

The Future of Learning – Going Mobile?

By Lindsay Clandfield

As we look forward to a new decade, one of the most important trends emerging in the field of education worldwide is small enough to fit in your pocket but could have enormous implications on how we learn: mobile phone technology.

A 2009 report from Canada's Athabasca University makes the following bold claim: *Mobile learning, through the use of mobile technology, will allow citizens of the world to access learning materials and information from anywhere and at anytime. Learners will not have to wait for a certain time to learn or go to a certain place to learn. With mobile learning, learners will be empowered since they can learn whenever and wherever they want.*

Will this mean the end of classes as we know them? Of teachers? Perhaps not, but there are signs that a m-learning revolution is underway. The technology is already present and widespread. Figures for internet usage in Poland in the late 00s show slightly more than 30% of the population; for mobile phone use the percentage rises to more than 60%. The new generations of phones now also offer far more than just a means to communicate with each other; there are hundreds of thousands of mini applications, also called apps, which cater to all kinds of needs from keeping a record of shopping lists to playing games to creating works of art with your photos.

Different projects around the world have already begun, from places as far apart and diverse as the United States, Thailand and Mongolia. How could this technology be harnessed for the language learner? Here are some potential scenarios, many of which are now possible.

- Learners subscribe to a service which delivers grammar or vocabulary exercises to their phone every day, and keeps track of their score
- For homework, the teacher assigns the learners a short video clip to watch on their phones or computers; the learners can watch as many times as they need to, with or without subtitles. The next day in class the teacher and learners watch the video together and do exercises related to it
- Learners have audio recordings of the texts they have studied in class stored on their phone. While they listen, the text appears at the same time on their screen.
- At the beginning of a new course, learners are given an audio bank of words and phrases that they will be learning during the course. The learners can listen to the vocabulary of the lesson on their way to class, or listen and repeat sets of words as many times as they like.
- Learners have a series of conversations recorded and stored on their phones; they can listen and practise everyday English
- Learners have access to an English dictionary on their phone; they can look up a word or translation any time they need it – and hear the correct pronunciation.

These are only examples, but they serve to show just to what extent language learning can be a flexible activity. Stuck in traffic for an hour on the way home? Review the lesson's vocabulary. Taking the train to work? Why not watch a couple of English videos? Got a test today? You can review the material literally while you walk to class. Teachers have long known that for language learning to be successful, the learner has to devote a lot of time outside class towards that goal. Many of today's learners have an incredibly powerful computing device that they carry around with them right in their pocket. Devoting more time towards that goal has suddenly become a lot easier, and potentially a lot more attractive.

Sources:

Ally, M. Mobile Learning: Transforming the delivery of education and training; Athabasca

University Press; e-book <http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120155>

Internet World Statistics – Poland <http://www.internetworldstats.com/eu/pl.htm> Official figures from 2007.

ITU World Telecommunications Database Europe Statistics <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/ict/index.html> Official figures from 2004