

# Mobile learning in the foreign language classroom –challenges and opportunities

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## Abstract:

The article focuses on how foreign language teachers could use mobile learning in formal and informal learning environments. One of the key aims of the article is the focus on defining the pedagogy of mobile learning in the context of foreign language teaching and learning through the use of mobile learning tools during the foreign language lessons but also in informal learning contexts, encouraging learner autonomy and involvement in the learning task. Thus, the article presents how language teachers could try mobile learning based activities during foreign language lessons and outside the class, using students' own devices through the implementation of a *Bring Your Own Device Policy (BYOD)* within foreign language lessons.

**Keywords:** mobile learning, pedagogy, foreign language teaching, *Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)*, Apps, language skills

## Rezumat:

Articolul prezintă modul în care profesorii de limbi străine pot folosi *mobile learning* în situații de învățare formală și informală. Unul dintre obiectivele cheie ale articolului este accentul pe definirea pedagogiei bazată pe principii de *mobile learning* în contextul predării și învățării limbilor străine prin folosirea instrumentelor mobile în cadrul orelor de limbi străine dar și în situații informale de învățare, încurajând implicarea și autonomia elevilor în activitatea de învățare. Astfel, articolul arată modul în care profesorii de limbi străine pot încerca activități la clasă sau în afara clasei, folosind dispozitivele mobile ale elevilor prin implementarea politicii *Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)* în cadrul orelor de limbi străine.

**Cuvinte cheie:** mobile learning, pedagogie, predarea limbilor străine, *Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)*, aplicații, competențe de limbă

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## **1. An overview of Mobile Learning**

Burston (2014) points out that the definitions of mobile learning fall into two categories, depending on whether the main importance is given to the mobility of the learner or to the use of the mobile device. In this context, Sharples, Taylor and Vavoula (2005, p. 5) consider that “it is the learner that is mobile, rather than the technology...interactions between learning and technology are complex and varied, with learners opportunistically appropriating whatever technology is ready to hand as they move between settings, including mobile and fixed phones, their own and other people’s computers, as well as books and notepads.” This definition focuses on the mobility of the learner rather than the use of a mobile device while suggesting that basically any kind of technology characterized by flexibility stands for mobile learning.

On the other hand, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008, p.273) propose a definition of mobile learning which focuses on the use of portable technology: “For our purposes, then, ‘mobile learning’ refers to learning mediated via handheld devices and potentially available anytime, anywhere.” In the same context, Palalas (2011, p. 76-77) attempts to incorporate both aspects of mobile learning by stating that “MALL can be defined as language learning enabled by the mobility of the learner and...portability of handheld devices...”

According to Palalas&Ally (2016, p. 5), mobile learning represents learning “across physical and virtual contexts which is enabled and supported by highly portable devices (both handheld and wearable) as well as communication and social network technologies.” This recent definition of mobile learning shows that m-learning represents a new phase in foreign language learning, making learning possible not only in physical, but also in virtual contexts, enabled by network technologies. Moreover, m-learning can reach audiences that could not be reached by any other technology in the past, blending learning in formal and informal contexts and taking language learning into real-life environments (Palalas&Ally, 2016).

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a sub-area of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) which uses mobile devices instead of a computer in order to deliver educational content. Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) believe that MALL is different from CALL, as MALL uses personal mobile devices which allows for new ways of learning to occur.

## **2. Literature review**

Although it may appear as a new area to explore in foreign language teaching and learning, m-learning has actually almost two decades of application in foreign language learning with over 345 research studies on m-learning (Palalas&Ally, 2016). However, the studies remained marginal to the curriculum and they were not followed by curricular integration (Palalas&Ally, 2016). The use of mobile tools for educational purposes has begun with the release of the iPhone (2007), Amazon Kindle (2007), the iPad (2010) and it also involved the use of PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants), of electronic dictionaries and of MP3 players. The use of these devices gradually gave rise to the field, known as mobile learning.

