

# Twenty Ideas for Using Mobile Phones in the Language Classroom

These days it seems mobile phones are used everywhere by everyone, which leads to the obvious question: How can mobile phone technology support learning in the second language classroom? The answer is “in a number of ways” because mobile phones come with ever-increasing functions that most students are adept at using. In this article I describe 20 practical ways to use mobile phones to support second language learning, both inside and outside the classroom. Most of the activities will work with most mobile phones and do not require special knowledge or additional software or hardware. I will also discuss drawbacks such as cost, increased workload, and other problems that might impact the use of phones in the classroom, and will suggest ways of mitigating them.

## Mobile-assisted language learning

Recent interest in the potential for mobile phones and other portable devices to support learning and teaching has been driven by the fact that

mobile phones are relatively cheap and increasingly powerful (Chinnery 2006; Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler 2005). Another benefit is that learners are used to working with them, often more so than with computers. Thornton and Houser (2003) report that young Japanese learners prefer to use mobile phones for many activities, from emailing to reading books. Research on the use of mobile phones for the delivery of vocabulary materials to English learners in Taiwan shows that students enjoy using their phones because of easy access to materials and the ability to practice anytime and anywhere; in addition, some students like the screen size limitations, which make the amount of content more manageable than that of other teaching materials (Chen, Hsieh, and Kinshuk 2008).

There are several pedagogical reasons to consider using mobile phones in the second language classroom. Most importantly, phones are social tools that facilitate authentic and relevant communication and collaboration among learners. This makes them

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an ideal tool to support *situated learning theory*, which states that learning is more likely to take place when information is contextually relevant and can be put to immediate use (Lave and Wenger 1991). For example, second language learners can use mobile technology to access relevant vocabulary and expressions while at a bank opening an account, to look up movie reviews while at the theater, or to discuss weekend plans with an English-speaking friend. Since mobile phones are part of students' everyday routines, they help minimize the separation between the classroom and the outside world. Applied linguists agree on little when it comes to theories for explaining language learning, but one thing seems clear—more exposure to the target language and more practice, or *time on task*, explains most of the variation in students' success. Any tool that can increase students' access to the language will contribute greatly to their progress.

Another compelling argument for using mobile phones in the classroom is that they give students control over their own learning. Students control the medium, and teachers, by elaborating how best to use the medium, provide a blueprint for autonomous learning, especially during the wide range of daily social activities where mobile phones are most likely to be used.

### **Preparation**

Before asking students to pull out their cell phones in class, you need to have a plan. As with any other teaching activity, ask yourself what you are trying to achieve. Are you focusing on speaking, listening, reading, writing, or some combination of the four skills? Or do you simply want students to reflect on their language use outside the classroom? Start by identifying a specific teaching objective and then structure a mobile phone activity around that. Ask yourself if there is an added value to using a phone for the activity you have in mind. If there is none, perhaps it is better to find an alternative.

The next step is to take stock of the resources that you have available. There is an enormous range of phone makes and models, and the technology is always advancing. Many of the following ideas will work with all but the most obsolete phones, but some require the use of more recent models. In my own

teaching I have sometimes asked students to work together in small groups and share one phone that had the required capabilities.

### **Twenty practical ideas for using mobile phones in the language classroom**

The following ideas for using mobile phones for second language learning generally focus on developing the four skills and in many cases integrate speaking with listening and reading with writing. The material and activities can be modified to conform to different syllabi and are easily adaptable for different ages, learning levels, and interests. It is important to note that the names of the features used here may not be the same for all mobile phones.

#### **Idea 1: Use the Notes feature to collect everyday language**

Most mobile phones have a feature that allows them to take notes. Ask students to use this feature to take notes on the English they read or hear outside of school and either present the notes to the class or send them to you as a text message. Instead of giving regular homework, you can ask students to hunt for specific language forms (e.g., common nouns, the past perfect tense, formulaic expressions), and the student who collects the largest number of correct samples wins. Learners have a tendency to tune out when a classroom lesson is over; this activity helps circumvent that problem by breaking the boundary between class time and daily activities.

#### **Idea 2: Use the Camera feature to take pictures of text**

One of the easiest ways to use a mobile phone for learning is to record samples of the target language by taking pictures. Students can take pictures of English text by using the Camera feature on their mobile phones. They can then make a collage of the images or upload the pictures to a shared Flickr account ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)). If students do not have a data connection (or if you do not want them to incur data costs), they can transfer the pictures to a computer and upload them from there.

