TWITTER MOBILE APPLICATION: A SOURCE OF COMMUNICATIVE AND AUTHENTIC LEARNING

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Abstract. *Acknowledging the importance of information and communication technology for enhancing and supporting English language learning (White, 2006), this paper explores using mobile technology in language education. In particular, it focuses on the role of the Twitter app in assisting language learning through a combination of authentic and communicative methods and approaches, and reveals that the Twitter app can produce a unique learning environment, which, coupled with its social acceptance, has the potential to make it an exceptionally useful tool for integrating language learning into learners' lives outside traditional learning environments.*

Key words: *information and communication technology, language learning, mobile app, Twitter*

1. TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are so fundamental to human activity that is not surprising to witness the massive impact of ICT on all aspects of life including education. Nowadays, adult learners are usually agitated by various distractions inside and outside the classroom. That is to say that the stereotyped teaching methods are unpopular in this era of ICT generation. Its pedagogical importance emerges from the key role that ICT plays in enhancing and supporting the learning of a second language (White, 2006). Despite the fact that language theories attempt to justify the factors determining the success and failure of second language acquisition and learning, there is still no concise agreement on consensus or dominant theory (Ellis, 2008). However, research has convincingly shown that ICT has an ultimate impact on scaffolding second language learning. The rapid development in ICT and sciences, especially the integration of mobile learning approaches in language learning and teaching offer a favorable language learning atmosphere for educators and learners of diverse individual differences, learning styles, and cultural and educational backgrounds, through its audio- visual applications.

The integration of mobile applications in second language learning and teaching is considered as a phenomenal success. Mobile learning can positively contribute to second language learning through its applications that reflect communicative, authentic and contextualized materials. Viberg and Grönlund (2012) state that "it [is] difficult to distinguish the theory of mobile learning from other learning theories and approaches" (p. 14); therefore, exploring mobile learning and second language learning in depth through a

combination of authentic and communicative approaches reveals a supportive environment for ESL adult learners. Based on that, this paper aims to reflect on features of Twitter mobile application that can be used in teaching the four macro skills in the English language classroom through engaging learners in authentic and communicative tasks.

2. ICT AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

With English allegedly the most universally learned second language all over the world (Crystal, 1997), it is vital to explore the role that ICT plays in learning English as a second language. However, integrating ICT to learn or/and teach a second language requires consideration of some varieties which may reflect intensely on the process of language learning and teaching. First, the notion of using ICT for language learning does not seem to be restricted to a particular age group. Learners are being exposed to a variety of ICT from a very early age at home and by the time they join school or college, they may have developed at least a variety of basic 'digital skills' that aid them to participate in 'technology-driven' activities (Battro, 2004; Facer et al., 2003). Second, despite the fact that there is an increasing access to mobile technology around the world, there are still some differences in the chances of accessibility and usage among learners and institutions; thus a 'one size fits all' approach to using technology for learning is neither appropriate nor practical (Pim, 2013), as each context demands a particular approach to language learning in which educators decide upon 'when' to use and 'how' to implement ICT. Third, it is argued that not only ICT has the power to utterly transform learning, but also there are various opportunities by which ICT can actually serve to reinforce linguistic, social and cultural hegemonies rather than challenge them (Rasool, 2000). Nevertheless, unlike linguistic and pedagogical hegemonies, social and cultural hegemonies have a considerable amount of acceptance among adults for communication. That is to say that ICT has less educational influence as adults use it mainly for social entertainment and communication. Finally, as part of the ICT landscape, mobile learning continues to be used for all sorts of specific language learning activities. However, mobile learning seems to be particularly successful when applied in 'live' contexts where English is autonomously learnt through contextualized, authentic and communicative activities. That is to say, educators can create fabulous contextualized language learning opportunities that emphasize sociolinguistic and cultural aspects through different authorized mobile applications.

3. MOBILE LEARNING: FEATURES AND CHALLENGES

Due to the swift revolution of ICT, an agreed-upon definition for mobile learning seems to be lacking. Some initial definitions of mobile learning tend to focus on the learner rather than the technology (Winters, 2006; Naismith et al., 2004). Some other definitions, on the other hand, shed light on 'social mobility' rather than the learner or technology itself. Traxler (2007), for instance; argues that, mobile learning is not about 'mobile' or about 'learning'; rather it is part of a new 'mobile conception of society'. Furthermore, Sharples, Taylor and Vavoula (2007) define mobile learning precisely as the "process of coming to know through conversations across multiple contexts among people and personal interactive technologies" (p.225). This definition supports the context in which interactions thrill the knowledge and skills of the learners. O'Malley, Vavoula, Glew, Taylor, Sharples and Lefrere (2003)

argue that mobile learning refers to any sort of learning that takes place when the learners take advantage of learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies. Therefore, with respect to all recent emerging technologies such as smart phones, iPads, iPhones, MP3 players and laptops, mobile learning generally refers to any handy device that can aid learning anytime anyplace.

