THE BUCHAREST UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES
The Faculty of International Business and Economics
The Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of ASE
The Romanian Association for Quality Language Services QUEST
6th International Conference: Synergies in Communication
Bucharest, Romania, **16 - 17 November 2017**

DIGITAL DEVICES – FRIEND OR FOE FOR STUDENTS OF BUSINESS ENGLISH?

Iulia **RĂȘCANU**[1]

Abstract

21st – century students are mostly individuals who use technology on a daily basis. Smartphones and iPhones are a must have that, fairly or not, safeguard a certain social status especially among university students. Whether these are merely an instrument for digital socialising or not is a matter still under discussion. Studies have shown that e-learning is a method of study that should not be overlooked. Meanwhile, the study of English (or of foreign languages in general) in many universities is mainly based on 'traditional' material (textbooks, CDs, DVDs and so on). Given that technological equipment can be scarce or outdated due to lack of funding in government high education institutions, this method is preferred by both students and instructors. This study aims not at demonstrating that 'the traditional' must be replaced by the 'the modern'; instead, it explores accessible options to improve and diversify the learning process while investigating students' availability and willingness for introducing such devices – otherwise widely used for more social activities – in their study of Business English. At this stage, the study does not apply to all students of Economics who are also enrolled in Business English courses but is restricted to specific sub-domains and year(s) of study.

Keynotes*: digital devices, mobile apps, Business English, traditional study, mLearning*

1. Introduction

In line with Quinn's (2011) vision according to which mLearning is not simply about installing applications on a mobile but also about augmenting learning and performance, the purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of mobile devices in the process of learning a foreign language – namely English (for Specific Purposes) – and to identify potential advantages and/or disadvantages of such a method. Although based on various theories on the topic available at this point, this one is a study of how some apps have been actually applied in class.

One reason this method is taken into consideration is students' day-to-day reality in which mobile devices have become an instrument of communication frequently used by learners. To support this view, one can look at Dr. Vanessa P. Dennen's (2014) statement according to which 'app designers should take advantage of some of the features that mobile devices afford over more traditional of learning media such as personalization, location-based services, crowdsourcing (Kukulska-Hulme, Traxler, &Petit, 2007) with potential variability (…)' (in Dennen 2014, page unknown), depending on learners' devices.

[1] Academia de Studii Economice, Bucuresti, Romania, iulia.nicole@gmail.com

This reason is linked to the theory of behaviourism. In accordance with Thorndike's Law of Effect (paraphrased by Dennen 2014), people are generally inclined to do activities that they enjoy and avoid those that they don't. Learners nowadays find it enjoyable if not natural to use mobile devices. Additionally, according to Dennen again, mobile devices offer learners feedback of the type auditory or visual affirmation given by clicking on a button which reassures them about the correct answer that they have chosen.

A second reason for embarking on such a study is based on the fact that since communication (in English as a second language) and study need diversity and updating, teachers often find it challenging to meet these requirements in a single textbook. Not discussing financial resources for several textbooks any further, students must be provided (or provide themselves) with study material for the class. Copyright infringement is also an aspect both students and teachers have to face. Therefore, public online available study material could be a good resource for both teachers and students if identified correctly.

There is a huge diversity of mobile apps (some available for free, others on cost) that can be installed on our mobile phones and be used for the purpose of studying, improving or testing our level of English. The issue at this point is being able to identify those apps whose content and structure are reliable.

This study is based on the first phase of an experiment that needs further implementation, interpretation and analysis. This study is based on experimenting with first-year students of Finance and Accounting while the apps utilised in the study are meant either for the testing students' level of English or for studying specific and specialised material (especially vocabulary). Consequently, the study is divided into subchapters that discuss the two categories.

2. English Level Test Mobile App

The study includes an analysis of how can mobile apps for testing students' level of English can be implemented. As large classes of students are often made up of students whose level of English is very diverse, teachers need an overview of the class level as a whole in order to adapt the future study material.

