activities on their own portable devices for additional practice within their course, in locations of their own choosing.

Our research indicates that the use of mobile devices can support the practice of listening and speaking skills effectively. Although most participants had not previously used their audio players to support their studies, the use of iPods and MP3 players was quickly adopted and found extremely useful as a means of increasing contact with the language in spaces and at times that suited their lifestyle. Furthermore, in sharp contrast with sophisticated media such as DVD-ROMs, the basic functionality of phones seems to have the potential to offer a surprisingly valuable way to practise listening and speaking skills. On the other hand, a few participants in this study missed the sophistication of the DVD-ROM when using their phone. We conclude that some learners will need to be helped towards recognizing the specific value of practice on the mobile device as a stepping stone towards

authentic communication, since not all students will immediately see it in that way. Levy and Kennedy (2005) remarked that the educational impact of a relatively simple mobile learning experience (e.g. receiving SMS messages) may be far-reaching, especially amongst more motivated students; for example, they will write down words in personalised dictionaries or look up grammar points. We believe all learners, not just motivated learners, should benefit in a 'far-reaching' way from mobile learning, but this may not happen without help.

Though the quantitative data for Group 2 is not reliable, the additional feedback received from students allowed us to identify a few directions we are investigating further. Interviews with a selection of participants from Group 2 are currently being organised. Questions will focus on their overall personal experience of the project in relation to their studies but will also explore the threads identified earlier, such as the lack of mobility, the type of activities participants preferred and the reasons why they were preferred.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

Examples of activities

Activity 412 (Pronunciation activity)

Ecoutez et répétez ces phrases.
Toutes ces machines fabriquent des biscuits.
Ce sont eux qui ont fait la réputation de la BN dans
toute la France.
Tout le monde connaît le port de Nantes.
L'idée du Choco BN est toute simple.
Tous les biscuits sont-ils fourrés au chocolat?
Cette machine peut tout faire maintenant.
Ils sont tous consommateurs de Chocos BN.
C'est un goûter qui est apprécié par tous les enfants
français.

Activity 411 (Comprehension and speaking activity)

Mémorisez cette courte explication sur la Biscuiterie Nantaise.
La Biscuiterie Nantaise: dans l'atelier de fabrication, les machines produisent les biscuits qui
ont fait la réputation de la BN dans toute la France. Nantes est connue pour ses biscuits
depuis très longtemps. Au début, c'est un grand port, donc on y fabrique surtout des biscuits
de mer. Puis, c'est la mode du biscuit de luxe. Et à la fin du XIXe siècle, la Biscuiterie Nantaise
produit des biscuits chers pour le plaisir des riches. Mais le grand succès de la Biscuiterie
Nantaise, c'est le Choco BN, inventé en 1933. L'idée est toute simple: ce sont deux biscuits
ordinaires fourrés au chocolat. Aujourd'hui, le Choco BN est une véritable institution.Et c'est
le goûter préféré des enfants.

Maintenant parlez de la Biscuiterie Nantaise.

Activity 342 (Speaking activity)

Vous travaillez comme bénévole aux Restaurants du Cœur, à l'accueil de l'un des centres.
Thomas arrive. Il est père de famille célibataire. Il a une petite fille de six ans et un bébé. Il
est au chômage. Expliquez-lui tout ce que les Restos et les Relais du Cœur peuvent faire pour
lui et pour sa famille.