Focus on

MOBILE APPS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

1. What is it?

The mobile learning concept
Mobile learning can be understood as any learning or training that takes place using a mobile phone or tablet device. This is a definition linked to specific technological objects rather than any pedagogical assumptions or underlying theories of learning. It is therefore helpful to consider the characteristics of mobile devices that lend themselves most readily to language learning. In this paper, we focus specifically on how we can use mobile apps to achieve language learning objectives.

Apps
One of the great benefits of mobile devices for language learning is the vast proliferation of apps that can be downloaded for them. These apps can be broadly defined in two types: generic apps which have been developed for various ‘authentic’ purposes and dedicated apps which have been specifically developed for language learning. Both of these types offer students a vast range of functionality and content which can be employed for learning purposes. Generic apps such as video communication apps or social networking apps offer students the opportunity for learning through authentic language use and interaction with other target language users, while dedicated apps offer students a vast range of custom-built learning content.

2. What does it mean for the ELT classroom?

Easy access
Most students have their mobile device constantly within arms’ reach throughout the day, which makes them ideal for the delivery of spaced repetition activities that encourage students to regularly revise and review learning. Many vocabulary app creators take advantage of this easy access and build in regular vocabulary review.

Research online
Mobile devices make it easy to do quick research projects online and check a range of information. The use of specific apps can make this even simpler, as they allow more targeted searching than a full online search. They can also be accessed directly from the user’s screen without having to remember URLs, logins, and navigate to specific pages of sites.

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www.oup.com/elt/expert
Paced learning
Mobile devices allow students to view and listen to audio or video at their own pace. Students can also save the videos or audio they access for later study.

Time management
There are plenty of apps available to help us and our students stay organized and manage our time more effectively. Brainstorm ideas with your class. One example might be to schedule regular revision of vocabulary and other content.

Creating digital media
There is a wide range of apps that allow us and our students to create and edit high quality video for any projects or speaking activities we want to record. It can really fuel students’ motivation to push for accuracy during their speaking activities when they know that they and their peers will be watching the video afterwards. Watching the video later on enables them to reflect on and improve their own performance.

Sharing digital media
Students can bring their world into the classroom by recording video or audio to show one another in class. They can use apps to share, comment, collaborate, and interact around the media they create.

Authentic communication
Mobile devices were built for the purpose of communication and there are multiple apps that can make this both free and easy to organize, so this is an element that can be incorporated into the design of mobile learning activities.

We can add an element of authentic communication to our classroom by using video or audio conferencing apps. These can be used with other classes or to bring in guest speakers from outside the school. They also open up opportunities for contact with speakers from other countries, as many of these apps bypass international charges.

Real language use
The connection between apps and the world outside the classroom can make the class and the homework assignments we set much more relevant to students’ lives. Students’ level of engagement will likely increase as they gain a genuine sense of how they can use the language they are learning.

Learning in context
Mobile devices can be tracked to location. This has enabled the development of a number of apps that are able to deliver learning that is context- and location-specific, making it possible to map learning onto the world outside the classroom.

Courses and mobile apps
There is a wide range of structured language learning content that has been developed to be delivered through mobile apps, so it is now possible to support language course materials with a variety of mobile course content.

Apps allow us to use digital games, flashcards, and all kinds of autonomous learning activities to reward students or to keep those who finish early busy and productive.

There are also game or quiz apps that have been developed to allow us to upload and author custom content. These apps enable us to use the wordlists or structures that our students have been studying for a variety of quizzes and games.

It can be difficult for teachers to know where to start. On page 4 there are links to further reading on specific mobile apps for ELT.

3. What are the challenges?

Distraction
One of the biggest criticisms of mobile devices inside the classroom is that they are a constant distraction. Teachers can find themselves competing with the devices for the attention of students who are more interested in the latest tweet, text, or image from their friends.

Cross-platform compatibility
Few schools have the finances to provide devices for students and so a policy of BYOD (bring your own device) has become increasingly popular. This leaves teachers facing groups of students with a very wide range of devices using different operating systems. Finding apps that run on all of these devices can be difficult and take up additional preparation time.

Quality
Although there is a vast range of dedicated apps that students can download and use on their devices, the quality of these varies considerably and sorting through and trialing these can again take up more time.

Cost and connectivity
Cost can be an issue, both in terms of finding low-cost or free apps as well as the cost of connectivity. Access to Wi-Fi in schools can be limited and connecting to 3G or 4G in order to do school work in class may cost students or their parents money, especially if students are having to download an app to get started with an activity.

Storage capacity
In some cases there may be storage issues. Apps that are content-rich can often take up a lot of storage space on a user’s device and they may not have space available.