We are aware of the growing regularity of mobile and wireless devices, particularly smart phones and tablets, among the young generation. This availability of portable ICT provides benefits and challenges for the educational system. To start with, 'portability' of mobile technologies as the most significant feature, offers specific advantages (Kukulska-Hulme, 2013) for both learners and educators. Ogata and Yano (2005) summarize the foremost features of mobile learning which are permanency, accessibility, immediacy, interactivity and the situating of instructional activities. Evidence also suggests that there can be significant variability in educators' and learners' confidence with ICT (Lam, 2000, Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010, Ertmer et al. 2011). More importantly, the flexibility of mobile learning revolutionizes second language learning and teaching for it transforms physically-fixed classroom learning into an anytime, anywhere and any device learning atmosphere due to its small size and affordable cost. Another major feature is that mobile learning serves different learning styles; visual, audio and kinesthetic. Today's classroom environment consists of different learning styles which makes it difficult to deal with learners as a group. For this reason, Ming-li and Guo-chen (2008) assert that educators' knowledge is "the first step toward developing flexible, varied approaches to language instruction and toward creating a classroom open to style diversity" (p.31). That is to say that mobile learning can offer visual, audio and kinesthetic learners interactive and social tools that increase intrinsic motivation towards language learning. Added to that, Attewell (2005) believes that mobile learning has the capacity to enhance learners' 'literacy and numeric skills' to support their collaborative and independent learning experiences. Likewise, it allows learners to access and share information from any site, and can provide support through feedback and reinforcement (Naismith et al., 2004). Mobile technologies, in fact, offer learning experiences which can magnificently engage and educate contemporary learners and which are often obviously different from those afforded by conventional desktop computers (Naismith et al., 2004), since these mobile technologies are more personal, relevant and engaging. Together, all these benefits allow language learners to learn in their preferred sites and physical contexts outside classrooms or traditional learning environments and, consequently, unleash remarkable possibilities for creative uses in language learning and teaching.

However, mobile learning is not free of challenges, for it is argued that it poses some clear limitations and drawbacks. First, from a pedagogical perspective, mobile technology is just one of the means through which learning is aided. Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2009) believe that while mobile technology is essential for interaction, it "is only one of the different types of technology and interaction employed" (p. 22). That is to say that in spite of its distinguished acceptance among adults, language learning and teaching is not limited to mobile learning as the ultimate and the only tool for learning, since there are plenty of ICTs evolving and emerging rapidly through which language learning can be mediated. In line with educational issues, mobile devices may be seldom used for academic purposes. Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) pinpoint that "the primary function of mobile devices has been for personal and/or social purposes, as opposed to work or study purposes" (p.4). Some recent mobile applications, such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, and Twitter, are typically used for social communication rather than independent learning. Further educational shortcomings

which may affect the language learning and teaching process include limited length of written messages and inappropriate cultural context. The Twitter app, for example, has only 140 characters which, in fact, require its users to be very selective in writing the content of their messages.

Another major limitation related to mobile learning is technical issues. Chinnery (2006) argues that reduced small-size screen, poor audiovisual quality, virtual keyboarding, one-finger data entry and limited battery life, are some of the tangible technical limitations 'inherent' in the portability of ICT. Other major technical limitations, such as capacity of data storage, processor speed and compatibility of devices in terms of both operating systems and transfer of large amounts of data need to be considered when implementing mobile learning (Koole, 2009). The implementation of mobile learning; therefore, demands both educators and learners to seriously consider such limitations and seek the best opportunities that benefit the process of language learning and teaching in an information age.

4. THE TWITTER MOBILE APP AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The current concentration of the role of mobile applications in second language learning places a strong emphasis on the materials that allow learners to become independent and autonomous, and allow educators to explore new methods of making teaching and learning exciting and beneficial at the same time. Mobile applications have the potential for innovative educational use for they allow engaging learners in real interaction experiences and learning to occur in authentic and meaningful contexts which enable them to create, share, and communicate in real time (Hsu & Ching 2012).