There are plenty of mobile apps meant to check students' level of English. The one selected for this study includes various options such as 'grammar', 'vocabulary', 'writing', 'speaking' or 'full' (which takes one through all the competences mentioned above). Students can choose one of these options by simply clicking on it and the test starts. There is one single question or sentence with gaps followed by four potential answers at a time. One answer only is the correct one. The student must simply click on the answer s/he thinks is correct and the grid on the left is lit green according to whether the answer was good or bad. The grid contains the levels: beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, advanced and near native. Each correct answer takes the student up until 'near native' level. Once it is reached, the student is asked supplementary questions to establish the level. If the answers are all correct, the level remains 'near native'; otherwise, the app takes you down one or several levels depending on the difficulty of the question (e.g. one can fall from 'near native' to upper-intermediate or worse). Once the level is established, the app moves to the next competence and the process starts all over again.

2.1. Method of implementation

How can this app work in class? After all, it is a test that is normally done individually since it is meant to establish the English level of a person. I was about to find this out when trying to work with it.

First, I explained to my students how the app works before telling them that this was just one of the methods of testing one's level. Subsequently, I asked them if they knew other methods. Many of them

were already aware of tests such as the Cambridge test or the IELTS test. None of the students knew about the European language portfolio.

Aware that the mLearning is an alternative meant to just help one identify one's level without obtaining formal certification, they agreed to do it anyway. Because of the short time limit we had, we tried the 'Full' option which takes shorter than if one passed through all the competences separately. The students were asked to go through all of them at home and ponder on this experience.

2.2. Problems encountered in class

One problem that should have been expected is the fact that students who have an Android and those who have an iPhone may have different applications available for them. As the teacher was trying to use one or several apps in the classroom, some students were not able to find the app and therefore had to bring an Android they had left at home for the following class. Other problems may be of a more technological matter in that students may not have Internet on their phones or the battery may need recharging.

Another problem consisted in the type of individual work/testing that made it difficult for the teacher to monitor all the students. Additionally, the questions were in a different order from student to student. Nonetheless, students soon got used to the app and felt more confident about using it without teacher monitoring as the app gave instant reply (good or bad). What it did not give though was feedback; students did not know why the other answers were not correct; they were not even given the correct answer for comparison.

How could this problem be solved? One way would be to use a video-projector for the whole class to see the performance of a student after they have done their own tests. This stage is needed for general feedback as the questions may appear in a different order, but they are the same for everyone. By doing the test with the whole class, the teacher is advised to discuss with the students why the other three answers are not correct. These discussions take students through several competences and improves their knowledge while encouraging knowledge-sharing with peers. Thus the mobile app also becomes a good instrument for practice and revising.

2.3. Mobile app testing vs self-assessment

Students were also asked to assess their level of English by using the descriptors of the European Portfolio of Languages. The teacher explained that this was a self-assessment method and that they had to be very honest when reading the descriptors and choosing their level.

Problems found: some students found it difficult to understand how it worked due to the many descriptors for each competence at each level (one reason may be that it was the first time when they used the language passport). Students with a low level of English felt frustrated to find out that there were so many competences they did not actually have. This did not motivate them to work harder but it discouraged them, especially when comparing their level with that of other colleagues in the group. They were afraid they could not actually comply with the requirements of the English seminar.

To sum up, the teacher noticed that many students found the app rather enjoyable and frequently challenging. Some just thought it was good practice but did not invest it with much trust preferring a specialised 'traditional' course and test. This was mainly due to the narrow range of questions in the test. Consequently, most students agreed that they prefer the 'traditional' method of testing their level of English especially if they envisaged getting a certificate.

3. Financial Accounting Guide and Finance Dictionary vs. 'Traditional' Textbook

A second mobile app discussed in this paper is applied to groups of students whose specialty is finance and accounting. The app has been used with eight groups of 26 to 27 students. the results are obtained

through class observation and Q&A sessions performed with the students after class. The immediacy of the session ensured a higher degree of reliability as the experiment was still fresh for the students.

When teaching English students of finance and accounting, what needs to be mainly taught – and as a special requirement of the students – is specialised vocabulary. Many textbooks have plenty of vocabulary exercises of the type 'fill in the gaps' or 'matching' (the term with a definition). It appears problematic that the volume of the same type of exercises is big and thus creates exercise type repetitiveness rather than repetition of words, which is not lucrative. Students accumulate a huge number of definitions that are not used as such in their studies. The vocabulary is indeed repeated mainly in listening activities but only having as an effect the spelling of those words. Therefore, vocabulary is not taken out of the language paradigm and brought in contexts that make students work with the content as well as with the form. Exception to this are textbooks that include case studies and role-playing for students. The problem with case studies though is that – given that the domain is economics – in a few years the information presented in the case study is outdated and so the 'real context' meant to expose students to real-life situations is lost.

