LEFT TO MY OWN DEVICES: LEARNER AUTONOMY AND MOBILE-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Javier E Díaz Vera, (Ed.). Emerald Group Publishing Limited, UK. 2012. Innovation and leadership in English language teaching series, v. 6. 250 pages; dimensions 9.1 x 6.1 x 0.9 inches

Reima Al-Jarf

King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
E-Mail: reima.al.jarf@gmail.com

1. SUMMARY

This new book from Emerald Group Publishing Ltd contains ten chapters as follows: (1) Language learning defined by time and place: A framework for next generation designs by Agnes Kukulska-Hulme; (2) Towards a rationale for mobile learning by Frank Farmer and María Elena Llaven Nucamendi; (3) Language learning on the move: A review of mobile blogging tasks and their potential by Anna Comas-Quinn and Raquel Mardomingo; (4) Learning on location with AMI: The potentials and dangers of mobile gaming for language learning by David Robinson; (5) Mobile learning in action: Towards a formulaic approach to second language acquisition by Yanling Su Jones; (6) Mobile technology and student autonomy in oral skill acquisition by Reima Al-Jarf; (7) Mobile technology, collaborative reading, and elaborative feedback by Philip Murphy, David Bollen, and Craig Langdon; (8) Bringing the world into the institution: Mobile intercultural learning for staff and students by David M. Palfreyman; (9) Workplace mobile-assisted second language learning: Designing for learner generated authenticity by Lisa Gjedde and Mads Bo-Kristensen; (10) Learning Greenlandic by SMS: The potentials of text messages support for second language learners in Greenland by Barfuss Cathrine Ruge.

Chapter 1 reports the results of a series of studies led by the author that investigated how college students use mobile technologies to support their language learning. Interview data showed that students undertook a wide-range of activities such as repeating lists of words and phrases, using flashcards and vocabulary games, and making use of recordings and camera features to capture samples of authentic language. Mobile language learning was used as a regular, habitual pattern of activity and in a spontaneous, unplanned way. Learning took place at home and in locations such as public and private transport, cafes, parks, gyms, sports complexes, beaches, while waiting for people and transport, and to a lesser degree at a desk, at work, or while walking between buildings. Instructors can take into consideration the type of activity, time and place of practice reported in the chapter, when planning language learning activities.

In chapter 2, a mobile learning project for using cell phones in an-English-for-tourism course in Mexico is described. The relationship among technology, the service provider, and the end user are also described, to show how human and paper resources are fully integrated with MALL. The chapter relates the use of cell phones to CALL, ESP and learner autonomy. The project is still at the design stage. The chapter focuses on the

pedagogical design that makes use of appropriate characteristics of the cell phone for delivering the material, exploring language, practicing, and assessing learning. It defines the typology of technologies, learner autonomy, learner experiences, language learning activities, and feedback, access, hardware, software, finance and security affordances.

In chapter 3, Comas-Quinn and Mardomingo examine how mobile blogging can be used for language learning. They highlight the advantages of mobile blogging and give examples of authentic situated tasks that can be used for language learning such as capturing and sharing real experiences or cultural event and using the target language to address a target language audience. They also outline a number of issues that have to be taken into consideration when implementing mobile blogging such as choice of content, defining teachers and students' roles, providing adequate training for teachers and students, sharing and collaboration, and personal and cultural factors that may affect the success of mobile blogging. The authors also highlight the challenges that mobile blogging still faces, such as maintaining the right balance between intervention and students' freedom, and assuring the quality of learning experiences connected with mobile blogging.

As for chapter 4, it focuses on the European Union funded AMICITIAS Project as a central case study. The aim of the project is to integrate language learning into the process of playing and discovering things about a place. The game is based on specific real-world locations including Barcelona, Toledo, Galway, Sicily, Sardinia and Bradford. Six games were constructed; each designed to improve user skills in at least two languages: A primary language, through which the main game interaction occurs and a secondary language, which is touched on at an introductory level only. The choice of languages is based on the EU's target minority language and the locations chosen on the basis of likely encounters with these languages and associated cultures. The user should acquire the skills necessary to accomplish the game tasks, both by interacting with the mobile application and also with the place itself. The chapter points to ways in which individuals may negotiate privacy, spatial awareness, and technology interaction for learning within public areas. The intermingling of intercultural, touristic, historical, and language learning elements into location-based scenarios and narratives is highly innovative.

The potential for mobile learning (m-learning) to facilitate the initial stage of L2 learning is addressed in chapter 5. The author discusses three lessons learned from 3 distinct areas of research that might be relevant for all L2 acquisition through MALL. These cover the following: (1) The augmentative communication systems, such as TALK, designed to promote conversational fluency in disabled, nonspeaking individuals; (2) the artificial use of prefabricated material in real-life conversation by intermediate and advanced L2 learners; (3) the over-reliance on a limited range of formulaic sequences (phrases) to be nativelike by proficient L2 learners'. The chapter establishes a balance between relying heavily on formulaic material and promoting creativity in the use of individual words.