Twitter is a free micro-blogging application that has been used by a huge number of users since its creation around 2006. Once learners install the application, they can sign up, create a profile and start sending tweets: short messages and/or updates of up to 140 characters through real-time and asynchronous communication (Gao, Luo, & Zhang, 2012). Learners can follow other Twitter users around the world and once following is accepted, communication and interaction occurs in real context between a Twitter user and followers of diverse linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds. Twitter messages, known as tweets, can be seen worldwide unless learners choose to restrict tweet delivery to just those following them. New tweets appear to 'followers' constantly, combined with tweets from other followers who can comment on the updates (Mills & Chandra, 2011). The Twitter app allows users to list their interests, associations, and update their profile page, to post tweets to their followers, to organize or tag tweets, and to forward tweets.

Twitter is impressively altered into a more purposeful social media tool for language teaching and learning as it transfers learning into a participatory process. Twitter creates opportunities for authentic learning and communication between both learners and educators. Learners can tweet their real events and share moments with their colleagues. Moreover, they can follow different language learning groups or hash tags to enhance their communicative competence in the four macro skills. Morgan (2014) believes that using Twitter encourages learners to exert better effort, because they have to publish their work for an authentic audience. Learners are more motivated intrinsically when they feel that real life events are involved in their learning by sharing daily communication needs and cultural experiences. Added to that, Twitter offers real social and cultural interaction with other learners with the same educational aims all over the world. Social engagement of the learners is extended

beyond the cultural perspectives of a local community to diverse groups that are geographically dispersed, such as groups of learners in online learning atmospheres (Hsu & Ching, 2012). Learners may extend their learning and communication beyond the classroom time. They can discuss assignments, projects and presentations, and share resources, knowledge and opinions via Twitter. Twitter can also motivate shy learners and low achievers, who may find face-to-face classroom environment stressful, to freely participate and express their thoughts to other classmates and to the real world as well. Educators, on the other hand, can further classroom discussions, keep learners updated about any related issues to their studies, offer guidance for assignments and projects and suggest some links or useful materials. Anderson (2011) states that educators can create a hash tag to track the conversations that are going on in and out of the classroom, answer questions, and share resources.

As a pedagogical tool, Twitter can provide access to large quantities of authentic input materials, and at the same time provide enough real world practice of the target language through communicative experiences. Using Twitter in language learning and teaching provide learners with a rich source of authentic and communicative experiences that improve the four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. First, authentic listening materials in Twitter guarantee 'comprehensible input' that develops learners 'true' listening ability in learning a second language. Second, real-world speaking tasks of exchanged topics in Twitter are best enhancing learners' involvement in speaking activities, thus encouraging learners to meet their communicative needs. Third, suitable, exploitable and readable authentic tweets and texts, that are based on the reader's linguistic recognition and background knowledge, are vital in enhancing reading comprehension. Finally, setting up expressive and purposeful writing tasks via a hash tag on twitter or writing groups is important to convey 'genuine' up-to-date topics of intrinsic interest to ESL learners.

To start with, authentic materials have profitable impact on second language teaching and learning. Gilmore (2007) insists that authentic materials are "a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort" (p. 98). Thus, they provide a manifestation of a wide variety of text types and language styles, exposure to real-language and cultural information, and relevance to the learner's desires and interests (Berado, 2006). These authentic materials have not been changed for ESL learners; hence, they are valuable for augmenting the 'communicative' aspects of the real-life language. Miller (2003) and Musallam (2007) in contrast, debate that unauthentic materials are 'artificially' designed for 'learning purposes' and are useful for teaching 'grammatical forms'. However, it is claimed that such materials present poor 'real' language because they lack the pragmatic competence provided by natural discourse. Lam (2002) underlines that unauthentic materials do not help the learners to develop their 'communicative competence' as they, in truth, lack interactional materials. They contain 'false-text indicators' that present perfectly formed sentences (Berardo, 2006). Therefore, Brown (2001) insists that language educators need to base their teaching of the language skills upon authentic materials which assist students "to see the relevance of classroom activity to their long-term communicative goals" (p. 258). Thus, Twitter is an up-to-date and immediate source of authentic materials that may involve a micro blogging of various radio broadcasts, news, conversations, vine videos, songs, articles, magazines, advertisements, brochures, blogs and tweets.