3.1. Implementing Financial Accounting Guide app and online dictionaries (L2-L2 instead of L2-L1) as supplementary study material

Students of finance and those of accounting have constantly expressed and proved a willingness and preference towards studying specialised vocabulary irrespective of their grammar level. While not overlooking grammar issues, the teacher can meet the students' needs and preference by combining 'classic' learning strategies/methods with mLearning.

'Traditional' textbooks of business English often include many vocabulary exercises that introduce students to the way in which concepts are defined rather than helping students connect and internalise the concepts they are presented with. Such a strategy is good but leaves great room for improvement if one is interested in long-term knowledge. Another strategy that students - rather than teachers - are inclined to use is translation of terms in the students' mother tongue. The problem with this strategy is again short-term knowledge if circumstances that allow students to re-use those terms (both in English and their translation) do not occur or are not created.

Alternatives as well as supplementary strategies are represented by mLearning. First, there are several trustworthy available online dictionaries (English-English) that can add value to teaching/learning vocabulary. Interestingly enough, despite the fact that students have smartphones and can access the Internet, the answer I have always obtained from them when asked what digital resource(s) they use in order to get the meaning of a word is Google translate. When subsequently asked whether they have been satisfied with it, the constant answer was negative rather than positive. Nonetheless, students continued to use it. This shows that students are open to using digital devices in order to get instant knowledge but they are less open to utilising diversified resources such as online dictionaries.

In order to introduce them to online dictionaries I performed the following experiment with them. The purpose of this experiment was to show students by doing that using online dictionaries such as Oxford, Cambridge or Merriam Webster is both easy and useful while not being less fast than the resource they generally used, Google Translate. To reinforce this point, other researchers have found that using online dictionary over traditional ones is an effective way to study vocabulary (Nyikos and Macaro 2007) especially due to its speed and efficiency.[2]

As students were doing a vocabulary exercises that included many new words and concepts, and as students felt they needed to know 'the meaning' (i.e. the translation, in their view) of those words despite the definition they already had in the exercise, I asked them to search for the website of an online dictionary (in this case, Oxford online) and just type in the word that they wanted to find out. Not only were students surprised to find that the definition offered by the dictionary was clear enough to understand the meaning of the word, but this was doubled by the example which followed the

[2] See also studies by Levy and Steel (2015), Kukulska-Hulme (2009) and Goodwin-Jones (2011)

definition. Additionally, the fact that they could click on the icon that offers the correct pronunciation of that particular word was also exciting. I encouraged them to look further and read the additional meanings of the word to see that, at least in English, one can always look beyond the first meaning of a term. The practical result of the experiment was that, without resorting to a L1-L2 dictionary, students were able to offer the translation themselves from English into Romanian as they were familiar with the concept in Romanian having used it in their specialised courses.

Therefore, one can sum up by saying that students are aware of other resources available to them but are not convinced of their utility due to an incorrect view/preconception that these are not as fast as Google Translate. With this 'game', students could see for themselves that while Google Translate is a handy tool for getting the meaning of words, it is not necessarily the best nor the only one. The fact that they were even given a wrong translation of a term from Google translate while Oxford online offered a clear explanation was reason enough to stay open to *several* online tools instead of one.

Secondly, and in line with the what has been presented above, are mobile Apps for specialised dictionaries such as Banking Terms Dictionary and Oxford Finance & Banking among others. These can be installed on students' mobile phones and they can have access to specialised vocabulary in English all the time.

Thirdly, another online resource that helps students understand and have direct access to concepts of specialised domains are mobile Apps such as Learn Accounting in 21 Days and Financial Accounting Guide. The latter has been used as supplementary study material to introduce first year students of Finance and Accounting. The App has been chosen from among others due to its structuring and especially due to the fact that concepts and calculation formulas are presented as embedded in a story with a main character. This way, students can connect more easily with the concepts being offered a context in which the character acts and in which theoretical concepts occur in relation to those actions.

