

## USING MOBILE PHONE APPS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY: ATTITUDES, PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract.** *This paper reports on a study that explores students' attitudes to mobile learning and their perceptions about their practice and challenges of using mobile phone applications in language learning. The participants are undergraduate students studying English at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. To collect data, a questionnaire is used on whether students use their mobile phones as educational tools in learning English inside and outside classrooms, and how they do so. The results show that mobile learning is gradually becoming popular among Omani undergraduate language learners who use a variety of apps as educational tools outside the classroom. However, the results indicate a lack of adequate support on the part of many language teachers who either do not allow the use of mobile phones in class or provide limited guidance for using mobile apps in independent language learning.*

**Key words:** *mobile learning, the English language, undergraduate students, Sultan Qaboos University*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. From mobile phones to m-learning

Communication, entertainment, and consumption were once to be the main purposes of mobile phones (Seipold, 2012) but over time they have changed to be a tool for everything (Stodd, 2012). To download a ringtone was once the most exciting thing to do with your mobile phone (Godwin-Jones, 2011). These days mobile phone users have hundreds of millions free downloadable mobile software applications (apps) to choose from and the choice is not easy (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Unal & Unal, 2014). According to Johnson, Adams and Cummins (2012), “these simple but useful apps have found their way into almost every form of human endeavor (p.7). And education is not an exception (Ozuorcun & Tabak, 2012) where “new literacy practices in online contexts” (Hafner & Miller, 2011, p.68) have clearly emerged.

The general concept of e-learning which includes Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has evolved by the arrival of mobile devices to form a new concept known in literature as mobile learning. Brown (2005) considers mobile learning as an extension of e-learning. It can be simply defined as “a dynamic learning environment

through the use of mobile technologies especially in the field of education” (Keengwe & Bhargava, 2013). Recently, the interest level of m-learning has increased among many language educators because these devices are possessed by almost every student and supported with amazing apps that make learning of every single element in any field attractive and accessible anytime and anywhere (Kukulka-Hulme & Traxler, 2005; Johnson, Adams, & Cummins, 2012). Consequently, these devices with their huge potentials would definitely revolutionize the learning process (Mahat, Ayub, Luan, & Wong, 2012). A learner of English language becomes hesitant of what to download if he/she looks for a dictionary for example. There are countless sorts of free dictionaries with very cheap ones available in the market. All the hard copies of dictionaries that students used to buy in the past now are available online and many of them can be used even offline by installing them in their mobile phones. There are also numerous apps for learning English and some well-known international institutes like the British Council and BBC designed their own free versions of such apps to be available for free globally. Many academics have accepted the fact that today’s mobile devices are tomorrow’s textbooks (Kim, Mims, & Holmes, 2006), as hardcopies of books are being replaced by electronic versions (eBooks), and it is becoming the trend going forward to be the norm (Abachi & Muhammad, 2014). The faculty members in Indiana University are trying now to turn textbooks into apps and find great ways to comment on texts (McFadden, 2012). This trend is to meet the needs of the new generation and to have effective learning by providing tools that support the process of learning and teaching in the 21st century.

To many educators, the challenge is to find links between the use of these devices outside the classroom and the required educational elements (Seipold, 2012). In fact, using these devices normally requires many competences that are also needed in education, such as communicating, organizing, ordering, planning, assessing, evaluating, producing, etc. (Seipold, 2012). Seipold (2012) argues that since these competences have become part of the ‘routines’ (so-called “cultural practices”), by mobile phone users, there is a need to reconsider them to be integrated into school learning practice and curricula. Not surprisingly, this phenomenon has been of great interest to many researchers (see Cochrane, 2011; Godwin-Jones, 2011; Seipold, 2012; Keengwe & Bhargava 2013; Khrisat & Mahmoud, 2013; Kafyulilo, 2014; Abachi & Muhammad, 2014 for more information), as these digital tools are deemed to be ways to shift education to the new era and be compatible to the “digital natives” as Prensky (2001, 2005) describes students of today.

