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TABLETS AS INSTRUCTIONAL TOOLS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Theoretical and empirical research, carried out over the last decade, argues that mobile assisted language learning (MALL) can support foreign language learning in new ways, both inside and outside the classroom. New educational technologies and software have facilitated the creation of MALL applications especially for tablets. Furthermore, an increasing number of studies are carried out looking at the use of tablets from a variety of angles in the foreign language classroom as it is expected to have a great influence on the performance of learners. Teachers can also play an important role in the successful introduction and use of tablets in the classroom. This study sought to examine both pre- and in-service teachers’ perceptions of using tablets in the foreign language classroom. Based on the literature review an online questionnaire was developed, with two types of Closed-Ended Questions, Multiple choice questions and Likert scaled questions, in order to examine the teachers’ views in Greece. 285 participants (132 in-service and 153 pre-service teachers) completed the survey. The results, presented thoroughly in this article, refer to the participants’ opinion regarding the use of the tablet as an educational tool, the assets or/and drawbacks of its use as well as its pedagogical application and the way it can be used in a foreign language classroom. The present paper highlights also the concept of MALL, the characteristics and the different types of the pedagogical use of tablets.

Keywords: MALL, tablets, foreign language teaching and learning, teachers’ perception.

1 INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, the popularity of mobile devices has attracted the attention of scholars and instructors from various fields, leading them to the examination of whether mobile devices can be used as tools to support educational aims. Therefore, mobile devices have been incorporated into formal education and into the distance learning environment and thus a new approach for technology enhanced learning has been generated called mobile learning (m-learning). M-learning is the next step in the evolution of educational technology as it offers modern methods of support to the process of learning through the use of mobile instruments [1]. A subarea of m-Learning which deals with the use of applications designed for mobile and wireless devices in language teaching and learning is Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). As corroborated by ample research, MALL opens a wide range of learning and teaching opportunities for second and foreign language (L2) learners and teachers as it can support L2 learning in new ways, both inside and outside the classroom. In fact, new educational technologies and software have facilitated the creation of MALL applications especially for tablets. Due to their characteristics such as portability, simple interface and to a great range of other applications, tablets are quickly integrated in schools across the world and used in different experimental projects at all levels of education. [2], [3], [4], [5].

Although findings of these experimental projects have revealed a number of problems concerning the use of tablets in the classroom, if teachers know how to handle and work with tablets in the classroom, the advantages and possibilities outweigh the disadvantages [6]. There are many ways in which teachers can turn the popular device into an educational tool in order to enhance student interest, motivation and productivity. Still, as Churchill, Fox and King [7] pointed out “the extent to which Tablets will be used in education depends largely on teachers’ perceptions of the affordances of this technology”. Accordingly, the role of the teacher in the successful integration and use of tablets in a L2 classroom is of great importance. Understanding how teachers perceive the use of tablets as educational tools could prove beneficial, thus, there is a need for research on this topic.

For this reason, this research sought to examine both pre- and in-service teachers’ perceptions in Greece of using tablets in the foreign language classroom. Based on the literature, review an online questionnaire was developed in order to examine teachers’ points of view in Greece. The questionnaire consists of two types of closed-ended questions, multiple choice questions and Likert
scaled questions. 285 participants (132 in-service and 153 pre-service teachers) completed the survey. Statistical analyses were carried out in the analysing process. In the following sections we will thoroughly present the results concerning the teachers’ opinion regarding the use of the Tablet as an educational tool. The results revealed that teachers perceive the use of Tablets in the foreign language classroom as a positive process.

2 BACKGROUND

The education sector has discovered the potential of MALL in recent years. According to the literature review, there is a growing interest in the use of mobile technologies as educational tools in the foreign language classroom. Therefore, it is important to understand the role of MALL in the specific area of the second language. In the section below, we will try to define MALL and present its most important features.

2.1 MALL: definitions and features

MALL is becoming a real force in education, which uses increasingly more portable tools as support in the classrooms. Chen [8] proposes the following definition for MALL: “Mobile Assisted Language learning is the formal or informal learning of a foreign language with the assistance of mobile devices.” Taking the same view concerning mobility, Kukulska-Hulme & Shield [9] define MALL in terms of “its use of personal, portable devices that enable new ways of learning, emphasizing continuity or spontaneity of access and interaction across different context of use”. Besides, Palalas [10] underlines both aspects of mobility: “MALL can be defined as language learning enabled by the mobility of the learner and portability of handled devices”.

