

LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY USING MOBILE PHONES: SAUDI ARABIAN EFL TEACHERS IN FOCUS

Dr. Mansour Habbash

Affiliation: University of Tabuk

Abstract

As mobile connectedness continues to sweep across the landscape, the value of deploying mobile technology at the service of learning and teaching appears to be both self-evident and unavoidable. To this end, this study explores the effectiveness of using mobiles in teaching vocabulary in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes in Saudi Arabia. The main objective of this study is to find out the possibility of enhancing the students' understanding of English vocabulary through mobile phone interface and to help them in using vocabulary items more precisely. The study examines the viability of the use of mobile phones in the EFL classes for the undergraduate students of the university of Tabuk for improving their English vocabulary. The subsidiary objectives are to determine whether the students and teachers find it comfortable and convenient to use mobile phones for educational purposes inside and outside the classrooms at the university. The required data were gathered by distributing a questionnaire to all the teachers engaged in EFL classes. The responses are analyzed by the qualitative interpretive method and the results are put for discussions with the aim of using the outcomes in constructing the course materials for future EFL studies and for providing the teachers with proper recommendations in preparing materials and in choosing relevant methods for their languages classes.

Keywords: English language, EFL studies

Introduction: Statement of the Problem

Students of Saudi Arabia in general keep carrying the latest mobile gadgets to their classrooms. Often, the teachers of the university complain about their students' use of mobiles in classrooms and say that the students use their mobile phones for chatting and playing games that disturbs the teaching-learning environment. That's why many teachers feel that mobile

phone in classrooms are a great disturbance to their teaching process and so they stand strongly against the use of mobile phones in classroom. On the contrary, many students and teachers find that mobile phones in classrooms when used for academic purposes can yield great learning outcomes. All the undergraduate students at the University of Tabuk learn English in general as well as English for specific purposes. Since they use mobile phones extensively for playing games and chatting with friends, the researchers feel that it would be ideal to draw the students' attention towards using their mobiles for educational purposes as well. Instead of forcing the students' to keep their mobiles away from classrooms, it could be more useful when the mobiles phones are put to use in getting the students attain learning autonomy by using relevant mobile applications for their classroom activities. In an effort to identify the viability of using mobile phones in Saudi Arabian EFL classes and with the aim of using the results in constructing relevant course materials and in designing teacher-training programs, the researchers have taken up this exploration. The premise that has driven this inquiry is that all the students and teachers use their mobile phones extensively for different purposes, and the mobile phones have a number of applications that have lots of instructional content useful for classroom purposes, especially for teaching vocabulary. The other premise is that as in many other parts of the world mobile phones along with many other mobile gadgets are put to use in classrooms for teaching and learning purposes successfully, teachers in Saudi Arabia may also be using the latest gadgets in their classes. However, there are no recorded evidences that show whether the teachers in Saudi Arabia are using mobile phones in language teaching or not? Also, we aren't sure whether the teachers are in favor of using mobile phones or not? From the available premises, we suppose that the teachers in Saudi Arabia can use mobiles phones for educational purposes, or else the universities can think about arranging training programs that can upgrade their teachers' knowledge of the use of mobile gadgets for teaching language and vocabulary, inside and outside classrooms.

Research Objectives and Limitations:

The main objective of the study is to explore the viability of the use of mobile applications in improving English vocabulary of the undergraduate students at the University of Tabuk. The subsidiary objectives are to find out whether the students and teachers find it comfortable and convenient to use the mobile applications for educational purposes inside and outside the classrooms at the university. Since the mobile gadgets have become indispensable in the electronic age, we assume that the students and teachers are in favor of using the latest mobile gadgets for teaching and learning purposes. The second assumption is that the availability of wide spread hot

spots and the varying educational applications useful for teaching and learning that can be downloaded easily teachers can make use of the facility to improve their productivity as well as learner outcomes. Because all the teachers and the students are well used to usages of mobile phones and the other latest mobile gadgets, we assume that all the teachers are well aware of their students' use of mobile phones and the analysis of the responses from the sampling of the teaches can help us in finding out the viability of the use of mobile phone in their classes. The variations in the standard levels of the students in English language are too wide to generalize in a specific course. As this variation makes it difficult to crate a generalized student sampling for data collection we're confined to examine the responses from the sampling of the teachers and planned to go with the analysis of the responses from the students' sampling in another project.

