

Mobile literacy among Syrian refugee women teachers

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Abstract. This research project investigates mobile literacy of Syrian refugee women teachers settled in Lebanon and Sweden. Our research provides input into Syrian refugee women teachers' professional aspirations and their connection to informal mobile learning. In both countries, training programs are used for these newly arrived teachers, enabling them to move forward in their careers, where digital and mobile learning play an important part. The purpose is to investigate how Syrian refugee women teachers are blending their teaching profession and vocational training with mobile literacy and digital technology. A qualitative method approach was applied, interviewing 20 refugee women in Lebanon and Sweden, all teachers from Syria. The outcomes show that the teachers are developing their vocational abilities in getting more career-oriented training in their areas of education by means of enhancing their language skills through mobile technology.

Keywords: mobile learning, MALL, professional learning, refugee, mobile apps, teacher training.

1. Introduction

The increasing migration from the Middle East has left remarkable consequences on a range of areas, such as infrastructure, demography, and education. The complexity of the situation for Syrians migrating to neighboring countries as well as further away has no less also affected the teaching and learning area of the large number of Syrian women teachers, who are struggling to participate in the labor market in the host countries. One important aspect of staying updated with

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the profession is to learn the language of the new country, where digital skills and mobile literacy are important tools (Bartram, Bradley, & Al-Sabbagh, 2018; Bradley, Berbyuk Lindström, & Sofkova Hashemi, 2017; Kaufmann, 2018).

Krause (2014) suggested that being a refugee can redefine and deconstruct community patterns. Displacement can actually provide women refugees with opportunities to assume new roles. It gives these refugee women the potential to improve their well-being and self-confidence (Jabbar & Zaza, 2016). However, the situation around refugees maintaining a career is still complex (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018). There are a number of obstacles in terms of structural barriers for being eligible for employment but also learning to communicate in the new context. In a study of women refugees in Australia, Watkins, Husna, and Richters (2012) describe language difficulties as the primary issue affecting the refugees' well-being. The transitional role of first being a teacher in the home country to being a learner in a new country and finally proceeding with professional life in the new country is indeed challenging.

The main purpose of the research is to investigate the mobile literacy of Syrian refugee women teachers participating in a vocational training program in Lebanon and Sweden. We address two research questions.

- (1) What Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) tools do Arabic speaking women refugee teachers use?
- (2) How is mobile technology used as a tool to become included in a new society?

2. Theoretical framework

Mobile language learning enables learner-centered and ubiquitous learning characterized by interrupted, sporadic activities whenever there is an opportunity for it (Burston, 2015; Kukulska-Hulme, 2007). Mobile technologies support informal mobile language learning (Hager & Halliday, 2006). In other words, learning is taking place where it was not planned or intended as learning activities, which is what happens in everyday life in activities not traditionally designed as learning events. In line with autonomous learning, such self-regulation implies that learners are “active participants in their own learning process” (Zimmerman, 1989, p. 329).

The concept of Mobile Human Computer Interaction (MHCI) (Martiz & Recker, 2019) is considering the relationship between people, mobile computer systems, and their application on a daily basis. Martiz and Recker (2019) developed a framework to examine mobile phone appropriation based on MHCI, defining appropriation as “exploring, adapting, and adopting new uses for features in a technology, going beyond its intended regular use” (p. 16).

3. Methods

A qualitative method approach was applied with interviews and an analysis of MALL apps. Through teacher training centers for newly arrived migrants, all in all 20 Syrian refugee women teachers gave their consent to participate in interviews, ten teachers in each respective country. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the respondents’ mother tongue, Arabic, and subsequently translated to English for analysis with the research team. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research team used Google Drive as a shared space and Skype for collaboration between Gothenburg and Beirut. Studying the professional situation of refugee women teachers in these two particular countries displays the situation in two countries which have both accepted a large number of Syrian refugees during the past few years, however, geographically, being far apart.

4. Analysis and results

Our results show that the respondents are quite active in terms of incorporating online tools in formal and informal learning to obtain their goal of proceeding with their professions as teachers in the new country. They all had a smartphone that was used actively; primarily social media for staying connected with friends and family but also for watching videos, surfing the web, and translating.

In terms of MALL, all respondents apart from one had used the phone to learn a new language. The respondents suggested 19 different MALL resources and apps distributed over 37 responses (see Table 1): MALL apps (22%), translation services (54%), video (16%), such as YouTube and TED talks, and other (8%). This is in line with Rosell-Aguilar (2017), suggesting that social media apps, dictionary apps, and translation apps are used for language learning together with MALL apps. The respondents were willing to use MALL apps for language learning, although our studies show that there were obstacles in terms of usability (Al-Sabbagh, Bradley, & Bartram, 2019) and limitations in these apps in terms

of both language learning, pedagogy, user experience, and technology (Bartram et al., 2018).

Table 1. Resources and apps mentioned in the 37 responses by the respondents

Categorization of resources and apps	Resources and apps mentioned	Number of responses
Apps for language learning	Duolinguo, Memorize, Sayhej, Harvard University app for learning English, Språkplay, Melody, The American English Application, English with Disbeta	8
Apps used for but not created for language learning	Youtube, TED talks	6
Dictionaries and translation apps	Google translate, Lexin, Translator, Translate application, Dictionary	20
Surfing the internet	Swedish web, Swedish text, Google search for new teaching strategies and activities	3
Total		37

Moreover, the results displayed a group of self-directed learners in the new country, which was quite a transition from the teaching role in their home country. This transformation requires efforts to proceed, where an app serves as a tool to engage in formal as well as informal learning. As a consequence of migrating, teachers needed to orientate themselves in terms of practical issues where language learning skills play an important role to be included in the new society and for their career. In the process of continuing their careers in a new environment, the respondents were exploring and adopting uses of technology beyond the intended use (Martiz & Recker, 2019).

5. Conclusion

The overall results show that all Syrian refugee women teachers have used digital technology in terms of mobile applications in their own teaching and learning process. In addition, all of them have utilized different digital tools in their teaching sessions and are in the process of developing strategies for being autonomous learners in their vocational training. Most of them have shown that the training programs they have joined in Sweden or Lebanon are beneficial in strengthening and developing their teaching and learning skills as well as their language learning competency. All but one have used different language learning resources to make their aptitudes much more compatible. Mobile learning

offered continuous professional development and additional training by using mobile applications that enhance the teaching and learning process and the use of MALL allowed these women to widen their scope and feel more confident using languages other than Arabic.

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