

Using Smart Phones in Language Learning – A Pilot Study to Turn CALL into MALL

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Abstract. The popularity of smart phones has increased enormously in the last few years. Because of the increasing penetration of these devices and the above-average willingness of our students using new tools and devices in language courses, we decided to design a voluntary pilot project for mobile language learning for students who learn German as a second language ($N = 70$). In our project we decided to use busuu.com, because of its easy registration process, the clear design, the very active and helpful busuu community and primarily, because of the provided tasks and materials, which are available via PC and via mobile devices too. The voluntary pilot project started in March and ended in May 2013. Every week, the students had to finish a lesson of their own choice and they could give feedback and share their experience during the project in the learning management system of the school. In May, we asked the participants how they used their devices in language learning, their experiences with language learning with busuu, what they felt were ideal learning environments for mobile learning and the types of activities they felt that their mobile devices were suited for.

Keywords: smart phone, mobile learning, MALL, CALL.

1. Introduction

The popularity of smart phones has increased enormously in the last few years. In addition, MALL research has multiplied as well (Palalas, 2011; Steel, 2012; White & Mills, 2011), although according to a MALL literature review most of the reviewed studies are experimental, small-scale and conducted within a short period of time (Viberg & Grönlund, 2012).

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According to a survey from 2011 ($N = 81$), one in every three students learning German as a second language at our institution owned a smart phone. In our last survey from 2013 ($N = 70$) we found that almost half of our students learning German as a second language now have a smart phone.

Building on the increasing penetration of these devices and the above-average of willingness of our students to using new tools and devices in the language courses, we designed a pilot project about mobile language learning for students who learn German as a second language ($N = 70$). Participants were enrolled for the project on a voluntary basis.

2. Method

2.1. The participants, the tool used and the pace of the project

The participants of the project were students of our college ($N = 59$, $M = 21.03$ years) who learned German as a second language. For the purposes of the project a mobile language learning tool had to be used. Because of its easy registration process, the clear and functional design, and the very active and helpful community, *busuu* was chosen for the present project. A special advantage of *busuu* was that it provided tasks and materials which are available via PC and mobile devices. The *busuu* mobile application can be run on both Android and iOS devices. The voluntary pilot project started in March and ended in May. During the project the participants had to finish a lesson of their own choice weekly and they could also give feedback or share their experience in the learning management system of the school.

2.2. The qualitative data of the project

In May we asked the participants about their opinions and experiences with *busuu*. We used three questionnaires: an ICT, a smartphone and a MALL questionnaire. They are available on our research blog (<http://ict-research-blogspot.com>).

3. Discussion

3.1. The main findings of the ICT questionnaire

As the results indicate, our students are technically well equipped. Every student has an internet connection at home and the majority (60%) have a quick internet connection (ADSL, cable modem, mobile internet).

97% of the students use a laptop instead of a desktop computer. In contrast, our institution almost exclusively owns desktop computers instead of laptops. 97% of our students own a mobile device and 82% of these devices are smart phones. Furthermore, almost every fifth student (19%) has a tablet.

Computers at home are mainly for fun, communication and homework. The vast majority of students (92%) use the computer at home for finding fun information and watching videos on the internet. 81% of them participate in social networks (e.g. Facebook) and send emails; 61% of them use chat. 69% of students do their homework on the computer.

Desktop computers available at school are used only by a fraction of the students on a daily basis. The highest every-day-value stands for “download, upload or browse material from the school’s website” (15%) followed by “browse the internet for schoolwork” and “use e-mail at school” (10% alike). These ratios indicate that teachers (except for language teachers) at our institution use computers in the classrooms very rarely.

According to the survey, students use computers more than 60 minutes a week in mathematics, marketing and accountancy lessons (2% in each) and lessons that were not listed in the questionnaire (24%). The only exception are the language lessons where the ratio comes to 86%.

