

Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition through Mobile Assisted Language Learning

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Abstract

Vocabulary is essential in second and foreign language acquisition. Appropriate and sufficient knowledge of vocabulary helps the learners understand others and express their own feelings. Hence vocabulary acquisition is the key component to master any language. Mobile-assisted language learning is a language learning approach which consists of using handheld technologies to teach and learn a language. Mobile devices can induce increased vocabulary learning, encouraging ubiquitous learning through their portability and access to various activities anytime, anywhere. This paper aims at exploring the benefits of Mobile assisted Language Learning in vocabulary acquisition by a second language learner. It also discusses the vocabulary activities and strategies that can be facilitated through different mobile devices so as to fit to the needs of the learner.

Key Words

Vocabulary acquisition, Educational technologies, m-learning, portability, vocabulary learning research

Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is often viewed as a critical tool for second language learners because a limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication. Underscoring the importance of vocabulary acquisition, Schmitt (2010) emphasizes the fact that language learners tend to carry dictionaries instead of grammar books. Wilkins' quotation (1972) describes clearly the importance of vocabulary for communication; "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed". Most learners, too, acknowledge the importance of vocabulary acquisition. In my experience as a teacher, I noticed the fact that students usually find it difficult to speak English fluently. They usually consider speaking and writing activities exhausting because they keep on using the same expressions and words and very soon their conversation is abruptly interrupted due to missing words. And the main reason for such communication problems is the lack of vocabulary.

Indeed, the mastery of the complete vocabulary items is beyond not only foreign language learners but also native speakers. In fact, one's vocabulary size depends largely on the purpose of the learner; if the purpose is to achieve native-like proficiency, then it is supposed to have a vocabulary size similar to a native speaker (Schmitt, 2010).

On the whole, the basis of every language lies in its vocabulary which has a crucial impact on the mastery of the different aspects of the language. Hence, improving learners' vocabulary size facilitates learning the language as well as communicating effectively and appropriately. In other words, the more EFL learners acquire vocabulary items, the better they learn the language.

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

With the remarkable growth of educational technologies, Mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL), as a language learning approach, has started to make its presence felt in the field of education, emerging from the field of mobile learning (meaning). Mobile technologies are attracting a wide range of educators and EFL practitioners due to the large number of advantages they provide; such as flexibility, ubiquity, and personalization. Quinn (2000), who viewed m-learning as e-learning through mobile computational devices claimed that m-learning is the intersection of mobile computing and e-learning.

Mobile-assisted Language Learning describes an approach to language learning that is assisted through the use of handheld or palmtop technologies (Valarmathi, 2011). This new wave of educational technology uses a wide range of mobile devices. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008b) explicate that unlike CALL, MALL opts for a variety of handheld technologies, often with internet connection, ranging from ultra-portable laptops and handhelds to smartphones, mobile phones, MP3 and MP4 players, digital voice recorders and cameras. Thus, Mobile-assisted Language Learning is a branch of technology-enhanced learning which can be implemented in many forms of education including face-to-face, distant or on-line. In fact, MALL has the potential to assist learners and to reinforce their learning process at the exact point of need and in ways that are congruent with the learner's lifestyle. MALL then gives EFL learners the opportunity to learn languages not only in a classroom but also outside a classroom; whenever they desire and wherever they are.

There are various criteria that should be fulfilled in order to use mobile learning specifically for educational purposes. Despite the fact that this new wave provides a wide range of affordances, mobile learning still faces some educational challenges.

Significance of Mobile-assisted Language Learning

Mobile technologies offer a wide range of practical uses in language learning. Some of them are

Portability

Due to their size and weight, mobile technologies can be taken to different places, and at any time. When compared to PCs, devices used in MALL are more lightweight. Thus, they are more practical and provide the opportunity to bring new technology into the classroom as well as outside the classroom.

Anytime-anywhere advantage

The mobile technologies provide learning at the time we want, and in the place we want. That is, mobile learning lies for Just-in-Time-and-Place learning where web browsing and applications can provide instantaneous information to a learner's fingertips in moments.

Ubiquity

Mobile devices are readily available. This new wave of technology continues to spread among the world population due to the unlimited functions the mobile devices provide.

Cost

Mobile devices are typically less expensive than PCs and laptops, which makes them affordable for language learners. This affordance consolidates bridging the digital divide.

Interaction and Engagement

Mobile learning facilitates learner interaction with teachers; administration, and amongst peers. MALL also enhances learners' engagement because it fits different learning styles and enables learners to partake in learning activities.

Motivation

Learners get motivated when they experience new tools. The widespread ownership of different mobile devices increases commitment to using and learning from them because learners feel secure and spontaneous.

Collaboration

Due to the communication features of mobile devices, learners can work on collaboration among each other. For instance, several learners at different locations may perform the same activity. They can share files, multimedia, apps, and so many learning materials.

Challenges of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning

Notwithstanding its benefits, MALL also poses related challenges. Those challenges may differ from one device to another.

Technical Barriers

M-learning poses a number of technical challenges. Battery life of mobile devices and connectivity are at the top of challenges. Most of the time, learners have to limit their online connection times, while sometimes they may not have internet at all. In addition, screen size, key size, and limited audio-visual quality may cause visual problems to learners while performing activities delivered in small chunks.

Educational Barriers

M-learning still faces some educational and social challenges that decelerate its integration within teaching and learning process. Funding and affordability still are one of the obstacles faced in using mobile devices in education. For instance, some educational applications require paying a sum of money. Few learners may pay, while others are not able to take in charge the high costs. In addition, developing the appropriate theory for m-learning activities may be a challenge for practitioners. There is also a risk of distraction for learners. M-learning may disrupt learner's academic achievement because of misuse of devices and applications.

