MOBILE ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (MALL): WILL IT EVER BE AN ENGLISH LEARNING REALITY IN SRI LANKA?

A.M.M. Navaz [1]

[1] Department of English Language Teaching, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka. Email:navazamm@seu.ac.lk
.

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:
*Mobile;Language;
Learning;phones;
English; Sri Lanka;*

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is becoming a popular term along the line of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) in the Western arena. Yet in Sri Lanka CALL and MALL have not sustained a place among the ESL (English as a Second Language) Learners. Unavailability of CALL software in Sri Lanka and high cost of software available internationally, along with the difficulties in maintaining computer laboratories make CALL unpopular. On the other hand, mobile phones, especially smart phones, have become popular and commonly available among the Sri Lankan University students. In the present context, though mobile phones are used for learning English their use for language learning is not studied among university students in Sri Lanka. The objective of this study is to find how the fourth year students at the Faculty of Arts of a Sri Lankan university use their mobile phones in English classes for learning English. In addition, this study explores the possible uses of mobile phones for learning English. Observation, followed by a written report and in-depth interviews with students are the main sources of data collection. In this study, it was revealed that students use mobile devices mainly for acquiring vocabulary skills. They check spellings or obtain the meanings of words. Sometimes they access internet service for translating sentences and also for browsing model

essays, letters, etc. In addition, they use mobiles for sharing information via WhatsApp and Viber. Nevertheless, these uses seem to be not productive enough for language development like the way students use CALL for learning a language.

INTRODUCTION

We live in an increasingly mobile world, where travel and migration are more common and mobile devices are a part of everyday life (Kukulska-Hulme, et al., 2015). Since the 2000s, the number of mobile devices available has significantly increased and mobile devices have widely penetrated into everyday life (Fujimoto, 2012). Mobile devices include smartphones, hand computers and iPad. Hence, in this study smartphones are considered as mobile devices. In fact, it has been reported interestingly that in some countries in the world the number of mobile phones has exceeded the population of the country. For example, in Russia it is claimed that it has 1.8 times more active cell phone accounts than people, whereas Brazil has 1.2 times higher (Pramis, 2013). In Sri Lanka, according to Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRC), the number of Cellular Mobile Telephone Subscriptions has been estimated to be around 27,157,647 (Report of TRC, March 2017). It is notable that the population of Sri Lanka is 21.2 mn and the Cellular Mobile Subscription per 100 inhabitants as at 2016 December is 123.7. These figures indicate the rate at which the mobile use has been tripling in a developing country like Sri Lanka, compared to the developed countries. Researchers are thinking about the possibilities of informal learning or out of class learning activities (Bahrani, 2011). Learning via mobile phones can create different learning opportunities for students (Başoğlu and Akdemir (2010). With mobile learning, learners will be empowered since they can learn whenever and wherever they want (Ally, 2009) and therefore mobile learning is considered to be more flexible. It is also believed that mobile phones and smartphones just like personal digital assistants and MP3 players support learners on the move and can be used for open and distance learning as an alternative to handheld computers (Ellis, 2011). The practical difficulties and cost of using computers for language learning (CALL) (Navaz and Sameem, 2013) can make mobile learning more popular among learners.

Use of Mobile phones is increasing by leaps and bounds. Mobile Phones are the most powerful, popular and fast medium of communication (Mehta, 2012). Further it can be claimed that we live in an increasingly mobile world, where travel and migration are more common and mobile devices are a part of everyday life (Kukulska-Hulme, et al., 2015). The

four main ways in which mobile devices are typically used at the moment are to support communication, for content delivery and creation, to encourage personal engagement, and in contextual learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006).

