



**Beyond the Classroom: Mobile Learning the Wider World**

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Ken Beatty's article, "*Beyond the Classroom: Mobile Learning the Wider World*," addresses the central issue of advancing the field of English language teaching and learning through technology. Although Beatty's contention that mobile language learning is beginning to supplant traditional classroom instruction is perhaps debatable, he does offer persuasive viewpoints on what we can expect in the near future as a consequence of mobile technology.

In his treatise, Beatty raises a valid question over whether it is possible to ascertain the degree to which mobile technologies can help language learners achieve educational goals and objectives. He cites Park (2011) in reference to the need for "a solid theoretical framework which can guide effective instructional design" (p. 83). Furthermore, Beatty asserts that mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) applications lack the level of validation that is generally more characteristic of teacher qualifications and course book materials. In my opinion, I would say there is a need for MALL applications – whether they are teacher-created, free online resources, or commercial products – to go through a vetting process, particularly during the development or pre-selection stage, that considers clearly defined learning and proficiency standards, typologies (such as Chandler's (1984), which Beatty proposes), Bloom's taxonomy, and other benchmarks and frameworks. This process would address to a significant extent the issues of pedagogical credibility, as well as the measurability of outcomes. Research could then focus on whether language learners meet target goals and objectives after using mobile learning technologies, either as a supplement to classroom instruction or as an individual, self-directed pursuit.

Beatty also expresses his concern over the issue of access, underscoring a potential digital divide that may result from differences in buying power: Those who can afford more powerful technology may have access to better learning opportunities as opposed to those who cannot. Incompatibility of applications across various types of platforms, operating systems, and hardware can be a daunting challenge as well. Actually these problems are related in terms of possible alternative solutions. Application and curriculum designers should come together and develop MALL materials that from their very conception are meant to be accessed from the simplest of devices. Ensuring such capability requires that applications be developed using HTML5 code, for instance, since it facilitates accessing multimedia content through a range of internet browsers, platforms, and device types (e.g., smartphones of diverse price ranges, tablets, iOS or Android operating systems, Mozilla Firefox or Internet Explorer, etc.). At the Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano (ICPNA) binational center, where I work, all of the content we create uses HTML5 code in order to maximize coverage and accessibility. Our experience has been that commercial Learning Management Systems (LMS) and other mobile learning providers are increasingly bent on using HTML5 code with the same purpose in mind.

The problem of the "path of diminishing returns," as Beatty calls the process, in which teachers invest time in learning new technologies only to see them quickly become obsolete, is a real one. And certainly the resulting disillusionment among teachers can do much to hamper efforts to make the learning experience more in line with the expectations of today's 21<sup>st</sup> century, tech-savvy learners. Perhaps one solution is to focus on developing mobile compatible and other technologically supported learning



materials that are based on solid learning principles and thus can resist technological change over time. Therefore, even though the appearance of the content and interface tools may “evolve,” the purpose and utility of the application should remain the same. For example, at ICPNA, we have been using the “Virtual Assistant,” which is a classroom tool for accessing server content (e.g., audio, video, internet), for over 15 years. The appearance, capacity, and response times have changed (for the better), but the application’s purpose and the procedures for accessing content have practically remained the same all this time, benefitting teachers enormously.

The same logic applies in terms of mobile technologies. If we were to use the mobile version of Facebook as another example, the appearance and features have improved somewhat over the past few years, but the purpose, functionality, and procedures for its use have all nearly remained the same. The key is in the design, which is why – again – software and application developers as well as curriculum planners should develop content and materials that can stand the test of time. If anything, applications should become more user-friendly over the years, and teachers should not overly concern themselves with technical issues. The problem arises when we acquire technology for its own sake because we are dazzled by what it can do, rather than by what it is supposed to do for the principle end-users: teachers and students.

Later on, Beatty makes an excellent point when he highlights the need for language teacher education to include familiarization programs on supporting technologies, particularly those related to MALL. Teachers cannot be expected to make an optimal use of technology unless they are provided with the knowledge, training, resources, and other means to do so. Support systems for teachers should also be permanent; quite frankly, one-shot solutions never work. I would also add that such teacher education programs should familiarize teachers with today’s *millennial* and “digital native” (Prensky, 2001) learners, the ultimate beneficiaries in this day and age of any technologically oriented educational initiative. It is not enough to master the technology itself but also to understand the end-users’ needs and expectations as much as possible. And, of course, learners need the same degree of orientation, guidance, and support when technological learning solutions are involved. With MALL, in addition to being as user-friendly as possible, applications should provide virtual tours, online tutorials, and other means of assistance as needed. Only then will efforts to maximize learning outcomes be successful.

Finally, regarding the influence of MALL on the future of the field, I agree with Beatty in that there is great potential in using it to promote situational learning. Yet, he also brings up the question as to “whether mobile technology will progress to the point where learners question the actual need to learn a language.” In my opinion, despite the continuous advancement of mobile technologies, there will always be a need for organization, structure, achievement targets, assessment, and interaction among learners in any language learning experience that seeks to promote cogent proficiency development. In fact, the ultimate test as to whether someone has learned a language successfully is having the opportunity to communicate with others in person, something MALL simply cannot do as well as more traditional learning paradigms. Therefore, until mobile-assisted language learning can convincingly fulfill all of the expectations we normally associate with full-fledged, face-to-face study programs, it will probably continue to play a much more efficacious role as an explicit or implicit supplement to classroom instruction. More specifically, it should be used as a powerful means for maintaining our students engaged with English outside of the classroom. Beatty also initiates a discussion as to the personalization that MALL affords, and I concur with the belief that there is much to explore here as well.



What I see as a need for the future of MALL is appropriate vetting of mobile learning technologies in order to ensure significant advances in learning outcomes. Over time, commercial providers of educational materials, curriculum planners, and teachers will have a more prominent role in this endeavor. Research organizations like TIRF can aid efforts towards advancement by conducting studies on the nature, frequency, and overall success in the use of MALL. It should also be pointed out that with better designed MALL technologies, learners will have the opportunity to use “idle time” more effectively in order to enhance their ability to meet their educational goals and objectives; countless hours could be used more productively as learners wait in line at the bank, sit in a bus and commute to work, or sit on a park bench waiting for a friend. With systematic, purposeful use over time, MALL may actually shorten the amount of class contact time it may take learners to achieve current language proficiency benchmarks.

As a way to close the discussion on the present and future of MALL, we at ICPNA are currently in the process of developing a completely online learning solution for *Telefonica del Perú*, the country’s largest telecommunications company. It currently provides 86% of all internet connections and 64% of all mobile lines nationwide. This agreement will give us access to a first group of more than 1.5 million of the company’s internet users alone. We are combining commercially available platforms with our own content in order to develop tailor-made products for this unprecedented project. As mentioned earlier, our content is being created using HTML5 code in order to maximize our ability to extend the learning experience to mobile devices. We hope to engage in collaborative research efforts with organizations such as TIRF, since there is an enormous potential for obtaining data that could very well contribute to advancing the field. ICPNA will certainly spare no efforts to be among the leading organizations committed to MALL and we look forward to sharing the experience in the not-so-distant future.

#### **Reference List**

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