

Integrating mobile technologies into very young second language learners' curriculum

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Abstract. This report is based on an exploratory case study of a private multilingual preschool language program that integrated a Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) project into the curriculum of five/six year-old children whose native language(s) is/are Russian and/or Tatar. The purpose of the study was to reveal teachers' and parents' perceptions of the educational value of mobile language learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and explore the case of MALL integration into the curriculum of young language learners. To collect the data, the researchers surveyed eight teachers, including a teacher who introduced the MALL project into her class of 12 children, as well as 12 parents whose children participated in this project. The results speak for the growth of MALL enthusiasts among teachers and the lack of MALL supporters among parents.

Keywords: mobile-assisted language learning, MALL, early childhood education, EFL.

1. Introduction

The educational value of mobile devices for young learners has been questioned by many educators and parents. While many instructors demonstrate a positive attitude to the usage of mobile technologies in the adult classroom (AL-Maagb, 2016; Tai & Ting, 2011), educators have less enthusiasm towards their educational value with younger students (Shuler, 2009). Parents, in turn, allow children to use

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mobile devices even when they do not recognize their educational benefits (Chiong & Shuler, 2010).

This report is based on a case study built around a MALL program that was designed and integrated into the curriculum of five/six year-old children. The report focuses on the instructors' and parents' perception of MALL educational value for very young foreign language learners.

2. Method

This exploratory case study was designed to document and analyze efforts of a private multilingual kindergarten and preschool that enhanced the language curriculum with iPad tasks. Located in Kazan, a Russian city with a multicultural population, this school for children from ages two to six emphasizes the importance of early multilingual education and promotes a curriculum that enriches native (Russian and Tatar) language developmental programs with English, Spanish and Chinese language classes. In late 2015, teaming up with experts in English teaching and educational technologies, the school designed a small-scale program with mobile English language activities for a group of preschoolers (N=12) who had previously studied English for two and a half years. In spring 2016, Reading Eggs™ (<http://readingeggs.co.uk/>), an internationally recognised Australian program with online reading games and activities for children aged three to 13, was selected as an appropriate mobile application introduced into the curriculum of 12 children whose native language(s) is\are Russian and\or Tatar.

The leading teacher of the class that participated in the study reviewed the Reading Eggs™ application and redesigned her regular English language curriculum to integrate activities suggested by the program. Due to the lack of mobile equipment in school, the Reading Eggs™ activities were suggested for homework to enhance language skills developed in class. The leading teacher registered each child to the mobile application and modeled learning tasks in class to children and after class to each parent individually. As the school promotes active parent-to-child learning, parents were encouraged to supervise and guide their children when they were on the mobile device. The children completed activities at home on their iPads for 30 days (the period of free trial of this commercial application). The activities suggested by the Reading Eggs™ application included picture recognition, word comprehension and voiced books with reading/listening comprehension questions. The application was used to enhance reading and listening comprehension skills in support of the content material covered in the classroom. The leading teacher

regularly checked if students completed homework activities and evaluated their progress by incorporating Reading Eggs™ tasks into class work. She also administered a test after the 30-day project.

While the case study collected data to get in-depth understanding of the conditions and results of the MALL activities integrated into the curriculum of young language learners, for the purpose of this report the following research question is selected as focal point: What are the teachers' and the parents' perceptions of integrating MALL into very young second language learners' curriculum?

Parents of 12 children who participated in the MALL activities, as well as all English teachers of the multilingual school, including the leading teacher of the target children group, were asked to complete paper-based questionnaires consisting of one open- and four closed-ended questions. 12 parents and eight teachers responded to the questionnaires.

3. Results and discussion

Responses from Question 1 of both questionnaires established that the survey was completed by school teachers who worked with children from ages two to seven and by parents of five/six year olds.

Question 2 of the teacher questionnaire stated "*Do you use any educational mobile applications for English language teaching? If yes, please, name these applications*". The responses indicated that three teachers (37.5%) used mobile applications for language learning and five (62.5%) had not yet adopted MALL for their teaching practices. When parents were asked the same question in regards to their own children, all 12 of them named Reading Eggs™ as the application in use by their children.