Chinnery (2006) investigated the state of mobile language learning focusing on projects which used phones for vocabulary practice, live tutoring, quiz delivery, email lesson content delivery. Chinnery's (2006) findings revealed that there were several problems associated with these devices, such as small screens, poor audio quality, limited storage memory and also slow Internet connectivity. Likewise, as Godwin-Jones (2011) points out, the operating systems (Palm OS, Windows Mobile, Nokia Symbian) were very limited. Moreover there were few apps which could be loaded onto those systems and web browsing was slow (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Burston (2014) also observed that the early attempts to incorporate these devices in education were not very successful given several technological limitations. However, since 2007 and the arrival of Apple iPhone, Android devices and Windows 7 products, these limitations have been gradually overcome. These devices are now associated with mini computers given their multiple functionalities (Godwin-Jones, 2011). From its early beginning, the main focus in mobile learning has been on foreign language applications, English being the target language in over 60% of the mobile-assisted language learning studies (Burston J., in Palalas&Ally, 2016) as shown in figure 1 below.

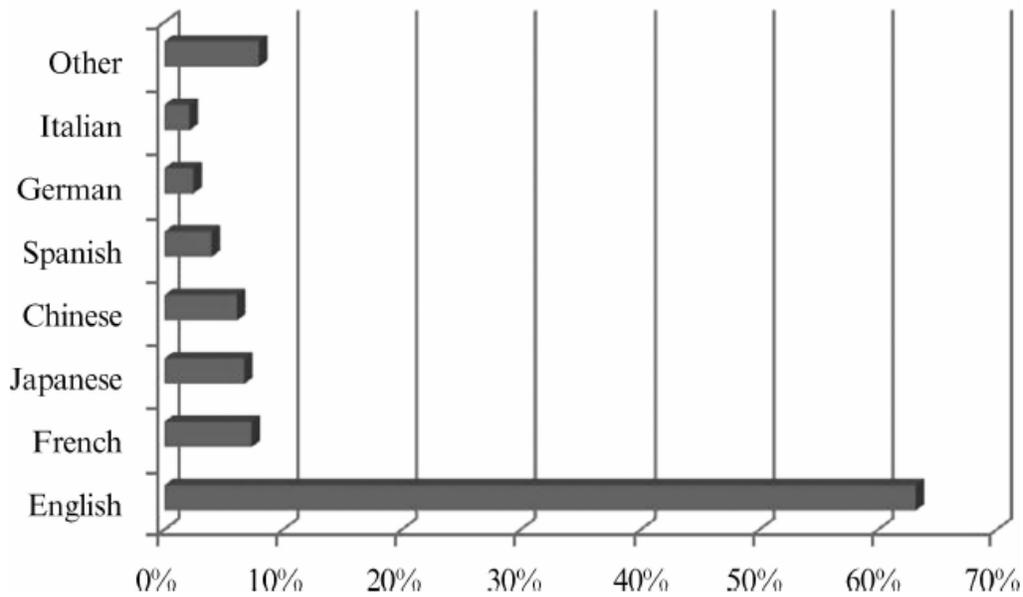


Figure 1. Language Taught (Burston J. in Palalas&Ally, 2016)

As to which age group uses mobile tools for language learning, Figure 2 shows that it is mostly College/University students that have used mobile learning for foreign language learning (Burston J. in Palalas&Ally, 2016).