### **1.2. A Change in generation and contextualizing mobiles phones**

Although widening access to and ownership of smart devices by all students should be recognized by English language teachers, there are teachers who are still reluctant to allow their students to touch these devices during class time. To many teachers, these devices are for communication and entertainment, and not for education. They think that these devices should not be used in class as they may cause disturbance to both teachers and students (Begum, 2011). In fact, mobile phones can be used for educational purposes as there is much useful educational software which students can install and use inside and outside the classroom as their mobile devices are available with them all the time. Prensky (2001), explaining a clear change in today’s generation of students, states that “today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach” (p.1). He calls this generation “the native speakers of technology” (Prensky, 2005, p.8) or

“digital natives” (Prensky, 2001, p.5) because they have grown up with technology and are already fully engaged with digital lives inside and outside the classroom (Mahat et al., 2012). To exemplify, Khrisat and Mahmoud (2013) found that their Saudi students do “not only have the most up to date mobile phones but they are also professional in using them” (p.170). Similar findings were reported in a study by Ott, Haglind, and Lindström (2014) who found that almost half of their secondary school students were ‘expert users’ of mobile phones. As a consequence, many researchers encourage teachers to take advantage of new tools and applications and support students by creating new learning experiences for them (Prensky, 2005; Kukulska-Hulme, Traxler & Pettit, 2007; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; Ott, Haglind & Lindström, 2014). In Kukulska-Hulme’s view (2009), “irrespective of whether teachers decide to adopt new technologies in formal education, learners are found to be already using them to support aspects of their learning” (p.161).

Indeed, for many students, mobile phones have already become a part of their learning process even though these devices have not been fully integrated into formal classes yet. Students are using them outside formal classes informally the way they like. This process can go under what is called autonomous learning and many educators are manifesting its importance in education nowadays. Al-Busaidi and Tuzlukova (2013) state that students learn at their own pace and become more autonomous because such applications give learners a less controlled environment and thus, an opportunity to improve their skills. Therefore, educators cannot ignore what is happening around them and they need to accommodate themselves to new changes that are taking place so the gap between learners and teachers can be bridged; otherwise, the whole process of both teaching and learning will be affected.

### **1.3. Bridging formal and informal learning by m-learning**

A number of researchers have pointed out the role of mobile phones in contextualizing and authenticating language learning (Prensky, 2001; Reinhardt & Nelson, 2004; Prensky, 2005; Thornton & Houser, 2005; Chinnery, 2006; Shin, 2006; Herrington & Herrington, 2007; Kukulska-Hulme et al. 2007; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; 2010; Al-Shehri, 2011; Al Aamri, 2011; Begum, 2011; Cochrane, 2011; Keengwe & Bhargava 2013; Khrisat & Mahmoud, 2013; Kafyulilo, 2014; Abachi & Muhammad, 2014). Prensky (2001) believes that not computers, but mobile phones that are currently banned in many schools, are the most important tools that would engage the 21st century students. Nowadays, they operate as ‘high-tech mobile computers’ (Andersen, 2009) that feature the same functions (Cui & Wang, 2008; Kukulska-Hulme, 2010), namely, short messaging service (SMS), graphics, user-controlled operating systems, browsers, camera functions (still and video), geo positioning, etc. Some mobile phones have sensors, fingerprint readers, and voice recognition, and what more. Additionally, mobile phones are being constantly improved. For example, Corbeil and Corbeil (2011) report on new developments in mobile phones from 2007 to 2011 that have been integrated in learning. Definitely now in 2015 we have a longer list of mobile phone applications and more sophisticated functions that have been added. In language learning, Chinnery (2006) argues that these functions help to “communicate language practice, access to authentic content, and task completion” (p.10). He concludes that what these benefits indicate is “the potential MALL has in expanding social inclusion in language learning” (p.13). Besides, Kukulska-Hulme (2009) supports this idea that “outside the classroom, mobile and wireless technologies enable learning to be more directly connected with real world experiments and artefacts” (p.160). Likewise, Reinhardt and Nelson (2004) and

Shin (2006) argue that technology can engage English language learners with authentic and meaningful materials and can enhance their sense of community with contextual elements of an out-of-class learning environment. Indeed, mobile technology has become a social and cultural phenomenon (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007, cited in Kukulska-Hulme, 2009, p.158) that has effective learning and pedagogical potential to create educational environments that encourage social interactions (Kekwaletswe, 2007) and better knowledge transfer.