Therefore, as derived from the definitions above, the major feature distinguishing MALL from traditional language learning is the mobility the learner affords, in addition to the possibilities of spatial and time shifts yielding increased learning opportunities [11].

Other important characteristics which are also considered as educational benefits listed in the literature are connectivity and the advantages it offers to the language learners [8], convenience and portability, productive utilization of dead time, ability to interact, affordability, accessibility of up-to-date material, and multimedia options [12].

Summarising briefly the educational benefits listed in the literature we can claim that the use of mobile devices in language teaching and learning can enhance L2 acquisition and learners’ motivation as it can facilitate alternative learning processes and instructional methods [12], [14] focusing especially on the development of lexical and grammatical competences and reading and listening skills [15].

Finally, access to mobile technology allows L2 students to create their own learning contexts in terms of when, where and how they use online information and material best, and consequently learning becomes independent and self-directed [13], [16], [17].

2.2 Characteristics, educational affordances of tablets and limitations

Tablets have become a popular and attractive device for educational use because they are halfway between laptops and mobile phones and they have greater functionality compared to smartphones and e-readers. Furthermore, they have larger screens than other mobile devices, an increasing variety of interactive apps, a greater processing power and the availability of audio and video recording software [17], [18].

Concerning the educational affordances of tablets, Bannister and Wilden [18] argue that immediate collaboration, response and feedback are significant factors in the effective implementation of tablet devices. Another important benefit of the use of tablets for educational purposes is that they can support personalised, autonomous, cooperative and game-based learning as the students are able to select between levels of difficulty and to work at their own pace with a variety of digital learning materials which can be shared in and out of the classroom [4], [6], [18]. The use of tablets as learning tools is also linked to increased motivation and creativity and the development of IT skills [4], [6], [7], [18].
In regard to the drawbacks of the use of tablets and the limitations to the implementation in schools, teachers have argued that tablets could easily be a source of distraction for many students [4], [17]. Furthermore, they are very concerned about data privacy when students share devices, e-safety and the access to inappropriate material [5]. Other limitations which have been pointed out by researchers are the lack of sufficient teacher training by means of pedagogical recommendations and teaching activities [4], [19]. Finally, we have to point out that the educational focus and the context of tablet use varies depending on the level of education.

3 THE RESEARCH

The research was carried out in June 2016 and aimed to examine teachers’ perceptions of using tablets as instructional tools in the foreign language classroom. Among the tools available to conduct the research, online questionnaires were opted for as the target participants were heterogeneous and geographically dispersed.

3.1 Description of the sample and methodology

3.1.1 The questionnaire

Both pre- and in-service teachers participated in the research, as the questionnaire was addressed to undergraduate and postgraduate students of the foreign language departments of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (English, French, German and Italian language and literature), graduates of the aforementioned departments and foreign language teachers currently serving in primary and secondary education. The questionnaire was compiled after the pertinent literature review which was presented in previous chapters and was initially more extensive as it aimed to record all the parameters concerning the introduction, use and exploitation of tablets in foreign language teaching, their potential and ensuing prospects. This rationale resulted in the creation of a body of closed-ended questions in table form (Likert scaled array questions), accompanied by a number of multiple-choice questions.

In order to maximise the likelihood of completion of the questionnaire by the participants and minimise the number of incomplete answers, the version finally uploaded contained 14 questions, through which the basic parameters of the subject to be evaluated were, in our view, amply covered. These questions aimed to investigate:

- the participants' profile (questions 1-8),
- the users' views on tablet usage in class today and in the future (9-12),
- the users' views on the pros and cons of tablet usage (13-14).

3.1.2 Participants

Every possible way of reaching educators of the primary and secondary sector was employed to ensure a sufficient number of participants: informing university students, teachers' unions, direct contact with individuals or schools and most importantly the promotion of the research through the Internet, via both the official webpages of the French Department – to which the researchers belong – and the webpages of students, graduates, and teachers’ unions as well as the social media.

From the total number of educators reached, 354 people finally participated, 285 of whom completed the questionnaire (132 in-service and 153 pre-service teachers). The remaining 69 participants did not complete the questionnaire, leaving various sections blank.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in research</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of questionnaires</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires fully completed</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires partly completed</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Data analysis and results

The results refer to the participants’ opinion regarding the use of the tablet as an educational tool, the assets or/and drawbacks of its use as well as to its pedagogical application and the way it can be used in a foreign language classroom.