4.1. Listening

Listening is considered as an essential receptive skill that has received a great amount of interest in language teaching research. Krashen (1982) believes that learning takes place when a 'comprehensible input' is provided. Authentic audio visual materials available in twitter mobile app, for example BBC World News, documentary films, lectures and interviews with native speakers, can aid learners' comprehension in a non-threatening environment where their knowledge of the real world is broadened. Thus, authentic input of listening materials enhances learners' 'true' listening abilities by exposing them to real exposure of the language; hence, enhancing their self-confidence to listen contentedly to the target language (Thanajaro, 2000) as these listening materials reflect topics which have relevance to learners' daily experiences. Educators are advised to offer comprehensible authentic listening tasks that feature the voices of native speakers so learners can (i) pay attention to native pronunciation and grammar, (ii) decode the message through sounds and words and (iii) follow natural speed of conversational speech that has pitch, stress and intonation (McDonald, 2010). Subsequently, learners become more aware of the 'authentic input' which they incorporate in developing their communicative competence in their everyday interactions. The advantage of listening to authentic materials is that they give ESL learners exposure to native speakers' language and, as a consequence, to comprehensive input that aids their aural production of the language. Authentic listening on Twitter can include TV programs, films, radio broadcasts, songs, weather forecasts recorded lectures and interviews, to name a few favorable oral materials by learners.

4.2. Speaking

Speaking a second language is another important skill that demands a significant amount of authenticity. Authentic speaking materials aid learners' communication needs and are reflective of their real life. Learners usually assess their language learning on the basis of how fluent speakers they become. Hence, fluency is the goal of teaching and/or learning speaking skills that develop through the use of real-world tasks which require real communication on the part of the learners. It is argued that speaking tasks that reflect real world activities increase natural communication through the use of strategic competence. Ellis (1994) defines communicative competence as "the knowledge that users of a language have internalized to enable them to understand and produce messages in the language" (p.696). The production of these messages is mainly attained by the 'compensatory strategies' that learners manipulate to overcome any break downs in their communication. The use of real world speaking tasks enables learners to be more social and interactive in their conversations since the relevance of speaking tasks to the real world communication provides learners with self-esteem and security in their production of the message. Real world tasks can be (i) 'interactional', such as chatting to a colleague on Twitter, telling a classmate about an amusing weekend experience or exchanging opinions of a social event, (ii) 'transactional' such as explaining a need, asking for clarification and making a request, or (iii) 'performance speaking', such as giving a speech of welcome or conducting a class debate (Richards, 2008). The main focus of these tasks is to get the message across, to carry on the conversation and to achieve communicative goals of the learners. Twitter is an interactive tool that can provide an improvement during group discussions. Therefore, learners can use Twitter to converse with native speakers and their views about a certain topic to be orally discussed or presented to classmates on the next day. Additionally, learners can

videotape presenting information, in the Opera House, Al Alam Palace, The Wave or Jebel Sifah Resort, for instance, and share it with their followers or they can record a field report to share with classmates and have informative discussions about it.

4.3. Reading

Reading is perceived as a source of authentic input that enhances language learning. Alderson (2000) defines reading as "… an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed" (p. 28). It is believed that authentic 'contextualized' written texts play a vital role in teaching a second language as learners focus on the content and the meaning rather than the language itself (Oura, 2001). Hence, authenticity in reading reflects the interaction between the students and the text, not the text itself. Contextualized reading texts can be extracted from various authentic resources: newspaper articles, movie advertisements, sports reports, advice columns, restaurant menus, news report and the internet to name but a few (Oura, 2001). However, it is argued that these materials should have three features: 'readability', 'exploitability' and 'suitability' of content (Berardo, 2006). Firstly, the level of reading texts needs to be readable, suitable to the learners' level (Berardo, 2006). Secondly, exploitability of texts presents the extent to which students develop their reading competence by becoming good readers. In other words, reading texts that are not exploited to serve the learners' purposes in the real world have no real value in education. Thirdly, suitable reading texts interest learners and reflect their real life needs outside the classroom. To support these criteria, it is advised that authentic texts are combined with photos, diagrams and pictures that grab learners' attention and contextualize the content. However, it is assumed that the success or failure of comprehending any contextualized text depends on the recognition of its linguistic items; that is the notion of 'Bottom-up' process where the learners build up meaning by deep scanning of vocabulary and syntax. In contrast, reading comprehension built by some 'clues' in the text and by the learners' good schema knowledge is known as 'Top-down' process. Hadley (2001) emphasizes that comprehension is not a matter of simply processing the words of the message; rather it involves "fitting the meaning of the message to the schema that one has in mind" (p. 148). Therefore, the interpretation of written texts is based on the learners' interest, experience and background knowledge. It is worth mentioning that the two processes are complementary ways of understanding reading texts. Hence, language educators are recommended to deliver Twitter authentic texts that are (i) linguistically comprehensible, that is, texts containing vocabulary and structure beyond the learners' current level (Krashen, 1982), and (ii) meaningful and relevant to the learners' existing knowledge. Twitter is rich in reading tweets that can be utilized for supporting reading inside and outside classroom. For instance, tweets of news, celebrities, weather forecasts or hash tags are absolutely meaningful reading examples with readable, exploitable and suitable features for the learners. Additionally, learners can use it to read bits of information they need for their studies, projects or presentations for instance, or read some blog posts by other learners and share ideas or express opinions.

