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BLENDED LEARNING AND USING MOBILE DEVICES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Blended learning as an approach is not new as the practice of combining (blending) different learning approaches and strategies is well known. Distance learning courses have long combined blended learning through a mix of self-access content (print / video / TV / radio) and face-to-face/telephone support. 'Traditional' courses have always combined (and some still do) a variety of delivery modes that combine content such as lectures, seminars, tutorials, workshops and group work to give learners a range of learning opportunities. So we could say that the term 'blended learning' refers to every time teachers mix different media (e.g. print, audio, and video) with classroom interaction, maximising authentic input in order to support learners' output and skills development. As such, blended learning has more or less always existed, although the term itself is a mere 15 years old at most, and is now understood to mean a rich, supportive learner-centred learning environment where the 'right blend' is synonymous with effective learning (and teaching). What is new is that today, technology combines all the different media within one environment: online. The online space facilitates learner-learner interaction, encourages incidental and exploratory learning and allows learners and teachers to stay connected outside the classroom. Learners can benefit from the fact that space and distance do not matter any more. Teachers and educationalists are now understanding more and more that, with the 'right blend', teachers can offer a much richer, supportive learning environment, learning opportunities increase, learning becomes more effective and the learning process becomes more enjoyable [1].

There are many definitions for blended learning, but they all have the following in common: they refer to two different learning environments - face-to-face (synchronous) and online (asynchronous); and they refer to combining those two learning environments in a complementary way to deliver a programme of study so that learners can be supported both within the classroom environment and outside of it. In other words, the term blended learning refers to any programme of study that is delivered by appropriately combining both synchronous interactive study (usually face-to-face) and asynchronous (individual) study (usually online).

It is clear that the key to a successful blended learning approach is to use the strengths of each medium appropriately, combining the two different learning environments in an integrated way so that each medium complements one another: the classroom environment being used for what it does best, such as introducing new topics, explaining important language points or for meaningful communicative activities, and the online environment being used for what it does best, such as preparing for the next topic (by watching a video / reading a text, etc.), and / or

practising and consolidating what has been learnt in class or for extra practice. Both modes of delivery put the learner at the centre of the learning process.

Thus, the term 'blended' is used to mean combining different learning environments in an integrated way and appropriately and the stress is very much on 'learning' (not teaching) - either learning in the classroom with the teacher's help and support or learning online more independently or with peer support [1].

It is undeniable that the linguistic theories on language teaching and learning of the last 50 years and their application in the classroom have influenced teachers worldwide. Most English language programmes have communicative competence as one of their main objectives. Learners worldwide need English to communicate. Teachers worldwide are using (more or less successfully) the Communicative Approach to teach English and the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) to develop level-appropriate communicative language programmes. However, time in the classroom for listening to learners, supporting them and helping them become communicatively competent is limited.

It is essential to point out that teaching cannot be defined separately from learning. The role of a teacher is multidimensional: it is to facilitate learning, to support learners through their learning journey, to know when to intervene (with suggestions, explanations, encouragements), and when to stand aside and observe. Today's learners are often said to breathe technology and this must be used to the full by the teacher because learning happens everywhere, not just in the classroom. This is particularly true in our digital age. Online learning provides learners with the ability to be both together and apart, and to be connected to a community of learners anytime and anywhere, without being bound by time, place or situation.

However, we must not forget that the online environment must be learner-driven and not technology-driven. Technologies, mobile or otherwise, can be instrumental in language learning. They are very powerful tools for the transmission and distribution of linguistic information (input) or, in other words, aids to communication rather than a means of instruction. An appropriate online environment must be conceived and developed to provide support to those learning online and thus must focus on learners' needs and use technology appropriately to support these needs. When the online environment within a blended approach is used appropriately, it empowers learners, provides them with rich interactive input, gives them just-in-time support, helps them become independent learners and encourages learner discovery. When the classroom environment within a blended approach is used appropriately, it is an effective way for teachers to fulfil their multidimensional role. It gives teachers the possibility of giving more individual attention to learners, it maximises social interaction in the classroom, and it facilitates teacher-learner communication outside the classroom [1].