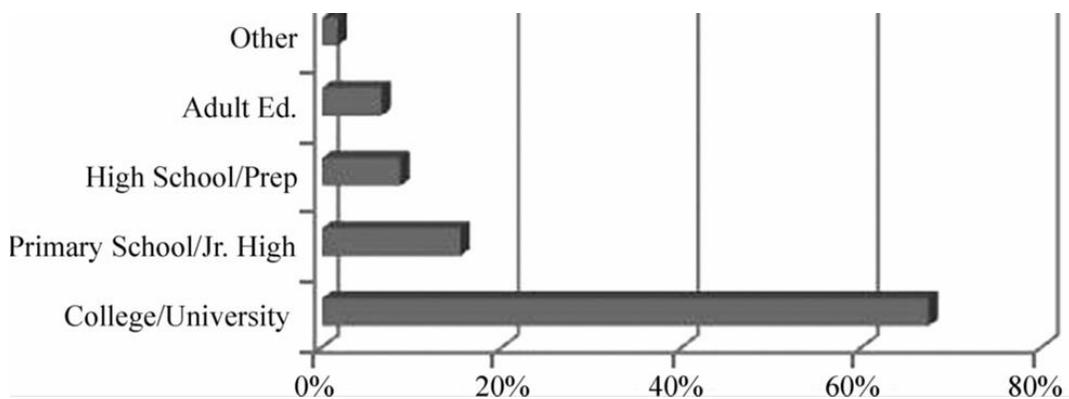
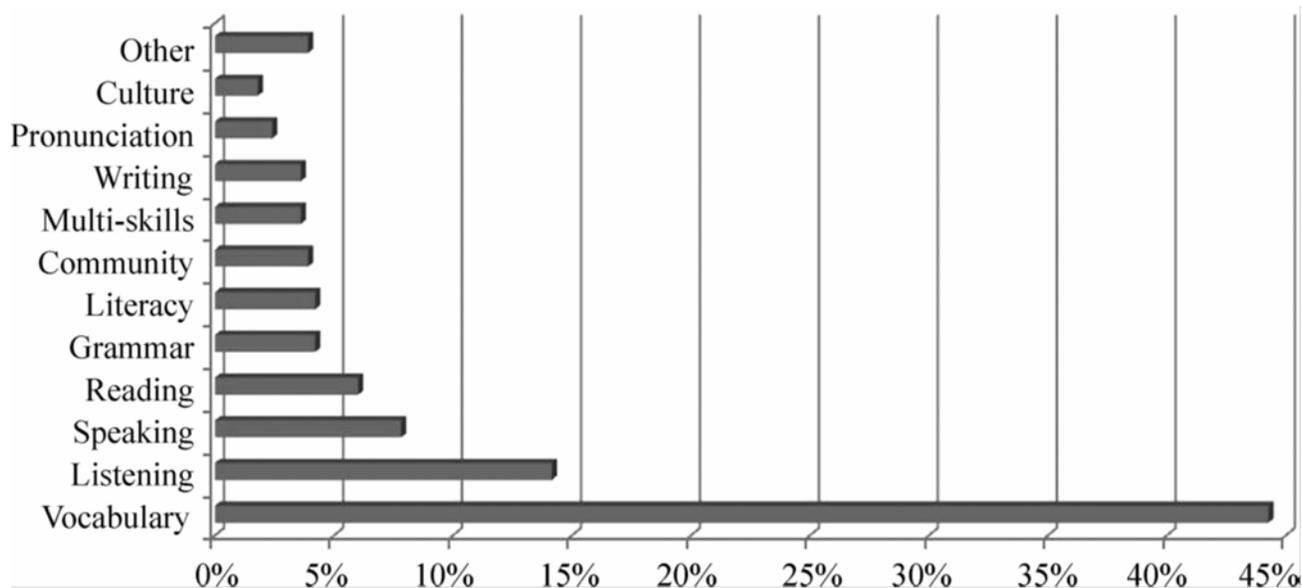


Figure 2. Educational Level of MALL Learners (Burston J. in Palalas&Ally, 2016)

When considering the language area mostly explored in language learning Apps, research has shown that it is vocabulary learning, as shown in Figure 3 (Burston J. in Palalas&Ally, 2016).



*Figure 3. Targeted Language Area of MALL Implementations (Burston J. in Palalas&Ally, 2016)*

In a secondary school context mobile-assisted language learning could have a great potential for increasing learner autonomy, for integrating real life into learning, for increasing the willingness to learn in informal contexts and for facilitating peer interaction in formal learning contexts.