The complete results of the research are uploaded on the web\(^1\). The following paragraphs briefly cover the main points and ensuing conclusions.

3.2.1 Participants’ profile

The first two questions concerned the participants’ age and gender. The participants were mostly women (86.32%), which was to be expected seeing that in the foreign and Greek language university departments there is an overwhelming majority of female students. Age wise, however, participants were more evenly distributed. 27.37% were under 25, 29.47% were between 25 and 35, 24.21% were between 35 and 45, 17.89% were between 45 and 55 and only 1% were over 55.

The third question concerned the language the participants were teaching or were to teach in the future. For the most part, participants teach – or are going to teach – French (67.37%), followed by English (23.16%), Italian (5.26%) and German (4.21%). This is not typical of the Greek primary and secondary education where English dominates, as its instruction is compulsory and French and German are far behind since these languages are on offer as an option in far fewer schools and Italian is not an option\(^2\).

The next question aimed to depict the proportion of participants who are still students, the graduates who have not yet been appointed and the ones serving as teachers. It turned out that in the sample there were 53.68% pre-service teachers (41.11% under/post graduate students and 11.58% unemployed graduates) and 46.32% in-service teachers.

The next four questions concerned only the 132 in-service teachers (for the remaining 153 – pre-service teachers – these questions did not form part of the online questionnaire) and aimed to record years of teaching experience, whether the participants were employed in the public or private sector and whether they taught at primary or secondary establishments. As it turns out, 15.9% are teachers with less than 5 years of work experience, and 2.1% are at the end of their careers with over 25 years of service. The main body of the participants have been serving for 5-15 years (38.6%) or 15-25 years (40.9%). As regards education stages, 45.5% of the participants work in primary education, 29.5% exclusively in junior high school, 4.5% exclusively in senior high school, while 20.5% work in both junior and senior high school concurrently.

3.2.2 Teachers’ perception of the use of tablets in the classroom

Most of the participants, as can be concluded from the results, were familiar with tablet use, as 87.4% of them use it daily for information, communication or recreation. A small proportion (12.6%) stated that they did not possess or use a tablet. The proportion, however, of those who use it in class, is limited to 32.8% in total. 9.47% said they used it “very frequently” and 26.3% “sometimes”. In fact, most of the teachers (67.2% in total) “never” (36.8%), or “rarely” (27.4%) use tablets.

The teachers who already more or less use tablets as part of the foreign language lesson utilize it for a variety of activities and exploit a wide range of applications and services. The pertinent data are presented in table 1 below in column A. Column B concerns the teachers’ proposed aims (the ones who already use tablets and the ones who have not started using them) as regards activities, applications and services to be exploited in the future. Let it be noted that more than one option was allowed in the questionnaire.

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\(^1\) In the School of French website: http://www.panosarvanitis.gr/index.php/en/research-en/

\(^2\) However, it will be available as an option from the next academic year.
Table 1: Educational uses of the tablet in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which of the following activities or applications do you use in the classroom?</th>
<th>A. I use them already</th>
<th>B. I plan to use them in the future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to online dictionaries and grammars</td>
<td>41.05%</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to MALL apps</td>
<td>25.26%</td>
<td>56.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to online educational games for language learning</td>
<td>26.32%</td>
<td>64.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to online activities for language learning, (quizzes, etc.)</td>
<td>34.74%</td>
<td>58.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating content (blogs, Wikis, etc.)</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
<td>37.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information access</td>
<td>42.11%</td>
<td>45.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online real-time communication</td>
<td>14.74%</td>
<td>50.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making course notes</td>
<td>16.84%</td>
<td>31.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in virtual classrooms or educational social networks</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
<td>51.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing data</td>
<td>13.68%</td>
<td>22.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None. I do not intend to use tables in the classroom</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the data above, the main uses of tablets in the classroom today concern information search, access to exercises, quizzes, online dictionaries, grammars or other language aids as well as special educational language games or applications designed for foreign language learning. On the other hand, online communication or social media and virtual classroom participation is exploited by a very small proportion of teachers, while very few use tablets for the creation of content (blogs, wikis).

