Community-based interventions for language learning among refugees and migrants

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents recent research projects carried out at The Open University UK that involved work with migrant learners. Across these projects the aim was to understand the use of mobile technologies, to create and evaluate a number of mobile applications for informal learning scenarios, and to design learning activities with an aim to support language acquisition. By drawing on a small exploratory study carried out in community settings with diaspora youth we reflect on technology deployed, methods used and lessons learnt with an aim to contribute to research agenda that could guide HCI research in refugee contexts.

KEYWORDS

Technology-supported learning, language learning; community-learning; migrants; refugees

1 INTRODUCTION

Migration and forced displacement are among the most pressing global challenges of our era. UNHCR Global Trends report [1] finds an unprecedented number of people being displaced from their home by conflict or persecution in 2015 – 65.3 million. Apart from acute and long-term needs such as food and shelter, social integration and education are also significant challenges for both the immigrants and the host communities [2].

Education has enormous potential to facilitate integration of displaced learners by allowing them to gain necessary skills, knowledge and cultural understanding. As a result there is a growing need for the international and research community to place a focus on education of immigrants and refugees to preserve the continuity of learning in conflict and disaster contexts, open and enrich learning opportunities for them, and strengthen inclusion in host communities [3].

Children and youth are among the hardest hit by displacement and often experience prolonged interruptions to their education. Adults also experience such interruptions, along with the need to quickly develop their language skills in order to solve everyday problems, gain suitable employment or to access formal education. In addition to attending language classes, many refugees and migrants look for online resources and communities that will help them fill specific knowledge gaps or to build up their confidence in using the target language. The resources and communities are frequently accessed on mobile phones. This paper recognizes the huge potential of mobile technology for providing more efficient and sustainable support of immigrants and refugees, especially in relation to addressing their need for developing their language skills in the host country. Being competent in the language of the host country is identified as a common denominator and a strong enabler of integration [4]. At the same time, displaced communities bring with them their own languages, which in the new environment may mediate communication with their social networks in the host country or elsewhere in the world. The main question this paper aims to address is: How can technologies support language acquisition to aid integration into communities and classrooms?

In the following sections the paper will draw on recent research projects carried out at The Open University, in which we have worked with migrant learners to understand their use of mobile technologies, to create and evaluate a number of mobile

applications for informal learning scenarios, and to design learning activities based on personal interests and goals. As an institution that aims to make learning accessible to all, The Open University is keen to respond to social inclusion issues, refugee movements and education challenges by making learning resources more widely accessible and exploring new models of education delivery. Many of our research projects support these aims.

2 OPEN UNIVERSITY PROJECTS WITH MIGRANT LEARNERS

Mobile phones and other handheld devices are everyday technologies that are increasingly adopted for learning purposes. In the last few years, it has become apparent that location-based and context-sensitive resources and activities can be a powerful resource for language learning [5]. In two of our projects, MASELTOV and SALSA, we explored how location- and context-triggered learning might be supported by smartphones to assist recent adult migrants with language learning and social inclusion. The MASELTOV project developed and evaluated a range of services to support learning through daily activities in urban environments, while the SALSA project investigated how learners can be encouraged to engage with location-triggered language activities around a town. Both projects developed apps that were trialled with volunteer immigrant language learners. Both of them drew on the concept of incidental learning, "unintentional or unplanned learning that results from other activities" [6 – 1], recognising the power of authentic everyday situations and personally relevant contexts to motivate learners.

The European Union-funded MASELTOV project (Mobile Assistance for Social Inclusion and Empowerment of Immigrants with Persuasive Learning Technologies and Social Network Services) focused on the development of a smartphone suite of tools containing a range of integrated services (e.g. language learning, translation, navigation, social forum, finding local volunteers) that the target audience could use in their daily lives [7]. Underpinning the system was a recommendation engine that gathered data from the user's interactions, contexts and preferences. Several of the tools drew on locational data gathered by the phone to support the services. For example, by allowing the smartphone app to identify the user's location, better contextual recommendations for learning resources could be made. Working closely with organisations supporting migrants, the project organized field trials in several European cities.

The SALSA project (Sensors and Apps for Languages in Smart Areas), funded by The Open University in response to a call from the Milton Keynes smart city project 'MK:Smart', investigated location-triggered language learning activities via smartphones for learners out and about in an urban environment [8]. Working with tutors and English language learners from a local Adult Education Centre, the project team identified locations and contexts around Milton Keynes where communications challenges might occur. Twelve different scenarios were developed comprising

contextually relevant educational resources. The project made use of Bluetooth beacons distributed across a range of locations that sent prompts to a custom built Android based smartphone app and triggered relevant content when a learner's smartphone was within range.

Interestingly, SALSA field trial participants did not tend to use the app content at the location for which it was designed. For example, rather than approach the bus ticket sales desk with the app open on the page about purchasing a ticket, one participant preferred to study that content discreetly nearby, then enter the ticket office to practise the phrases she had just learned. MASELTOV field trial participants also indicated that requiring the active and obvious use of a smartphone to trigger learning resources (such as taking a photo of a sign in a public place to use the translation tool) can deter users from taking advantage of potential learning opportunities. Learners adapted the use of the provided apps to meet their personal goals, taking into account the local social and cultural contexts.

