

“THINK(ING) OUTSIDE THE BOX”: RECONSTITUTING THE PEDAGOGIC PERSPECTIVES OF M- LEARNING TO FOSTER CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract:

M-Learning or Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), a successor to Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is one of the most recent trends in Collaborative Language Learning where language facilitators are harnessing the technological mobility and user-friendliness of technical gadgets to restructure the curriculum, approach and objective of language learning. Developed by the Stanford University learning lab in a Spanish learning program in 2001, there has been a consistent interest regarding the scope of MALL in language classrooms as language teachers, curriculum developers and technical experts have been exploring its potential in effective situated learning and fostering “intercultural communicative competence” among learners (Byram, 1997). With innovations in internet enabled mobile phones and its mass availability, MALL is being seen as the future of language learning where mobile phones, presently a platform for delivering contents will participate in retention, utilization and honing linguistic talents of the learners.

A step ahead of CALL, MALL foregrounds a smart, mobile, ubiquitous approach and calls for effective content designing and appropriate teacher-training to ensure maximum student competency. Easily downloadable educational apps, free e-books, e-libraries and academic podcasting form an integral part of MALL- but the real problem that has been identified is the lack of appropriate course design and effective teaching methodology to channelize the vast resource that an internet enabled mobile phone gives access to. In a *Beginner's Guide to Mobile Learning in ELT*, Amy Lightfoot explores opportunities for learning English by using mobile phones both inside and outside the classroom- targeting both productive and retentive capacities of a language learner. My article seeks to explore ways how the language classrooms can be redesigned at intermediate and advanced levels with a change in the teaching content, instructional methodology and evaluation techniques. The target is to sculpt the content, methodology and evaluation techniques (taking into account the unavoidable technical and pedagogical challenges) to utilize the smartness of new-generation mobile phones in the scheme of developing linguistic and communicative competence among learners and espouse a sense of cultural awareness, thereby establishing a “sphere of interculturality” (Kramsch, 1993).

Key words: Language learning, curriculum, technology, culture, competency

With the global technological explosion in the last two decades and subsequent encroachment of technology into the remotest territories of human lives, there has been a radical involvement of technology in the fields of teaching-learning. There has been a paradigmatic shift in the construction and composition of classrooms, particularly language classrooms, giving birth to concepts and terms like Blended Learning, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and M-Learning. One of the newest jargons in the domain of language learning, M-Learning or Mobile Assisted Language Learning is a perfect union of the science behind hand-held smart phones and its active role in the language classrooms. In his recently

published doctoral dissertation exploring the acceptance of mobile technologies as learning tools, Mazharuddin Syed Ahmed notes how M-Learning has a potential to offer techniques such as personalized learning, contextual learning, situated learning, collaborative learning, ubiquitous learning, lifelong learning, just-in-time learning, micro learning, rich media learning, immersive learning, synchronous learning and asynchronous learning (Franklin, 2011; Ahmed, 2016). By virtue of its portability, ubiquity and cheap availability, smart phones are able to connect a broad spectrum of the society, making them new favorites of language teachers who are constantly revising the existing pedagogy and curricula of language teaching to achieve a harmony between the underlying theoretical perspectives and their practical implementations.

Recognition of mobile phones enabled with internet access as potent tools for language learning started way back in 2005 when Laouris and Eteokleous (2005) reported receiving 22,700 items when searching Google for the term “mobile learning” (Crompton, 2013:3). Ever since the recognition of the potential of mobile phones in the field of language learning, there has been several attempts to define this new approach. While some researchers have over-focused on the technical aspect of the approach, others have defined this approach from a pedagogical perspective only. While Keegan (2005) provided a definition that takes into account the tech- orientedness of m-Learning, stressing on the mobility of the technology that in turn drives the learning scenario; Georgiev et. al. (2004) focused on the ubiquity of the device that enables a learner to access it from anywhere and at any point in time (cited in Ng, Nicholas et. al., 2009: 43). Crompton (2013) quotes Sharples et.al. (2007) who defined mobile learning as: “the process of coming to know through conversations across multiple contexts among people and personal interactive technologies” (2007:4) and comments:

Although this definition included the four central constructs of m-learning (namely, pedagogy, technological devices, context and social interactions), this definition is somewhat confusing and ambiguous...Therefore, for the purpose of the chapter, and this book at large, the author of this chapter [Crompton herself] and the editors of this book (Crompton, Muilenberg and Berge) have modified Sharples et al.’s 2007 definition...definition for m-learning is “learning across multiple contexts, through social and content interactions, using personal electronic devices”.
(2013:4)