In the context of blended language learning, it is interesting to analyze the use of mobile devices for language learning. Personalized learning with mobile devices is one of the latest trends making an impact on a global scale, promising to deliver new ways to enhance and promote language learning. Many people see technology as a way to facilitate personalized learning and mobile learning in particular has received increased interest because of the widespread use of mobile phones and other personal devices. At the same time there are some questions and concerns being voiced around access,

security, affordability, teacher and learner competency in using digital tools, and possible threats posed by ever smarter technologies.

One thing is obvious: mobile devices are convenient tools that are often used for informal learning. Use of phones, smartphones, tablets and wearables (such as fitness tracker wristbands) for everyday activities like checking facts, getting advice from friends on social networks or monitoring progress towards fitness goals, highlights both the broad appeal of personally-relevant learning and the potential to advance the idea of personalization in education at all levels.

The devices, and the practices and behaviours associated with their use, have been attracting the attention of education stakeholders for a variety of reasons:

• the sudden abundance of technologies and media where previously there was scarcity, high expense and other high thresholds to adoption;

• the enormous potential to expand the reach of educational opportunity and to provide the same opportunities for all;

• the promise of more sustained learner engagement leading to completion of study programmes and qualifications;

• new ways to improve the quality and appeal of teaching and learning by means of technology-mediated innovations in content and interaction [2].

It should be noted that the term 'mobile learning' is sometimes used casually to refer to any informal learning activity that makes use of mobile phones or tablets, for example searching for information on Google, watching instructional videos, listening to podcasts or reading ebooks. The everyday meanings of mobile learning are thus shaped by people's experiences. The term is also popular in workplace contexts where mobile learning may be seen as a flexible mode of delivery of self-paced instruction or performance support.

In education contexts (primary, secondary and tertiary education), more attention is paid to how mobile learning supports or disrupts social, cultural and pedagogical practices. Mobile devices are proving to be highly versatile tools inside and outside the classroom, while also helping learners to develop digital competence (the ability to use a range of digital tools effectively) which is increasingly considered to be a key part of contemporary education. Mobile learning can be a positive catalyst for rethinking relationships between teachers and learners and considering the extent to which learners may be able to take greater ownership of their learning and increase their active participation.

On the other hand, mobile device use among young people is implicated in issues such as cyberbullying, undermining of teacher authority in schools, and distraction caused by easily accessible social networks and entertainment. Implementation of mobile learning in education also poses some challenges. One of these is a lack of relevant training for teachers. Another is that learning involving online social networks or content downloads relies on ready access to the internet, but in many places internet connectivity is still expensive, intermittent or unreliable [2].

So there have to be sufficiently strong reasons for integrating mobile device use in education. Mobile learning tasks can be designed so as to take advantage of the tools and software available on a device, and various contexts in which they can be undertaken. For example, tasks can involve creation and sharing of multiple media

(photos, videos, etc.), communication on social networks, or recording of language use outside the classroom. Activities like these can be motivating and create additional opportunities for language practice and raised awareness of language use.

In this article we will be looking at how the use of mobile devices in the language classroom can, in fact, have a number of positive outcomes for students and teachers. These include:

1. integrating into instruction multimodal language learning tasks involving use of images, audio and video;

2. enabling collaborative classroom activities using mobile devices for group writing, listening or speaking;

3. enriching classroom activities with authentic language resources through apps and online sites;

4. leveraging individual preferences on mobile devices to personalize learning and develop learner autonomy;

5. enhancing students' digital literacy and other 21st-century skills needed for the workplace;

6. encouraging out-of-school and lifelong language learning.

These represent enhanced learning opportunities that are difficult, or in some cases impossible, to implement without mobile devices. Allowing students to use their devices in class breaks down the barrier between school and life. Doing so aligns teaching practices with the real world, in which mobile technology is integrated into most spheres of work and leisure. Today, mobile devices are so ubiquitous that students are likely to expect to use them in that part of their lives which happens to take place at school.