Nevertheless, with the rapid growth in innovative technologies, companies try to improve the mobile devices features to suit the various fields.

In spite of these challenges a few motivational features were also identified in learning with mobile devices. They are

Control over Goals

In the context of informal learning, learners have the control over their goals; they set to partake in defining the tasks and activities they wish to engage in. Learners, therefore, feel free and intrinsically motivated in learning with mobile devices.

Ownership

Furthermore, the personalised nature of mobile devices seems to give learners a sense of ownership which is often highlighted as a key motivational factor. M-learning is viewed as a personal learning process because mobile devices are viewed as individual personal property when compared to other kinds of digital tools.

Fun

Mobile devices are viewed as a source of entertainment. In the context of m-learning, this feature helps learners to engage in the learning process without getting bored.

Communication

Many mobile devices are made to for communicating. This feature allows learners communicate among each other's in a collaborative way.

Learning-in-context

Recognizing the context is the most distinctive feature in m-learning. To put it simply, mobile devices enable learners to access to whatever information they need, in whatever the context they are in, and share this information with others. To elucidate, learners can access to web sites from their mobile devices, downloading files at the time they need them.

Continuity between Contexts

Due to the portability of mobile devices, learners have the chance to use the information captured in one context in other different context. This feature provides continuity between different settings, especially in informal learning; enabling learners to support their learning process over time and in different locations.

These affective factors seem to be interrelated and therefore suggest that learning with mobile devices is likely to be highly motivating and engaging.

Vocabulary Acquisition Activities and Strategies through MALL

The rapid growth of mobile devices has brought new perceptions into the field of vocabulary acquisition. The digital devices assist the process of acquiring new vocabularies through various mobile activities. Researchers have been investigating the area of vocabulary acquisition with regard to mobile devices usage in order to compare between the traditional methods in teaching and learning vocabulary that rely on paper and pen, and the new methods

that rely on mobile technologies. The studies differ as the tools and techniques differ; some studies focused on using text messaging as a powerful tool to deliver vocabulary related activities, other studies focused on the device itself. However, various mobile vocabulary activities and tools may be personalised by the EFL learners so as to fit their needs. Here are some selected examples of vocabulary activities and strategies that can be facilitated through different mobile devices.

Text Messaging

Text messaging seems to be the most frequently employed tool in vocabulary learning research. This may include explicit as well as incidental vocabulary learning activities. In other words, it can be through deliberate messaging of vocabulary items, for example, a teacher sends a word per day through SMSs to their students, as it can be through unintentional vocabulary acquisition as one may send SMSs and emails using EFL. Text messaging through social media is considered as an effective means to learn vocabulary. It can take many different forms, such as wikis (Wikipedia), blogs, microblogs (Twitter), social networking (Facebook), video sharing (YouTube), photo sharing (Flickr), and shared bookmarking (Pearl trees).

Games

Different studies have revealed that EFL learners can make vocabulary acquisition an entertaining, funny, and motivating task through selected games. The rise of different educational games dedicated to learn vocabulary enables EFL learners to acquire new vocabulary items. Vocabulary games include crossword puzzles, picture-word matches, word scrambles, and so many other games. These educational games help in developing vocabulary knowledge in an entertaining way.

Mobile Applications (Apps)

Mobile applications, or apps, are a few of the available offers of mobile devices that can enhance vocabulary acquisition. The applications vary as mobile devices learners' needs and strategies vary. The mobile apps range from flashcards, notebooks, dictionaries, translators, to e-books/audio books, and so on. EFL learners may download the application that suits their learning styles. Another tool for vocabulary learning are mobile dictionaries which are good alternatives for hard copy dictionaries; they provide not only definitions and synonyms, but also abbreviations, antonyms, translations, idioms, phrasal verbs, and so many other options. One may also use the notebook application to make a documentary of collected vocabulary. One may download the application accessed through the appropriate operating system (Androids, laptops, desktops) the newly acquired vocabulary items.

Websites

With the arrival of the 3G mobile devices, the problem of internet connection has been partially solved. Thus, EFL learners may take advantage of the different websites that provide a wide range of vocabulary activities, anytime and anywhere. So, EFL learners may take advantage of numerous websites that may fit their learning styles and enhance their vocabulary acquisition.

Exploiting the Mobile Features

One may exploit the various features available in the mobile device such as the camera, the voice recorder, Bluetooth, MP3/MP4 player and so many other features. Learners may use the camera to take a picture of something they want to know its name, as they may use it to produce a short movie or animation show of some vocabularies they have acquired. They may also record their voices as well as native speakers' conversations to learn the pronunciation. In fact, this would make it possible to extend MALL activities, namely vocabulary related activities, to the low-tech and low-cost mobile devices.

Conclusion

Vocabulary acquisition is the key component to master any language. Hence, ESL learners should be aware of the key notions of vocabulary development in order to better enhance their vocabulary knowledge. Understanding key notions of vocabulary and how vocabulary is acquired can help learners adopt the effective strategy that suits their needs and styles. In addition, it is significant to know how vocabulary items are processed and stored in memory. The mobile devices have become a part of the EFL learners' everyday routine which facilitates the vocabulary learning process. They also help bridging the gap between classroom (formal learning) and the outside world (informal learning). Thus, MALL is proved to be effective in enhancing EFL students' vocabulary acquisition. To conclude, both EFL teachers and students are concerned with using mobile devices as new educational tools in an appropriate manner so as to achieve better pedagogical results.

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