
LET'S LEARN ENGLISH THROUGH MOBILE PHONES

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Abstract: The paper deals with the possibilities of using mobile devices in education. Due to these devices a new form of teaching has appeared the so-called m-learning. Authors focused on utilizing m-learning in teaching English language since this foreign language has become the most requested and widespread means of communication all over the world. This paper introduces the results of module planning suitable for m-learning usage with the help of a special program package.

Key words: mobile devices, m-learning, language learning, assessment development

1. Introduction

Nowadays the traditional forms of learning are not sufficient any more – the capacity of classes are limited, the number of those wanting to learn is rising and there is always something new to be learnt. Teaching is a time- and money-consuming activity therefore we have to strive for realization of the most efficient, but also the fastest and the cheapest way of training.

In these cases we can use today's information and communication systems, that help us to apply those teaching methods and aids which may motivate students in reaching higher performances thus achieving better results and also enables us to be sparing in time and expenses.

2. M-learning

Mobile communication tools have become the articles of our everyday use. Just a couple of years ago mobile phones were regarded as luxury; nowadays they have a central position in our life. With their help we can manage our everyday duties more flexibly and comfortably; many of us set the mobile phone as alarm clocks; we may browse our e-mails during our morning coffee, and they have also appeared in education.

Also the developed world has brought the problem that present students have to learn and absorb too much information, however, the knowledge they obtain during their school years seems insufficient in real life. To be successful on the workforce market knowing at least one foreign language is a must. Unfortunately, schools in the past did not train their students to meet these requirements. Facing this problem, many start to learn languages, they enrol in courses, pay private teachers or decide to be self-students, but after some time the initial enthusiasm and determination gradually abates. The reasons of this can be various; it is very hard to get down to regular language learning from a book with the workload at work, the family and the children.

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New teaching and learning methods are needed to be acquired and implemented in education so that our students can understand the essential information and easily, almost playfully learn them.

Mobile phones can be involved into learning process outside of school classes, in an informal environment. Through our mobile phones we can get immediate answers to our questions – be it at school, at work or on holiday, so at any situation of our life.

The use of mobile-size computers became natural. Accordingly the learning contents have new interpretations.

They have to be adequate to two conditions:

- The information giving pages have to make the best of the possibilities of mobile environments.
- The structure of content can be simple, else it will be not traceable and hand able. [4]

Thus the mobile may easily become the favourite learning aid for those thirsty of knowledge. István Maradi, vice-president of Magyar Telekom said in one of the episodes of Minden Tanulás: „In comparison to the PC, the mobile-learning is more efficient because people may persuade themselves to watch a short language teaching video while waiting for the tram, sitting in a traffic jam or have some spare minutes before a meeting. The power of mobile lies in the fact, that the knowledge basis is accessible anywhere, anytime.” [1]

Mobile-learning (m-learning) came into life as one of the solutions for learning anytime, anywhere and also for the problems of life-long learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, mobile learning supports a new dimension in the educational process. Characteristics of mobile learning include:

1. urgency of learning need;
2. initiative of knowledge acquisition;
3. mobility of learning setting;
4. interactivity of the learning process. [2]

The m-learning is not only a new learning possibility for students; it can be used by anybody wanting to learn. This learning method meets students' need for individual as well as group work; it encourages the students to cooperate. Its greatest advantage is that it enables the study material to be presented in short instalments, comprehensible and simple form which can be introduced and acquired through interesting examples. Last but not least it may be a great experience to learn new things while using our mobile. The operation of the tool becomes automatic with the practice; due to the simple and playful form of learning screenplays the applied software offers easily understandable explanations about any topic for anybody.

Specialists on m-learning usually approach it from more viewpoints:

1. **Development** – the mobile-learning frees e-learning from the usage of bulky and heavy devices (e.g. personal computers and laptops), and instead of them all the necessary functions are united with a miniature, than again a very clever computer in a mobile phone. Its usage is much easier without losing a bit on the quality.
2. **Mobility** – Mobile-learning provides students with experience which would not be accessible for them in the course of „everyday” learning, thus it ensures the flexibility of teaching and learning process.
3. **Technical approach** – students can learn by using their mobile phones.