Another of our projects, Mobile Pedagogy for English Language Teaching, which was supported by the British Council [9], set out to help teachers understand the full range of opportunities for learning beyond the classroom. On the basis of interviews with international students, migrants and their teachers, inquiring about their practices, guidance was developed to enable teachers to design mobile learning activities for their students. This teacher-focused project has complemented our more learner-focused projects. At the same time, it has highlighted the importance of designing learning activities that are in tune with students' existing practices on their mobile phones and tablets, such as their use of social networks and their preferences in terms of applications and media.

In the next part of this paper we present a small exploratory study located within the field of community education in the UK – an arguably low-resource educational setting in the country. The study was undertaken by teachers as action research, largely designed as partnership between researchers and practitioners in a UK National Museum and in community settings. It is noted that this study had no direct involvement with refugees, instead it involved work with diaspora communities in the UK - young people who are second and third generation immigrants. It draws on popular approaches to educational research, i.e. action research and community-based interventions to support technology integration in a learning setting and trigger a discussion about the adaptation of such methods in the context of working with/for immigrants and refugees. It reports on technology deployed, methods used and lessons learnt that can be adapted and applied to refugee contexts.

3 LEARNING IN DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN THE UK

3.1 Study

This study was carried out as a community/classroom interventions in two community settings. Participants (13-17s) were attending Greek language lessons in Supplementary Schools (for a description see [10]). The aim was to examine the integration of web-based citizen inquiry technologies in and beyond the classroom along with methods of citizen inquiry as means to engage young people. It draws on a blended approach to learning and utilizes methods of inquiry learning (e.g. observation, data collection, reflection) and mobile technologies to facilitate young people's engagement in their learning.

3.2 Tools

The online Citizen Inquiry platform nQuire-it has been employed in the study (www.nquire-it.org). The aim of the platform is to assist citizens in conducting their own science investigations, enhancing the social investigation aspect and promoting scientific thinking and exploration of the world.

3.3 Lessons Learnt

3.3.1 Design for connections in and beyond the classroom. The design of the missions on the nQuire-it platform (e.g. #Looking for AllThingsGreek, #Picturing Cultures) allowed for young people to explore their own environments (e.g. home) with an aim of bringing their contributions back to the classroom. The design also drew on practices popular to young people (e.g. taking photos) to resource the implementation of the activities as a way to break down barriers between formal and informal learning.

3.3.2 Design for connections between the physical and digital experiences. The study built upon face-to-face formal instruction in the language classroom and gave attention to the blend of the physical and the digital experience with a purpose to bring the digital world into the physical world of the classroom and at the same time to represent real everyday experiences directly into the digital domain. Apart from facilitating online engagement with the nQuire-It platform and mobile technologies, the study had at its core specific physical experiences (e.g. a museum visit, inter-generational workshops).

3.3.3 Value the learners' everyday experiences and environments. The online missions that were created on the nQuire-it platform considered the learner's everyday contexts as a resource, hence the design took into consideration questions related to learners' everyday life (e.g., ItsAHabit), their material heritage (e.g. My very own museum) or their immediate environments (e.g., 'Picturing Cultures'). The artefacts (e.g. posts, photos) that were created by the participants fed back classroom lessons and discussions [10] and this was seen as allowing students' voice to be heard.

3.3.4 Build on tools and modalities students already use (e.g. mobile phones). The study highlighted the potential to use learners' own devices (Bring your Own Technology) especially due to the fact that community education in the UK is low-resource. In practice, applications already built (e.g. camera) enabled the transfer of visual information from one context to another. Despite BYOT's potential, the quality of the resources generated, the range of devices that students had – and support needed with them – was seen as adding to the teacher's workload.

3.3.5 Pedagogy-driven design of activities. The study followed a learner-centred approach and an approach to learning based on inquiry, which involves learners to engage in reasoning and problem solving and gaining a better understanding of research methods and approaches. The aim was primarily for young people to engage critically with ideas of identity and heritage and also develop speaking and writing skills, whilst the use of technology was seen as supporting this aim and the learning activities rather than driving the activities.

3.3.6 Develop a strong understanding of the context before applying the technology. The study built on work in partnership between researchers, community stakeholders and practitioners in community settings and a National Museum in the UK. The partnership was formed to address the needs of a highly diverse group of young immigrants for whom neither a foreign language approach nor a mother tongue approach was seen as appropriate. It was furher based on a firm understanding of the context of UK community education and learning in museums. Drawing on this example, it is argued that any implementation of technology in a community setting should rely on a strong ethos on valuing each other's expertise.

4 Conclusions

In the UK a growing number of initiatives that focus on migrant and refugee education are currently taking place in community settings, mainly relying on volunteers to take the initiative in dealing with many of the challenges and designing learning. It is widely accepted that technology can providing more efficient and sustainable support of immigrants and refugees, especially in relation to addressing language needs. This paper reported on some of The Open University's projects in the area of migrant leaning, and on a small community-based research project looking at the use of web and mobile technologies as a way to facilitate young immigrants' engagement in the learning of their community language. We believe the lessons learnt provide a useful context for work to be adapted and applied to refugee contexts and can contribute to the HCI research in these contexts.

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