Literature Review

As the Post-PC era sports advanced smart-phones and tablet devices that are incorporated with all the PC applications, information access with just a slight touch of our finger can, for sure, expedite our learning. The latest techy devices have made the learning easier and comfortable. We no longer need to carry the tomes or travel and walk longer distances for a library. We can design our lesson plan a few seconds before the class. As Hymes (1972, p.287) mentioned, the communicative competence of a person depends on his 'developmental matrix'. In the current world, the matrix includes the gadgets also. And without the gadgets, communicative competence in the present-day context is impossible. The communicative competence entails, apart from the linguistic elements, the knowledge of the operation of different applications of the gadgets used for communicative purposes. The email communication and sharing information via social-networking sites like the Face Book, Google+, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. have become a part of the day to day lives of people. McCarten (2007) reports that students now have access to the wealth of information and the language tools like the dictionaries online, and the only requirement for tapping this wealth of information and the online sources is to prepare the students and teachers on the ways to make use of them. Teaching grammar patterns and vocabulary that includes collocations, formality etc. becomes easier and provides the students a way for their leaning autonomy. It's now a necessity for teachers to find ways of using the techy devices for educational purposes instead of trying to prevent the students, if anyone in the world does so, from using them in classrooms.

According to Socialbakers' more than 500 million people all over the world are interacting via the social network sites. Language learning activities like the practice on e-mail composition for formal contexts,

understanding etiquette, sentence framing, improving grammatical accuracy, essay composition, creative expressions can be done well by mobile gadgets wherever and whenever you would like to do so. The spread of hotspots everywhere made it more congenial even to create online classroom environments any moment. The present generation has no other go than becoming ‘e-literates’, for their communication and interaction, which needs the capability to surf the net, find the required data and understand it, apart from the regular social interactions via the Web. 02 based blogs and social-networking sites like Face Book and Twitter.

Jee M.J (2011) brought forth the different ways, the mobiles and the web.02. technologies can be used in language pedagogy. In fact, we can find a number of articles that tell us how to use the gadgets like iphone, iPad, iPod, PDAs, palmtops, Galaxies, androids, etc. for pedagogical purposes. Campbell (2003) explained about Weblogs and the way one can develop a tutor blog, a learner blog and a class blog that can be used for ESL classes. A study by Lan, Sung & Chang (2009) revealed that MPAL (Mobile-Device-Supported Peer-Assisted Language Learning) can “improve collaboration in elementary school level EFL learners and promotes their reading motivation.” Ki, Peter & Roland (2008) explored the potential of mobiles for browsing through the internet in EFL classes, the attitudes of the learners while using the mobiles and the efficacy of mobiles in collaborative, student centered, constructivist and task-based learning approaches. They found that the Wireless Application protocol (WAP) sites can be effectively used for developing listening. Meei-Ling (2007) demonstrated the use of web-based environments and the on-line support tools or the e-referencing tools like the ‘bilingual concordancer’ (an example of concordancer is and a ‘dictionary’ for reading articles, doing comprehension activities and interacting with other students using on-line forums both for learning English as a foreign language and for developing intercultural competence. Wikipedia mentioned portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity, connectivity and individuality as the five most important affordances that are possible by MALL. Sarah (2010) listed a number of articles emerged on MALL since 2000. However, there are many barriers for MALL worldwide that make it non-interchangeable with the traditional classroom setting. Zelezny (2010) delineated a number of barriers with regard to the electricity, gender roles, call-cost and ownership of mobiles, and mobile handset languages in Africa. Hsueh (2011) discussed the challenges to be met by the language teachers in adapting the web2.0. and mobile 2.0 in language learning. nevertheless, the barriers are not irresolvable. The efforts of the local governments and the technological advancements can find viable solutions to the current barriers in different countries. Another drawback with mobiles is that in larger classes, with more than 30 students, it’s difficult for a teacher to monitor the

students and control them from watching undesirable websites. Some teachers, in tune with Boyle (2013), complain about the insufficient bandwidth of internet facilities in institutions that can't provide access to the web content fast and becomes discouraging to the enthusiastic teachers. The incongruity between the online tools and local hardware or the institutional IT policies can also affect the accessibility to Internet.