The main idea of m-learning is to summarize the study material in a comprehensible, clear and enjoyable form. The mobile-learning presents the study material in an easily understandable and simple form, besides with the increased usage of the employed mobile communication devices its application will become automatic.

3. Developing m-learning syllabus

Using m-learning is possible in present or distant form of training therefore when preparing the assessment it is not necessary to differentiate its content whereas with both forms the material reaches the students in identical ways, by the medium of mobile devices. Nevertheless creating these materials differs from those of other forms of electronic training. Most of the teachers who have planned e-learning modules so far find working out shorter units for m-learning difficult and problematic. Hitherto used constructions of lectures and courses must be reduced into smaller pieces which have to be made up so that in the final implications they would constitute a coherent and complete corpus.

At present there are some programming environments for creating these kinds of modules which enable to make up displays with texts, pictures or animations simply. Besides they offer new possibilities for creating tests and test evaluations. [3]

One of such program package is Learning Mobile Author, developed by Hot Lava Software, through which a module for learning English for beginners was created. Basics of English are taught at various types of schools therefore the modules are planned so that their usage could be universal.



With the help of the mentioned software it is possible to create modules with various contents respectively create modules for various subjects of technical orientation or humanities.

Naturally this programme is not only applicable for creating or reshaping the syllabus; it is useful for making up quizzes and tests too. We do not have to rewrite the whole syllabus into mobile-learning form, since we can explain any new information and materials directly on the lesson or we can provide our students with example situations and exercises to practice, but their examination or questioning can be replaced with the tests prepared in Hot Lava Software. After collecting or drawing the pictures which we want to use as illustrations for the assessment, we can easily install them preceding or following the text of the test as we like it. The typed-in text can also be coloured; we can change the background colour as well as the size and position of the letters. As we see, utilising these possibilities give us space for creating original assessments and tests as well.

4. How can we utilise the advantages of m-learning in language learning?

Besides the telephone communication our mobile phone can be of a significant help in learning languages. We can get exercises in the form of short messages every day, we can also download texts or make easier to understand materials of the training through audiovisual content.

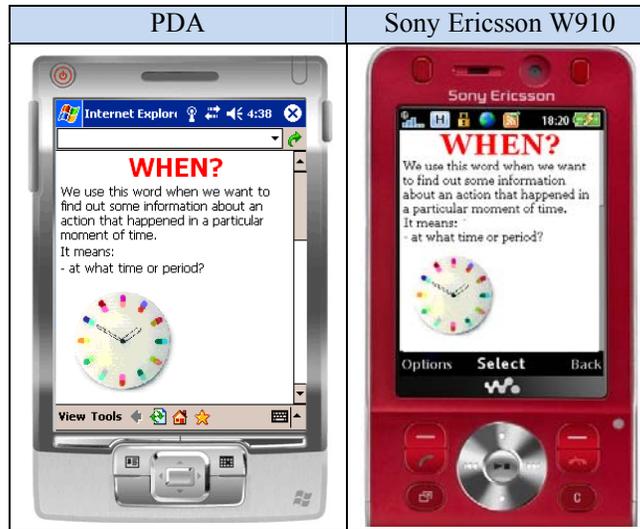
M-learning can be successful in language teaching and learning for many reasons. On one hand because of the small size of the display the assessment must be introduced in a short and comprehensible way, however it must remain interesting. The language learning might be aided by pictures and voices which are essential when learning a foreign language, what more we can make our syllabus more colourful with using video instalments.

Of course, the learning process might be even more entertaining with using m-learning if the assessment is incorporated into a story. In case of an interesting story or an exciting game it is very probable that the student will keep on reading or will not stop playing thus it will result in learning the given material.

We should also keep in mind that mobile phone being a relatively small, handy device carried by everyone everywhere is an ideal tool for learning a foreign language because its features enable the students to get in contact with the target language and learning material as frequently as it is possible for them. Frequency is a key problem with most of the language learners. Many of them do not understand that acquiring a language is very unlikely if they do not devote to it enough time which should be distributed evenly, not in big instalments of some hours but only occasionally. One of the essential factors for successful language learning lies in its regularity, which can be fulfilled by using such an omnipresent and familiar tool as our mobile phone.