Crompton clarifies: “the word “context” in this definition encompasses m-learning that is context aware and context neutral. In other words, the learning may be directed by others or by oneself, and it can be an unplanned, spontaneous learning experience; learning can happen in an academic setting, or any other non-academic setting; and the physical environment may or may not be involved in the learning experience” (ibid). Along the lines of ubiquity of the devices, Ng, Nicholas et. al. (2009) point out that if ubiquity of the device is harnessed for learning puposes, there has to be certain parameters for that and note:

Ogata & Yano (2004), referencing the work of Chen, 2002 and Curtis et. al., 2002 identified these requirements as (1) permanency, where learners never lose their work unless it is deleted on purpose (2) accessibility, where learners are able to access their files, documents and data from anywhere (3) immediacy, where learners are able to obtain information immediately and (4) interactivity, where learners are able to interact with teachers, peers or experts through synchronous or asynchronous communication... (5) situating of instructional activities, where learning is embedded in the learners’ daily lives and (6) adaptability, where learners are able to get the right information at the right place in

accessible ways (2009:44)

Following the trend of ‘socio-constructivist learning in the 1900s’ where knowledge was constructed by the collaboration between the individual and his external environment (as proposed by theorists like Vygotsky, 1978), technology started playing a major role in the field of education; learners as well as instructors started becoming gradually aware of the potential of the internet-enabled mobile phones in building knowledge- researchers, instructors and curriculum designers envisaged the need to restructure the pedagogy and curriculum to ensure a “mutually productive convergence between main technological influences on a culture and the current educational theories and practices” (Sharples, 2005: 147, Crompton, 2013:7). This led to conduction of multiple researches to explore the potential of mobile phones in situated learning, preparing the proper course material to harness the potential of the technology and most significantly, developing the methodology to blend this smart handset into smart learning. Reinders (2010) notes that research on the use of smart phones for the delivery of vocabulary materials to English learners in Taiwan showed how students enjoyed using their mobiles for its size, portability and because of the amount of content was better manageable than other teaching materials (Chen, Hsieh and Kinshuk 2008, Reinders 2010). Besides the physical dimension and easy availability of this technology, it must not be forgotten that mobile phones are important social tools that help connect the individual to the world around, a factor that was gradually noted by researchers and course-designers to foreground the possibilities of m-learning in fostering cultural awareness among learners. My article seeks to trace how the language learning curriculum was constructed around MALL, the lacunae in such construction and explore how the content, methodology and evaluation techniques (taking into account the unavoidable technical and pedagogical challenges depending upon the context) be sculpted to develop not only linguistic and communicative competence among learners but espouse a sense of cultural awareness.

In its early days, m-learning was used to “channel e-learning methods and techniques” that quickly exposed the limitations of cell phones and PDA s (Personal Digital Assistants) compared with desktop computers at the time (Traxler, 2011; Cromton, 2013). With gradual development in mobile technology, a lot of things changed radically. The increased processor speed and portability, longer battery life, internet enabled global connectivity, diverse applications and features made mobile phones not only widely available among masses but an indispensable component in people’s lives. Wang, Xiang, and Fesenmaier (2014) noted that “smart phones transform individuals’ daily lives”. The same research also found that respondents used smart phones over desktops and laptop computers for increased communication with family and friends, increased information searches (Ahmad, 2016). Thus, against computer desktops and even laptops, mobile phones were gradually evolving as a better alternative technological and informational tool. As an educational tool, these new-age mobile devices provided access to many features and applications that enabled learners to generate, review and share content ‘anytime and anywhere’ (Sharples, Arnedillo-Sánchez, Milrad, & Vavoula, 2009; Ahmad, 2016). But the challenge remained in developing appropriate content and curriculum to channelize the technological potential in real-time learning environment. The bulk of the research on M-Learning, as investigated by Wu, Wu, Chen, Kao, Lin, and Huang (2012) had concentrated on “school students, without placing a clear focused investigation on any tertiary education domain” (Ahmad, 2016) Moreover, as Ahmad notes, “the literature review by this same study found that the bulk of these studies investigated the motivations, perceptions and attitudes of students towards the type of mobile device used for education rather than assessing its educational benefits.” Herrington et al. (2009) rightly noted that while M-Learning has been branded as “an emergent paradigm in a