Rationale

Mobile phone has become an integral part of everyone in the world. This is more so in the case of college goers. Traditional learning environments in many parts of the world are still in support of keeping mobile phones switched off or out of reach of the students while they are in classes. Though, there are strong arguments against MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning), and it's not proven that MALL can completely replace the conventional pedagogical methods, an in-depth study of the mobile gadgets clarifies that they are in many ways helpful in academic learning. MALL has been a learning style for decades, however, the importance of it's use in classroom has been noticed relatively recently and the academics in many countries are in support of their students' using mobile gadgets in classroom for academic purposes. Although Mobile phones are comparatively smaller for managing the lesson content, the tablet devices like iPad, Galaxy Note and other android gadgets prove to be great for classroom activities. The classroom materials can be taken from any free English language websites depending on the students' standard and the teacher's choice. As the communicative competence mainly depends on vocabulary and pronunciation, drill on vocabulary can be done better with the help of the tablets that are equipped with dictionaries and translators. The iPads and galaxies can be endowed with the dictionaries like Merriam Webster's and Oxford as well as with several other free educational applications that can be used well for practicing pronunciation. Practice using tablets can be better alternatives to 'kazoo's and 'rubber-bands' in terms of quality, although not in terms of cost. Recording our voice and checking our pronunciation is much easier with the built-in camera. The application of 'siri' in iPhone4S can help you check your pronunciation instantaneously.

Although creating a virtual classroom is not a totally new phenomenon, the emergence of 'hotspots' made it much easier, and it's now an anywhere-anytime activity. The PC applications like 'Adobe Connect', 'Vyew', 'Any Time Meeting', 'Mega-Meeting', and 'Yugma' that have been used for webinars, online courses, and conferences can also be used in the Tablets. Already one can have a group conversation on 'Skype' on mobile phones, and a teacher can create a class room ID and interact with his or her students via the social-networking sites like 'Face Book' on tablets. The

tablets like iPhone and Galaxies are suitable well for creating teacher and student blogs in the websites like www.wordpress.com. Read Naturally has developed “Read Live”, a web technology based platform that could support the students for developing their comprehension, fluency, vocabulary and their knowledge of phonics. Read-Live also has a “live benchmark assessor” that can be used by teachers for making instructional decisions, monitor progress, predict students progress on the likely tests and document the progress of the students. Archipelago Learning offers web based targeted instructions for all levels of students from lower grades to higher grades. Audiopal is a great tool for practicing pronunciation. This is free, need no basic formalities, and can be used by many at once. “Nearpad” is another web-based platform where the teachers can create interactive content, take control of the students and obtain reports of the results. Nearpad is best suitable for creating classes on ipads and other tablets. The “BrainPop” has created some useful iOS applications for mobile gadgets and can help teachers take on to the classes straight away. The availability of lots of learning sources prompts us to take up this study in order to push the teaching standards in Saudi Arabia on a par with the rest of the world in using technology in education.

Research Design:

A questionnaire with fifteen questions about the viability of using mobiles in classroom was prepared and distributed to about one hundred teachers and we received responses from fifty-six teachers. The distribution of the questionnaire is based on the convenience sampling method and the analysis of the data is inferential and interpretive. The fifteen questions in the questionnaire are a combination of Likert items and close-ended questions. Some of the Likert items are designed to reflect positive meaning of the use of mobiles and some are designed to carry a negative meaning. The Likert items with positive meaning can help us find the teachers’ attitude towards the use of mobile phones in classroom and the close-ended questions help us find their opinions straight away. The findings were analyzed in light of Concerns Based Adoption Model that explain the process of adaptation to any new technology to make use of it effectively. The process of adoption of an innovation, as per the model, includes seven developmental stages viz. Stage 0 called Awareness; stage 1 called Information, Stage 2 called Personnel, Stage 3 Management; stage 4 Consequence; stage 5 Collaboration; and stage 6 Refocusing (Hall, 1974 p.8). Unless a teacher completes her/his voyage all through these stages, they can’t make use of the technology to its fullest extent of benefits.

