# SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL APPLICATIONS ON A MOBILE PHONE FOR ENGLISH TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING

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#### Abstract

The utter importance of knowing the English language cannot be denied today. Despite the existence of traditional methods for teaching a language in schools, a big number of children are left without the requisite knowledge of English as a result of which they fail to compete in the modern world. With English being a Lingua Franca, more efforts are mandatory to foster the English language learning abilities. This can be achieved by improving the traditional method of teaching by providing alternative means to ameliorate the effort. Keeping these aspects in view, research is being conducted to evaluate the performance of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course) and MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) to teach a language. However, this particular research will bring into the limelight a set of social networking applications commonly found in a mobile phone, which can serve as potential English Language Learning, Operant Conditioning, Sense of Community and Task-Based Teaching Principles, the social networking applications will be assessed. Therefore, this descriptive research aims to bring awareness on how the applications can be utilized to enhance task-based learning of English Language.

Keywords: Mobile applications, language learning, MALL, English language

# **1. Introduction**

There are numerous examples of educational institutions attempting to encourage the idea of integrating technology with task-based learning. For instance, iPods were provided to first year students at Duke University in 2004; the facility of free downloadable lectures was given to all those students who purchased the iRiver technology in Korea (Chinnery, 2006). Besides these devices, there are many other media considered useful by research scholars (Zhao, 2005; Salaberry, 2001) for instance, television, DVD players, digital dictionaries as well as mobile phones. In particular, the latter offer a range of opportunities to share and exchange information thanks to the myriad of options and specifications available through applications (Falaki et al., 2010).

The use of mobile phones has also been introduced in education, and in particular for language learning, leading to the development of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). Scholars have, however, debated on the effectiveness of MALL, showing slight distrust towards these technologies when compared to the traditional teaching system (Beatty, 2003), or advocating that MALL is changing the landscape of former learning processes, making these spontaneous, informal, personalized and ubiquitous (Miangah & Nezarat, 2012). According to Gay et al. (2001), mobile phones are not intended to be seen as replacements for regular teaching and learning, rather they are considered as sources that could efficiently aid in accelerating the process of English language learning. Kukulska-Hulme (2009: 163) points out that: "if language learners' preferences and needs can be allowed to have a bearing on what is learnt and how, mobile technologies have a clear role to play in realizing such an objective".

Keeping in view the literature which highlights an ample amount of research conducted on the impact of using social networks, like Facebook, Twitter and LiveMocha, to enhance English language learning, this article focuses on the importance of what can be defined Application Assisted Language Learning (APALL). Basically, APALL can engage learners in tasks which are technologically generated with the support of mobile phones, and, in particular, with phones which are based on Android, iOS or Windows operating systems via the use of various application software. APALL can then be considered as a sub-branch of MALL, which covers all the basic areas of mobile learning, including the use of SMS, camera, voice recording in general. Given the modern technological advancements in software development for smart phones, it is important, however, to consider APALL as a new field in its own right. While mobile phone applications are developed for daily interactive communication, their use in task-based language learning can meet the needs of current learners who are used to handling technological tools. APALL can, therefore, engage learners in a variety of interesting and enjoyable tasks beyond the traditional use of textbooks. As these applications provide the advantages of flexibility, low cost and user-friendliness, it is important to understand how they can be adopted for different pedagogical purposes to foster English task-based learning.

In this light, the aim of the current paper is to focus on the pedagogical adoption of mobile phone social applications commonly used by learners in their daily activities from a task-oriented approach to APALL.

## 2. The theoretical framework of MALL

With the rapid growth in mobile phone technologies and increase in the number of its users, technological practices have become more and more sophisticated. With this evolution, education has also transformed itself in order to become adapted to the newer trends (Miangah & Nazarat, 2012; Chinnery, 2006). For this purpose, it is highly significant for modern day teachers to have a complete awareness of the various technologies, software and applications that are currently trending in the market. They also need to creatively think how to utilize them to enhance the learning experience of their students.

The field of MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) has been amply researched (Kiernan & Aizwa, 2004). For instance, research has been conducted on special intelligent systems that are designated to teach different language skills to learners (Huang et al., 2012; Chang & Hsu, 2011; Chen & Chang, 2011; Chenget al., 2010). Further on, such frameworks as the Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1971) or the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) appear to support the principles of MALL. Other studies have investigated learner attitudes towards technological-based teaching and found positive responses (Hsu, 2012; Cheng et al., 2010; Rosell-Aguilar, 2007).