#### **1.4. M-leaning and social networks**

Current mobile phones are supported with apps, for example, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc., that help users to connect to the world and have a sense of community by belonging to sites that are known by social networks where users create virtual communities, exchange ideas, information, news, and even emotions. They are also found by many researchers to have an effective influence on students' learning. By providing social media in mobile learning, more engagement, collaboration and interaction between students, autonomous learning environment is maintained (Sharples, Taylor & Vavoula, 2005; Fisher & Baird, 2007; Petersen et al., 2008; Benson & Chik, 2010; Al-Shehri, 2011). Benson (2001) argues that learner autonomy is fostered by the use of technology in language teaching and learning when providing a rich environment of resources and tools that are easy to access for outside class activities for learning. According to Petersen et al. (2008), mobile blogs are effective tools that enable student-to-student interaction in diverse language situations, and there arise authentic opportunities for learners to interact with native speakers. Moreover, Al-Shehri (2011) argues that using "informal social media such as Facebook increased students' engagement in the learning task, and motivated them to implement contextual elements from their own environment" (p.8). Cochrane (2011) believe that mobile learning has "become a viable platform for contextual learning that bridges formal and informal learning environments in and beyond the classroom" (p. 251).

Since students in Oman generally use mobile phones extensively and for almost everything, there is a need for a study to explore how students at Sultan Qaboos University deal with mobile phones when learning English and how they use these mobile devices as educational tools inside and outside classrooms.

## **2. THE STUDY**

### **2.1. Objectives**

This study aimed at finding out undergraduate level 6 students' perceptions on how they use their mobile phones in learning English inside and outside classrooms. It also examined their views about mobile phone educational apps that can be used to enhance English language learning inside and outside the classroom, and challenges they face when using their mobile phones in language learning.

### **2.2. Methodology**

#### *2.2.1. Setting and subjects*

The study was carried out in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University in Spring 2015. The participants were 75 students from level 6 in the FPEL program from

different colleges. Thirty nine students were from the College of Medicine and College of Nursing. There were 18 students each from both the College of Law and the College of Science. They were mainly science stream and the selection of these students was random as the questionnaires were distributed to them after taking the permission of their teacher. The researcher got responses from 64 students, 32 were male and 32 were female (see Table 1 for detailed demographic information). This equality in gender happened coincidentally without any intention on the part of the researcher. This study did not intend to look at gender differences in using mobile phone apps.

Table 1 Demographic information

College	Level	Males	Females	Total
Medicine and Nursing	6	22	17	39
Law	6	8	10	18
Science	6	1	5	6
Total	-	31	32	64

### 2.2.2. Research instrument

To seek students' use of mobile phones in and outside classrooms and their perceptions, a questionnaire was designed by the researcher and distributed to 75 level 6 students from different disciplines from different sections of students in the foundation program at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University. The format of the questionnaire was designed to get a wide range of information to serve the study. Part one consists of five questions asking for participants' demographic information. Part two consists of seven open ended questions with multiple choice response options, some of them asked questions about the participants' practices and perceptions on how they use mobile phones in their learning inside and outside the classroom. Hard copies of the questionnaires were distributed to three sections of undergraduate students, and one electronic version was sent by email to one section of students but the researcher got only 6 responses.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Results show that all students who participated in the study own mobile phones. Seventy percent of the students indicated that they had always had internet access while 23% of the students said they had had it only sometimes. There were only two students who said that they rarely had internet access and another two said that they never had it. There were 36 students (56.2%) who indicated that they used their mobile phones in class while 28 students (43.7%) never used them. According to the students, they use mobile phones during the class time "if the lecture is very boring" or if they "need to check the meaning of the word." As for their reasons not to use mobile phones in class, they do so in order "to pay attention to the teacher", be "more focused", and "more concentrated". Some of them also believe that it is disrespectful to use a mobile phone in class. According to other students, "education is more important than mobile phone" and class is "time to learn and pay attention to teacher." It was also obvious from some students' comments (e.g., "Because my teachers said don't use it in class" that mobile phones are not welcome by many teachers and students feel nervous to use them in class as they feel