Analysis and Findings

The questionnaire that was distributed among a convenient sampling of teachers at a university in Saudi Arabia was a combination of different types of questions, the responses to which can be considered well in finding out the teachers' attitudes towards using mobile phones for classroom teaching. The analysis of a set of five Likert items that can form a scale reflecting positive connotations reveals that, despite the variation in the degree of agreement, about 82% of the teachers are in favor of using mobile phones in classrooms. On the other hand, to the close-ended question, 'Would you suggest that your students use mobile phones as reference tools for learning vocabulary in your classes?', the responses of 34 teachers, that makes 60.71% of them, are 'yes' indicating that they are in favor of using mobile phones in classrooms. Rest of the teachers that makes 19.64% say 'no' to the use of mobiles and the only reason most of them state is that their students, once allowed, to use mobiles, keep using them for fun activities and chatting with friends causing disturbance to the learning activities. However, the responses to the Likert item in the scale 3 given below indicate that about 82% of them agree that their students can use the mobile phones to some other activities that can distract them from learning activities. This is in tune with the responses to the Likert item in scale 2 given below. The responses to the scale 2 indicate that about 80% of the teachers aren't currently using mobile phones in classrooms. The analysis indicates that although most of the teachers are interested in using mobile phones in classrooms they aren't using them for the most frequently stated reason that the students aren't used to use mobile gadgets for educational purposes.

Likert Scale 1: Items and Responses in favor of using mobiles in classrooms.

n=56	Strongly Agree 1	Agree 2	Disagree 3	Strongly Disagree 4
Mobile phones are very useful reference tools for teaching vocabulary in classrooms?	14	32	4	6
Encouraging students to chat in English over online social networks like Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter can improve students' vocabulary?	30	14	4	8
Creating a class community in on-line social media can help teachers in encouraging students to communicate in English and improve their English vocabulary.	18	32	6	0
It's easy to teach the different forms of a new word by using the available mobile language learning applications?	10	42	2	2
I suggest that my students have their mobiles loaded with English dictionaries and other English learning applications.	Always 28	Quite Often 12	Some times 10	Never 6

Liker Scale 1: Analysis details

n= 56	Strongly Agree/Always	Agree/Quite Often	Disagree/Sometimes	Strongly Didagree/Never
Sum	100	132	26	22
Median	18	32	4	6
Mean	20	26.4	5.2	4.4
Percentage of mean	35.71%	47.14%	9.28%	7.85
Standard Deviation	19.54			

Likert Scale 2: Question Related to the Current Practice

How often do you suggest the use of mobile phones in classrooms?	Always 6 (10.71%)	Quite Often 4 (7.14%)	Sometimes 30 (53.57%)	Never 16 (28.57%)

Likert Scale 3: Question Directed with Negative Connotation

If my students are encouraged to use mobile phones in classrooms, they start using them for other purposes and so I don't suggest the use of mobile phones in classrooms.	Strongly Agree 22 (39.29%)	Agree 24 (42.86%)	Disagree 10 (17.86%)	Strongly Disagree 0

Likert Scale 4: Question Directed with Negative Connotation

I prefer the use of green/white boards to mobile phones in teaching vocabulary.	Strongly Agree 16 (28.57%)	Agree 30 (53.57%)	Disagree 8 (14.28%)	Strongly Disagree 2 (3.57%)