state of intense development” (O’Malley, Vavoula, Glew, Taylor, Sharples, & Lefrere, 2005), very few educational institutes have actually adopted this technology, and in those that have, it is “not clear that they are being used in pedagogically appropriate ways”. In extension, it was stated that most of the research studies and projects so conducted in this field have examined mobile learning from an “identified theoretical perspective” (cf. O’Malley, et al., 2005; Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, & Sharples, 2004). Patten, Arnedillo Sanchez and Tangney (2005) suggested a framework for classifying educational uses of mobile technologies which were limited to ‘administrative functions’ such as calendaring and timetabling; ‘reference functions’ such as e-books and dictionaries; and ‘interactive functions’ as in response and feedback activities. Commenting on such classification, Harrington et al. (2009) says: “the theoretical underpinnings of these activities appear to be either non-existent or principally behaviorist in nature.” What is regrettable is that despite the multifarious potential of mobile phones in language learning, research shows that their present use is limited within a teacher-oriented paradigm, instead of a learning environment that provides learner autonomy and blends the mobility of the technology into the curriculum so devised (Harrington et al. 2009). Unfortunately, due to lack of ideological consensus or proper training or perhaps both, along with lack of adequate funds, there has been a big gap between the advanced technology with all its possibilities and potential and the conservative curriculum built around it. This gap was identified in countries where the administration was actively engaged in improving educational methodologies as the Australian initiative of Digital Education Revolution where the Government funded the training of teachers in digital learning. Post identification of this gap and subsequent recognition of the multidimensional capacity of M-Learning, there has been assumptions and estimations by researchers, teachers and administrators regarding restricting the existing pedagogy and framing it in a way that besides linguistic and communicative competence, language learners develop a global cultural awareness- a move towards raising cultural awareness in language classrooms and establishing a “sphere of interculturality” (Kramsch, 1993).

Patten, Arnedillo, Sanchez and Tangney (2005) argue that the true benefits of mobile learning can be reaped through collaborative, contextual, constructionist and constructivist learning environments. Hence, the focus should be shifted from using the technology as assistive tools in language learning to engaging them as authentic platforms for performing real-time activities since “meaningful learning can only take place if it is embedded in the social and physical context within which it will be used” (Oliver & Herrington, 2001, p. 78, Geraldine Lefoe et al. 2009). Herrington and Oliver (2000) suggest that authentic learning environments should provide an authentic context that reflects the way the knowledge will be used in real-life; authentic activities; support collaborative construction of knowledge; promote reflection to enable abstractions to be formed and provide for integrated assessment of learning within the tasks (Herrington and Oliver, 2000; Geraldine Lefoe et al.,2009). In this learning scenario, the role of a teacher is revised as a facilitator; with students controlling the medium and the content, the role of the teachers will be constructing the curriculum to foster autonomous learning. Instead of simply using the mobile phone as a tool in the classroom, a lot of preparation task must be done by content designers to enumerate the pre-skill activities, the skill sets targeted, subsequent methodology and possible outcomes. In the article titled “Twenty Ideas for Using Mobile Phones in the Language Classroom”, Hayo Reinders suggests some practical ideas how mobile phones can be used in modern-day language classrooms. One such idea as enlisted is using the ‘notes’ feature to collect everyday language. This activity is targeted at increasing the vocabulary of the learner and since the task uses the mobile as its learning platform, the boundary between class- work and other activities is nullified, ensuring autonomous learning and maximum retention. Besides

designing activities like solving comprehension passages over phone, the teacher can also ask the students to maintain a blog where the learner can write about his/her personal experiences, share ideas, post pictures which can then be assessed by teachers and shared among others. The voice memo recorder and the camera can be used to record language and capture pictures from external sources which can then be used in the language classroom. For example, in a listening activity, learners may be asked to collect language samples from any external resource (like a conversation, an announcement etc.) using the recorder in his/her mobile phone which can then be played in the class and other students be asked to guess the context of the sample and content. This activity will effectively engage students, develop their listening skills and above all, boost their confidence due to working with authentic materials. As noted by Reinders, a study by Thornton and Houser (2003) shows that Short Message Service (SMS) texts can be used to send out vocabulary items at spaced intervals thereby increasing student retention.