Nevertheless, the future image appears noticeably different, since the figures depicting teachers’ intentions as regards the utilization of this technological medium are overall remarkably increased. What is also of interest is the teachers’ standpoint concerning tablets. While the proportion of those not using them at all today is high (35.79%), as can be seen from the results, it is likely to shrink dramatically to 5.2%, since teachers seem to believe in the usefulness of tablets and are willing to introduce them into the classroom.

3.2.3 Benefits and challenges in using Tablets in the classroom

The last two questions were clearly intended to assess tablets as foreign language learning tools and therefore aimed at pinpointing their advantages and disadvantages as to classroom use.

In monitoring teachers’ views, table (array) type questions were used, with 9 and 6 statements respectively, to which the participants were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree on a 1 to 5 LIKERT scale (1. I totally disagree, 2. I tend to disagree, 3. I neither agree nor disagree, 4. I quite agree, 5. I fully agree). In the following tables (2 and 3) the answers are briefly presented.
Table. 2: Benefits of using the tablet in the classroom, as perceived by teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How far do you agree with the following statements about the benefits of using the tablet in the classroom as an educational tool?</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Access to online information</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Access to a variety of resources (images, applications, videos, etc.)</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Students’ development of linguistic competences</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Students’ development of IT skills</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Fostering of collaborative learning</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Greater collaboration and communication among students</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Fostering creativity</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Fostering student motivation</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Fostering learner autonomy</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table. 3: Challenges and deterrents to the use the tablet in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How far do you agree that the following deter the use of tablets in the foreign language classroom?</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Major source of student distraction</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Difficult to write on a tablet or underline notes</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Difficult to open more than one window</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Difficult to organize classroom work and check whether all students work on the same task or activity</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Lack of instructional scenarios and lesson plans for introducing tablets in the classroom.</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Lack of sufficient teacher training by means of pedagogical recommendations</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be concluded from the replies, participants in the research feel that apart from their obvious usefulness as tools (as a means, for instance, of easy access to information or as a multimedia source), tablets are also valuable educational tools because they can significantly contribute to the development of language communication and technical or collaborative skills while also motivating students and encouraging creativity and autonomy.

They pinpoint, however, functional problems inherent in the nature of the medium, such as hardware limitations when compared with PCs (inability to open numerous windows or difficulty in notebook use). There are also significant fears concerning pedagogical issues. The likelihood, for instance, of student distraction and teachers’ inability to monitor their student activities are described as near certainties. Nevertheless, what is presented as a more serious issue is the lack of instructional scenarios that they could benefit from and the lack of pertinent teacher training to facilitate integration and utilization in the classroom.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The mobile devices industry is currently growing rapidly. The use of mobile devices as learning and instructional tools at all levels of education is increasing quickly also. MALL is becoming a real force in education because of the educational benefits it offers to L2 students in terms of gaining linguistic
knowledge and skills. Furthermore, learning activities and applications especially for tablets are designed in order to support innovative approaches to L2 teaching and learning in and outside school.

Prior research has demonstrated that tablets as learning tools can foster motivation, learner autonomy and creativity and help students to develop IT skills. This research aimed to explore how both pre and in-service teachers perceived the use of tablets as instructional tools in the foreign language classroom in Greece.

Findings from this research revealed that foreign language teachers and future teachers in Greece plan to use tablets in their classroom. In fact, teachers are eager to implement tablets in their class as they believe that they can enhance students’ motivation and creativity, foster collaborative learning and help them to develop their linguistic competences, their autonomy and their IT skills. Additionally, participants believe that tablets are very useful instructional tools in class as they provide easy access to online information and to a variety of multimedia resources. Concerning the challenges involved in using the tablets in class, participants indicated that tablets could be a source of distraction for the students. As for the drawbacks mentioned they concern technical aspects of the medium such as the difficulty in opening more than one window and the difficulty in taking notes or underlining text.

However, both in-service and pre-service teachers agree that training and instructional scenarios are important factors for the successful use of tablets in the classroom. Therefore, future research should focus on how teachers can integrate MALL in the classroom and how they can plan lessons based on the use of MALL applications designed for tablets. Resources should be made available to foreign language teachers so that they are trained in both the pedagogical and technical aspects of using tablets for educational purposes.

Lastly it would be useful to design the curriculum and the syllabus around the educational uses of tablets and the applications designed for them.

REFERENCES