The learning with mobile phones has been known with different names, especially mLearning for language learning, MALL (Mobile-assisted Language Learning) or MALU (Mobile-assisted Language Use) (Hockly, 2013). In this paper the term MALL is used. Herrington (2009) exhibited the ways in which mobile learning can be incorporated into a higher education learning environment. They are:

1. Real world relevance: Use mobile learning in authentic contexts

2. Mobile contexts: Use mobile learning in contexts where learners are mobile

3. Explore: Provide time for exploration of mobile technologies

4. Blended: Blend mobile and non-mobile technologies

5. Whenever: Use mobile learning spontaneously

6. Wherever: Use mobile learning in non-traditional learning spaces

7. Whomsoever: Use mobile learning both individually and collaboratively

8. Affordances: Exploit the affordances of mobile technologies

9. Personalise: Employ the learners' own mobile devices

10. Mediation: Use mobile learning to mediate knowledge construction.

11. *Produse*: Use mobile learning to produce and consume knowledge.

 (Herrington et al., 2009: 134)

The research studies on the use of mobile phones for language learning are on the rise (Fujimoto, 2012). These studies follow along the lines of studies that investigated the use of different devices in language learning. For example, use of iPods and the use of mobile phones for delivering course materials and bulletin boards for second language learning (ibid).

LITERATURE REVIEW

El Hariry (2015) elaborates the uses of mobile phones for language learning. He explains that most mobile phones are equipped with functionalities including SMS, MMS, Facebook, Twitter, internet access, mp3/mp4 player, digital camera, video recorder and many can run multimedia contents including audio and video. Some mobiles have special inbuilt learning software such as edictionary, flash card software, quiz software, voice recording and listening.   He adds how the mobile phones can be used for language learning.

Through recording facility, learners can be guided to record their communication and after listening to their records, they can be asked to improve their weak areas. Mp3/Mp4 can be used in playing audio/video clips pertaining to English instructions. Students can record interviews or conversations outside the classroom and later on they can play them in class for feedback and discussion. Through a memo recording feature, most phones can be used to collect language samples from TV or radio (ibid).

Karimkhanlooei and Fooladi (2015) studied the effect of vocabulary learning by using SMS versus a traditional method of language learning (using flashcards) among 35 dentist students at an Iranian university. Students were assigned to two groups. One group received the specific vocabulary through short message system (SMS) while the control group was asked to learn using flashcards prepared. To collect the data, two vocabulary and reading comprehension tests were administered. At the end it was found that the students who learnt vocabulary using SMS performed better than the traditional learners. But in a previous study by Alemi and Lari (2012) among Iranian university freshmen students it was found that learning vocabulary using SMS did not bring any significant impact among the students compared to traditional way of learning using dictionaries. But the students who learnt via SMS were highly motivated to learn. In a similar study in a Turkish university Başoğlu and Akdemir (2010) found that vocabulary learning using SMS was effective. This study was conducted among 60 students studying in the Undergraduate Compulsory Preparatory Program of a public university in Turkey.

Thornton and Houser (2005) found that Japanese university students were interested to learn English vocabulary lessons more using mobile devices compared with students who had regularly studied using identical materials on paper or Web. In addition, seventy-one percent of the students in this study preferred receiving these lessons on mobile phones rather than PCs. Watanabe (2012) studied the students' use of mobile devices such as smart phones and tablet computers among the second year students learning Japanese at a university in Australia. The study showed that mobile devices are gaining popularity but at the same time the students are more convenient with the use of desktop computers at home to access the university's LMS (Learning Management System).

As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, Fazeena, et al. (2012 & 2015) conducted an online survey among the undergraduate students and found that students liked to adopt mobile learning to learn language. The analysis of the results showed that most of the students have a positive attitude towards mobile learning and believe that mobile phones could be used to enhance English proficiency. Other than these two known studies, other studies have not been surfaced with regard to the use of mobile technology for language learning. Hence, it is believed that the present study will shed light into this emerging area and will pave way for further research and practice in the area of ESL teaching and learning. The objectives of the study are to find the present use of mobile phones and possible uses for learning English. Thus, the study focused on the following research questions:

1. What is the perception of ESL undergraduates with regard to the use of mobile phones in language learning?
2. How do they use their mobile phones in ESL classes for language learning?