#### **Idea 3: Use free programs to organize language samples**

An extension to Ideas 1 and 2 is to use a free program like Evernote ([www.evernote.com](http://www.evernote.com)) to upload notes and pictures to your

account (which can be accessed from any computer). One neat feature is that the program recognizes words in pictures (such as on billboards or even handwritten notes) and converts it to text, generally very accurately. Students can use this program to organize personal notes on their account and share it with a group or the whole class. Different accounts can be exchanged, compared, and discussed in class. Again, to avoid data costs notes could be transferred from the mobile phone to the computer for uploading.

**Idea 4: Use the Voice Memo Recorder feature to record language from media outlets**

Most phones include a memo recording feature that can collect language samples from TV or radio. The students' collected samples give you an opportunity to analyze the language, discuss where they were collected, and provide feedback.

**Idea 5: Use the Voice Memo Recorder feature to record conversations outside the classroom**

Students can record interviews or conversations they engage in outside the classroom. Obviously you will have to consider privacy issues and impress upon learners the importance of obtaining their interlocutors' permission before they do interviews, either with each other or native speakers. Students can play the interviews and conversations in class for feedback and discussion. I have used this idea to send students on quests to collect information from sources in the community, including from native speakers (Reinders and Lewis 2009). Although we used iPods with a microphone, the same task is now easily accomplished with mobile phones. The principle remains the same: try to get students to *use* the language as much as possible!

**Idea 6: Use the Text Messaging feature to reinforce vocabulary learning**

A study by Thornton and Houser (2003) shows that Short Message Service (SMS) text messages can be used to send out vocabulary items at spaced intervals, thus increasing student retention. For example, you could text the words covered in class to encourage students to review them outside the school context. By sending out the words multiple times, you increase the chances that students will remember them.

**Idea 7: Use free programs to make flashcards for mobile phones**

If you do not want to create your own vocabulary lists, there are several companies that produce flash card software that runs on mobile phones, such as [www.flashmybrain.com](http://www.flashmybrain.com) (there is a charge to set up an account). You or your students can create vocabulary flashcards that can be retrieved, shared, and practiced anywhere.

**Idea 8: Use the Text Messaging feature for circular writing**

The reality is that many students do not like to write. They associate writing in the school context with boring assignments and a punitive environment of criticism and negative feedback. In other words, the *fun* is missing. However, if one considers writing as any form of textual communication, it becomes clear that students actually write a lot. The number of text messages, status updates on social networking sites, and instant messages (IMs) sent by the average young learner is staggering; clearly, a lot of writing is going on! The challenge is to encourage that type of writing that helps students learn English.

If students are not ready to write essays, they can practice with shorter texts to develop their writing skills. One activity is *circular writing*, where students create a story together by contributing one text message at a time. Each student writes a sentence or two and then sends this on to the next student, who adds another message, and so on until the story is complete. The teacher is copied and has a record of the story as it emerges. You can experiment with different text types such as narratives (as in the example above), or shorter forms such as news reports, instructions, and warnings.

**Idea 9: Use the Text Messaging feature for tandem learning**

Interactive writing can be encouraged through *tandem learning*. In this activity two students who wish to learn each other's native language pair up and exchange text messages. I recently used this technique with a group of 16-year-old high school students from Taiwan preparing for a trip to the UK and a group of London-based students taking Chinese language classes. Here is a good example of the situated learning I referred to earlier:

Theo: [having lunch in a Chinese restaurant] What do you call those dumplings again?

Jun: They called yum cha. Hen hao chi! [They taste great!]

#### **Idea 10: Use the mobile phone to keep a blog**

A more advanced form of using the mobile phone for writing tasks is keeping a blog. This does require a phone with a connection to the Internet (or the use of a wireless network at home or perhaps at school). Students use the Text Messaging and Camera features to add messages and post pictures to their personal blogs. This is great for writing about personal experiences, places visited, and people met, but it can also be used as an activity in which students collect information and report on it like journalists. Teachers can read these blogs and provide feedback, request more information, or ask students to comment on each other's work.

#### **Idea 11: Use the mobile phone for microblogging on Twitter**

No report on mobile writing would be complete without mention of Twitter, the popular microblogging service. Microblogging involves sending short messages (with a limit of 140 characters, including punctuation and spaces) from a computer or a mobile phone. Initially intended to provide friends with status updates ("Now going to the gym," "Watching Lost in Translation," "Feeding the hamster"), Twitter is now used by many different professions, including educators, to keep people informed about who is doing what. You can use Twitter for a wide variety of assignments, such as asking students to report on their daily activities. To focus on specific aspects of language, you could ask students to write down each idiom they find in a book they are reading or to report when they hear someone use a negative adverb such as *seldom* or *hardly*. You may not be able to (or want to!) read all the comments, or *tweets*, yourself, but you could ask students to follow some of their classmates' tweets and respond to them.