How mobile devices are used for second language learning in the classroom will vary based on a variety of factors:

• the specific lesson and the teacher's learning goals;

• how the work with mobile devices fits in with other planned activities for the day;

• the language skills involved and how the features of the device / app facilitate their use and practice;

• the availability of devices for all students (or the need to share) and the reliability of the network, if used;

• the familiarity of students and teachers with the device / service / app;

• the extent to which the mobile device use can serve as a springboard for in-class communicative activities [3].

The experiences of language teachers who have used mobile devices in the classroom point to some best practices:

1. As with any technology used in the classroom, it is important for teachers to do a technology-related activity first themselves, so they have a clear understanding of its usage. For activities involving access to a website, it is good practice to check in advance to make sure it is up and available. One should avoid sites (or apps) with long load times.

2. The instant on / off of mobile devices allows them to be used with great flexibility in the classroom. To avoid tempting students to use their devices for other

purposes, the teacher might explicitly call for devices to be taken out, and, at the end of the activity, put away.

3. Keep activities with mobile devices short. Actual time on the device will likely not be the principal learning gain, but rather that task will be used to generate active language use in the classroom through pair / group discussions or other follow-up activities.

4. Keeping mobile use short also means that activities should not be overly complex. While the use of mobile devices for an assigned task might involve several steps or even different apps or websites, the focus should be on using the devices to generate active language use. More elaborate tasks should be assigned for homework. Complex assignments may involve more teacher talk, giving directions, than is desirable in a communicative learning environment, even if the instructions are provided in the target language [3].

Vocabulary and grammar. The largest volume of published articles, teacher blog posts, and apps related to mobile language learning target vocabulary acquisition and grammar study. Most of the sites for grammar and vocabulary learning and practice are mobile friendly. Some have created entertaining game-based activities, such as Grammaropolis for English grammar or Quizlet for vocabulary exercises. Johnny Grammar's Word Challenge (British Council) incorporates game-based questions on grammar, vocabulary and spelling for a variety of learning levels. The Phrasalstein app (Cambridge University Press) reviews the use of phrasal verbs through cartoon figures resembling Frankenstein.

Students can engage in a constructivist activity with vocabulary by collaborating to create their own multimedia glosses. Apps such as yodio and ThingLink enable audio or video to be added to texts or photos. Pictures and audio / video clips can be sourced online or can be taken / recorded with the students' devices, done outside of class. Alternatively, the teacher could supply a set of images for use in class. The multimedia glosses could be sent to a teacher-designated location (for example, through text messaging or email), or could be added to a multimedia sharing site such as Snapguide or Pinterest or saved to a virtual learning environment (VLE) such as Moodle, if used. In class, the submissions could be displayed and discussed through the teacher console.

Having students create projects using the lexis and structures under study can serve to make them more aware of language structures in context, leading to more 'noticing' of forms. Since learners need to consciously notice language forms in order to take them in, mobile learning can assist this process by encouraging learners to pay close attention to how language is used around them and record their observations in the real world, subsequently sharing their notes in the classroom or informally. Students could collaboratively use a tool such as H5P to create their own interactive grammar and vocabulary exercises. That can provide more insight into language forms, as well as encouraging reflection on approaches to language learning.

Reading and writing. Social media, widely used by students, provides an ideal vehicle for reading and writing in the target language. Social media engages students in real language use and contributes to their ability to use the language not only grammatically but in ways that are socially and pragmatically appropriate. That

includes learning about genre conventions, language registers, and cultures of use for different media and online communities. Knowing how and when shorthand texting language is used, for example, is an important competency for English learners today. It is likely that students already use available mobile versions of social platforms such as Facebook. This provides the opportunity to engage in class activities which can be extended to homework assignments or used later informally by students.

One of the factors to consider in reading and writing on mobile devices is the limited screen size, which may limit functionality in both areas. In fact, mobile users are used to dealing with short text formats, not long form writing. In line with this reality, it comes as no surprise that most reported projects focusing on second language writing on mobile devices have used text messaging (SMS, WhatsApp or other messaging platforms) or tweets (Twitter). The use of mobile SMS for learning English encourages classroom interactions, motivates students to learn English, promotes vocabulary acquisition and tests their progress. It is possible to involve students in circular writing through messaging, creating a story together and contributing one text message at a time. This kind of activity could be carried out through Twitter as well. Twitter is especially well suited for activities in which students report on their own daily activities or on language encounters (particular idioms encountered in reading, for example). Let us consider the following uses of Twitter for English language learning:

• Tweet a summary. In pairs or small groups, ask students to summarize a piece of text in 140 characters or less. Provide students with a hashtag, so the whole class can follow the conversation on Twitter and discuss it at the end.