Question 3 in both questionnaires stated "*Do educational mobile applications facilitate kindergarteners' language learning?*". The question referred to teachers' and parents' general perceptions of MALL effectiveness and no additional guidance was given. However, as the questionnaire was administered after the 30-day project was completed, it was assumed that parents would base their answers on observations of their children learning with the Reading Eggs™ application. The teachers' responses demonstrated that they shared the belief in the high educational value of MALL; none of them questioned language learning potential of mobile applications irrespective of whether they used them or not. Parents, in their

turn, did not demonstrate unanimity. One parent (8.3%) fully agreed that mobile applications enhance language learning among kindergarteners, 66.7% were not so certain and others (25%) expressed their doubt that mobile applications can assist in language learning. These results were later clarified in the interview with the leading teacher of the target children group. She explained that while all 12 parents were aware of the Reading Eggs™ application and were encouraged to support their child's MALL experience, only seven parents did so and only four children participated in mobile language activities on a regular basis. This indicates that not all parents whose children were supposed to be involved into the project did have a chance to experience MALL benefits and therefore they might have based their opinion on unjustified common beliefs.

Question 4 asked the teachers and parents to characterize language learning applications by selecting one or more answers from a list of ten options. The majority of the teachers found language-learning applications beneficial since they entertain, teach, motivate and enable teachers to diversify their lessons. Still, more than half of the teachers thought that mobile applications might cause addiction (62.5%), while a quarter of respondents (25%) believed that they did not teach at all and limited social interaction. One teacher believed that mobile phones increased the risk of eye damage.

In contrast to the teachers, the parents turned out to be technology pessimists. Most parents found language-learning applications harmful and causing problems such as eye damage (66.6%) and addiction (58.3%). 33% of parents agreed that mobile applications limit social interaction, 8.3% of parents believed that mobile applications distract children from studies and are of no benefit in general. However, half of the parents admitted that mobile applications entertain, teach and motivate, 25% of parents believed that mobile applications may diversify lessons, and 8.35% of parents described apps as 'effective'.

Question 5 of the parents' questionnaire, which aimed at examining overall children's involvement into the digital culture, stated "*Does your child use any mobile applications (games etc.)?*". Out of 12 parents, the majority (91.6%) reported that their children used mobile applications. One parent answered that his/her child did not use mobile devices. However, when cross-checking with Question 2, it became evident that the child did use one mobile application – Reading Eggs™.

In the teachers' questionnaire, Question 5 stated "*What difficulties can arise/arose when using mobile technologies in EFL classrooms in a group of kindergarteners?*". The teachers could select answers from a list of 5 options or give their own answer.

All the teachers thought that using mobile applications was challenging because they might lack access to a mobile device. Another problem that was noted was teachers' inability to use mobile applications with certain groups of students; particularly learners' very young age was seen as an obstacle. The teachers were also concerned about their insufficient knowledge of methodology of using mobile technologies for educational purposes and their inexperience in the sphere of mobile technologies in general.

4. Conclusions

MALL projects gradually find their place in the curriculum of young language learners. The study indicates that most parents may not share enthusiasm of teachers about high educational potentials of modern mobile applications for developing literacy skills, including foreign language literacy. Moreover, the findings suggest that while integrating MALL activities into homework can sometimes solve the problem with the lack of appropriate mobile devices in schools, some parents may not be ready to assist their children with mobile language learning tasks. Further research is needed to provide evidence-based recommendations on the effective ways of integrating mobile activities into the curriculum of very young foreign language learners. While each case has unique MALL integration conditions, projects similar to the one described in this report, may assist researchers and practitioners in building an understanding of the *hows* and *whys* MALL projects could work in a given educational context. It is our hope that school teachers' enthusiasm about MALL will help to overcome some parents' apparent disinvolvement and skepticism about MALL benefits discussed in this study.

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