#### **Idea 12: Use the mobile phone for social networking**

Like Twitter, Facebook and MySpace are enormously popular *social networking tools* that allow groups of "friends" to meet, post

messages, share pictures, and generally interact online in a myriad of ways. Most of the interaction takes place in writing, and simply asking students to use English instead of their native language produces a great deal of writing practice. Some teachers actively use such sites to keep in touch with students or to organize activities online. The sites can be accessed through mobile phones, and it could be good fun to ask students to post on each other's pages in relation to a topic you have just discussed in class. This activity is best used within range of a wireless network, so it may not work for everyone.

#### **Idea 13: Use the mobile phone for a language exchange**

Using phones for speaking may not seem like an original idea, but one way to encourage reluctant students to start speaking is to establish a *language exchange*. In this activity two students who want to learn each other's native language talk in that target language for half of the time. This activity may be expensive unless students can use Skype on their mobile phones.

#### **Idea 14: Use the mobile phone for "phlogging"**

To encourage students to practice individual speaking, they could start *phlogging*, a recent form of blogging that entails calling a number and leaving a message on a website. Some programs like the currently free [www.ipadio.com](http://www.ipadio.com) will even automatically transcribe the recording. This is an excellent task-based learning tool for students to update oral and written reports about a given project.

#### **Idea 15: Use mobile phone memory to distribute listening material**

Many phones have memory for graphics, photos, and music that you can use to download listening material for your students, who can in turn transfer them to their phones or other media. This could be a recording of your class, a podcast, or course listening materials. In addition to providing hundreds of existing podcasts for English language learners, the iTunes U website ([www.apple.com/education/itunes-u](http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u)) will upload your own podcasts to which students can subscribe.

Audiobooks are another source of listening materials. These can be downloaded in a variety of formats and can then be transferred and

played back on any phone that has sufficient audio capabilities. Numerous commercial websites sell audiobooks read by professional readers, but there are also websites where public domain audiobooks can be downloaded for free, such as <http://librivox.org>.

**Idea 16: Use mobile phone memory to distribute reading material**

Similar to the listening idea above, you could download reading materials for your students. There are numerous sites with free reading material, including Project Gutenberg ([www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org)), which also has many audiobooks available. Many books are now published in mobile friendly formats. As one exercise, you can ask students to use the voice recorder to take notes about the book while they are reading. The books, along with students' reflections, can then be discussed during the next class.

**Idea 17: Use the mobile phone to play games**

Many of the free games for mobile phones, such as Scrabble and crossword puzzles, involve a focus on language. Although not all of them may be suitable for second language learners, they at least encourage students to engage with the target language, and to do so in the context of entertainment. Once students determine that their phones have the capability to play games, they must download and install the programs.

**Idea 18: Use the Voice Memo Recorder, Notes, and Calendar features to keep a portfolio**

Most learning inevitably takes place outside the classroom. Students need to process new information and assimilate it into their *interlanguage*, which is their current stage of second language development as reflected by their control of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. Encouraging students to reflect about their language acquisition helps them to take control of their own learning and positively affects the assimilation process.

Many students either do not enjoy or do not have the discipline to keeping a formal journal or portfolio to reflect on their learning, even an online one such as the European e-portfolio ([www.eelp.org/eportfolio](http://www.eelp.org/eportfolio)). Mobile phones, by virtue of their portability, lower this barrier. Ask students to document their learning progress by using the Notes and Voice Memo Recorder features. In this way,

instant reflection replaces the formal e-portfolio. However, it is important to explain what you expect in terms of the amount and frequency of reflection (and explain why!), so that students take the activity seriously. Ask students to document their use of the language outside the classroom and any problems they encounter, such as a communication breakdown or misunderstanding, as well as any successful communicative interactions. Be creative! Some teachers use portfolio assessment to give credit for work done outside the classroom, which is also possible with a mobile phone portfolio.

In addition, you could encourage students to use the Calendar feature or other productivity tool available on most phones to set goals, deadlines for assignments, and reminders to rehearse material covered in class.

**Idea 19: Use the mobile phone to check student comprehension and get feedback**

The previous ideas focus on learning, but mobile phones can also help you in your teaching. One way is to add an element of interactivity to your classes through audience participation. Polleverywhere ([www.polleverywhere.com](http://www.polleverywhere.com)) is a free program that allows the teacher to pose survey questions to students. Students respond by texting their responses and the results show up immediately in a PowerPoint presentation or on a website. This is very useful for checking student comprehension and to get their opinions. You could, for example, ask students to choose from one of several options for the next classroom activity. This tool is particularly useful in larger classes where it is not easy to get feedback from all students.

