Introduction:

Mobile technologies have become pervasive, yet little is known about the detail of how they are used in informal ways to support learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010). This paper reports on a project which gathered empirical data on the role of mobile phones and other handheld devices in supporting informal learning, specifically language learning among adults. The broad aim of our work is to uncover emergent practices of self-motivated learners. By interviewing these learners, we seek to understand how mobile learning is changing language learning. We believe that mobile devices may ‘open up’ learning by introducing new types of content and interaction, enabling different patterns of access and helping learners identify their needs.

Design:

Mobile technologies can complement formal learning through informal interactions outside the classroom, e.g. Conole et al. (2008) found that students used mobile phones to contact each other about assignment queries. Mobile devices are therefore an important part of the ecology of learning resources, as shown in the ‘learner-centric’ model elaborated by Luckin (2010) which blends formal and informal learning. Surveys also report that students commonly use their phones, mp3 players and other devices informally as learning tools on the go, even when this is not part of their course of study (Kennedy et al., 2008; Kukulska-Hulme et al., in press). Straub (2009) suggests it is important to focus on how individuals understand, adopt and learn to use technology outside formal settings. Our research focused on (1) personal motivations for using a mobile device; (2) the extent to which the device ‘opens up’ learning; and (3) constraints on use and progress. These were explored against a background of information about interviewees’ experience in language learning and use of technology, which was collected via a pre-interview questionnaire. Thirty-two volunteer interviewees were recruited through our university’s intranet, personal networks and online social networking.

Results:

The outcome is an analysis of motivations, opportunities and constraints, representing a learner perspective on the current state and possible future of informal mobile language learning. They were 18 male and 14 female adult learners of Japanese, Spanish, French, German, Welsh, Russian, Euskera, Italian, Chinese, Indonesian and Irish at various levels of proficiency, half of them enrolled in a formal course. The mobile devices that participants used to support their informal language learning included mainly smart phones, mp3 players and handheld game consoles. Learners contrast “dreary classes” with the enjoyment they are experiencing now. Learners’ triumphs include finding the motivation to keep learning every day, discovering novel resources such as a user-generated pronunciation site, and embarking on new activities such as recording a real conversation to discuss it later with a teacher. Frustrations include user interface issues, cost issues, social constraints on what is acceptable behaviour, and limitations on the ability to tailor content and interaction to their needs.

Discussion:

Whilst focusing on languages, our research also has implications for other disciplines and professional fields where independent lifelong learning matters. Informal learning experiences and requirements can be used by mobile learning researchers and developers to ensure that there are synergies between authentic learner needs and technological or pedagogical designs. The research also reveals the practices of early adopters of mobile technologies for informal learning, suggesting ways in which these practices may complement, or may be incorporated into, formal learning.

References


Keywords: mobile learning, language learning, autonomous learning