The Likert item related to the use of social networks for teaching purposes gained lots of agreements from the teachers. A maximum number of teachers, 36 out of 56 that makes 64% of the total, strongly agreed with the statement. Since many teachers as well as student are used to sharing experiences via the social networks the teachers may find them to be most useful. However, the teachers look confused and doubtful about the use of these interfaces for teaching purposes in classrooms. When the teachers were asked to give the names of their favorite social net works they mentioned the names of Twitter, Moosocial, WhatsApp, Imo, Line Tango, FaceBook, FB Messenger, Linked in, Instagram etc. In spite of the availability of lots of social network platforms, the network that has the maximum frequency of appearance in the responses is the FaceBook, which indicates its popularity among the teachers, and next to FB, WhatsApp is the most popular among these teachers. Almost 90% of the teachers say that creating a class community in social net works for teaching purposes can be helpful in

improving students vocabulary. On the contrary, the responses to the Likert item in scale 2 finds that only 53% of the teachers are sometimes suggesting their students to use their mobile phones for learning vocabulary. Another interesting finding is that about 80% of the teachers' responded in favor of using white/green boards to mobile phones for teaching vocabulary as it can be seen in Likert scale 4. This analysis of the data can infer that these teachers are interested in using mobile phones for learning activities but they aren't using them extensively due to some reasons. The reasons can be the lack of complete awareness about the usefulness of latest gadgets or the use of mobiles in teaching is far away from the traditional ways of teaching so that the teachers, students as well as the administrators need time and training sessions for a complete transition from the traditional ways of teaching and learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the study bring out the confusing state of the teachers about the use of mobile phones in classrooms. Although most of the teachers are in favor of the advantages and conveniences offered by latest mobile phones, teachers look at this aspect of tapping mobile resources as risky in classrooms. The main reason as per our study is that because the students are not trained well for using mobiles for educational purposes they tend to misuse and abuse the mobiles and causes disturbance in the classrooms and the classes may go chaotic beyond the scope of teachers to bring it back to normalcy. The findings of Lam (2000) state that the main reasons for the reluctance and resistance of teachers to use technology in classrooms are related to either their personal beliefs or lack of personal beliefs in the benefits offered by technology. When institutions have become more like technophilic the teachers aren't trained well and carried away from their technophobic condition. Responses to the Likert item in scale 4 reveals that many teachers strongly believe that traditional white/green board based teaching is more convenient to them. Only a few teachers mentioned that they would use both ways; white/green board based teaching as well as mobile assisted teaching. Lam (ibid) argues that technophobia of teachers is a misconception and the decisions of teachers on using technology mostly depend on their beliefs about the usefulness of technology to their students. The implications in this argument are that either the students or the teachers are prepared well for the use of technology assisted teaching methods and so it's the responsibility of the institutions to identify the needs of teachers their students and carry on with proper training sessions. When new technological innovation are to be adopted in any field the users of technology need to travel from nonuse stage to effective use stage that involves several other stages as mentioned by Hall (1974). Institutes and change facilitators need to

take initiation to lead this journey in the form of training sessions and awareness programs.

Some other reasons that teachers mentioned during informal discussions are the inconsistency of the availability of Internet source, students' background and the influence of instructional models during their prior school education. In our study, the responses to the question related to the Internet source at the university many teachers mentioned that they use their personal data cards. Although there is an Internet facility provided by the university only a few teachers mentioned that they have access to that source. Some of the teachers say that they have no idea about the Internet source provided by the university. Purcell et.al (2013) report about the differences between the teachers of wealthier schools and districts in using the services offered by technology, and the differences between aged teachers and the younger teachers in their comfort levels in using technology in classroom.

Edtech innovators certainly don't seem to be flagging in their quest to produce feature-rich Web apps and software tools designed to make teachers' lives easier, but educators can't just put their jobs on hold to learn the ins and outs of every new tool. Tech integration in schools may just stay slow until there's a way for teachers and administrators to get some education of their own (Boyle, 2013).