**Idea 20: Use mobile phone memory for research and data collection**

Mobile phones are now becoming indispensable for research and data collection. Being small and light, they are excellent portable tools for researchers to collect socioeconomic, health, and other critical information from communities worldwide. Searching for the term "data collection" at <http://mobileactive.org> will show examples of this type of research and data collection. As an advanced project, students can replicate similar projects on a smaller scale, or come up with original mobile phone research tasks. The phlogging tool mentioned in Idea 14 is another way

to record research data or, by using a microphone, classroom interaction.

### **Potential problems and solutions when using mobile phones in the classroom**

Following are some potential problems associated with using mobile phones in the classroom, along with some possible solutions and suggestions

#### **Lack of access to mobile phones**

Not all students in all classes will have mobile phones, and the concerns around lack of access are valid; however, it is probably safe to say that of all the technologies available to teachers, mobile phones are the most widespread. I remember visiting Lake Tana in northern Ethiopia in 2005. There was no Internet, no computers, not even electricity for much of the day. I took a boat trip across a remote part of the lake and on my return realized I had left my money in the hotel. My guide pulled out his cell phone and said “Why don’t you just text me the money?”, referring to a widely used practice in many parts of Africa that allow payment by sending someone text credits. I was stunned as this was unheard of in the “developed” country I lived in at the time.

It is also important to make sure all students have access to phones that have the capabilities you need. In 2010 it is likely that most phones have most of the features mentioned above, but do check. One solution is to share phones between students for certain activities.

#### **Cost of mobile phones and wireless services**

It is important to realize that not all students have access to mobile phone technology and to not place a financial burden on your students and their parents by requiring students to have phones. Activities such as texting, going online, and of course making calls cost money. Not every student has an unlimited calling plan. Some of the ideas above involve sending and receiving text messages, which could be a problem because not all students subscribe to a texting plan. In some countries this can be expensive (subscribers in the United States, for example, pay even for receiving messages).

Transferring text messages to a computer is one way to avoid texting charges. Another alternative is to create a free text number for

your school. The messages are then free for students to send, and the costs are borne by the school. Another free alternative is to send text messages from a website that offers free texting, such as [www.textmefree.com](http://www.textmefree.com); a downside is that these types of websites typically display advertising. A fourth alternative is to request funding from your institution or a government entity; for example, my university makes text message bundles available on request.

#### **Noise and disruption in class**

Despite the exciting potential for mobile phones to increase opportunities for learning, the prospect of allowing noisy phones into a classroom may seem a bit daunting, especially if one has little experience using them as a teaching tool. As with music, movies, and computers, their usefulness depends on having clear tasks for your students to work with. Phones can be disruptive. For example, it would be counterproductive if they rang in class in the middle of a silent reading activity. Clearly some ground rules are needed. It is also possible that your school either prohibits cell phone use in class or does not yet have a policy. In that case you will need to communicate your intentions to the head of your department.

#### **Privacy considerations**

It is paramount to consider issues of privacy before using mobile phones in class. If you teach younger learners, you may need to get parents’ consent to use mobile phones in school. Some students may be reluctant to share private information with others, so it is important to explain to them what your intentions are and find out if they have any concerns about using their phones for learning activities. Similarly, you need clear rules about when and how phones can be used so that students do not use them for inappropriate purposes.

#### **Increased teacher workload**

Finally, the use of mobile phones, or any new technology, has the potential to increase your workload. There may be a learning curve, which is an investment that will hopefully pay itself back in increased student motivation and engagement. However, there is also the question of how to deal with the extra communication that use of phone

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generates. For example, what happens if all of your students start texting you? Just like with emails in the 1990s, you will need to set boundaries and make it clear to students what they can send to you when, what you can and cannot respond to, and what you will respond to individually and in class. Even receiving 50 text messages may not be an issue if they all relate to the same assignment you set in class and you can follow up with the whole group. There are also tools that can help you manage text messages. Programs like Notepage ([www.notepage.net](http://www.notepage.net)) let teachers respond to multiple text messages or send out bulk messages from a computer, thus greatly reducing the time needed to respond.

### **Conclusion**

All the ideas above allow you to offer increased opportunities for language learning by taking advantage of a tool that students are intimately familiar with and carry around at all times. Dealing with the challenges of using mobile phones may seem daunting, but teachers I know who use them have found it to be a worthwhile investment of their time and a welcome addition to their language teaching methods.

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