In order to answer these two research questions the following methodology was adopted.

METHOD

This study was carried out at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka which is one of the National Universities in Sri Lanka, established in 1996. The university is located in the Eastern coastal belt in the Ampara district. There are around 4000 students from three ethnic communities studying in this university: Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils. In addition, a few international students are also studying. There are six faculties in the university, namely Arts and Culture (Humanities), Management and Commerce, Applied Sciences, Engineering, Islamic studies & Arabic Language, and Technology. This particular study was carried out at the Faculty of Arts & Culture, which is the oldest and largest faculty.

This study used a mixed method approach for collecting data and analyzing. A questionnaire survey was followed by focus group discussions with students, along with classroom observations. Fourth year humanities students who were in different streams of their special degree were the respondents for this study. Students were allowed to use their mobile phones during English classes and mostly these students after learning English language courses for three years would feel easy to be respondents for the study. They followed a course called English for Communication and there are 66 students on the course which is held in two parallel sessions. For this study, a group of 34 students who were taught by the researcher was involved.

The students' mother tongue is Tamil and some of them have been studying in English medium for their degree. They belong to the age group of 22 to 23. Students were told that they could use their mobile phones in English classes for language learning purposes. Students were observed in their ESL regular classes for a period of 5 weeks to see how and why they used their mobile phones in classes and at the 6th week a discussion was held with them. Students were not told that they were being observed. As the researcher was the lecturer in-charge, the observation was easy. For Focus Group Discussions, students were met in two groups at different times. Before commencing the Focus Group Discussions students were asked to write their views on the use of mobile as a group activity. The discussions focused on the present and potential use of mobile phones for language learning.

Then again for three weeks students were observed and another focus group discussion was held at the 12th week. This delay in the discussion occurred as the students were unavailable at the 10th week. The discussions were held apart from the lecture hours and students were met in two groups. On both occasions it was encouraged to have the same students and in the same number but due to circumstances beyond the control a few students were absent for the second discussion and two new students appeared in a group.

In addition, the views of the English Instructors were also accommodated.

FINDINGS

Availability of Mobile phones

Among the students of this study, only 3 students did not have a smartphone. Due to personal reasons they didn't want to use it, they said. The smartphones have all necessary features and of different make and models. All have access to internet and are currently enjoying the Wi-Fi facility given by the university free of charge.

Uses of phones

Most of the uses reported by the students are for non-educational purposes (table 1) and are given in the order of priority (table 2). Nevertheless, 80% of the students preferred to use mobiles for language learning purposes.

Table 1: *Different purposes of using mobiles*

Purpose	%
Non-educational	91%
Educational	30%
Language improvement (English)	20%
Willingness to use for language learning	80%

When the students were asked to order the non-educational purposes the following results were obtained.

Table 2: *Non-educational purposes of mobiles*

Rank	Non educational purposes
1	Making calls
2	Sending SMS
3	Facebook/Twitter
4	WhatsApp
5	Youtube
6	News
7	Skype
8	Emails

The most prominent use was making calls as an obvious use, followed by sending SMS. Students rarely used emails nor skype. None of them reported that they use mobile phones to play games. Nevertheless, further investigation may be needed to ascertain whether the students play games using mobiles.

Further those students who reported that they used mobile phones for educational purposes listed the following:

Table 3: *Educational purposes of mobiles*

No.	Purposes
1	To google search for their literature review

2	To browse university web or to check the e-depository of the university
3	To get model essays, articles etc. for their classroom tasks and assignments (English classes)
4	To record the lecture delivery
5	To find lecture notes
6	To share things with friends using Viber and WhatsApp

Students use search engines, mainly, google, to find information for their dissertations. As these students are reading for their special degrees they need to complete a dissertation as a partial fulfillment of their course. Hence, the smartphone is of usefulness for them.