In Chapter 6, a group of English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) students in Saudi Arabia used a self-study mp3 English listening and speaking program that consisted of short sentences that the students could read, listen to, and mimic as many times as they needed. Posttest results showed that students who used the mp3 self-study lessons made statistically significant improvements in listening and speaking abilities which were noted in listening comprehension, oral expression, fluency, pronunciation correctness, and increased vocabulary knowledge. Results also showed positive correlations between practice time and number of lessons covered. The participants reported positive attitudes toward the mp3 self-study listening and speaking lessons and reported several benefits.

Similarly, Chapter 7 reports results of an experiment that investigated the effects of introducing elaborative feedback from an instructor in a mobile learning environment. Before reading a text and completing the comprehension exercises, freshman students majoring in EFL in Japan were randomly assigned to an anonymous partner. Then the student pairs were randomly selected to receive either computer-generated correct response only or elaborative feedback from an instructor upon request before the computer-generated correct response. Later, all of the participants individually completed a second reading-comprehension exercise with computer-generated correct response only. Reading comprehension posttest results showed no statistically significant difference between the computer-generated feedback and elaborative feedback from the instructor. However, qualitative analysis showed that elaborative feedback from the instructor was helpful in producing quality interaction between the students.

Another mobile tool discussed in chapter 7 is the mobile phone camera which was used by local Emirati EFL students at Zayed University to enhance learners' input into the curriculum and to promote intercultural learning among foreign university instructors. The students took photograph of the local culture with their mobile phone and sent them to new foreign instructors who sent questions about the photos to the students and received answers from them. The photographs triggered a dialogue between the new instructors and students, which was followed by a writing task for students. Exchanges between the instructors and students enhanced instructors' understandings of the local Emarati culture, and the students' autonomous learning of English, while explaining their culture to their foreign instructors, who are unfamiliar with it.

In Denmark, Gjedde and Bo-Kristensen describe a three-year MALL project for adult workers who need to learn Danish and acquire knowledge of the Danish workplace culture. The project aims to develop innovative and growth-enhancing MALL for employees of small and medium-sized enterprises. The student-workers recorded situations from their everyday life and work environment, using their mobile phone voice, video and text recording tools, uploading those recordings to the project server, communicating those new insights via mobile media to fellow learners and teacher, and reflecting on the phenomena recorded in the formal classroom. Although the project is still in its pilot phase, preliminary findings indicate a high level of learner ownership, engagement, and motivation. The mobile learning environment supports the meaningful, collaborative production, and sharing of learner-generated authentic content.

The last chapter describes how daily mini linguistic tasks were sent as text messages in second language teaching for immigrants in Greenland, and carried out face-to-face in collaboration with local speakers of the target language to overcome social and practical barriers that prevent them from using and practicing the language. Tasks sent by text messages were found to be an easy-to-use, low-tech m-learning solution. The exercises, being limited to 160 characters, were quickly made, and they seemed to support the development of better inter-personal relations between immigrant learners and local speakers of the target language.

Overall, the book is important for researchers, graduate students, academics, practitioners, course designers, and foreign language instructors in the field of online and ICT-based learning. It is specifically important for those interested in the emerging field of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in general, and its potential for foreign/second language teaching and learning, in particular.

The book provides several methodological approaches and mobile tools that the authors have used in the study of MALL. Those include interviews to explore learners' experiences mobile devices to support language leaning, mobile blogging, games, phrasebook, MP3 self-study lessons, augmentative communication systems such as TALK, elaborative computer-generated feedback in a collaborative reading comprehension exercise specially designed for mobile devices, images taken with students' mobile cameras to create intercultural exchanges between them and their instructors, authentic learner-generated contexts, and daily mini-tasks sent by text messages. MALL materials that were student-generated or prefabricated were utilized to develop listening, oral fluency, reading, lexical and intercultural communication skills.

The studies reported in the book were conducted with participants from different geographical and cultural backgrounds: Japan, Mexico, Greenland, Spain, Italy, UK, Ireland, UAE and Saudi Arabia, for general as well as specific learning purposes. MALL took place in the classroom, out of class and in the work-place. M-collaboration was carried out between immigrant learners and native speaking instructors and between expatriate native speaking instructors and local second language learners.

Results reported by the researchers in the book indicated that MALL was effective in developing language skills and inter-personal relationships among learners and instructors, and shed light on the interaction of time, space, personal, social, intercultural and motivational variables.

Coming from different teaching and learning contexts in Denmark, Greenland, Japan, UK, Spain, Mexico and UAE and Saudi Arabia the authors map the present and future of MALL, showed how learning activities using mobile technologies can be designed to support innovative educational practices, assess MALL, and show how social and cultural gaps can be bridged through MALL.

However, this volume on MALL contains some studies that are still in progress and whose results are unknown yet (as in chapter 2). Readers may not be able to trace the results of those studies in the future. The future publication of another version of those studies with the final results is uncertain. In addition, the volume does not investigate the integration of mobile tools and Apps such as You Tube language videos, mobile news, podcasts, live chat, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, test preparation and social networking Apps in developing specialized terminology, grammar, academic listening, reading and writing and standardized test-taking skills, in general, as well as ESP contexts by young, beginning and advanced-level adult learners, in different geographical locations such as china, Korea, India, Turkey, Iran, South America and Europe. It is hoped that these gaps are bridged in the future in a new volume investigating such issues.