However, the ownership of a mobile device does not necessarily mean its use for educational purposes by learners as they usually have different motivations for either learning or using their device. As Ushioda (2013) points out, learners have not only different reasons for using technology in learning, but also different reasons for learning a language. Learners' degree of motivation in learning a language reflects the priority they give to language learning in relation to other activities. Ushioda (2013) identifies some limitations which may account for unfavorable attitudes towards the use of digital tools in learning. Accordingly, students may view their smartphones as 'personal territory' and they may want to keep them separate from their 'studying space', which is also supported by Stockwell (2008).

Although learners have access to mobile technologies, it is very likely that they do not engage with them as long as there isn't a culture associated with the use of mobile technologies in learning at a more local or global level. Ushioda (2013) indicates that although there are students who may feel motivated in using mobile technologies, their engagement is rather superficial or casual.

The current paper advocates the fact that we do not learn from mobile devices, but we learn with them, learning is mediated by thinking which is activated by learning activities mediated by technologies. Therefore, a mobile learning device can facilitate learning and it can motivate students, but it cannot replace students' own learning and motivation to learn (Palalas&Ally, 2016). As Gardner&Davis (2013), point out, digital technologies are highly personal and invite activity on the part of the user. The two authors define 'activity' on the part of the user from two perspectives. First of all, the user of an app can be an 'app-dependent' user which means that the user follows the app rigorously, whereas other users can be 'app-enablers', which refers to the case when an app can open new possibilities leading the user towards new directions. In other words, some apps are very straightforward, very 'drill and kill' like, whereas other apps provide opportunities for the user to create content. Gardner&Davis (2013) also believe that many young people have become app-dependent rather than app-enabled.

### **3. Mobile learning initiatives in Romania**

In Romania, there has been an initiative to introduce tablet use in the classroom (Smart Classroom project, 2013), however its implementation was not feasible at the time, given several technological and financial challenges to be overcome by the Ministry of Education.

In order to clarify concepts for the current paper, I chose to define formal learning as learning taking place in the classroom and informal learning, as learning taking place anytime, anywhere, outside the classroom. Mobile devices can be used in both learning situations, the *Bring Your Own Device (BYOD)* policy favoring the use of mobile learning in formal and informal learning contexts as well.

There are several reasons why I consider that a BYOD policy would benefit students and the learning context. First of all, students can better look after their devices; secondly they have access to resources used in class anytime, anywhere; thirdly, it increases students' competences in using 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and learning tools.

Implementing the BYOD policy also involves greater integration of technology in the classroom, adding more value to the teaching syllabuses. BYOD also means encouraging personalized learning and collaboration with peers. Moreover, based on my observation of students using their own devices during the foreign language lesson, I noticed increased engagement in the tasks given as well as increased motivation on the part of the students. However, a BYOD policy

would not work unless a BYOD rules system is also used as one of the main challenges is students' disruptive behavior in class during the use of mobile tools. I strongly believe that students' learning behavior in a BYOD context can be monitored and managed properly provided a rule system is used.

#### **4. Towards a pedagogical framework for mobile-assisted language learning in the foreign language classroom**

Wheeler (2015) considers that pedagogy in the digital age is very social and it involves the negotiation of meaning and the co-construction of knowledge, the focus being on the 'learning together' aspect. Therefore, collaborative knowledge construction and creation of learner-generated artifacts are advocated in a mobile learning pedagogy. When implementing a mobile learning pedagogy in class, the focus is on embedding mobile learning based activities in the lesson, without disrupting the flow of the learning process taking place in the classroom.

Based on classroom observation, the personal use of mobile apps in learning and the related literature, there are two possibilities from which a mobile learning pedagogy can be discussed.

The first possibility involves the use of mobile learning tools in class for specific purposes and language learning activities, which fit the specific teaching syllabus followed in class, with the mobile as a teaching tool, communication tool or media source.

The second possibility implies student-centred multitasking on their own device in and beyond the classroom- the mobile being used as a personal learning tool. This possibility involves increasing students' learner autonomy through the use of their device as a learning tool. Active participation in language learning also implies that learners take responsibility for their own learning and that teachers play their role in enabling this.