they lose attention and focus on the teacher and some feel confused if they attempt to use mobile phones during class. This result agrees with what Al Aamri (2011) found in her study. According to Al Amri (2011), students like to use mobile phones but their teachers do not allow them to do so for the reasons that those identified in our study. By looking closely at students' responses, it becomes clear that some students try to use their mobile phones during class to look up words while others feel reluctant as it is whether not allowed by teachers or teachers do not integrate mobile technology in their lessons. Those students who use mobile phones in class, do it secretly without the teacher's permission.

The participants had different views regarding using mobile phones in class. Some students thought it had two sides, positive and negative, while others thought it is either positive or negative. Those who said that using mobile phones in the classroom is positive mentioned specific uses of mobile devices that they thought they need in class. They mentioned that they need it to check the meaning of words by using dictionaries or check and search for some information from the internet or use it as calculator function in their mobile phones. One student justified its positive effects. According to him, students want to use their mobile phones in class "because they use them everywhere and every time" and it is a "good idea to teach them the way they like".

On the other hand, students who viewed using mobile phones in class in a negative way believed that some students chatted during class using social networks. As a result, they lost attention, got confused, wasted time, could not understand the lesson, focus on the lesson and on the teacher. Some students thought it was not useful to use mobile phones in class as they do not help them to improve their language skills while others thought that it was disrespectful and impolite to use mobile phones in class. One student indicated that teachers got angry when mobile phones were used; therefore, they got low marks if they used mobile phones in class. Some students admitted that they chatted in class if they noticed pop up messages and they needed to reply to them. However, they admitted that this had a negative effect: they got busy with their device rather than their teacher or the lesson. These findings go in line with what Al Aamri (2011) found about mobile phones distracting students' attention and disabling them to focus in class. However, teachers should instill their students with knowledge of the educational potential of mobile phones, and teach them to use them constructively and positively to serve the class objectives and facilitate learning inside the classroom. For example, Engel and Green (2011) pointed out some considerations for using mobile phones in classrooms and they are briefed as follows: "awareness and knowledge, policies, student education and understanding, and parent involvement" (p.44).

Forty students (65.6 %) students who participated in the study indicated that they use mobile phones for checking words and some indicated that they do so if teachers allow them. Thirteen (20%) students indicated that they use it to get information from the web and others pointed out if the teacher allows. Ten (15%) students said that they chat during class especially if they receive an important message or if the class is boring. Nine (14%) students indicated that they do not use mobile phones at all. Comparing these numbers, it is clear that a big number of students used mobile phones for a good purpose if teachers allow them; they use mobile phones as translators for example. Students used different dictionaries to look up words they encounter in the classroom as teachers speak or while students themselves read or write. A good percentage of students (20%) indicated that they also used it to search for information which is also another good aspect of the presence of these mobile devices in the classrooms. On the other hand, there were some

confessions that these devices can take students away from the lesson and distract their attention by using these devices to chat via social networking apps like WhatsApp and BBM. This finding is also noted by Begum (2011) who reported that students used to play and SMS during class hours. Similar findings have been also reported by Al Aamri (2011) who found that teachers fear that these devices will cause distraction for both teachers and students. She also found that some students play video or music which caused noise in the classroom. It is also worth mentioning that there were 9 students who did not use their devices in the classroom at all. Some students still have this idea that these devices should not be used in class as students used to have this rule at school before they joined university.