References:

- Boyle, J. (2013). Why Aren't Teachers Using More Technology in the Classroom? *Edcetera: Strait Talk on Ed Tech (online)*. Retrieved from <http://edcetera.rafter.com/why-arent-teachers-using-more-technology-in-the-classroom/>
- Campbell, A.P. (2003). Weblogs for Use with ESL Classes. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. IX, No. 2 <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Campbell-Weblogs.html>
- Hall, G. E. (1974). The Concerns-Based Adoption Model: A Developmental Conceptualization of the Adoption Process Within Educational Institutions. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED111791.pdf>
- Hsueh, S. (2011). Challenges of Adopting Web 2.0 and Mobile 2.0 for Language Learning. In B. Facer, & M. Abdous (Eds.), *Academic Podcasting and Mobile Assisted Language Learning: Applications and Outcomes* (pp. 70-91). doi:10.4018/978-1-60960-141-6.ch005 <http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/challenges-adopting-web-mobile-language/50671>
- Hymes, D.H. (1972). On communicative competence. In *Sociolinguistics*, Eds. J. B. Pride and J. Holmes. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

- Jee, M. J. (2011). Web 2.0 technology meets mobile assisted language learning. *The IALLT Journal of Language Learning Technologies*, 41(1), 161-175.
- Ki, C. N., Peter W. & Roland, S. (2008). The potential of using a mobile phone to access the Internet for learning EFL listening skills within a Korean context. *ReCALL*, 20 , pp. 331-347 doi:10.1017/S0958344008000633
<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=2153124&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0958344008000633>
- Lam, Y. (2000). Technophilia vs. technophobia: A preliminary look at why second-language teachers do or do not use technology in their classrooms. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 56(3), 389-420.
- Lan. Y. J., Sung. Y.T. & Chang. K.E. (2009). A Mobile-Device-Supported Peer-Assisted Learning System For Collaborative Early Efl Reading. *Language Learning & Technology*, October 2007, Volume 11, Number 3, pp. 130-151. <http://llt.msu.edu/vol11num3/pdf/lansungchang.pdf>
- McCarten, J. (2007). *Teaching Vocabulary: Lessons from the Corpus; Lessons for the Classroom*. Cambridge University Press, NY, USA. Pp. 25
- Meei-Ling, L. (2007). Constructing a ‘third space’ for EFL learners: Where language and cultures meet. *ReCALL*, 19 , pp. 224-241 doi:10.1017/S0958344007000821
<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=999692&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0958344007000821>
- Purcell, K., Heaps, A., Buchanan, J., & Friedrich, L. (2013). How teachers are using technology at home and in their classrooms. *Washington, DC: Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project*.
- Sarah, S. E. (2010). MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning). Retrieved on March 04, 2012 from
<http://drsaraheaton.wordpress.com/2010/05/31/mall-mobile-assisted-language-learning/>
- Zelezny, G.R.(2010). The Potential Impact of Mobile-assisted Language Learning on Women and Girls in Africa: A Brief Literature Review. *International Conference “ICT for Language Learning” 3rd edition*. Retrieved March 04,2012 from Pixel.Net.
http://www.pixelonline.net/ICT4LL2010/common/download/Proceedings_pdf/IBL23Ronda,Zelezny,Green.pdf

Appendix: Research Questionnaire

1. Do you agree that mobile phones are very useful reference tools for teaching vocabulary in classrooms?
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
2. Would you suggest that your students use mobile phones as reference tools for learning vocabulary in your classes?
 Yes No
3. How often do you suggest the use of mobile phones in classrooms?
 always quite often some times never
4. If my students are encouraged to use mobile phones in classrooms, they start using them for other purposes and so I don't suggest the use of mobile phones in classrooms.
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
5. I prefer the use of green/white boards to mobile phones in teaching vocabulary.
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
6. Could you please name the Internet sites that you think are useful in teaching vocabulary?
7. Could you please name your favorite website/s that can be recommended for teaching English vocabulary?
8. I suggest that my students have their mobiles loaded with English dictionaries and other English learning applications.
 always quite often some times never
9. Could you please name your favorite English dictionary/dictionaries for mobile phones?
10. What kind of Internet source do you often use in your classes?
 Personal University Provided Sharing with other teachers
 sharing with students
11. Encouraging students to chat in English over online social networks like Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter can improve students' vocabulary?
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
12. Could you please mention the name/s of your favorite online social network/s?
13. Creating a class community in on-line social media can help teachers in encouraging students to communicate in English and improve their English vocabulary.
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
14. It's easy to teach the different forms of a new word by using the available mobile language learning applications?
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
15. Could you please write about the way that you prefer to use mobile phones in English language classes?