Students' learning environment is thus expanded beyond the classroom, bringing changes not only on students' approach to learning but also on teachers' approach to teaching, playing a crucial role in the development of digital learning strategies.

## **5. Types of classroom activities when using the mobile tool as a teaching/communication/media source**

### **5.1 Using the camera/video function for photo/film discussion and comparison /photo treasure hunt activity etc.**

Describing photos or short movies students already have on their device, related to the topic of the lesson are activities which bring students' real life and world into the classroom being very useful for B1-C1 learners. Lower level learners (e.g. A1-A2) can create a photo dictionary of common classroom objects, matching photos of objects with the corresponding vocabulary or start a photo treasure hunt activity. There are several activities students can do using the video function of their device, for example, students can be given tasks such as creating a short video about a topic related to the lesson (e.g. My town, My neighborhood, My family, My best friends, My summer etc.), an activity which is aimed at B1-C1 students. Another similar activity using the video function is the Invader game (Driver&Goldstein, 2014). In this activity, aimed for B1-C1 level, learners imagine they are aliens preparing to invade Earth, who first need to film people, places and objects in different parts of their school or town and make a report. As learners record the videos, they must talk about everything they see as if they are encountering it for the first time.

### **5.2 The use of voice recorders**

Voice recorders can be used when we want students to record a dialogue they role-played, creating thus more speaking opportunities for students. Also, students can be asked to record themselves while reading aloud at home, as part of homework. Another possibility is to ask students to have a dialogue about a certain topic and record it. Likewise, students can role-play an interview with a famous person, learners having the chance to practise question forms in the context of a celebrity interview. These activities are aimed for A1-B1 levels.

Students could also record ambient sounds and experiences outside the classroom and then use them in a speaking or writing activity in the classroom. Before the lesson, learners record different sounds on their mobile device – for example, a police siren, a dog barking, someone doing the washing-up or the train doors closing. In class, learners form small groups and take turns to play each sound to their classmates. They have to identify it and say what was

happening. Finally, they could use the sounds to tell/write a story based on the sounds. These activities are aimed for a B1-C1 level.

### **5.3 The use of the Calendar, Notes-taking, Map and Weather functions**

It is very useful to teach students how to record deadlines of projects, homework using the Calendar function. Also, the note-taking function can be used as a vocabulary notebook where students write unknown vocabulary.

Google Maps is very useful for discussing maps, giving and following directions in class. Some of the activities to be used with this function include finding out who has the longest journey to school, giving directions from one place to another, talking about means of transport.

The Weather function enables students to talk about the weather (in different locations), to use specific language structures for prediction and to practise language structures for actions happening at the moment of speaking. The above mentioned functions can be used in language activities for A2-C1 learners to develop speaking skills in formal and informal learning contexts.

## **6. Types of Mobile Apps for language learning to be used in both formal and informal learning situations**

Mobile devices come with built-in apps but also apps to be downloaded for free or not. Peachey (2013) enumerates four main criteria to take into account when choosing a learning App to download, namely: the technical criterion (accessibility, user-friendliness, registration), the financial criterion (free or not), the motivational one (digital literacy, authenticity) and the pedagogical criterion (learning goal, communication).

Apps for language learning can support learning taking place in class, they can enhance collaboration and communication between students, but they can also represent a bridge between formal and informal learning situations. Therefore, learning can be taken outside the class, enhancing thus learner autonomy.

Likewise, when looking for an appropriate app for our students, there are a few things to consider: the learning content of the app (appropriate or not for the level of our students), whether the app can build in any skill, whether gaming principles are used or not, whether the app can be motivational or not for students.

There are apps specifically designed for language learning purposes and authentic apps, not specifically designed for language learning, but which allow learners a more creative use of language. According to Peachey (2013), apps which are non-designed for language learning are the ones which have a more important role to play in learning. A similar distinction is made by Gardner&Davis (2013) when they observed that there are two types of apps, ‘dependent’ and ‘enabled’-which enhance more creativity.