The students listed forty two free mobile phone apps that they use in learning English inside and outside classroom, Among these are sixteen different dictionaries and translation services and/or tools, e.g. Merriam Webster, Google translate, English translator, Oxford dictionary, Dictionary.com, The Free dictionary, AB Dictionary, Dictionary online, Longman dictionary, Smart Dictionary, Golden Dictionary; a number of apps for English for Specific Purposes, e.g. Medweb, Medical Dictionary, Anatomy, etc.; social networks, e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, BBM and WhatsApp, etc.; not so well known but useful apps for language learning, such as Hinative, Babbel, Brainscape, etc. Most of the apps were found by the students independently with no guidance from their language teachers on what to pick up from the market and install in their devices. This may lead to confusion or misunderstanding if these apps are reliable or designed by trustworthy sources. These findings go in line with some researchers (Prensky, 2005; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; Mahat, Ayub, Luan, & Wong, 2012; Khrisat & Mahmoud, 2013; Ott, Haglind, & Lindström, 2014) who state that students are already using these mobile phones informally outside their classes effectively and professionally. These students are actually reflecting autonomous learning by trying available apps to enhance their language learning. Such apps might provide them with extra exercises in different language skills and motivate them to learn individually outside the classroom to be connected with language for a longer period with something that is interesting and innovative.

According to the students, dictionaries are most popular among them and are followed by social networking apps, for example, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook. Other useful apps, as students' responses reveal, are Radio FM, English Vocab quizzes, English 1000 words, Quizlet, Snapchat, and Hinative. Indeed, there are apps that are well-known and students share them, while other apps are used by few, although they are useful for learning English. Thus, these apps should be publicized by teachers. From these results, teachers should know that students use these mobile phones for language learning outside classrooms informally as these apps are being available for all users and for free. Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2007) recommend that in order to gain the most benefit from mobile learning experiences, students have to be guided even if they seem to be in control of these devices because their way of dealing with these devices may or may not be creative and beneficial for them. Kukulska-Hulme (2009) also argues that learners will struggle without teacher's direction and guidance. As teachers, we need to encourage students, guide them to these apps or at least encourage them to look for apps that help them in their study by bringing them to the class, or by sharing them with other students after teachers check them and approve their effectiveness and their appropriateness to the level. This procedure is recommended to avoid unreliable sources of apps that may not be of good quality or may not be designed by trustworthy people or companies that may cause confusion or damage users' devices if they contain viruses for instance.

Engel and Green (2011) contend that enabling students to have access to information and use available resources to locate information is an important 21st century skill that students should have. Undergraduate students at Sultan Qaboos University, according to their responses, use mobile phones as supportive devices to equip them with what they need in their studies. They utilize them naturally and informally (Santos & Ali, 2012; Ozuorcun & Tabak, 2012) to find meanings of new words easily and quickly, search for information, create groups with friends to communicate and develop language skills, watch educational videos, chat English, share information about assignments and tasks, listen to lectures in English, etc. To exemplify, one of the students wrote: "I use mobile to open some internet pages and links. Also, to open the YouTube. And I use screenshot to capture the screen when I find something I need. Also, I use "keep" (like "note") to write something that is important or I will need".

In the students' opinion, the most useful app for English language learning is WhatsApp. This view was shared by 33 undergraduate students who believed that this app could enable them to create groups so they could chat, send messages, share photos, video and audio files, share information about their language course, class time, place, etc. According to students' responses, WhatsApp can help them to "share ideas", "discuss topics they study in class", "study new words", "improve spelling", etc.

Another popular app among Omani undergraduate language learners was Twitter that is globally viewed by many as a useful tool to enhance communication and collaboration (Cochrane, 2011). Seventeen students, who participated in the study, believed that this app was effective when they wanted to "follow English people", "meet more people from different countries who talk English", "communicate with English people", "read tweets in English and chat with native speakers", etc.

Facebook (12), BBM (10), Instagram (6) and YouTube (4) were also popular with the students. For example, they use Facebook, because they can "meet more people from different countries who talk English", "chat with people in English", "read scientific news", "share and get information", "use it to improve reading skills". As for BBM, students find it useful because, according to them, this app for chatting that requires users' PINs instead of phone numbers help them to "communicate in English with the teacher and classmates", "share images, sounds, and many other files", "learn new English words", "have discussion groups and stay connected with people who encourage learning", "share with the teacher and classmates information in English and pictures which help to improve English language skills. Instagram, in students' view, which was designed to share photos and videos, comment on them and reply to other users' comments, can be effectively used to "find many people who speak and write in English" and improve reading skills. YouTube which is currently used by many students around the world for educational purposes (Jones & Cuthrell, 2011; Watkins & Wilkins, 2011) is also popular among undergraduate students in Oman. They believe they use YouTube because they can "listen to lectures and movies", "understand information", "watch educational videos", and "share with many friends and teachers".