• What did you do at the weekend? Ask students to tweet photos of their weekend. Provide a hashtag for all the tweets. They could include photos of interesting people they met, a funny sign, or a meal they enjoyed. This will provide students with plenty of material for discussion on a Monday morning.

• Describing people. Ask students to describe someone they are following on Twitter, in English. What were the reasons for following them? Do they read their tweets daily? Do they follow them on other social media channels? Is there anything in particular they admire about them?

Listening and speaking. One of the characteristics of online interactions that has emerged with the explosive growth of mobile technology has been the merging of modalities, i.e., text, image and audio / video, often today converging in texting, blogging, and in all forms of social media. This convergence will necessarily be reflected in the use of mobile devices in language learning. Tasks - in class and at home - are likely to combine text with other media. A recommended activity, for example, has as its final product a draft letter to accompany a job application. Before working on the letter in class, students watch an online job interview video at home, then in class discuss with other students what they found useful in the interviews. Thus, the activity involves writing, listening and speaking. As is the case here, assigned tasks involving mobile use should ultimately lead to active student language use, collaborative opportunities, and, whenever possible, a connection to the 'real' world outside the classroom [3].

One of the ways in which language teachers can bring the outside world into the classroom - and in the process authentic linguistic and cultural learning materials - is through the use of online audio and video. There is now a wealth of videos of all kinds available on YouTube and through other online video services. Podcasts are also widely available and have been used for some time in language learning as a source of information on current affairs or in the form of student- or teacher-created podcasts. Some apps feature slowed-down audio for language learners, or may, as does the Audio News Trainer for English, offer audio recordings at different levels of difficulty. The great variety of topics available means that teachers are likely to find sample clips to fit any thematic focus. This provides options as well for students to find audio / video resources that align with personal or academic interests.

Watching video clips or listening to podcasts can serve as models for students themselves creating multimedia. This is in fact one of the most used features of modern phones, to take pictures and record audio / video. The voice-recording feature can be used to record selected classroom activities for later study, reflection or transcription. Voice and video recording are ideal vehicles for practising presentations, assigned dialogues or classroom skits. Final versions can be posted online to a class webpage, a video-sharing service, or to a public folder on a cloud service such as Dropbox. Students might use their phones to conduct video interviews with each other, related to topics currently being studied [3].

The fact that mobile device use can address a variety of student learning styles points to the flexibility and versatility in their use in language learning. All four language skills, as well as cultural learning, can be addressed using different mobile functions, apps, and web-based resources. Mobile use in the language classroom can serve as a welcome break, start-up, or concluding activity. Mobile-based activities can stimulate rich collaborative work, as students work together to communicate in the target language, based on what they have heard, watched, read or written through the mobile devices. Teachers are likely to find that students react quite positively to integration of their devices into classroom instruction. This positive experience may well lead students to continue to use their mobile devices for informal language learning beyond the classroom.

To conclude, it is worth noting that blended learning is an approach that takes into account different learning styles and combines different learning environments in a flexible, integrated and complementary way in order to help, support and enhance learners' diverse needs and provide a successful, efficient and enjoyable learning experience. Mixing different media, different modes of delivery and different instructional strategies is not a new approach, but the capabilities of today's technology can make a blended approach both easier and more meaningful for learners. Blended learning puts learners at the centre of the learning process, encouraging them to be more independent, and also helps teachers in their vital role of supporting learning [1].

Blended learning - if appropriately conceived, developed and delivered - can support any number of learners, anywhere and anytime; it can help managers use human and other resources in the most efficient way possible to give learners the best learning experience possible. It is satisfying to know that there is a growing body of

evidence to support the view that blended learning can result in a better student learning experience, an improvement in learning outcomes, and greater student motivation, confidence and satisfaction, leading to learners becoming more independent learners and enjoying learning the language.

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