This paper argues that the Mastery Learning Theory, Sense of Community, Online Sense of Community and Task-Based Language teaching principles appropriately corroborate the significance of mobile applications for English language teaching and learning.

According to Mastery Learning Theory, which is based on the Operant Conditioning Theory of Behaviour (Bloom, 1964), mastery is achieved provided requisite and ideal conditions cum circumstances are being given to young learners. Emphasis is on mastery rather than on mere learning, irrespective of the time consumed to achieve expertise. Instructors, thus, provide learners with individual and personalized corrective feedback, ensuring they develop awareness of their mistakes. Mobile applications can easily support this learning process as instructors can go online, listen to or read students' messages and respond in real time. Distance between a teacher and single learners which occurs in traditional faceto-face interaction is thus narrowed thanks to the adoption of mobile applications.

On the other hand, the Sense of Community Theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) acknowledges that all individuals identify themselves and perform their roles in relation to one another. They have a psychological sense of community, be it territorial or relational. This element of unity and working as a social online group can be used for various pragmatic and pedagogical outcomes. By taking this theory further, Rovai and Jordan (2004) argue that if this sense or feeling of community results in a better flow of information and cooperation, it

can also be used for online pedagogical purposes. The Online Sense of Community Theory, thus, emphasizes the development of this sense of belonging within virtual environments of learning, where participants and learners' interactions and mutual trust are fostered as a result of this practice. Mobile applications can again easily contribute to building an online sense of community where a task-oriented approach to learning is adopted. Following the seven principles of task-based language teaching introduced to evaluate teaching materials and tools (Nunan, 2004), it is further possible to objectively assess mobile applications and their potential in language learning. These can be summarized as follows:

- 1. *Scaffolding*: this principle implies that learners should be guided by the instructor on how and what to do within supportive frameworks.
- 2. *Task Dependency*: this denotes that one task should lead to another so that the sequence tells a "pedagogical story" (Nunan, 2007: 35).
- 3. *Recycling*: this principle explains the importance of repeating an item again for learners to gain full mastery over it and also to depict whether they have really understood it or not.
- 4. *Active Learning*: Learners need to be provided with maximum opportunities to practically use the language.
- 5. *Integration*: this principle illustrates that learners should not only be aware of the meaning of the linguistic item taught, but more importantly of the communicative function it serves.
- 6. *Reproduction to Creation*: initially, students should be taught how to reproduce items they learn. In the next phase, however, they should be instructed to creatively employ them.
- 7. *Reflection*: tasks should allow students to personal reflection on learning in order to understand the importance of a particular task for learning language.

## **3.** APALL in light of the MALL framework

The theoretical MALL framework is helpful in understanding how APALL can be effectively evaluated for the purpose of task-based language learning. APALL opens a gateway to unravel some novel areas of mobile technology which can play a vital role in the improvement of English Language Learning. Keeping in view the Mastery Learning, Online Sense of Community Theory and the evaluative principles for task-based language learning, the prime purpose of APALL is to enhance learners' English language proficiency, also by reducing time consumption. Previous empirical research (Lenhart, 2009; Wei & Kolko, 2005) has revealed

that teenagers and adults have either a mobile or a smart phone to keep updated with events in their surroundings on a daily basis. This is especially possible through applications available by default for social networking on current mobile phones. Nowadays, the mostly widely used include *Skype*, *Viber*, *Whatsapp* and *Hike Messenger*.

In the following sections, each application will be described and evaluated against the principles underlying the theoretical framework of MALL discussed in section 2.

#### 3.1. *Skype*

Research (e.g. Chinnery, 2006; Miangah & Nazarat, 2012) has revealed that learners tend to take more interest in learning when there is a shift away from the traditional environment of blackboards and textbooks. Among the various mobile applications, the functionalities of *Skype* can prove useful in task-based learning. The software is built in English and supports all kinds of operating systems, including Android, BlackBerry, iOS, Windows. Features include voice messaging via microphone, video calling through the use of a webcam and also instant messaging via the Internet, making it a popular online tool.

