
Mobile Apps in the EFL College Classroom

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Abstract

The article shows the advantages of using mobile Apps in language learning, types of language learning Apps, how to search for language Apps, criteria for selecting mobile language Apps, instructional stages with mobile Apps, the instructor's role and some implications for teaching and learning with mobile Apps.

Keywords: Mobile Apps, Language Apps, Mobile Learning, Mobile Technology, Smart Phones

Introduction

Students of all ages spend a great deal of time interacting with their mobile phones. They use their mobile phones for communication, entertainment and learning. Young Japanese learners prefer to use their cell phones for almost everything, from emailing to reading books (Thornton and Houser, 2005). Smart phones feature a Google Play and iPhone App Stores which have thousands of applications in a variety of subject areas and categories such as books, references, magazines, business, comics, communication, education, finance, health and fitness, libraries, media and video, news and others. In addition, the Google Play and iPhone App Stores have a multitude of applications that can be downloaded and used for teaching and learning English, in general, and specific skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, grammar, vocabulary and dictionaries by children as well as adults of different proficiency levels and for a variety of purposes.

Aims of Study

The study aims to provide EFL college instructors with a model for integrating mobile apps in the classroom. The study will show the following: (i) Advantages of using mobile language Apps; (ii) types of language Apps that can be used; (iii) how to search for language apps, (iv) criteria for selecting language Apps, (v) instructional stages with Apps; (vi) instructor's role; and (vii) recommendations.

Literature Review

A review of the literature has shown numerous studies that have investigated the effect of using mobile Apps in language learning in general, and in developing specific skills and sub-skills. For example,

Kohnke (2020) investigated Hong Kong university students' perceptions of a vocabulary learning app developed by the researcher as a tool for helping students improve their L2 receptive vocabulary. The researcher found that undergraduate students have a strong motivation for using the App to learn L2 vocabulary. However, they preferred mobile Apps with gamified features. Another useful app is "Learning English Listening & Speaking BBC/VOA News" which offers learners a massive archive of updated BBC and VOA podcasts both online and offline (Abdi and Makiabadi, 2019). In addition, contextualized mobile language learning proved to be beneficial for students' learning as it adapts learning activities to the students' real-world environments (Böhm and Constantine, 2015). Another study by Rosell-Aguilar (2018) found that the "Busuu" Mobile App helped thousands of students improve their knowledge of the language they are learning, with vocabulary as the main area of improvement. The students considered the App a reliable tool for language learning. Likewise, Berns, Palomo-Duarte, Doderer, Ruiz-Ladrón, Márquez (2015) created an app called "Guess it! Language Trainer". The App allowed students learning in a compulsory German language course at a Spanish University to share, assess and co-construct their foreign language knowledge. It supported students' independent language learning outside the classroom and provided both students and teachers with new opportunities for learning and assessment.

Based on the results of prior research on mobile learning, the author will provide EFL instructors with a model for integrating mobile apps in language skill teaching and learning. The model is described below.

Why Use Mobile Apps

Mobile Apps can be used as extension activities or as a supplement to in-class EFL college instruction. Students can use the Apps anywhere, anytime and as many times as they need. Mobile Apps are free. They are easy and quick to download and update. They can be deleted if the students do not find any of them beneficial. The students can get the App, its icon, a description, user ratings and comments about it. They can get numerous Apps for a specific skill or a grammatical structure that they need to develop or practice. Apps targeting a specific skill have different material coverage, content difficulty level and use different approaches to skill development. They save instructors' time and effort as they are readily available. Instructors do not have to prepare any Apps or supplementary material.

Types of Language Apps

Mobile Apps covers all aspects of language learning such as: Listening, pronunciation, stress, intonation, spelling, speaking, reading, phonics, writing, grammar, vocabulary, prefixes, suffixes and roots; daily English lessons; different kinds of standardized tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, GRE, SAT, TOEC; test preparation; audio-books; monolingual and bilingual dictionaries; encyclopaedias; ESP; flashcards; podcasts; novels, short stories, magazines, newspapers, and YouTube.

Searching for Mobile Apps

The instructor may search the Google Play Store or Apple Store for Apps targeting a specific skill by selecting specific search terms such as “English vocabulary apps” and “TOEFL preparation”, enclosing the search terms in quotation marks, and using Boolean operators(&, or, not). It is important to add the words “English” and “App” in order to get more relevant results and to avoid getting apps in other languages. Additional search terms are suggested by Google Play once a search term is entered in the search box. The students can also locate, select, and suggest Apps related to the skill or topic under study.

Criteria for Selecting Apps

Apps selected should be related to the skill under study. They should focus on a single skill/aspect. Download several Apps that target a particular skill to accommodate the students’ different proficiency levels, learning styles, interests and needs. Apps chosen should contain enough material and exercises. Take into consideration the degree of familiarity of the content, material difficulty level, complexity and content details, and speed and accent of the speaker.

Instructional Phases

Pre-Task Phase

The instructor tells the students which App/Apps they need to locate or use. She shows the students how they can search Google Play or Apple Store for Apps targeting a specific skill. She tells the students how to download the Apps and helps with problems. She introduces the App/Apps to be used. She posts sample Apps on any LMS (Learning Management System), blog, online discussion forum, Facebook, Twitter, Whats App, Telegram and others. She states the objective of using a mobile App, i.e. tells the students what they are going to do, study or practice. She tells them how they are going to use the app (individually, in pairs or in small groups). She gives clear, specific, and detailed instructions on how to use an app and how a particular task should be performed. She gives examples. She tells the students what

is expected of them, how many Apps they need to complete and sets a time limit or deadline for completing the App/Apps.

Task Phase

Students work with the Apps on their smart phone at home or in class. They work on the Apps individually, in pairs or in small groups. They post queries, comments, and evaluations of an App on an LMS or a social media network. The instructor provides guidance, answers students' questions, and helps with difficulties.

Post Task Phase

The instructor gives feedback and comments on the students' performance. She encourages the students to use mobile Apps and gives credit for using them. The students correct each other and comment on each other's performance. Students keep a log of the Apps they have completed with their evaluation of each.

The Instructor's Role

The instructor serves as a facilitator. She helps the students find and download relevant English language apps that meet their needs and purposes. She matches the students' proficiency level with App difficulty level. She encourages the students to fully participate in the activities. She follows the students up to make sure they are making the best use of the Apps. She gives extra credit for using mobile Apps depending on how many they have completed. App material may be included on tests to motivate the students to take the App activities seriously.

Recommendations

Instructors can exploit latest technologies, such as mobile Apps, to help students develop their listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary skills in English. Mobile Apps allow learners to use their visual and auditory senses to learn complex language concepts and difficult procedures. Instructors should always keep in mind that technology does not teach by itself and its use does not guarantee skill improvement and the automatic learning of the content. The students should be required to engage and participate in, respond to and be actively involved in the mobile App activities. They should not be left on their own. They should be supervised, receive feedback, guidance and encouragement. They may use