4.4. Writing

Writing is the toughest skill to acquire, yet it is "a unique tool for language learning" (Raimes, 2002, p. 309). Authentic writing activities can be considered as a useful way of getting learners excited about language and learning and can foster learners' creative

production. Learners need to consider not only the higher skills of generating and organizing ideas, but also they need to consider the lower skills of spelling, grammar and punctuation. These are the reasons why learners have the sense of fear and worry when they are asked to compose a simple piece of writing, not because of the difficulty of the writing itself, rather because of "the difficulty in doing it [writing] in a new language" (Raimes, 2002, p. 307). Researchers argue that learners' comfort, confidence and fluency should be addressed through the use of purposeful and meaningful writing activities. Rigg (1991) and Brown (2001), for instance, stress that language activities that engage learners in functional, purposeful, and real language experiences can lead to better learning and long-term retention. Therefore, educators are advised to use content that inspires learners' engagement and communication. That is to say, educators have to base the writing tasks on personal experiences, social issues and cultural issues that learners encounter in the real world (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), in other words, activities relevant to learners' lives, interests and communities. Most importantly, Brown (2001) claimed that 'real writing' is more common in language classes than 'display writing'. Real writing refers to the situation when the reader does not know the answer and hence seeks to know some information. In comparison, display writing targets to present the learners' knowledge where their educator is the only reader who judges the piece of writing (Brown, 2001). Researchers (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2001; Olshtain, 2001) advocate the communicative role of writing that encourages learners to convey messages to unknown readers as well as to their educators. However, it is advised that the purpose of the writing is recognized by learners so that writing is "more effective and appropriate to the communicative purpose" (Reppen, 2002, 320). Subsequently, non-contextualized and purposeless writing is conceived as meaningless writing. Davis and McGrail (2009) believe that purposeful writing tasks on the Internet often improve learners' word choice, grammar, punctuation, and syntax. Learners who find essay writing challenging, may enjoy writing short tweets. It is easy for them to write one simple sentence quickly rather than write a full essay or an email that requires a lot of accuracy. Kurtz (2009) found out that tweeting throughout the day improves word choice, punctuation, and ideas of the learners. When learners post their writing for others to view on the Internet; they attempt to be more precise (Howard, 2011). They often check their writing more closely to find out whether those outside the class would comprehend their message. This mainly happens because they are aware that they write for a real audience who might comment on shared ideas.

4.5. Challenges

Nevertheless, the benefits of using Twitter authentic materials in learning or/and teaching the four macro skills are not without their challenges. First, authentic spoken materials such as weather forecasts, airport and station announcement, radio talks and interviews might be "too culturally biased" (Tamo, 2009, p.76); therefore, such materials are difficult to be understood outside their language community. Added to that, listening materials might be in various accents, hence this makes it too confusing for enhancing learners' language learning in the early stages. Moreover, authentic materials used to teach receptive skills may include complex and mixed language structures so that lower levels may have a hard time decoding the texts (Kim, 2000). The vocabulary, content and length, for instance, might be above the learners' level and might cause a burden for both educators and learners. That is to say, the 'comprehensible input' is not available, thus

learning will not be facilitated for learners to develop their communicative competence. Finally, the writing skills may have tasks that are prepared for native speakers; therefore, they are a little bit challenging for second language learners to digest, for they are meaningless and purposeless to the learners. Informal and slang languages are commonly used among micro bloggers. Therefore, one way to overcome these challenges is being selective by integrating mobile learning tasks that have communicative value that learners can use in their daily communication.

5. CONCLUSION

Mobile devices are now radically transforming societal notions of discourse and knowledge, and are responsible for new forms of art, employment, language, commerce, and learning (Traxler, 2007). In education, mobile technology has a positive impact on learners' engagement with, understanding of and motivation for the subject matter and facilitating communication and collaborative work among learners (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006c). The Twitter mobile app can be effectively used as a tool aiding language learning and can produce a unique learning environment which, coupled with its social acceptance, has the potential to make it amazingly useful for the integration of language learning into learners' lives outside traditional learning environments. Teaching with Twitter may motivate students, create more opportunities for students to express thoughts, help develop digital literacy, encourage collaboration, and improve language skills (Morgan, 2014). However, authentic materials found on Twitter have three main limitations, namely, cultural bias, different accents or dialects that hinder learning in its early stages and the variety of complex and mixed structures that prevent understanding. These need to be considered by language educators when planning lessons with Twitter.

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