The application is structured in 22 units long enough to offer enough information while not occupying the whole seminar. If time is short, units can also be given as homework for reading and extracting specialised vocabulary. All the units offer enough vocabulary as to create a vocabulary pool that can be/is enriched with every unit. The additional advantage of covering these units is that, by reading, students use specialised vocabulary repetitively while adding new one. Like in every story, elements of the story – in this case, the story of the character that starts his own small business and continues to grow it – are brought up from time to time, taking the reader back to previous episodes. This is meant to keep track of the story but also to consolidate knowledge. Another advantage of the app is the fact that it is structured on episodes. Just like a series film, the story can be interrupted and resumed anytime one wants to.

An additional benefit is that, besides vocabulary, the teacher can extract several grammar issues that can be developed in subsequent seminars. The teacher may also offer explanations for the respective grammatical issue and provide practice material as homework for students.

3.2. Students' Response to the Financial Accounting Guide Mobile App

One must mention again that this App has been used with first year students of Finance and Accounting. At the time when we used this App, students have not been introduced to mLearning before (besides using google Translate). They were not even introduced to the concepts of the first unit as they had not started their specialised course of accounting/microeconomics in their mother tongue. Nonetheless, the first unit of the App has not proved difficult for the students. The reason for this is the fact that concepts are embedded in a real-life story with which learners/students can connect easily. One may make a simple comparison here between kindergarten level learners and university level students and the method of teaching. If in the former case, the teacher can provide learners with pictures of the concepts s/he wants to teach, in the latter the teacher introduces learners to stories that are credible in real-life.

Consequently, students' response to the App was a positive one. Through class observation, the teacher could notice that students were putting down new words while making any available connections that they or the teacher could. These include synonyms, antonyms, and family words.

It must be noted here that while mobile Apps have been included in the learners' method of studying (and the teacher's method of teaching), 'traditional' study material has not been completely overlooked. Due to the facility offered by the sequential quality of the App to pause and resume at any time, the teacher could insert study material from the textbook that gave additional information on the topic or could be used as 'testing/self-testing material' for the vocabulary and concepts already learned. The teacher noted that the return to 'traditional' material was welcome because students – when asked – still felt reassured by the materiality of the study material rather than by the content. Although they are aware of both types of study material providing the necessary information, some (or in some classes many) students are not ready yet to give up material that they can touch. In other classes, where the students' level of English is higher, digital study tools are more welcome. This could be explained by the fact that these students are more confident and therefore, the materiality of the study material is not important for them. Instead, they are happy to see that they can improve their language and vocabulary without carrying along 'traditional' material.

A proof in this sense is CIP (Cognitive Information Processing). Focusing on learners' memory, the process differentiates between short-term memory (working memory) and long-term memory (storage memory). Working exclusively on vocabulary exercises of repetitive type (matching, fill in the gaps) supports learners' short-term memory as they do not have the necessary time and proper environment to actually store new vocabulary. New lessons bring new vocabulary, therefore one would say learners' vocabulary is enriched, but how long does that vocabulary stay in their minds, in other words how frequently is it used? Supplementary study material that has a real-life aspect of the mLearning type comes to both complement and reinforce long-term memory.

4. Conclusions

The students that have been introduced to mLearning in this study are first-year students of Finance and Accounting who have worked with (and heard of) mobile Apps for the study of English for the first time. This detail proved of importance for the teacher to analyse students' response to the use of the mobile device as study material in comparison to the 'traditional' one.

The first remark is that, under these circumstances, the students were fairly and sometimes very open to new strategies/learning methods. Apart from being curious about mLearning, they are generally open to new things.

One must note however that students whose level is lower are not confident enough about using the mobile as tool for study and feel reassured by textbooks. This happens despite the fact that they are aware of the opportunities and diversity offered by mobile Apps. More confident students are more willing to use Apps but still want to sometimes use printed study material especially when they want to study grammar.

Therefore, in general, the students in the study expressed their wish to use both 'traditional' material and mobile Apps, showing a willingness to become more familiar with mLearning and possibly include it on a more regular basis in their study. It must be also noted that there have been a few students who showed preference of mLearning over 'traditional' study. These students are accustomed to using the Internet for more diverse purposes and thus learning a foreign language by means of digital devices comes more naturally to them whereas those who use the Internet for a more restricted range of usage such as Google Translate and social networks (in which they mainly communicate in their mother tongue anyway) feel more confident with printed material. Nonetheless, it is not fair to generalise as there are some students of the second category that show more openness towards mLearning than others of the same category.