The following sections show examples of designed/non-designed for language learning apps and how they could be used by students in both formal and informal learning situations.

### 6.1 Vocabulary learning apps

The vocabulary apps help the learners to know the meaning of words, to create personal flashcards with words they have learnt, to learn new sets of words, but also to play different word games. Students can use the apps at home, as part of homework or simply in their own free time. Based on students’ observed behavior, the game-like vocabulary apps are mostly preferred by students (e.g. *Scrabble*, *Wordsearch*, *Hangman* etc.) being used mostly in informal learning situations. *Memrise* and *Quizlet* require more effort and motivation on the part of the learner to learn vocabulary. The benefits of using *Quizlet*, for example, can be noticeable only if students are closely monitored in their use of the app and if the vocabulary to be practised matches the one covered in class, working like any other supplementary material brought to class.

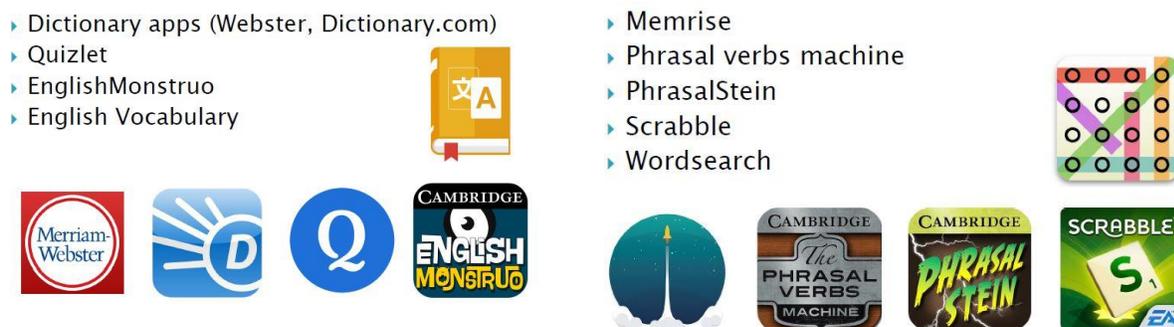


Figure 4. Vocabulary learning apps

### 6.2 Grammar learning apps

After reviewing several grammar apps for English, I noticed that the available grammar apps provide a rather limited range of exercises, most of them having either multiple choice exercises or fill in the gaps exercises, following a ‘drill and kill’ pattern. However, they could supplement the other practice activities students do in class and outside the class. One of the apps I would

recommend is the *Irregular Verbs* one, as it can be used in different ways both in class and outside class. In class, I personally used it with students to practise Irregular Verbs on their own device, but also as a frontal activity, by connecting my smartphone to the projector via the *SideSync* app, designed for Samsung users. Therefore, by connecting the phone to the projector, teachers can use any grammar app in the classroom, more creatively in group work or other contest-like activities in order to make it more challenging and interactive.

- ▶ Johnny Grammar (British Council)
  - ▶ Easy Grammar
  - ▶ My Grammar Lab (Pearson)
  - ▶ English grammar tasks
  - ▶ Grammar Up
- ▶ Practice English Grammar
  - ▶ English Irregular Verbs
  - ▶ Oxford Grammar and Punctuation
  - ▶ iPractise



Figure 5. Grammar learning Apps

### 6.3 Reading Apps

Depending on students' age and language level, there are several choices to be made when it comes to using apps for reading skills. Learners can choose between non-designed for learning apps, which provide great authentic language (BBC news or different blogs, short stories etc.) and apps which have some built-in comprehension questions. I would recommend *English Short Stories* to be used in class or as part of homework to encourage extensive reading among young learners.