In the academic context, *Skype* supports conference call, video charts and screen sharing between more than twenty people simultaneously without any charges (Leontjeva et al., 2013). It can further be used to create task-based virtual classrooms in which learners can interact using the options of voice and text messaging under the supervision of a moderator who can also play the additional role of facilitator. Activities can further be designed to allow new and different ways of doing familiar tasks by using *Skype* as an additional channel for oral communication (Godwin-Jones, 2005), or to enhance speaking skills through the option of conference calls (Correa, 2015). These activities can be considered as part of Jost's (2003) *debating* type of task and can be strategically designed for *active learning* (Nunan, 2004).

Another feature which can support task-based language learning is the screen sharing visual aid as it displays textual content which is usually not available in the traditional communication mode. This functionality can be employed, for example, as a *scaffolding* strategy (Nunan, 2004) in preparing oral presentations, or for information-gap activities (Kiernan & Aizawa, 2004) based on fact finding as part of the *listing* type of task (Jost, 2003).

#### 3.2. Viber

Basically, *Viber* is an instant messaging application which also provides the service of Voice over IP (VoIP) on smart phones, also allowing the exchange of video, audio, text, image and illustrative messages. One of its important landmarks is the availability of group messaging

service (Cooper, 2012), which allows for the creation of an online sense of community between the users of *Viber*, and which can be seen as fulfilling the criteria of Mastery Learning.

A specific feature which can be used to support task-based learning is the option of sending 'Stickers', which contain various emotive and textual messages. While browsing and choosing the stickers to communicate, learners gain meaning and communicative functions of various words and of their emoticons. Stickers, thus, can be seen as an *integration* strategy (Nunan, 2004), for example, in tasks of the type based on *comparing* (Jost, 2003).

Another feature worth considering is the unique option to 'Doodle' on *Viber*. Clicking on this option will open a blank white page on the user's mobile phone where diagrams/maps can be designed and keywords handwritten. Used as a *reflection* strategy (Nunan, 2004), this feature can support *problem-solving* types of tasks (Jost, 2003), which involve planning activities, or even brainstorming through the design of mind maps.

## 3.3. Whatsapp

Similar to *Viber*, *Whatsapp* has been declared as the most active and popular message application with around 600 million users around the globe (Olson, 2014). Keeping in mind the options of voice messaging in addition to text messaging and video sharing (Mahajan et al., 2013), *Whatsapp* can be typically used to improve learners' pronunciation. The feature of voice messaging can thus be seen as a *recycling* strategy (Nunan, 2004), which counters learners' frequent hesitation to articulate words in the traditional pedagogical environment. Conversely, language learners feel more comfortable in engaging in this kind of task as a result of the absence of a physical observer. In addition, learners can play back their voice recordings, which are displayed as complete audio files, thus engaging in the task type of *comparing* similarities and differences (Jost, 2003) between their production and native-like English pronunciation.

#### 3.4. Hike Messenger

This instant messaging application is readily available for smart phones with Internet access. Through *Hike*, the users can not only send text messages but also can use illustrative stickers, images, music files, videos, contact files, voice messages and documents. In addition to its basic chat affordance, this application also provides various chat themes, which are sharable and viewable by both the sender and receiver on their respective screens. This option can be seen as a *Reproduction to Creation* strategy, whereby task-based activities can be, for

example, of the type of *discovery* (Jost, 2003) of new content related to chosen themes. Group chat is a further option which can be used as an *active learning* strategy (Nunan, 2004) for example, in *debating* and *problem-solving* types of task-based activities (Jost, 2003).

These are simply some basic examples of how social applications on mobile phones can support principles and types of different task-based activities as summarized in Table 1.

Mobile Social Apps	Task-based Principles	Types of Tasks
and Their Functionalities	(Nunan, 2004)	(Jost, 2003)
Skype		
Conference calls	Active learning	Debating
• Screen sharing visual aid	Scaffolding	Listing
Viber		
<ul> <li>Sending stickers</li> </ul>	Integration	Comparing
• Doodle	Reflection	Problem-solving
Whatsapp		
• Voice messaging	Recycling	Comparing
Hike		
• Chat themes	Reproduction to Creation	Discovery
• Group chat	Active learning	Debating/Problem-solving

Table 1: Examples of the use of mobile social apps according to task-based principles and task types.

## 4. Evaluation of mobile-based applications for Task-Based Teaching

The mobile social applications afore examined can, thus, be evaluated within the broader perspective of APALL according to the principles for task-based teaching (Nunan, 2004).