Screen size variation
Screen sizes can vary across devices. Some activities that are achievable on a tablet screen may be too small on a mobile phone. Other activities which work in landscape orientation on a tablet may not switch to a view compatible with mobile phones.

Privacy and safety
Make sure students know how to keep their personal details safe. If we are asking students to sign up to use apps, then we need to be aware of any information the apps are collecting, especially if this relates to personal data. If students are using social media apps, talk to them about what action to take if they...
receive unwanted or offensive messages from fellow students or strangers. If they are using mobile devices to capture images or video of each other, then there must be strict school policies in place for how this data is stored and used.

Training
All of these apps and the functionality they offer hold huge potential for language learning. However, in order to effectively unlock that potential, teachers need training in using mobile devices for language learning, guidance on apps that will enhance their students’ learning, and time to experiment with putting it into practice.

4. How can this be implemented?

Bite-size delivery
Mobile phones in particular have a small screen size which makes prolonged attention and concentration more difficult. However, their portability makes it easy for students to access and complete activities from anywhere. As a result, well-designed mobile learning activities are likely to be most effective when delivered in bite-size chunks.

Taking control
Research suggests that many teen and young adult students are aware of possible ‘addiction’ to their phones, so one of the first things you can do with your students is teach them how to control the notifications on their phone and make sure they turn them off, at least during class. The apps that have notifications have been designed to constantly grab users’ attention, so helping students take control of notifications can be a good first step to helping them control how they use their phones.

You can make a lesson out of this by getting students to find a video tutorial showing how to do this for their particular model of phone.

Monitoring
If you are using apps in the classroom, be sure to monitor closely to make sure students are on task. The temptations of social media and checking out what friends are doing is always there and it will help them stay on track if they know you are keeping a close watch on the task in hand.

Acceptable use
Create an acceptable use policy (AUP) for your classroom and get students to read and sign up to it. These are the kinds of policies that are commonplace in the workplace, and in a school environment they stipulate how and when a student can use a device during class time or in relation to school-related work. Be sure to include rules for the classroom as well as rules regarding the sharing of content on public sites or via social media.

Protecting themselves
Educate students about how to protect themselves online. This should include building their awareness regarding the sharing of personal information as well as helping them to understand how to block or report any abuse or harassment.

Making materials digitally accessible
The best way to keep mobile phones from being a distraction in the classroom is for students to use their devices in a productive way to develop their learning skills. For example, instead of playing audio or video from the front of the class, ask students to watch and listen via an app on their own device at their own pace.

Preparation
If you want to use specific apps in the classroom, check to see if there is a version of the app that can simply be used in the mobile browser or whether there are versions for different mobile platforms. If students need an app to use in class, tell the class beforehand so that they can download and install it at home in advance.

Evaluation criteria
Create a list of criteria for the evaluation of dedicated language learning apps. This should speed up the evaluation process when you are deciding whether an app is appropriate for your class. For example, does it give the students feedback? Can it be used for collaborative work? You can also share these criteria with students and get them to evaluate apps. For example, is it user-friendly? Is it engaging? That way you can build up a list of useful apps together and also develop their awareness of what to look for in a learning app.

5. Over to you

There is limitless potential for using mobile apps for language learning both inside and outside the classroom. Now that you have considered the challenges and benefits of mobile apps in general, we encourage you to explore and experiment to find what works best for your requirements and context.
6. Further reading

International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies
www.i-jim.org

5 OUP Apps for the Classroom
https://oupeltglobalblog.com/2019/08/30/apps-english-teachers/

10 Popular Apps for English Language Learners and Teachers

20+ Things You Can Do With QR Codes in Your School

25 Practical Ideas for Using Mobile Phones in the Classroom

The Use of Current Mobile Learning Applications in EFL

Students’ Perceptions and Experiences of Mobile Learning
http://www.lltjournal.org/item/2825

Evaluating Authentic Mobile Apps for Learning

Social media groups for teachers interested in mobile apps
Apps for Education
https://www.facebook.com/groups/290327681003438
Educational App Talk
https://www.facebook.com/groups/EdAppTalk/
Google Apps in the Classroom
https://www.facebook.com/groups/181610115614397

Twitter accounts to follow
https://twitter.com/AndroidEducator
https://twitter.com/ClassTechTips
https://twitter.com/edappadvice

Hashtags to search or follow
#mlearn #mlearning #edapp #edtech

Talking points

Have you used mobile apps with your students? Which ones, and how did you use them?
What problems have you had with mobile apps? Were you able to overcome these problems? How?
What apps do your students use in their day-to-day lives? How could you exploit these for language learning?
How can you cope with classes that have a mix of students who do and don’t bring mobile devices to class?
Which apps could you use to get your students creating video and audio? What tasks or activities could you get them to do with these apps?
How could you use apps on your own mobile device to create motivating video and audio for your students?