Uses of mobile phones in classes:
Only at the third and fourth year English classes students are allowed by the Instructors to use mobile phones during class time. The reasons are students tend to get distracted and get into unwanted applications in the mobile, as Instructors fear.

Students mentioned how they use the mobile to access internet for their language learning tasks.

1. **Search on a topic**: Whenever a writing task is given in ESL classes, students tend to search on the topic in order to complete the task. Sometimes they tend to copy the sources itself and they also make their own writing using the models available on the web. One of the prominent websites used by the students is: Hello English: Learn English.

Students tend to see the models of different pieces of writing such as formal or business letters, memos, advertisements, etc.

2. **Instant preparation of presentations:** Whenever they are asked to make a presentation instantly, they find some relevant information from the web.

3. Translation: Students use google translation page to translate entire sentences whenever they do not understand the reading texts given to them. They use this to get the meaning of words too and the translation is from English to English or English to Tamil. Students also feel that google translation has its limitations in presenting the actual meaning of the sentences. They realize the differences between the translation and the meaning explained by the Instructors in the class.

4. **Dictionaries** – Students use dictionaries on their mobile phones to check the meanings of words. Mostly they use English to Tamil dictionaries and a few of them use English–English dictionaries too. Sometimes they check the pronunciation of the words too. A student stated:

Sometimes when we learn English in classroom we can't understand some words that time we use Dictionary. In the world many types of Dictionaries are available on our smart phones. Those are oxford dictionary, English to Tamil dictionary, Tamil to English Android dictionary, English to Tamil dictionary for IOS. Those dictionary apps are available in play store.

5. Taking photos: Students can take photos and use them for any multimedia slides.

Potential uses of phones

Students were asked for what other uses mobile phones can be used for language learning. Hence, the students stated that they can browse Facebook pages containing lessons for language learning.

Some students said they joined some WhatsApp groups in which they chat about language learning. Some of the groups give assistance for learning English. One such group is known as 'Importance of English.' From this group students get assistance for translation, learn some grammatical structures, etc.

A student mentioned:

Messenger App allows us to exchange messages. We can create groups. Send each other limited images, videos, and audio messages over an internet connection using groups. Facebook groups can be a great way of communicating with our students. We can share ideas, opinions and homework projects.

Willingness to use mobiles for learning English

Students considered using mobiles for language learning is a new step which should be given welcome. But most of them are not aware what to use and when to use. Guidance is missing in this connection. Despite some other issues, students did not have a different opinion in using mobile for language learning.

Constraints in using mobiles

In Sri Lankan educational system, especially in universities, a traditional system of learning prevails. The use of mobiles in language classes and lectures has been looked upon as an unwanted activity. As a result, students are not encouraged to use the mobiles even in language classes. Only Senior Instructors and lecturers sometimes ask students to use mobiles in classes. But another connected issue is that the students misuse phones to involve in unnecessary activities (e.g. texting) in the class.

Other issue students complained is the data consumption. Most of the Apps can be used online which consumes a lot of data. Students cannot afford to spend such amount of money. Even though a few network operators charge a subsidized rate such network coverage is poor within the campus.

Moreover, students do not have much awareness about the authentic learning sites for language learning.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

As revealed in this study the use of mobiles is easy and affordable for language learning, compared to CALL. Students do not want to go to laboratory for learning English using CALL resources. Lack of time and other administrative difficulties are there. English teachers/Instructors are also of the view that maintaining a computer laboratory is a difficult task. Using laptop is also a costly activity because of the data consumption on net and students reported that carrying laptop is practically difficult. As

mentioned earlier mobile learning is on the move, flexible and students feel they own it. Students feel mobile is more convenient for them if they want to learn English. Hence, they state that the Apps are more compatible. Fujimoto (2012) claims that 'the use of mobile phones can be considered to be a trend in language learning' […] '[R]ather than artificial settings, educators need to seek settings where mobile language learning can be accepted naturally by the learners in the future, in spite of the negative views that they may hold on using their mobile phones for learning.' (ibid: 194)

Presently they have been provided with free Wi-Fi access. But the problem is the language learning should be formalized. Students should be exposed to appropriate learning modules and courses. There should also be proper mechanism to check on their learning and measuring progress. Under these circumstances a proper curriculum should be developed for language learning purposes. Hence, the government and the higher educational institutes should undertake further studies and research to develop suitable language learning software or introduce the students to the appropriate learning sites where students can monitor themselves of their progress of learning.