## 4.1. APALL Scaffolding

In a complex classroom environment, it is difficult to align all the critical elements which contribute to scaffolding. APALL scaffolding moves beyond classroom constraints, allowing teachers to be online for ongoing diagnosis of student learning, carefully calibrate required individual support and to hand over the responsibility of learning to each single student. In other words, APALL responds to "synergistic scaffolds which are different supports that augment each other; they interact and work in concert to guide a single performance of a task or goal" (Tabak, 2004: 318), addressing learning needs in different ways.

## 4.2. APALL Task Dependency

Task dependency is strictly related to the way in which tasks are sequenced. Unlike the traditional linear manner of sequencing pedagogic tasks gradually, APALL enables major task-based flexibility, allowing learners to choose and control content sequencing and pace their learning according to their individual needs (Plastina, 2015) in order to achieve the goals set by the required tasks.

#### 4.3. APALL Recycling

In the process of learning, reinforcement and reintroduction play an important role for learners' understanding of the target language (Lynch, 2000). Pedagogical recycling in APALL gives both the teacher and students the freedom to re-focus on a previously discussed item, but with a new function in mind. The medium of technological applications facilitates activities of pronunciation, spelling corrections and vocabulary improvement for this purpose.

# 4.4. APALL Active Learning

The facilities of APALL fulfill the requirements of active learning, particularly in the cases of immediate instructor feedback, practice in the use of the target language and in engagement in academic activities of discussions, reading and writing (Bonwell, 2000). Online forums provide learners sufficient freedom to interact with their teachers and class fellows, using the target language on a one-to-one basis.

#### **4.5. APALL Integration**

Understanding of the form, function and meaning of each linguistic item is essential to the integration feature of a task (Nunan, 2004), which APALL provides through the utility of live textual/spoken communication, instant presence of the tutor, usage of 'Stickers' and 'Doodle' options, and the related image-sharing function. This not only stimulates learners' understanding of linguistic items, but also provides them with practical means and learnable opportunities for communicating aptly in these electronic media.

#### 4.6. APALL Reproduction to Creation

The process of taking the learner from a phase of simply reproducing the learned material to creatively incorporating it into different contexts is another necessary step while conducting any language teaching task (Comer, 2007) through the use of APALL. Learners are, in fact,

provided with virtual functions in the respective applications in order to use them according to their creative preferences. In such a way, learners can switch themes, select relevant emotive stickers, create personalized doodles, formulate their own audio recordings and convey their personal thoughts in the target language.

## 4.7. APALL Reflection

The task must enable the learner to comprehend the strategies behind its function is necessary (Willis, 1996). For this purpose, the immediate communicative environment via APALL is conducive for learners' reflection and feedback. APALL reflection also allows teachers to collect information on student reflections right after the tasks, which provides teachers with the correct direction to follow (Ruso, 2007) in a new online teaching approach targeted to learners' needs.

# **5.** Conclusion

This article has introduced some of the common mobile applications currently used for daily activities and underlined basic ways in which they can be adopted in English task-based language learning. In particular, specific functionalities of four different applications have been analyzed against the seven principles of task-based language teaching to show how social applications well adhere to these.

Undoubtedly, language learning is considered the most popular application of mobile technology-enhanced learning (Hwang & Wu, 2014) and MALL has been amply researched. Nevertheless, attention to the implementation of social mobile applications in English task-based language learning using native mobile functionalities is still currently scarce. Despite the rise of new social applications makes it a challenge to offer guidance, teachers intending to keep abreast of technology-enhanced language learning may want to focus on the use of Application Assisted Language Learning (APALL) to engage 21<sup>st</sup> century learners in more authentic and motivating tasks. Within the newly emerging area of mobile devices in order to access and/or communicate information on an anywhere/anytime basis and for a range of social and/or academic purposes in an L2" (Jarvis & Achilleos, 2013), APALL is a key to future task-based language learning.

As a number of EFL/ESL teachers may still lack sufficient training in MALL, it is worth bearing in mind that APALL can be easily aligned with the emerging principles in the field proposed by Stockwell and Hubbard (2013). Thus, APALL should consider that:

- affordances and limitations of mobile social applications should be directly connected in a principled way to SL learning;
- multi-tasking should be limited to avoid interference in language learning;
- task design should reflect different learning styles;
- tasks should be short and coherent;
- applications should be adopted to fit language learning tasks.

In adopting APALL, teachers need to change their students' perception of these applications which will probably perceive their social use rather than their task-based instructional support to language learning.

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