Communicative competence can be fostered by encouraging students to record their own voice clips (an activity that may involve them to speak about a given topic for a given time span) in the mobile voice recorder and send it to the teacher who can assess and evaluate it and provide appropriate feedback. Another way of encouraging students to speak individually is by making them participate in a “phlogging” activity. Ph logging is a new form of blogging that allows its user to broadcast from any phone to the Internet live. It can also be integrated with social media and other blogging platforms. Social media like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (all of which can be accessed both from desktop as well as mobiles) can be used as an integral element in developing communicative as well as cultural competence among language learners. A web quest is “a great way to promote cultural awareness” (Frank, 2013). In this activity, students are assigned the task of gathering information about a target culture (etiquette, cuisine, music etc.) by surfing various websites in their mobile phones in a given span of time after which the findings are to be presented to the teacher. Frank (2013) notes how this activity “develops students’ cultural observation skills by tying concepts to real-world materials”. Besides the cultural awareness value, these tasks also focus on grammar competence, vocabulary building and specific skills like skimming, scanning and summarizing. Besides developing listening, speaking and reading skills, writing skills can also be honed by designing blogging activities in mobiles. Tandem learning encourages interactive writing and intercultural competence. Pair activities can be designed using easily available free tandem learning apps that can be downloaded in learners’ mobile phones and used to exchange messages between learners of different language (Reinders, 2010). Innumerable language learning apps are available in various platforms like Google Play Store (for Android users) which are targeted at situated, spontaneous self-learning. Some of the best language learning apps for both Android and iOS are BBC language learning app, Babbel and Memrise. The BBC learning app can be used both inside and outside a language classroom. Composed of audio clips of varying time-limits, the BBC language learning app mainly focuses on listening and speaking skills. Students in a language classroom can be made to listen to a particular audio clip and practice saying it and assess his/her progress. This is one of the readily available, free to download app that can be effectively integrated in the course curricula by language instructors. Babbel consists of lessons that play for about 10 to 15 minutes each, covering different abilities and competence level. It focuses on speaking and vocabulary skills. As the name suggests, Memrise is an app developed to build word stock and vocabulary retention. It targets developing the listening skills and vocabulary building in a learner and ensures retention of newly-learnt words, phrases and grammar rules.

Besides being seen as a potent tool for encouraging communicative competence among

learners, M-Learning is also being recognized as a significant platform for incorporating cultural knowledge and understanding in language classrooms. Frank (2013) notes that although the need for incorporating socio-cultural factors into the classroom is being felt by language teachers (Palmer and Sharifian, 2007), “there is a lack of consensus on how to introduce cultural elements into the lessons. He opines that language teachers can help students understand important elements of their own culture and thereby develop an awareness of other cultures (Byram, 1997).

The Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLEP, 1999) provides a distinct framework for students to integrate “the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices and the products- both tangible and intangible- of a society” (47), better known as the 3P model of culture (Frank, 2013). An easy way to foster cultural awareness in a language classroom is following the “cultural iceberg” method espoused by Edward Hall (1976). This analogy was developed to illustrate the differences between surface and deep cultures- the immediately visible cultural codes and the underlying embedded beliefs that are understood after deeper cultural interactions, respectively. Frank suggests how the iceberg analogy can be a fun way for students to think about elements of culture that are visible and those that are so ingrained that members of a culture are not aware of them (2013). As discussed previously, Web Quests can be significant tools for encouraging language learners to develop cultural competence as well.

However, although there has been a global recognition of integrating mobile technology with language learning, the theoretical perspectives, curricular design and limitations like difficulty in classroom management or privacy considerations tend to limit the proliferation of its full potential. Litchfield, Dyson, Lawrence, and Zmijewska, (2007) rightly observed: “A body of knowledge of learning and teaching principles and strategies is urgently needed to inform teachers wishing to utilise innovative mobile technologies and also to inform the development of national policy and pedagogical approaches about emerging mobile devices” (p. 591). Mobile apps are attractive to teachers and learners alike, because of their technology-based and technology-mediated learning opportunities in a relatively low-cost package (Dennen and Hao, 2014) but app creators must harness the features exclusive to mobile devices as personalization, location-based services, crowdsourcing (Kukulka-Hulme, 2010) in order to set it apart from other technological devices like laptops and desktops. Future app-designers, curriculum designers, language instructors need to join hands and progress towards innovating new pedagogy and curriculum in the field of language learning, one that will embrace technological advancement and harness it to attain learner’s communicative and cultural competence.

In the Introduction to the essay A Diachronic Overview of Technology Contributing to Mobile Learning: A Shift towards Student- Centred Pedagogies, Crompton (2014) notes that “M- Learning is a relatively new field of learning. It is embryonic in nature, still changing form and growing. It is pushing the boundaries of traditional pedagogies and challenging epistemic beliefs” (2014:7). With rapidly evolving technological sphere, mobile technology is proliferating in rapid scale and across multiple dimensions. For curriculum developers, the aim should be towards harnessing learner autonomy by perfect blending resource materials in a technological domain. The teachers need to implement the curriculum in the classrooms, uniting the theoretical perspectives of socio-constructivist, communicative learning with their practical applications. As for learners, mobile phones will cease to be a platform for solving classroom tasks but become an integral component of the learning process by the amalgamation of classroom teaching techniques and active involvement of learners in a single

substrate. Only then can the true objectives behind blending technology in learning with an aim to foster communicative and cultural competence be fulfilled. After all, m-learning is “not about putting e-learning courses on a phone... (but) about augmenting our learning and our performance”(Quinn, 2011). Hence, teachers and curriculum designers need to think out of the box and innovatively design learning course materials that will augment the performance and competence of learners.

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