PowerPoint and Excel dominate the list of applications. Tasks that students can do by themselves are the following: create a presentation (100%), use a spreadsheet to plot a graph (85%), edit digital photos (68%), create a multi-media presentation (47%) and create a database (34%).

For the majority of the students it is very important to work with a computer (73%) and playing or working with a computer is really fun for them (76%). Nevertheless, the majority of students have a pragmatic approach to technology; they are not using computers because they are very interested in them (61%), but because they see their advantages.

3.2. The main findings of the smartphone questionnaire

73% of students own a smart phone, most of them have one from Apple, Samsung or Sony. Most students can control the frequency of smart phone usage, while only 12 % use it more than 4 hours per day. There are no restrictions at our institution regarding the use of mobile phones, so 37% of the students use their phone during

lessons. Sending messages (15%), browsing the internet (14%) and listening to music (12%) are the three most frequently used services by our students.

On average the students have 18 installed applications on their devices. Only half of the students download an application every week. If they do so, they typically check either the appstore (35%) or follow the recommendations of their fellows (33%).

3.3. The main findings of the MALL questionnaire

Before the project started, only two students had used a language learning system like *busuu*. Apart from one feedback, all other reactions on the first impression were positive: “Funny, happy surface”, “Just like a game or Facebook”. The students participating in the project liked *busuu* very much, 79% rated it good or very good. Although the majority (64%) thinks that acquiring a foreign language only with *busuu* is not possible, they nonetheless see it as a helpful tool in language learning.

92% of students would not pay after a 7-day-trial-period for the premium membership. Interestingly there were only two students who paid for a service on the internet.

Almost all of the students mentioned vocabulary as the real strength of *busuu*. Because of lack of the Hungarian language the typical language setting of students was German-English (all of our students speak English) and in their comments many students added learning a lot of English words and idioms. Some of the students said that *busuu* was helpful not just for learning new stuff, but also for reviewing and practice.

According to the students’ feedback, the strengths dominated clearly over the weaknesses. The mentioned strengths were that (1) language learning was playful and easy, and the information provided was not overwhelming, (2) audio helped acquire the pronunciation, and (3) the vocabulary supported many common situations and a vast variety of topics. Students also liked the interactive online communication with other users, the immediate feedback, and the idea that their writing tasks were corrected very quickly by other *busuu* users.

Most students did not add any weakness, but if they did so, they found the fee for premium membership too high. Additionally, some of them missed their native language (Hungarian) equivalents from the bilingual glossaries and had imagined more challenging tasks. Some of the students found *busuu* boring after a while.

Students also articulated their opinion about effective language learning methods. Despite the fact that the mobile language learning application *busuu* was very well received by most of the participants, they still need, according to the feedback, real (mostly oral) communication with real persons; so language learning is still something lively and non-artificial.

The majority of the students think that the most effective way to learn a foreign language is learning it abroad. For many students oral skills are essential (e.g. communicating with native speakers, learning through conversations, dialogues). Private lessons are welcome by many of them as well. Some of the students are aware of the importance of every-day-practice and motivation, and there are still many students who believe that the “conservative learning method” with books and exercises is the key to success (“Everyone should learn the basics first”).

4. Conclusions

As the technical conditions for mobile language learning are given – smart phones are available for the vast majority of students (82%) and everyone has an internet connection and a laptop at home –, in the present project we looked for a mobile language learning solution, which combines computers and mobile devices. If we could integrate the mobile devices in our language teaching practice, our students could gain valuable additional learning time outside the school and that could improve their language learning efficiency.

The mobile language learning application chosen for the project, *busuu*, was positively received by our students. However, *busuu*, at least for the time being, had a serious limitation in large scale language teaching. The 7-day-trial-period is way too short for an effective use of the app in practice. And since teachers may not expect their students to pay an extra fee for a language learning tool, free alternatives or a, presently not available, educational package of the provider is sought after. A further alternative would be the collaboration of several educational institutions to get funding for common MALL projects.

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