- ▶ English Short Stories
- ▶ English Stories
- ▶ Picture Story Book For Kids
- ▶ Webquests (Zunal)
- ▶ English Reading Comprehension



Figure 6. Reading Apps

## 6.4 Speaking Apps

The Speaking apps below are not designed for language learning specifically, but given their gaming features, they provide great opportunities for enhancing speaking skills. For example, the *Story Dice* App enhances students' creativity and speaking skills as students have to make up a story starting from the pictures shown on the dice. *Heads Up* implies students guessing words based on the description they get. *What am I* and *Charades* are designed to use the same guessing principles. The *Truth and Dare* App is similar to the traditional game and it involves both speaking and miming. These apps can be used in a formal learning context, but once the students start using them, it is very likely that they will be using them in informal contexts as well.



Figure 7. Speaking Apps

## 6.5 Listening apps

Similar to the authentic apps for reading, there are several apps which can be used to improve students' listening skills. The available free podcasts can be used during listening activities in class followed up by comprehension questions prepared by the teacher.



Figure 8. Listening Apps

## 6.6 Quiz generator apps

Users can write quizzes using a quiz generator app, quizzes which can be further completed by students on their devices in class creating a really competitive atmosphere among students. *Kahoot* is an example of a quiz generator app, mostly preferred by teachers as it engages all students in class and creates motivation for learning. I personally recommend *Kahoot* because it is very user friendly, teachers can find ready-made quizzes as well as write their own quizzes and students get instant feedback. One of the downsides is that it requires Internet connection in class.



Figure 9. Quiz generator Apps

## 7. Challenges

As a teacher in Romania, there are several challenges to consider before implementing mobile learning in the classroom. First of all, teachers have to engage with mobile technology themselves before using it in the classroom, therefore, more teacher training is needed in that area but also the willingness to explore and review apps in order to make the best decisions as to how useful an app can be for students. Likewise, one needs to set up a mobile learning policy in the school/class where she/he intends to use mobile learning as the disruptive aspect in class is one of the main challenges for teachers. In order to make sure students are not distracted by social media, clear objectives have to be set for students.

Likewise, the introduction of apps and mobile learning activities in class has to be done gradually, little by little, one activity at a time given the fact that learners need to be taught a certain learning behavior and attitude in class when it comes to the use of mobile learning. Another challenge is that many of the apps recommended do not work offline, therefore, that could limit the use of some of the apps during the lesson. It is highly important to reflect upon

the use of apps in order to be able to realize what works well in class with a certain group of students and what doesn't. Therefore, before choosing a particular app, one should pay attention to the following aspects: the extent to which the app can build on a certain skill, whether the learning content is appropriate for the students' level, whether it is motivational for the student (e.g. the student wants to go back to it), whether the app uses any gaming principles and whether the app provides a bridge from the classroom to real world. Taking these into account, choosing the right app or deciding which app is the best, can be quite challenging.

I believe that choosing an app that reinforces something I have taught in class can add value to the learning content covered in class and it can determine students to use it in informal learning situations as well. Deciding which apps are valuable in terms of learning benefits highly depends on how learners and teachers use the apps chosen, for example a simple dictionary app can be very valuable as long as it is properly used. Also, a grammar drill-like app could be very effective if it is used for practising certain structures taught in class, anytime, anywhere or if it is used in a more competitive way in the classroom.

## **8. Conclusions**

By using the existing functionalities of the device and accessing the infinite source of authentic material, with creativity involved in the delivery of lessons, mobile learning represents a step forward in language learning pedagogy. Moreover, Traxler (in Palalas&Ally, 2016) pointed out that there is a relationship between language, pedagogy and digital technology, with digital technologies being the technologies to learn languages, having the ability to transform languages and learning.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that although using mobile learning in the foreign language classroom could be quite challenging at times, it also implies creating new opportunities for students to practise vocabulary, grammar and improve their language skills. Mobile learning activities have the potential to engage students, to provide instant feedback and to allow learners to work collaboratively as well as individually at their own pace. Thus, students have the possibility to use their devices for educational purposes and to consider these devices more than entertainment tools, but as tools they can learn with.

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