Being active in such social networks helps in the overall learning process that according to Al-Shehri (2011) "goes beyond the classroom" and has the potential to establish learning practices that are not only based on learners' needs and experiences. In his study, Al-Shehri (2011) found out that using "informal social media such as Facebook increased students' engagement in the learning task, and motivated them to implement contextual elements from their own environment" (p.8). Since millions of students use these social networks in their mobile phones, Bosch (2009) and Eren (2012) affirm their



usefulness and potential as an educational tool. Besides, Faizi, El Afia, and Chiheb (2013) believe that social media websites and learning languages are inseparable because they found that they enrich the language learning experience of learners. These social networking websites increase and facilitate interaction with native speakers around the world. Faizi et al. (2013) reported that social media, such as Facebook and Twitter have become areas where learners can practice language skills with native speakers.

In spite of all the positive impact reported by the students, some of them mentioned that they faced challenges when using mobile phones for study whether in or outside the classroom. These included, for example, teachers' negative reaction when mobile phones were used during class time; technical issues (e.g. slow internet, bad internet connection, etc.); lack of perfect apps for individual learning needs and pace of learning; etc. Some students pointed out that when they use mobile phones in class they often get distracted. To exemplify, one of the students wrote: "When we want to use it for study, we use it to play." Some of these challenges were also found by Al Aamri (2011), such as, for example, teachers preventing using these devices in the classroom and misuse of mobile phones which causes distraction and loss of focus in class. Other challenges are can be resolved by raising the awareness among teachers regarding the potentials of using mobile phones in education. Technical problems are always a challenge but improvements are constant and day by day mobile devices are much faster, affordable and accessible.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper discusses how undergraduate students in the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University use mobile phone apps to support their study inside and outside the classroom. Findings show that all students, who participated in the study, own mobile phones and over 70% always have access to the internet. Results also show that students use a variety of mobile applications to support their learning English although they mostly use them informally without their teachers' direction or guidance, and sometimes face technical and functional challenges. The results show that many students have a generally positive attitude toward using mobile phones in language learning. They report that they use them in class if teachers allow them to look up meanings from dictionaries installed in their mobile phones or search the internet, and so those applications are perceived by most to be useful to their learning. On the other hand, some students report that they hardly use their mobile phones inside the classroom because teachers do not allow mobile phones in their classroom, as they cause distraction and noise. Nevertheless, when students find a chance to check their social networking apps during the class, they do, but in doing so, they lose attention and focus on both the lesson and teacher. Additionally, findings reveal that students are finding their way to try out other supportive apps that may connect them to English outside their classrooms. They practice some informal activities and engage themselves in some popular social networking websites to find other ways to learn the language. Results show that students are already informally using different well-known social apps like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube for language learning purposes. They create groups in these apps to discuss issues in English, follow other users from different countries and create educational environments away from university rules and formality. Therefore, learning happens naturally and takes place voluntarily and autonomously. However, in order for our students to take advantage of

the available mobile phone applications, teachers should be more involved in guiding students to reliable applications and helping them in effective use of these applications in language learning.

##### 5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Having questionnaires as the only data collection instrument is one of the limitations; it would be resourceful and richer if other types of evidence are used such as follow up interviews with students as well as teachers to find out why some students had such perceptions and practices about using mobile phones in their studies. A bigger sample size of participants would give a wider and more general view of the perceptions of Sultan Qaboos University students and it would be even better if students from other universities in Oman were also involved. The author believes that other studies are needed to find out the possibility to design curricula that integrate smart devices and effective ways to utilize them in a manner that engage students into learning English.

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