REFERENCES

Alemi, M. & Lari, Z. (2012). SMS Vocabulary learning: A tool to promote reading comprehension in L2. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 4(4) 275- 287.

Ally, M. (Ed.). (2009). Mobile Learning Transforming the Delivery of Education and Training. Edmonton: AU Press.

Bahrani, T. (2011). Mobile Phones: Just a Phone or a Language Learning Device? Cross-Cultural Communication. 7(2) 244-248.

Basoglu, E. B. & Akdemir, O. (2010). A Comparison of Undergraduate Students' English Vocabulary Learning: Using Mobile Phones And Flash Cards. *TOJET: The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology.* 9(3) 1-7.

El Hariry, N. A. (2015). Mobile Phones as Useful Language Learning Tools. *European Scientific Journal June 2015 edition*. 11(16) 298-317.

Fazeena, J. F., Ekanayake, Y. & Hewagamage, K. P. (2015). A Theoretical Approach to initiate Mobile Assisted Language Learning among school leavers and University Students of Sri Lanka. Paper presented at the Australasian Conference on Information Systems.

Fazeena, J. F., Hewagamage, K. P. & Ekanayake, Y. (2012). Suitability of Mobile Learning to enhance English language learning: A survey among University of Colombo School of Computing Students. Conference paper.

Fujimoto, C. (2012). Perceptions of mobile language learning in Australia: How ready are learners to study on the move? JALTCALL Journal. 8(3) 165-195

Herrington, A, Herrington, J & Mantei, J, Design principles for mobile learning, in Herrington, J, Herrington, A, Mantei, J, Olney, I & Ferry, B (Eds), *New technologies, new pedagogies: Mobile learning in higher education*, Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, 2009, 138p.

Hockly, N. (2013). Designer learning: The teacher as designer of mobile-based classroom learning experiences. Monterey, CA: The International Research

Foundation for English Language Education. Retrieved from http://www.tirfonline.org/english-in-the-workforce/mobile-assisted-languagelearning/

Karimkhanlooei, G., and Fooladi, F. (2015). Comparison of the Effect of Vocabulary Learning Using SMS versus Traditional Method (Flashcards) on Reading Comprehension of Dentistry Students. International Journal of Review in Life Sciences. 5(9) 466-475.

Kukulska-Hulme, A., Norris, L., & Donohue, J. (2015). *Mobile pedagogy for English language teaching: a guide for teachers.* London: British Council.

Mehta, N. K. (2012). Mobile phone technology in English teaching: causes & concerns. MJAL, 4(2) 82-91. Retrieved from www.mjal.org.

Navaz, A. M. M. & Sameem, M. A. M. (2013). Computer Assisted Language Learning: Perception and Practice of Undergraduate Students of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Paper published at the conference handbook of the Third International Symposium of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, July 2013.

Pramis, J. (2013). Mobile phones to exceed world population in 2014. Digital Trends. Retrieved from http://www.digitaltrends.com/mobile/mobile-phone-world-population2014/ #ixzz2cpK-2a2af.

Thornton, P. & Houser, C. (2005). Using mobile phones in English education in Japan. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 21, 217–228

Watanabe, Y. (2012). Ready for m-learning? Access to mobile devices by tertiary students studying Japanese. In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewarts (Eds) Future Challenges, sustainable futures. Proceedings ASCILITE, Wellington 2012. pp 1030-1038.