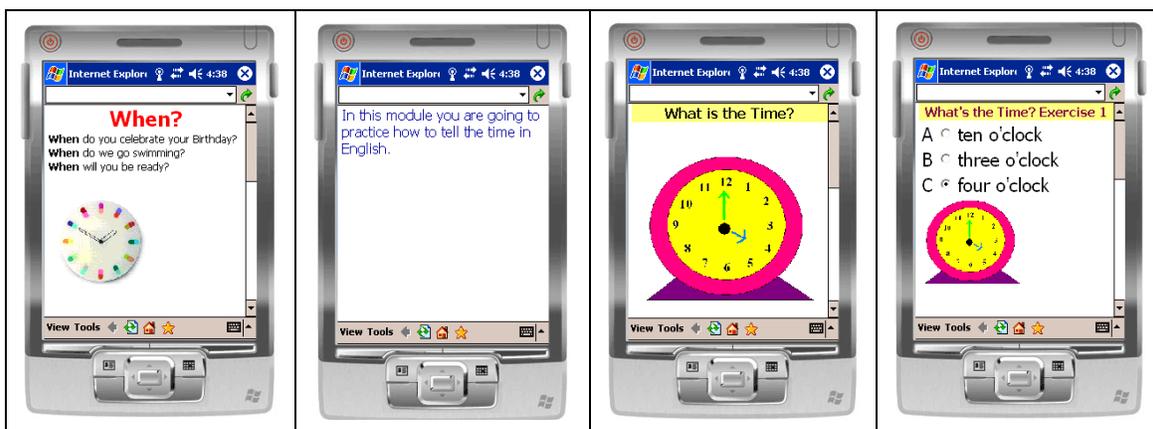
Now let us see how easy and fun can be an assignment through our mobile. The mobile environments have their special features. Their screens are generally too small for the use of any sophisticated applications. Their keyboard is also very small and is often incomplete or it is missing completely that is why the screen is used as a keyboard. Therefore the learning material must be prepared accordingly.

Picture 1 shows an example of learning the use of questions with the question word when. There is a selection from a series of displays prepared for this module. The pictures show the same displays of two different mobile devices – a pocket computer (PDA) and a Sony Ericsson W910 mobile phone. We are presenting them for the visual input since they make it obvious that the content is clearly readable on displays of various sizes. Modules can be used on mobile devices supporting JAVA applications.



Picture 1. Example of teaching material on displays of two different mobile devices.

Picture 2 shows some of the displays of mobile phones with more example sentences for when as well as practising how to tell the time. This is to demonstrate a module of teaching how to tell the time in English. These illustrations on the displays (in our case they are clocks) help deepen and fasten the acquiring process in students as well as enhances visuality of our syllabus.



Picture 2. Example of teaching material.

Looking at these pictures of exercises, one might even get the appetite for practising in this way, which seems to be much more entertaining and attractive than the classical, dry pen-and-paper method in a classroom.

The module includes also a simple self-control test for checking obtained knowledge. The testing involves simple, exercise-like questions but at the end there is a short evaluation in two forms (Picture 3). The evaluation is verbal since the aim is certain self-control of the student.



Picture 3. Pictures of test evaluation.

5. Conclusion

M-learning should not be feared. It does not jeopardize the so far well-known teaching methods and forms nor does it endanger the teaching positions of teachers. Training through mobile devices can be perceived as an aid in learning because so far there has not been other such device that could be used at an arbitrary place and in arbitrary time for getting the needed information thus obtaining knowledge. [5]

Also we have to admit that mobile phones are widespread and popular means of communication for our students. They use them on an everyday basis and have long found out possibilities of these devices apart from their basic function of telephoning. The youth has already mastered the usage of their mobiles which can be a positive thing when using them as teaching aids: we do not have to spend precious time with training students how to use them because for now it has become their second nature. So why not utilize such a device as an educational tool? Its users will not feel repugnancy to it which might result in a better approach to the whole question thus reaching significant development in learning languages.

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