It is important that students/learners be aware of the availability of mobile apps (see Steel 2012) as they can enable learners to practice language anywhere and anytime. And, although mLearning is mostly seen as appropriate for individualisation (cf. Viberg and Gronlund 2013) – 83% of the respondents of Viberg and Gronlund's study had positive perceptions of using mobile apps -, there is yet an important percentage (74%) of respondents who want to use them for collaboration while 73% of respondents prefer it for authenticity.

One significant remark is that, since the institution does not have a specialised platform or project dedicated to mLearning which would provide both uniform resources to all students and increased trust on their part, this study can only offer information about possibilities that should not be overlooked given that it is a method that is no longer very new in other countries. It is therefore study material for decision-makers of institution(s) who can implement this method at a different level and in a more organised way.

References and bibliography

Burston, J. 2015. 'Twenty years of MALL project implementation: a meta-analysis of learning out comes'. *ReCALL*, 27 (1), 4-10. http://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344014000159

Dennen, V. P. 2014. "Paradigms of Use, Learning Theory, and App Design". In The New Landscape of Mobile Learning: Redesigning Education in an App-Based World, by Charles Miller and A. Doering (eds.). New York and London: Routledge. Pages not available. Viewed on google books: https://books.google.ro/books?id=mvvpAgAAQBAJ&pg=PT46&hl=ro&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false. 29 Oct 2017.

Godwin-Jones, R. 2011. 'Emerging technology: mobile apps for language learning'. *Language Learning and Technology*, 15(2), 2-11, http://llt.msu.edu/issue/june2011/emerging.pdf

Kukulska-Hulme, A. 2009. Will mobile learning change language learning? ReCALL, 21(2), 157-165. http://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344009000202

Kukulska-Hulme, A. 2010. 'Learning cultures on the move: Where are we heading?'. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 13(4), 4-14.

Kukulska-Hulme, A., Traxler, J. & Pettit, J. 2007. Quoted in Dennen, 2017.

Kukulska-Hulme, A., Traxler, J. & Pettit, J. 2012. 'Designed and user-generated Activity in the Mobile Age'. *Journal of Learning Design*, 2(1), 52-65. doi:10.5204/jld.v2il.28

Levy, M. and Steel, C. 2015. 'Language learner perspective on the functionality and use of electronic language dictionaries'. *ReCALL*, 27(2), 177-196. http://doi.org/10.1017/S095834401400038X

Nyikos, M. and Macaro, E. 2007. 'A review of vocabulary learning strategies: focus on language proficiency and learner voice'. In A.D. Cohen & E. Macaro (eds.), *Language Learner Strategies: Thirty Years of Research and Practice* (pp. 251-273). Oxford: OUP.

Quinn, C.N. 2011. Quoted by Dennen, 2014.

Steel, C. 2012. 'Fitting Learning into Life: Language Students' Perspectives on Benefits of Using Mobile Apps.' In M. Brown, M. Hartnett, & T. Stewart, *Future Challenges, Sustainable Future*. Wellington: Proceedings Ascilite, pp. 875-880.

Thorndike, E.L. 1913. *The Psychology of Learning*. Teachers College, Columbia University.

Viberg, O., Gronlund, A. 2013. 'Cross-cultural analysis of users' attitudes towards the use of mobile devices in second and foreign language learning in higher education: a case study from Sweden and China'. Comput. Educ. 69, pp. 169-180.

Mobile Apps

Banking Terms Dictionary
English Level Checker
Finance and Banking (Oxford)
Financial Accounting Guide
Google Translate
Oxforddictionariesonline.com

The author

Iulia-Nicoleta Rascanu is Lecturer, PhD with the Department of Modern Languages and Communication in Business. Granted a PhD by the University of Mumbai, as part of the E.U. ITN7 'Marie Curie' project *Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging* in 2016, Ms. Rascanu has been a university teacher since 2001. The disciplines taught are ESP (English for various aspects of business and economics) and as a researcher she approaches education and culture, Cultural Studies, Literature and Critical Theory, Diaspora Studies, Migration Sudies, Transnational Studies, Gender Studies, Third World Feminism, and Film Studies.